

Jeremiah 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 16 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 15 Then the Lord said to me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go.

And when they ask you, Where shall we go? You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, and those who are for the sword to the sword, those who are for famine to famine, and those who are for captivity to captivity.

I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord, the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy.

And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem. Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem?

Or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord. You keep going backward. So I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you.

[1 : 0 4] I am weary of relenting. I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land. I have bereaved them. I have destroyed my people. They did not turn from their ways.

I have made their widows more in number than the sand of the seas. I have brought against the mothers of young men a destroyer at noonday. I have made anguish and terror fall upon them suddenly.

She who bore seven has grown feeble. She has fainted away. Her son went down while it was yet day. She has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies, declares the Lord.

Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land. I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me.

The Lord said, Have I not set you free for their good? Have I not pleaded for you before the enemy in the time of trouble and in the time of distress? Can one break iron, iron from the north, and bronze?

[2 : 0 4] Your wealth and your treasures I will give as spoil, without price, for all your sins throughout all your territory. I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know.

For in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever. O Lord, you know. Remember me and visit me. And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.

In your forbearance take me not away. Know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them. And your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.

For I am called by your name, O Lord God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice. I sat alone because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation.

Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail? Therefore, thus says the Lord, if you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me.

[3 : 09] If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you. For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Chapter 15 of Jeremiah continues the material of chapter 14 concerning the drought, and Jeremiah's prayers for the people, which the Lord rejected.

The Lord instructed Jeremiah not to pray for the people, in chapter 7 verse 16, in chapter 11 verse 14, and in chapter 14 verse 11. The Lord begins the chapter by declaring that even were Moses and Samuel to stand up and pray for the people, he would not listen to them.

Moses and Samuel were the great intercessors of Israel. Most famously, after Israel's sin with the golden calf, Moses had interceded for the people, in chapter 32 to 34 of the book of Exodus.

[4 : 16] This was one of several occasions when Moses stood between the people and the Lord, interceding for them and sparing them from the Lord's destruction. In 1 Samuel chapter 7 and 12, Samuel serves a similar purpose, interceding for the people before the Lord, that he would deliver them from their enemies.

As paradigmatic prophets, Moses was the one by whom Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, and established for the first time as a nation. Samuel was the prophet who stood at the foundation of the kingdom.

In Hosea chapter 12 verse 13, it seems that the prophet is referring to these two characters. By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was guarded.

However, on account of their sin, the people are expelled from the Lord's sight. His heart won't turn to them. The language here is similar to the language of expulsion from Pharaoh's presence in the story of the Exodus, but now they are expelled from the presence of the Lord.

Four forms of destruction are assigned to them. Pestilence, sword, famine, and captivity. This is similar to the four horsemen of the apocalypse in the book of Revelation. There seems to be a connection between the number four and such judgments.

[5 : 26] We see a similar thing in Ezekiel chapter 14 verse 21. For thus says the Lord God, After the four forms of destruction mentioned, there are four destroyers, the sword, dogs, birds, and beasts, with four modes of destruction that they come with, killing, tearing, devouring, and destroying.

Creatures usually ruled or wielded by man are going to turn against their master and destroy. And all of this is occurring on account of the wickedness of Manasseh. This is a common theme in the books of the kings.

2 Kings chapter 23 verse 26. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.

In 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 3 and 4. Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed.

For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon. In verse 5 the Lord takes up a lament for Jerusalem. No one now is concerned for Jerusalem's peace.

[6 : 48] But Jerusalem has rejected the Lord, and so he has destroyed them. He did not initiate the break. They did, by their unfaithfulness. The Lord's hand is now stretched out, not in salvation, but in judgment upon them.

He relented many times, to no real change on Judah's part, and now he is weary of doing so. Verses 7 to 9 present a litany of judgments that the Lord brought upon them, all to no effect.

They have been winnowed, bereaved, destroyed. Their widows have been multiplied. A destroyer has been brought against them. And the effect of this judgment is described in verse 9.

The one who was born seven has grown feeble. The woman with a full household loses all her children to war. The woman with seven children is also used as an image of prosperity.

In 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 5, Jeremiah turns to the Lord at this point.

[8 : 01] He regrets his birth. He is a cause of vexation to the land, but not in a way that has provoked any repentance on their part. Like another famous sufferer in scripture, Job in Job chapter 3, he declares a woe upon the day of his birth and the mother who bore him.

He will return to this theme in chapter 20 verses 14 to 18, in even stronger language. Cursed be the day on which I was born, the day when my mother bore me. Let it not be blessed.

Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father. A son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity. Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb.

So my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame? Jeremiah declares himself innocent of any wrong towards his enemies.

He is not a usurer. He is not a debtor who fails to repay. Rather, he is the bearer of a deeply unpopular message, a message that is provoking anger and opposition, but the message of the Lord that he is faithfully bearing.

[9 : 11] The Lord had appointed him as a prophet for the people's benefit and good. The Lord had delivered him from his opponents as well. Here our minds should be drawn back to the call of Jeremiah in chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. 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.

The Lord has stood by Jeremiah against his opposition, as he had promised back in chapter 1 verses 17 to 19. But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. The people might be like iron, but Jeremiah is iron from the north, the toughest iron available, iron most likely made in Pontus in northeast Asia Minor.

[10 : 21] Judah's wealth will be taken by her enemies, as will her sons. This returns to the judgment being declared prior to Jeremiah's lament. Verses 15 to 18 contain another lament of the prophet, one of the confessions of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah acknowledges the Lord's knowledge of him and of his situation, but he calls the Lord to take note of it, and in his forbearance to spare him. He wants deliverance from the Lord, but he also wants vengeance upon his enemies.

He is suffering as the Lord's faithful servant, for the Lord's sake. He ate the Lord's words. The Lord had placed his words on his mouth back in chapter 1 verse 9. This is similar to the experience of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 8 to chapter 3 verse 3.

The reference to the words of the Lord that were found might be a reference to the words of the book of the Lord discovered in the temple.

Jeremiah delighted in the words of the Lord. He was like the righteous man of Psalm 1. He did not sit with the revelers who were celebrating, but he was filled with indignation on the Lord's account, on account of the rebellious people.

[12 : 08] And now he turns to the Lord about the pain that he is feeling in his vocation. The word of the Lord has become painful to bear, and no relief seems to be offered to him. Is God's word as a deceptive stream?

Has God called him just to increase his pain beyond his bearing? The Lord responds by recalling Jeremiah to his task. He must return, and he will be restored in his mission.

He will stand before the Lord once again as his prophet. He will utter the words of the Lord, and he will be as God's own mouthpiece. As commentators note, there is a play here upon the term turn.

Walter Brueggemann translates it as follows. If you will return, I will return you. And then, they will turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. The Lord repeats the promise that he gave to Jeremiah at the beginning.

He will make Jeremiah to the people like a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against him, but they will not prevail against him. The Lord has placed his words in the mouth of Jeremiah, and the Lord will stand by his words against all who oppose Jeremiah.

[13 : 10] Jeremiah may think that he stands alone, but the Lord is with him in his corner, to save him and to deliver him. In some ways, we could read the experience here of Jeremiah as an anticipation of the experience of a faithful remnant in exile.

Jeremiah is already in exile. He is cut off from his people. He is facing their resistance and opposition. But the Lord is with him in this condition, and the Lord stands by him against all these enemies that are arrayed against him.

None of them will prevail. A question to consider. Reflecting upon the pain of the prophet Jeremiah, what might we be expected to learn?