

Jeremiah 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 24 And the Lord said to me, What do you see, Jeremiah?

I said, Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans.

I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

But thus says the Lord, Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.

[1 : 42] Jeremiah chapter 24 likely begins a new section of the book, after the material related to the kings and the prophets in chapters 21 to 23. The historical context of this chapter is between the first deportation to Babylon in 597 BC, and the second deportation in 586.

King Jehoiakim, also called Caniah or Jeconiah, his officials, his craftsmen, and other leading figures in the land, had all been taken away and were in exile, never to see the land of Judah again. And now Zedekiah, his uncle, is on the throne of Judah. He will be the last of the kings before the final exile. The first deportation had left Judah without many of the people who would be useful in warfare.

The kingdom as it remains is very weak. The vision that the Lord shows to Jeremiah here has two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. Perhaps these are actual figs that the Lord is directing Jeremiah's attention to, or they may just be within a vision.

That they are placed before the temple of the Lord suggests that they might be offerings, perhaps the first fruits of some worshippers. However, these figs need to be inspected, as they are of clearly contrasting quality.

[2 : 51] Jeremiah notes that one of the baskets is full of very good figs, first ripe figs. The other basket, however, has extremely bad figs that are completely inedible. Part of the background that we must consider for this prophecy is the fact that Judah is the tree of the Lord's planting, and the Lord wants fruit from it.

The inspection in this vision, then, would very naturally fit with the Lord's inspection of his people and their works. If you were to consider the two groups of Jews, those who had been deported from Judah to Babylon in 597 BC with Jehoiachin, and those associated with Zedekiah who were still in the land, or those who had gone to Egypt, you would presumably think that the latter were the more fortunate ones.

In escaping the deportation, the Lord had clearly shown some mercy upon them, sparing them from the fate that their fellow Jews who had been deported to Babylon had suffered. Yet the vision the Lord gives to Jeremiah here turns this picture on its head.

The actual good figs are the Babylonian exiles, not those still in Judah, or those who have escaped to Egypt. In describing them as the good figs, the Lord does not seem to be making a statement about their moral character.

Jehoiachin and the men with him were not righteous men. However, those who remained were worse, and a greater judgment awaited them. In referring to Jehoiachin and those around him as the good figs, the Lord is making a statement about their fate, not so much their current moral character.

[4 : 12] He says that he will regard them as good, and this is because he has set his eyes upon them for good. He is going to restore them. The language of Jeremiah's commission back in chapter 1 recurs here.

I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up. The promise given concerning the good figs here is essentially the promise of the new covenant. The Lord will give them a heart to know that he is the Lord.

This had been the failure of the kings. They had not known the Lord in the way that they had failed to exercise justice and righteousness. But when they return to the land, there will be righteousness and justice among them.

This will ultimately be achieved, not by the repentance that the people themselves will initiate, but by the Lord's gracious work towards them. Such a promise is also found in Ezekiel chapter 11 verses 17 to 21.

Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations, and I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them.

[5 : 19] I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God. A few chapters later, in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34, Jeremiah will give his famous prophecy concerning the new covenant.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

[6 : 29] This promise goes back a long way, that the Lord would take the initiative after their exile, restore their heart, and bring them back to the land. In Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6, the failure of Israel to keep the covenant is foretold, but also their restoration after exile.

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. The hope of Judah lies not in the city of Jerusalem, not in those who are still the remnant within the land, but far away in the land of Babylon.

As for those still in the land, they are like the bad figs that are completely inedible. Zedekiah, his officials, and all the remnant of Jerusalem are fit only to be spat out of the land.

[8 : 00] Those who did not follow the Lord's instruction and went to take refuge in Egypt will also be lost. Israel was called to be a light to the world, and however Israel lived its life, it would serve as a spectacle to the surrounding nations.

If they were faithful, the nations would be amazed at their wisdom. If they were unfaithful, the peoples would see God's justice in judging them. Here the remnant of Jerusalem will suffer that fate with Zedekiah their leader.

Their fate will become an object of comment for all the nations of the world. There is an accumulation of terms here. There will be a horror, a reproach, a byword, a taunt, a curse. People will comment upon the judgment that they have suffered, and consider what they must have done to have suffered such a dreadful fate. The terms we read here are found elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, along with other ones like desolation, a curse word, a ruin, an object of hissing. All of this fulfills the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 37. And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.

[9 : 08] A question to consider. The people who were taken away to Babylon with Jehoiakim are described as good figs, because the Lord has set his eyes upon them for good. They were deported on account of their sins, but yet can still be described as good.

The description of them as good seems to anticipate what God is going to do with them. He is going to give them the heart to know that he is the Lord, and they will be his people, he will be their God, the famous covenant formula.

They will return to him with their whole heart. These are good figs, but they are figs that have been made good by the Lord. How might reflecting upon this help us better to understand our standing before God?

