

Jeremiah 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Jeremiah chapter 9 O that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!

O that I had in the desert a traveller's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them, for they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land, for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord. Let everyone beware of his neighbour, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbour goes about as a slanderer.

Everyone deceives his neighbour, and no one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongue to speak lies. They weary themselves committing iniquity, heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit.

They refuse to know me, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will refine them and test them, for what else can I do because of my people?

[1:06] Their tongue is a deadly arrow. It speaks deceitfully. With his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbour, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him. Shall I not punish them for these things, declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?

I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard.

Both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled, and are gone. I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant.

Who is the man so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken, that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?

And the Lord says, Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice or walked in accord with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts, and have gone after the bales, as their fathers taught them.

[2:16] Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will feed this people with bitter food, and give them poisonous water to drink. I will scatter them among the nations, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider, and call for the mourning women to come, send for the skilful women to come. Let them make haste, and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids flow with water.

For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion. How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings. Hear, O women, the word of the Lord, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth.

Teach to your daughters a lament, and each to her neighbour a dirge. For death has come up into our windows. It has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets, and the young men from the squares.

Speak, thus declares the Lord, the dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none shall gather them.

[3:30] Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches. But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these things I delight, declares the Lord. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh, Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert, who cut the corners of their hair.

For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart. The pathos of the prophet Jeremiah's lament over his people continues in chapter 9.

He begins by expressing the remarkable desire that his whole head were waters, and that his eyes were a fountain, so that he would never be lacking tears to shed for the city of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, famous for his lamentation over the city of Jerusalem, in which he expresses his devastation at its horrific fate. In verses 2 and 3 we hear about the Lord's own distress.

[4 : 46] The Lord's heart is for his people, but yet they have rejected him, despised him, turned their backs on him, and provoked his indignation. In a most remarkable statement, the Lord expresses his desire that he might escape from his people.

If only he could shrug them off and move away from them, he could be relieved of the pain of seeing his people despising him day by day, their adulterous idolatries put straight in his face. The statement of the first half of verse 2 is very similar to Psalm 55 verses 6 to 8. And I say, Oh that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.

Yes, I would wander far away. I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest. The people have become defined by their adultery, by their treachery. They betray God and they betray each other. They have fashioned their tongues into an instrument of warfare. It serves only to deliver lies and slander. In place of truth, falsehood is becoming more and more entrenched in the land.

[5 : 48] They are growing in evil. Their evil developing to ever more mature forms. Underneath it all is their failure to know the Lord. Although they may take the Lord's name upon their lips, they do not seek his face.

In verses 4 to 6, the claims of verse 3 are unpacked further. Societies are built upon trust and upon truth. When these things fail, everything else starts to crumble.

In the Jerusalem of Jeremiah's day, the social fabric is rapidly unravelling. It is only a matter of time until such a city faces destruction. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

Other prophets describe a similar social condition. In Micah chapter 7 verses 5 to 6, for instance, Put no trust in a neighbour. Have no confidence in a friend.

Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms. For the son treats the father with contempt. The daughter rises up against her mother. The daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

[6 : 46] A man's enemies are the men of his own house. The unfaithfulness that the people have shown to the Lord is a symptom and a cause of a far deeper unfaithfulness that riddles the entire social fabric.

Everyone deceives and slanders his neighbour, speaks against his neighbour in order to advance himself. When deception and slander are the order of the day, words start to fail.

No one can trust the statements of his neighbour, always considering what ulterior motives they might have in saying things. What has been called a hermeneutic of suspicion becomes the standard way by which people's statements are judged.

No truth statement can be taken at face value. Every truth statement is really a veiled attempt to gain power for the speaker. The people accumulate oppression and deceit.

Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit. Earlier in verse 3, we were told that they did not know the Lord. Here we read that they refused to know the Lord.

[7 : 42] Their ignorance is a willful one. In verse 7, the Lord declares that he will test his people as a refiner tests the quality of metal. Earlier in chapter 6, verses 27 to 30, he had given Jeremiah this task.

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. 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.

It is the speech of the people by which they are most characterized. Isaiah talks about living among a people of unclean lips. Jeremiah lives among a people of deadly lips. Their tongues were described like bows in verse 3, and in verse 8, they are like deadly arrows.

People use their speech to lie in wait for their neighbor, speaking peace while calculating their destruction. One might perhaps see something of the poetic justice in the false peace that they speak to each other, and the false peace that their prophets speak to them as a doomed nation. [8 : 54] Most especially in the wisdom literature, the tongue is singled out as that which reveals the character of the heart. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Here, the revealed character of a violent, untrustworthy, and duplicitous people sets them apart for judgment.

Shall I not punish them for these things, declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? Jeremiah takes up the lamentation for the mountains and the pastures of the land.

Both have been laid waste, abandoned by man and beast. Even the sound of birds cannot be heard there anymore. Formerly populated lands are now utterly desolate. The Lord responds to the prophet's lamentation in verse 11 by declaring that Jerusalem itself will face such a judgment. Jerusalem itself will become one of the wild places, a haunt of jackals, as will the other cities of Judah. We have a lengthier description of such a judgment, upon Edom in this case, in Isaiah chapter 34 verses 9 to 15.

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur. Her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched. Its smoke shall go up for ever.

[10 : 06] From generation to generation it shall lie waste. None shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it. The owl and the raven shall dwell in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness. Its nobles, there is no one there to call it a kingdom, and all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses.

It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. And wild animals shall meet with hyenas. The wild goat shall cry to his fellow. Indeed, there the nightbird settles and finds for herself a resting place.

There the owl nests and lays and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow. Indeed, there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate. To those hearing this prophecy, it might sound baffling that the entire city of Jerusalem and all the surrounding cities of Judah might suffer quite such a devastating blow.

Surely there are the promises of God to his people. How can anyone make sense of this? In verses 13 and 14, we are given the answer. The people have forsaken the law.

[11 : 14] They have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, nor have they walked in the Lord's way. To this threefold negative judgment are added two positive reasons for which they have been judged. They have followed their own hearts stubbornly, pursuing autonomy rather than faithfulness to God's word.

They have also gone to serve other foreign gods, the Baals, persisting in the unfaithfulness and the idolatries of their fathers. In a fivefold judgment in verses 15 and 16, the Lord declares that he will pursue them until they are completely destroyed.

They must not be fooled. When devastation comes upon them, it will have come from the Lord's hand, not from some supposed independent force contrary to his will. The Lord instructs his people to prepare, as it were, for the funeral of the nation, summoning the mourning women, teaching their daughters a lament, and their neighbours a dirge.

Death has come upon them like a flood. There is no nook and cranny that it does not reach. The youngest child in the streets is not safe. The most powerful people in the palace cannot escape it. Bodies will fall on the open field, with the dishonour of dung itself. As the reaper of judgment comes upon them, their bodies will be abandoned like sheaves, with no one to pick them up and give them a proper burial.

[12 : 27] What is the source of people's confidence? In verses 23 and 24, the Lord shows the true source of confidence, placed in contrast with wrongful sources of confidence.

The wise man or the skilful man can boast in his skill and his wisdom. The mighty man can boast in his might. The rich man can boast in his riches. But none of these are a true source of boasting.

None of these give a ground for confidence that is reliable. Rather, the true source of boasting should be that the person knows the Lord, the God who is defined by his practice of steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth.

In earlier verses, the Lord castigated the people for their failure to know him, and also their refusal to know him. Here boasting is found in true knowledge of God, a knowledge of God from which the true worshipper will become like the God that they worship.

They too will practice steadfast love, justice and righteousness, the very practices that were most manifestly lacking in the life of the nation of Judah. The Apostle Paul references this chapter in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 28 to 31.

[13 : 35] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

The Judah of Jeremiah's day has been putting its trust in the temple, in the sacrifices, in its possession of the law, and more generally in their privilege of being the covenant people. Much as the Apostle Paul challenges the Jews of his day for their trust in circumcision, So the Lord through Jeremiah tells his people that their circumcision will be counted as uncircumcision if they are not faithful to the law.

They look to the nations round about them as uncircumcised, as outside of the covenant. Yet they themselves, while bearing the covenant sign, are uncircumcised in their heart.

In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 16, The reason for this is given in verse 17.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. Judah's possession of circumcision is not going to excuse it from the demands of the law.

[14 : 54] The Apostle Paul famously develops this point in Romans chapter 2 verses 25 to 29. For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

His praise is not from man, but from God. A question to consider. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, there is a challenge to the formalism of the people, the way that they go through the motions, the way that they trust in their possession of the law and circumcision, while not observing the law and circumcising their hearts, and the way that they put their faith in their sacrifices, when they are not obedient to the Lord.

Given their vulnerability to such mere formalism, what benefit, if any, is there to possession of circumcision, the law, the temple and the sacrifices?