

Jeremiah 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 5 They have made their faces harder than rock.

They have refused to repent. Then I said, These are only the poor. They have no sense. For they do not know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. I will go to the great, and will speak to them.

For they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. But they all alike had broken the yoke. They had burst the bonds. Therefore a lion from the forest shall strike them down.

A wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces. Because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great.

How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery, and troop to the houses of whores.

[1 : 20] They were well fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife. Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord. And shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?

Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end. Strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me, declares the Lord.

They have spoken falsely of the Lord, and have said, He will do nothing. No disaster will come upon us, nor shall we seize sword or famine. The prophets will become wind.

The word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people would, and the fire shall consume them.

Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. It is an enduring nation. It is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say.

[2 : 28] Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food. They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds.

They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees. Your fortified cities in which you trust, they shall beat down with the sword. But even in those days, declares the Lord, I will not make a full end of you.

And when your people say, Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us? You shall say to them, As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.

Declare this in the house of Jacob, Proclaim it in Judah. Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but see not, who have ears but hear not. Do you not fear me?

Declares the Lord. Do you not tremble before me? I place the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass. Though the waves toss, they cannot prevail.

[3 : 31] Though they roar, they cannot pass over it. But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart. They have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, Let us fear the Lord, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.

Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have kept good from you. For wicked men are found among my people. They lurk like fowlers lying in wait. They set a trap.

They catch men. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and rich. They have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds and deeds of evil.

They judge not with justice, the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper. And they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? Declares the Lord.

And shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction.

[4 : 37] My people love to have it so. But what will you do when the end comes? Jeremiah chapter 5 continues the condemnation of the nation of Judah.

The chapter opens with a pervasive indictment of the society of Jerusalem. The rot extends throughout the entire social body. The opening eight verses are structured as a five stanza piece of poetry with alternating speeches.

The Lord addresses the search party sent throughout the city in verses 1 and 2. Jeremiah addresses the Lord in verse 3. Jeremiah speaks to himself in verses 4 and 5 and to the Lord from the end of verse 5 to verse 6.

In the final stanza, the Lord speaks to the people. The chapter opens with an imagined task given to a search party. To scour the city of Jerusalem for one faithful man on account of whom the city might be spared.

There is clearly some allusion here to Abraham's conversation with the Lord in Genesis chapter 18 concerning the fate of Sodom. Whereas Sodom might have been saved for the sake of ten righteous, Jerusalem receives far more favourable terms.

[5 : 44] One man would be enough. The Lord is looking for justice and fidelity. However, when the city is inspected, not even one such person can be discovered. Jeremiah observes the insensibility of the people to the judgment of the Lord and their failure to respond to his correction.

Yet this insensibility, Jeremiah reasons, is among the poor of the land, people unschooled in the law and in its demands. Surely such dullness and resistance is to be expected to some extent among the uneducated of the people.

Things will be much better among the cultured elite of the land. They are not ignorant of the law. They have received instruction in it. But the condition among the great of the land was, if anything worse, the people who knew the law had willfully rejected it.

When the Lord had delivered his people from slavery, he had placed them as if they were his trained and faithful oxen under the yoke of the law. However, Israel had broken the yoke and run wild.

Now the runaway ox finds itself among the wild beasts. Rejecting the guidance and oversight of the Lord, it placed itself in the reach of the predators. A lion from the forest, a wolf from the wild lands, or a crouching leopard will come upon them and tear them apart.

[6 : 59] Having undertaken this failed inspection, the Lord poses the devastating question to the city. How can I pardon you? When the city was given the opportunity to make a case for its sparing, it could not make one.

It is now struck dumb before the Lord. The rebellion of the nation is described. They have abandoned the Lord and they have sworn by idols. Even when enjoying the Lord's bounty, they flagrantly violated the seventh commandment, trooping to whorehouses.

The affinity between the seventh commandment concerning adultery and the first and second commandments concerning idolatry and rejection of the Lord should be recognized here. The jealousy of the Lord for the heart of his people is connected to his upholding of marriage more generally.

Once again, Jerusalem is compared to an animal, albeit this time to a well-endowed stallion desiring to copulate with no self-control. The question that all of this leads to in verse 9 intensifies the question of verse 7.

How can I pardon you? becomes, shall I not punish them? For the Lord not to punish such a city would seem to be a dereliction of his justice. It would be a winking at the gravest infidelity.

[8 : 11] Everything about Judah's conduct calls out for judgment without sparing. And in verse 10, the Lord sends out a new party, as it were, this time to search and destroy. The vine rows of a terraced vineyard correspond here to the streets of the first verse.

Israel is the vineyard of the Lord's planting, but now all of its branches must be stripped away. However, in the face of all of the reasons to place Judah under the most devastating and complete of judgments, the Lord draws back.

The party must not make a full end, even in the face of Judah's utter treachery. There is no reason for the mitigation of the city's judgment here. The earlier search party investigated closely and found no one.

The only reason why the Lord would refrain from bringing a devastating and final end is his own sheer mercy. The people have scorned the prospect of the Lord's judgment. The prophets have denied it, yet it will most certainly befall them.

Because the people have spoken falsely about the Lord, prophesying the empty claims that his judgment will not be forthcoming, the Lord will place his words in the mouth of Jeremiah, his messenger, making those words like fire and the people like kindling.

[9 : 22] Here we should recall Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 9 to 10. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. The words of the false prophet who declare peace are hot air, but the word of the Lord in the mouth of Jeremiah is like fire.

A connection between fire and the mouth of the prophet can be seen on various occasions in scripture. Isaiah's lips were touched by a burning coal by the Lord. Tongues of flame rested upon the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, igniting their tongues by the Spirit manifested in their speaking of different languages.

In Revelation chapter 11 verse 5, fire proceeds from the mouth of the two witnesses and consumes their enemies. Jeremiah's word will not prove vain.

The judgment that he declares will come to pass. The Lord describes the enemy that he is bringing upon Judah, a powerful and ancient nation, a people with a strange language, mighty in battle.

[10 : 34] They will consume Judah's produce. They will consume Judah's young people. They will consume their flocks and their herds. And the fortified cities in which Judah placed its confidence will be obliterated by this invading force.

Yet even when this judgment falls, it will be tempered by the mercy of the Lord, which will save the people from suffering their final end. There is a poetic justice to the Lord's judgment.

His people have forsaken him and served foreign gods in their land. So he will forsake them to serve foreigners in a land not their own. If they are so eager to serve the foreign gods, he will give them their fill of it.

In Psalm 115 verses 4 to 8, the psalmist declares of the pagan nations, Judah seems to have suffered this fate.

They have become as insensible as the idols that they worship. They have eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear. This is a common description of the people of God grown hard-hearted, stiff-necked, and dulled in their senses as a result of their sin.

[12 : 00] The Lord is the creator of the whole earth, the master of its greatest forces. Yet they do not fear him. They are utterly dependent upon his provision for the rains and the harvest, which have been withheld from them on account of their sins.

Yet still they brazenly continue in their rebellion, acting as if they were beyond the reach of their maker. They have committed themselves to the way of practical atheism, behaving as if there were no just or powerful God to judge them.

The concluding verses of the chapter present a searing indictment upon the predatory and cruel elite of the land, profiteering off their mistreatment of others, failing to bring justice to the needy and the oppressed, to the widow and the fatherless.

The society is a rotten one, one in which the evil prosper, and the poor are downtrodden. The corruption is pervasive. The prophets prophesy obliging lies that serve to bolster the injustice, while the priests, who should be upholding the law of the Lord, are legitimating the oppressors instead. And it isn't as if this stopped with the injustice of those in authority. The people themselves are utterly complacent and consenting towards such injustice, happily tolerating it.

[13 : 08] These aren't the actions of a hated tyranny, but of a nation where injustice, oppression, and predation meet with widespread popular support, because life is easier that way.

A society where the poor are not protected may be a society where goods are cheaper, or where it is easier to get one's way through bribery, corruption, and mistreatment of the vulnerable.

A society that has little regard for, or protections for the weak, greatly advantages the strong, who don't need to provide for, or intervene on behalf of others. Bringing justice to such a society would

