

# Jeremiah 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 18 January 2021

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Jeremiah chapter 17. The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron. With a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, while their children remember their altars and their asherim, beside every green tree, and on the high hills, on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil, as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and 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. Thus says the Lord, Cursed is the man who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it?

I, the Lord, search the heart, and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds. Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by justice. In the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool. A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame. Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed. Save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise.

Behold, they say to me, Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come. I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips.

It was before your face. Be not a terror to me. You are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but let me not be put to shame. Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed. Bring upon them the day of disaster. Destroy them with double destruction.

[ 2 : 4 4 ]     Thus said the Lord to me, Go and stand in the people's gate, by which the kings of Judah enter, and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates.

Thus says the Lord, Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem, and do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath, or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers. Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffen their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction.

But if you listen to me, declares the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy, and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes, who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And this city shall be inhabited for ever. And people shall come from the cities of Judah, and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shefala, from the hill country, and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden, and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and shall not be quenched.

Jeremiah chapter 17 begins with another indictment of rebellious Judah. The law of God was supposed to be placed upon the heart, and later in chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, it will be written in the heart by the Spirit. The heart is supposed to be analogous to the Ark of the Covenant, the inner secret place where the Lord's throne is found, and where his law is treasured. Yet on Judah's heart, and on the horns of Judah's altars, its sin is written instead. It has been engraved with a diamond-tipped iron stylus. The altar was a place where things were presented to the Lord, and the horns of the altar were places for atoning blood. The heart is the core of the human person, where their deepest commitments, loyalties, and loves can be found. Judah's heart, however, is a sort of inversion of the law. It's a deep engraving of sin, and the horns of Judah's altars, that should bear the atoning blood that leads the Lord to forgive their sin, now bear indelible testimony to their iniquity, calling not for forgiveness, but for judgment. Children were a further repository of memory, as the people taught their offspring the law and God's great deeds. But the children have been taught the ways of the idols, rather than those of the Lord. As a consequence of Judah's idolatry, their wealth and their treasures will be given to their enemies as spoil, and they will lose their possession of the land that they have defiled. The disaster that will befall them is a direct consequence of their persistence and sin. Verse 5 takes the form of one of the curses of

Deuteronomy chapter 27 to 28. A curse is declared upon the man who trusts in man's own strength and the strength of flesh. This might anticipate some of Paul's distinctions between flesh and spirit.

[ 6 : 11 ]      Flesh is a site of wrongful human confidence. The true confidence of the people of God must be in the Lord. In verses 6 to 8, we have a comparison between human beings and trees. Human beings more generally are like trees. They draw nutrients from their surroundings. They need to be planted in good locations if they are to thrive. However, if they're well planted, they can thrive, become strong, endure trials, and provide security and resources to others. The contrast here is between a desert shrub that lacks the conditions to thrive, and a tree that's planted beside waters. Behind this, we might hear the words of Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does he prospers. Psalm 1 goes on to draw a contrast between the righteous and the wicked, but the wicked there are compared not to desert shrubs, but to chaff. In the contrast here in Jeremiah, perhaps the greatest feature that stands out of the righteous person is his preparedness for the difficult times, for when the heat comes, or in the year of drought, it is in the time of testing that the true character of a person is revealed. The hidden network of roots by which the tree drinks in water and brings up nutrients provides the strength and the stability that is displayed when the tree can withstand the fastest winds or the harshest conditions.

Once again in verse 9, the dysfunctional heart is seen to be the root of humanity's problems more generally, and of Judah's in particular. The heart is ill and it's deceitful. At the core of the human being is the sickness of sin, disease desires, cancerous attachments, core problems of which wicked deeds are the evidencing symptoms. Besides its illness, the heart is also mysterious and duplicitous.

Its ways are difficult to discern. We can't figure it out or master it. Jeremiah might also be speaking about his own heart here, along with the situation of the heart of Judah. God, however, understands the human heart. He searches it out and tests it. He reveals its true character. He is also the one who will judge the hearts and minds of all according to their works. We should entrust ourselves to God, as he can understand us. He can discern who we truly are, and we should beware of resting too much upon our own judgments concerning our hearts. Rather, we should take our bearings from God's own guidance.

The psalmist presents this truth in Psalm 139 verses 23 to 24 without the same despairing tone of the prophet here. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Also in 1 John chapter 3 verses 19 to 20.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our heart before him. For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Verse 11 is a wisdom saying, perhaps a traditional proverb. A number of possible suggestions have been put forward for what is meant here. Maybe the partridge steals young from other birds, or maybe it hatches birds that it hasn't laid. If this were the case, it might be a reference to the male partridge. Others have suggested the possibility that it fails to hatch the eggs that it has. The proverb likely draws upon ancient understandings of the behaviour of partridges, some of it possibly misguided. The point of Jeremiah is not to comment upon the behaviour of partridges, but to use the analogy of the partridge to speak about some of the sins of Judah. Perhaps the point is that just like the bird that has chicks not its own, the man who has riches gained by dishonesty will find that those riches abandon him in time.

[10:11] Riches apart from wisdom and integrity are short-lasting. The point here then might be similar to one that we encounter in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs chapter 21 verses 5 to 7 for instance, The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.

The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a snare of death. The violence of the wicked will sweep them away because they refuse to do what is just. Whether for nations or for individuals, the true character of people will ultimately be revealed. One cannot indefinitely avoid the consequences of your action and the exposure of your true character. In verses 12 to 18, or perhaps only 13 to 18, we have another one of the confessions of Jeremiah. He addresses the throne of God, the Lord's throne in heaven. Even in Jerusalem's distress, Jeremiah can turn to this higher throne.

The Lord is the one in whom the true people of God place their hope and the one by whom their future is secured. Those who reject him will be ashamed and dismayed. Written in the earth here likely contrasts with expressions like written in the book of life. It might also refer simply to death.

The dismay that they suffer is a result of their forsaking of the source of life. The Lord is the fountain of living water. Jeremiah calls out to the Lord for his effective healing and salvation.

He's being marked and dismissed by the people around him, yet he's been faithful in his charge. He calls the Lord to bear witness to his integrity in performing his prophetic calling, praying that in the day of judgment he will be vindicated and that those who persecute and dismiss him will be put to shame. The chapter ends on another surprising note as Jeremiah is instructed to stand in the gates and speak to people as they enter the city. In particular, he's supposed to speak to them concerning their Sabbath breaking. The Sabbath was the great sign of the covenant given at Sinai.

[ 12 : 05 ] It was a chief sign marking Israel out as a people who had been released from slavery, from the cruelty of their labors, being given rest, and who had been called to give rest and liberty to others.

Carrying on business as usual on the Sabbath day in Jerusalem was a failure to honor the covenant sign that the Lord had given at Sinai. Along with the commandment to honor father and mother, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy was one of only two positive commandments situated at the very heart of the ten words. Repeatedly in the book of Jeremiah, Judah's sin is identified as flowing in large part from a failure of memory. Judah's failure to remember the Sabbath, to set apart this one day as holy, led to wide-ranging failures in their understanding of the covenant and of their understanding of the creator God's sovereignty over their time. The people of Judah are presented by Jeremiah with great promise. If they honor the Sabbath day, if they keep it holy and don't work on it, then the glory shall be returned to the kingdom of Judah. Treasures and great riches will be brought into the city from round about, but if they fail to keep it, then great judgment will come upon Jerusalem and its people. Nehemiah, in a post-exilic context, shows the same concern for the observance of the Sabbath day in Jerusalem and the same struggle with people who are failing to do so.

This is particularly clear in Nehemiah chapter 13. We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 verses 33 to 35 here. A question to consider.

Where else in Scripture can we find parallels to Jeremiah's discussion of the sickness and the duplicity of the heart?