

Jeremiah 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Jeremiah chapter 12. Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you, yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?

You plant them, and they take root. They grow and produce fruit. You are near in their mouth and far from their heart. But you, O Lord, know me. You see me and test my heart toward you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it, the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, He will not see our latter end.

If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?

For even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you. They are in full cry after you. Do not believe them, though they speak friendly words to you.

[1:07] I have forsaken my house. I have abandoned my heritage. I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies. My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest. She has lifted up her voice against me.

Therefore I hate her. Is my heritage to me like a hyena's lair? Are the birds of prey against her all around? Go, assemble all the wild beasts. Bring them to devour. Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard.

They have trampled down my portion. They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. They have made it a desolation. Desolate it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart.

Upon all the bare heights in the desert, destroyers have come. For the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other. No flesh has peace. They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns.

They have tired themselves out, but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests, because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Thus says the Lord concerning all my evil neighbours, who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit.

[2:18] Behold, I will pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his heritage, and each to his land.

And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, as the Lord lives, even as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people.

But if any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the Lord.

Jeremiah chapter 12 begins with a powerful question of theodicy, the question of God's justice in the face of evil.

Issues of theodicy are very much at the centre of the book of Job, but the issue is also raised at several points in the Psalms and also in the prophets. Here the issue of theodicy takes the very particular form of asking why the wicked prosper.

This is a question that we find raised by some of the psalmists. Psalm 37 verses 1 to 11, for instance. Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.

[3:32] Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him, and he will act.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices.

Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

In just a little while the wicked will be no more. Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant peace.

In this psalm, although the wicked are prospering, the message of the psalmist is fundamentally optimistic, confident that such a situation is short-lived, and that the Lord will soon reverse it.

[4 : 33] The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 verses 1 to 14 is slightly more challenging. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled.

My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

They are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness.

Their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked.

[5 : 30] Always at ease. They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean, and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken, and rebuked every morning.

The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 is a lot closer to the experience of Jeremiah here. This passage follows on the heels, and probably continues, the complaint of Jeremiah concerning his opponents in Anathoth, his own hometown.

They have engaged in a conspiracy against him. But the point here seems to be concerned with something broader than just the conspiracy. It's the prospering of the wicked more generally. Jeremiah begins by affirming the righteousness of the Lord.

That is the basic premise of everything that follows. But yet he raises a complaint immediately following. An accusation. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are all who are treacherous thrive?

And the point is made keener in the verse that follows. God is the one that plants them. They do not just happen to thrive. The prophet believes that the Lord is sovereign in the events of history.

[6 : 33] And so when they thrive and produce fruit and grow and spread out, the Lord is not just passively letting that happen. He is providing and maintaining the conditions by which that situation can be the case.

They are wicked. They are treacherous. And also they are duplicitous. God is in their mouths. They confess his name. But their hearts are far from him. By contrast, the prophet knows that his heart is set upon the Lord.

And the Lord knows his heart. He calls for the Lord to act against them. He has been brought as a sheep towards the slaughter, unknowingly being caught up by their plots before the Lord made it known to him.

He calls for them to be pulled out like sheep for the slaughter, that what they sought for him, that it might come back upon their own heads. The whole land is suffering on account of these people's sin.

Jeremiah calls for the Lord to act in this situation, to vindicate his righteousness. There is, as long as this situation continues, some cognitive dissonance that the prophet feels.

[7 : 33] The Lord is righteous, as he has proclaimed at the beginning of the chapter, but yet the Lord is overseeing a situation that is clearly not just. As long as such a situation continues, the prophet will feel the great tension.

Having heard Jeremiah's complaint, what might we expect next? Maybe a comforting word from the Lord that he will bring justice to bear upon these unfaithful people, that he will vindicate his righteousness and avenge his servant.

But that is not what we hear. Rather, the prophet's discomfort will be intensified. If he feels as though he is in a wearying foot race with human beings, he must brace himself to compete with horses.

If he is struggling in a safe land, how will he cope when he is placed in the jungle with the wild beasts? The men of Anathoth have conspired against him. But it is not just the men of Anathoth. His own brothers, and members of his own father's household, have risen against him. They have joined the conspiracy. He is left altogether without anyone to trust, and he must cast himself wholly upon the Lord.

[8 : 37] As in the book of Job, the questions of theodicy placed before the Lord are not actually answered. Rather, the believer needs to learn to trust God in the continuing and the deepening darkness.

There is no assurance of near relief. Some response to the concerns of the prophet are found in the next speech. In verses 7-13, the Lord announces judgment upon his people.

These verses open with a threefold statement. There is an escalation here.

A movement from forsaking the house, the temple, abandoning the heritage, the land, and the people, and then giving up the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.

With that last in the sequence, we feel something of the divine pathos. The Lord has given up his very bride into the hand of those who would destroy her. Why has he done this?

[9 : 33] We are made to feel something of the pain of the Lord in the verses that follow. His inheritance, his people, his bride, has become to him like a lion in the forest. She roars against him like a wild beast seeking to take another's life.

In verse 9, Judah is compared either to a hyena's lair or to a speckled bird. If it is a reference to a speckled bird of prey, then there is a neat reversal in the statement that follows.

Are the birds of prey against her all around? The birds of prey, her natural companions, are now turning against her. And just as she was compared also to a wild beast, a lion of the forest, now the wild beasts are assembled against her, brought in to devour her.

All of this is an expression of the fact that the Lord hates his people because of their sin. They become like a predator towards him, and so his wrath turns against them, and he brings judgment upon them.

Many shepherds have come to destroy his vineyard. While this might be a reference to the kings of Judah who have been unfaithful and destroyed the vineyard of the Lord's planting, it might rather be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar and the kings and officials accompanying him in the first attack upon Jerusalem in 597 BC.

[10 : 46] The result of this attack is to render Jerusalem and the land a desolation. It's preserved in this desolate state. But yet, even though the Lord's hand was involved in all of this, Judah has not reflected upon the lesson brought by this judgment, or sought to repent.

The result of the Lord's judgment is a sort of reversion to chaos. They sow wheat and they reap thorns. The land does not yield its fruit in the way that they would hope. They have been cut off from the blessings of the Lord.

This chapter ends with a remarkable oracle. Although it seems to be placed far later in Jeremiah's ministry, it continues the theme of heritage that we've seen in the chapter to this point.

It refers to the fate of both Judah and the other nations after Judah's exile has been completed. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was told, 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.

That statement in Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 10 is not hard to see in the background of this great statement concerning the uprooting and replanting of nations. Those who have been involved in the uprooting of Judah will themselves be uprooted.

[11 : 59] And Judah will be uprooted from among them and brought back to their own land.

However, a return to the land is not for Judah alone. Other nations will also be blessed with a return to their lands.

And there will be a reversal of the course that history had taken to that point. Prior to that point, Israel and Judah had learned the ways of the nations and as a result had gone into exile.

Now the nations would learn the ways of the Lord's people. They would learn to swear by the Lord's name, where once the nations had taught Israel and Judah to swear by Baal. Taught in such a way, they would be built up if they were faithful.

If they were not faithful, they would be utterly and completely plucked up and destroyed. Here we could see an analogy with the way that the Lord dealt with the nations that were planted in Israel after the destruction of the northern kingdom.

Although those nations ended up adopting a form of syncretism, the Lord dealt with them in a way that, in the longer term, would encourage them to learn something of the way of his people, to enter into some form of relationship with him.

[13:01] Such grace would be shown to various other nations, with the intended result that not only Israel and Judah would be restored, but many other nations around them and through their influence.

Zechariah chapter 14 verses 16 to 19 also speaks of a grander restoration. Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths.

And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain.

There shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt, and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.

A question to consider. Where in the book of Jeremiah to this point have we seen other such statements of grace towards the surrounding nations?