

Jeremiah 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 6 Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem. Blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and raise a signal on Beth-hacharim, for disaster looms out of the north, and great destruction.

The lovely and delicately bred I will destroy, the daughter of Zion. Shepherds with their flock shall come against her, they shall pitch their tents around her, they shall pasture each in his place, prepare war against her, arise and let us attack at noon.

Woe to us for the day declines, for the shadows of evening lengthen. Arise and let us attack by night, and destroy her palaces. For thus says the Lord of hosts, cut down her trees, cast up a siege mound against Jerusalem.

This is the city that must be punished, there is nothing but oppression within her. As a well keeps its water fresh, so she keeps fresh her evil. Violence and destruction are heard within her, sickness and wounds are ever before me.

Be warned, O Jerusalem, lest I turn from you in disgust, lest I make you a desolation, an uninhabited land. Thus says the Lord of hosts, they shall glean thoroughly as a vine, the remnant of Israel.

[1 : 13] Like a grape-gatherer, pass your hand again over its branches. To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen.

Behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn, they take no pleasure in it. Therefore I am full of the wrath of the Lord, I am weary of holding it in. Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the gatherings of young men also.

Both husband and wife shall be taken, the elderly and the very aged. Their houses shall be turned over to others, their fields and wives together. For I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, declares the Lord.

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace.

Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall, at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord.

[2 : 24] Thus says the Lord, Stand by the roads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk in it.

I set watchmen over you, saying, Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not pay attention. Therefore hear, O nations, and know, O congregation, what will happen to them. Hear, O earth, behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words, and as for my law, they have rejected it.

What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me.

Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble, fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.

[3 : 23] Thus says the Lord, Behold, a people is coming from the north country. A great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold on bow and javelin. They are cruel and have no mercy.

The sound of them is like the roaring sea. They ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle, against you, O daughter of Zion. We have heard the report of it.

Our hands fall helpless. Anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor. Go not out into the field, nor walk on the road, for the enemy has a sword.

Terror is on every side. O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes. Make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us. I have made you a tester of metals among my people, that you may know and test their ways. They are all stubbornly rebellious, going about with slanders. They are bronze and iron, all of them act corruptly.

[4 : 27] The bellows blow fiercely, the lead is consumed by the fire. In vain the refining goes on, for the wicked are not removed. Rejected silver they are called, for the Lord has rejected them.

Jeremiah chapter 6 continues the preceding chapter's warning about imminent judgment. The chapter opens with a description of a rapidly approaching army from the north, similar to those of preceding chapters.

The warning trumpet must be blown, signals must be sent to the watchmen. Disaster is almost upon them. A small window of opportunity remains to flee the doomed city.

However, the elite of the city, who have complacently lived with its injustice, face destruction. The prophet singles out the high-class women, who most powerfully symbolise the decadent indulgence of the unfaithful bride.

In their fashionable garments, and in their refined manners, they are also the fullest expression of a society that through its oppression has created a mask over that oppression, so that it might not be seen.

[5 : 30] They look delicate and lovely, but they are really rapacious and cruel. Isaiah chapter 3 verses 16 to 24 has a similar condemnation. The Lord said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet, therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts.

In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves, the headdresses, the armllets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets, the signet rings, and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils.

Instead of perfume there will be rotteness, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, boldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty.

As if in stark contrast to these women, the city will be surrounded by shepherds with their flocks. The besieging armies are described as if low-class keepers of sheep, who are about to displace and topple the wealthy and decadent.

We hear inside their camp, as they're preparing for war, they want to attack as soon as possible, to make the most of a day of battle, before the night comes. And then, when the night comes, they also want to attack her palaces.

[6 : 57] And verse 6 makes clear that these people are not acting upon their own initiative. The Lord is directing and encouraging them in their siege. He is urging them to set up the siege mound.

The city must be punished, and they are the instrument by which he will do so. She must be punished on account of her oppression and violence. The Lord declares of her, sickness and wounds are ever before me.

He has placed his name in the temple at the heart of this city, that is rotten through and through.

Indeed, the city is described, not just as something fresh that became rotten, but as something that keeps its rotteness fresh.

In the most startling of images, the city is described as like a well of fresh water. But instead of fresh water, what is held inside the city is evil itself. The Lord warns his people of the threat of approaching judgment.

The Babylonians will be like gleaners who come after the harvest. The greater company of the people of Israel, having already been harvested in judgment by the Assyrians, now the Babylonians will come to glean the remnant.

[8 : 00] These gleaners will be diligent in their task. They will pass their hand again over the branches that have been appointed to them. The Lord tries to warn his people, but no one hears. Their ears are uncircumcised.

Like their hearts, they are unfit for the covenant. They have not been rendered fit for use. They are disobedient and resistant. Like their idols, they have ears but cannot hear, eyes but cannot see. The word of the Lord itself has become an object of scorn to them. They dismiss and laugh at it. Jeremiah, as the prophet of the Lord, has been given to bear the word of the Lord. And the word of the Lord is bubbling away within him.

It is about to burst out upon the people. He feels the anger of the Lord against the unfaithfulness of the people. Although he tries to resist expressing it, he must bring it forth.

In speaking the word of the Lord, he pours out the wrath of the Lord upon all parts of the society of Jerusalem. The children in the street, the gatherings of the young men, husband and wife, elderly and aged.

[9 : 00] The people are afflicted with greed and avarice. They covet unjust gain and they deal falsely with each other and with the word of the Lord. And they will suffer a poetic judgment as a result.

If they are greedy for the houses, fields and wives of others, then their houses, fields and wives will be given into the hand of a greedy foreign nation. The allusions to the 10th commandment should not be missed here.

We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30. You shall betroth the wife, but another man shall ravish her. You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it.

You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit. The false dealing of priests and prophets is seen in the way that they handle the word of the Lord. They declare peace to the people of God. When there is no peace, perhaps desiring the praise and the reward of men, they do not speak out against the sin of the people. They have lost the capacity to bring the law and the prophetic word of the Lord to bear critically upon their social condition, with the result that they are inured in their sin, utterly shameless in their rebellion and iniquity.

[10 : 08] Verses 16 and 17 present us with two images of the Lord's challenge to his people. First of all, he calls them to go back to the ancient paths, the paths where the good way is.

Presumably, this is a reference to the law itself. The law is that which provides structure to Israel's life. It was the foundation of their society and in radically reconstituting the society of Judah upon it, they will find rest for their souls.

They will find restoration. But yet, when they hear the word of the Lord through the words of his prophets, they refuse it. We will not walk in it. The second image is that of watchmen, people warning of approaching danger, most particularly the prophets.

If the ancient paths are the law, the trumpet is the prophetic word. Yet, as with the word of the law, they resist this. They will not pay attention. The disaster that will come upon them will be the fruit of their own devices, the consequence, presumably the natural consequence of their course of life.

In addition to all of the other things that they have done, they have perverted the worship of the Lord, transforming it into something that anaesthetises them from the injustice of their society. With costly sacrifices, and impressive but empty rituals, they have established a form of religion that is perfectly tailored for a rich, decadent, and spiritually complacent society.

[11 : 29] Such a challenge to a cultically scrupulous, yet morally impure, and socially oppressive society is common in the prophets. The Lord wants mercy, not sacrifice.

In Isaiah chapter 1, verses 12 to 17, we find another example of such a challenge. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts?

Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath, and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good.

[12 : 28] Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. The practice of proper worship, though really important, is empty if not confirmed in actual practice.

Where this is forgotten, grand gestures and fine appearance in worship can become a replacement for the reality of a relationship with God. Beautiful buildings, grand liturgies, costly vestments, all of

these things become worse than worthless if they are not accompanied by holiness of life, faithfulness to the Lord, and justice to the neighbour.

In the absence of these, as in the case of Jerusalem, worship is so easily perverted into a complacency producing mask upon the reality of a sick and evil society.

Once again, in verses 22 and 23, the approaching enemy is described, this people from the north country. Their great power, an irresistible might, is like the sea that's approaching, about to sweep all before it.

Hearing reports of this approaching army, Jerusalem will recognise that it is beyond hope. They will be like a woman in labour, but not about to give birth. Indeed, they are called to mourn as for an only son.

[13 : 41] The one son that would have preserved the person's name and continued their legacy into the future has died, and the future is closed with them. The Lord put his word in the mouth of Jeremiah like fire, and now he is presented as the tester of metals among his people.

Through him, the Lord will undertake a refining process, through which the precious metal of a faithful people might hopefully emerge. Yet Jeremiah's task proves to be in vain.

It yields no positive fruit. The nation is discovered to be nothing but base metal, nothing but dross to be rejected by the Lord. A question to consider.

How does Jeremiah's critique of the perversion of the worship of the Lord help us to recognise how the sinful performance of worship can end up as part of the structural support for evil within a society?

