

Today we see the intense agony of Jeremiah, as he contemplated the people he loved being ruined by their own sins.

The natural response to the stubbornness of the people is anger. But the dominant emotion of this section is panic for the people, and grief for God's prophet and grief for God Himself.

We have all experienced this sort of grief, haven't we? A person you love sinning and therefore is doing damage to himself or herself. We grieve.

Jeremiah was overwhelmed with internal conflict. On the one hand, Jeremiah loved the people. On the other hand, Jeremiah was loyal to God and God's commands, knowing that it was right for God to judge them for their sins.

We take too lightly the sin of lying. Think of the 10 commandments. If you were to write the 10 commandments, we would put murder and adultery, and stealing. But would we put "not lying" as one of the top 10 sins that do the most damage? 9th commandment "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." God has something for us to learn about the damage of lying and deceit.

Maybe the worst kind of deceit is the kind where we deceive ourselves. SI - A school teacher lost her life savings in a business scheme that had been elaborately explained to her by a scammer. When her investment disappeared and her dream was shattered, then she went to the Better Business Bureau. "Why didn't you come to us first?" the official asked. "Didn't you know about the Better Business Bureau?" "Oh, yes," said the lady sadly. "I've always known about you. But I didn't come to you first, because I was afraid you'd tell me not to invest the money." The lady believed she could get rich, despite knowing that it was a lie.

Jeremiah experienced a crushing grief over the damage of deceit in the people.

1. Jeremiah grieved that no help could be found for the people's deceit which led them into idolatry and consequently - pain. (8:18 -22).

The beginning verse in our passage, verse 18, seems to pick up the concept from verse 17. That the judgment of God was the snakes biting the people. The result is Jeremiah's first words in verse 18. "*My joy is gone; grief is upon me...*"

It seems that the snake bite was fatal. The people seem beyond recovery. Jeremiah is overtaken by a crushing grief.

Verse 19, Since the city of God is being attacked, then the people ask where is God? But when we dig deeper, we understand that it is God who is the one sending the attackers, because of the sin of the people. The people expect God to save them because this is God's city, and God has His King in His city, and so God was behind schedule, according to the people! God responded with expectations of His own. Verse 19, God asked, "*Why have they provoked Me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?*" There are 3 questions. If A, and if B, then C.

A: since it is true that the LORD is in Zion

B: since it is also true that the King is "in the house"

then C: the truth also follows that the people should serve God, and not serve foreign idols.

In other words, what did they expect God to do while they insisted on staying in their continuous idolatry? Since they persistently turned from God, why should God come to their aid? Back in Jeremiah 2:27, they turn their back to God, and then in a time of trouble they say to God, "*Arise and save us!*"

The people had a huge deceit in their view of the holy place of the city of God, and what it meant. The people expected God to forgive and heal them by a certain date on the calendar, whether or not the people had turned from their sins.

Verse 20, there is haunting poetry. Seasons come and seasons go. And by the end of a season, there is action required. If the summer has ended and you did not bring in your cucumbers, then it is too late. Later, when the harvest has passed, then you can no longer bring in the pumpkins either. There will be no pumpkins in January. What does the poem mean? It means you have to act at the right time.

It works both ways. The people needed to repent during repenting season, and God needed to save during saving season.

God would need to save them before the attackers destroyed the city and brought them into exile. Here is the thing to realize. God was not merely late. God was not coming at all.

So Jeremiah is grieving. And God is grieving. Which one is grieving in verse 21. Is it God or Jeremiah who is the I and Me of verse 21, "*For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.*"

God Himself is breaking down in agonizing sorrow. God Himself is crushed and wounded of heart, and is mourning, and dismay has taken hold of God. Why is

God grieving? Because of the violence inflicted on His people. Again the words of verse 21, *“for the wound OR because of the wound of the daughter of My people, is my heart wounded.”*

Can nothing be done? Is it really too late? Wait, this is God. God is grieving! Wait, why can't God do something?

This is where verse 22 comes in with that the famous phrase about the balm in Gilead. Please notice where it is couched. It is packed within that same set of 3 logical questions that we just saw in verse 19. Since A is true and, since B is true, then C is true. A: since there is balm in Gilead, for anything is possible with God, and B: since there is a doctor in the house, namely God then C: it is also true that the people should be healed and restored, right? A: since there is a God who heals and B: since God lives in that city with His people then C: it is also true that God should heal the people, right? But God is grieving. That brings us to 2nd point.

2. Jeremiah could not stop grieving, because they heaped deceit upon deceit. (9:1-6).

Verse 1, God is dissolving in tears over all of the dead bodies. Jeremiah wanted to weep all day. So did God. Listen to verse 1, *“Oh, that my head were waters, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of My people!”*

Yet in verse 2, Jeremiah wants to leave the people. But they are still the people Jeremiah loves, for Jeremiah still calls them “my people.” It seems that Jeremiah is holding his head in his hands and sobbing through the tears, “My people, my people, my poor, poor people.” Jeremiah is a picture of God weeping.

God reacts to sin in anger. We got that. But God also reacts to sin in grief and pain. These go together.

God takes action in both terrible anger and desperate grief simultaneously and appropriately. Anyone who has seen the breakdown of a marriage will agree. Love leads a person to have both intense anger and intense sadness. God is married to His people. We have seen in the book of Jeremiah how the relationship between God and His people was described as beginning with a honeymoon, and suffering a divorce, before God would mend it. Both anger and tears. Yes.

We knew there was riches in the book of Jeremiah!

Verse 1 was a longing for a head full of enough water for the tears that need to be shed for the suffering of the people. Verse 2 is a longing for something

entirely different. Verse 2 is the longing to get away from the people, because of their corrupt ways.

Who is speaking? Is it Jeremiah, wanting to get away from the people, or is it God wanting to get away from the people? It is God. We know that from the end of verse 3, which says, “*declares The LORD.*” God is saying the unthinkable in order to show the people that they were saying the unthinkable. It is a fearful thought to even imagine that God would want to leave His people. It is not an intention that God would ever carry out. God would judge those who turned away from Him, and God would discipline His people, but God would never abandon His commitment. Remember the commitment that God made to Abraham – I will be your God, and you shall be My people. That is a truth of God’s character.

What does it mean? That the people had become rotten to the core, filled with lies. They have the opposite of the character of God. Listen to verse 3, “*‘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.*” How could God be expected to remain as their God, without speaking to them about this, using the strongest terms?

This is describing social breakdown. The whole culture became a swamp of slander, spin and smears.

Jeremiah warns them in verse 4, “*Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer.*”

Human friendships cannot endure the constant presence of cheating. Even the bonds of families, extended families and immediate families, cannot outlast the evils of the art form of ever-present lying. Words become weapons to wound and entrap others.

Listen to the corrosive and pervasive nature of the problem in that ancient society in verse 5, “*Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity.*” Deceit is everywhere, in everyone. They hone their skills of lying. They put a lot of effort into the iniquity that they can accomplish by deception.

Verse 6 is God’s summary of the scene, “*‘Heaping oppression upon oppression and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know Me,’ declares The LORD.*”

Their culture believed that God and God’s law does not need to be known or followed, in order for a country to carry on business as usual. It was a widespread and public atheism.

3. God Himself joined Jeremiah in grieving at the widespread damage of their deceitful speaking. (9:7-11).

Deceitful societies are quick to say that God is not fair.

Listen to God's response in verse 7, *"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?'"*

God is saying, what else can I do? God is saying – what would you do, if you were in My place? What would the human courts do, if they found a person or a company guilty of such levels of fraud?

How could God be the moral judge of the universe, and NOT take action against such wrongs?

God described Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6 as the gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in love, and yet God also described Himself as the God who does not leave the guilty unpunished.

What is the guilt that God must punish? Verse 8, *"Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully; with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him."*

Is God unfair to punish that?

What sort of universe would we have then?

Verse 9, God asks us that question, *" 'Shall I not punish them for these things?' declares The LORD, 'and shall I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this?'"*

But God is not a cold machine of justice, like karma. God the Father is a person, and we have here a description of God's covenant relationship to His people with the response of love.

Listen to verse 10, *"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."*

God will punish, but do so with grief.

Would God destroy His own people in His own city? Yes, God will follow through with it, as we read in verse 11, *"I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant."*

The exile would be brought about by Nebuchadnezzar, but God gave the order.

Fast forward. The decision to turn Christ over for crucifixion was brought about by Pilate, but God gave the order.

God the Father, we are told in these verses, will weep and wail over the punishment that sin required for His people, and the punishment that sin required for His Son.

God was grieved over the devastation upon humans, and mountains and birds and animals, of the sin. God was grieved over the devastation brought by punishment for sin. God was grieved when the sky turned black on Good Friday.

God grieves at abandoned farms and empty cities. It is another picture of UN-creation, as we saw in chapter 4. Human sin takes a toxic toll on the people and even on the environment, and God created all of this for us to enjoy. So God grieves that loss. Judgment is another cause for grief. Creation suffers in silence, and God is wailing.

Fast forward from the days of the prophet Jeremiah weeping for Jerusalem, to the days of another prophet weeping for Jerusalem. In Luke 19:41, "*when [Jesus] drew near and saw the city [of Jerusalem] He wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!..'*"

But Jesus did more than weep for the people. Jesus preached from village to village and town to town. Matthew 4:23, Jesus "*...went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*"

Jesus did more than preach the gospel. Jesus died to actually heal the people from those damaging wounds of the sins of deception and lies. Jesus is the balm of Gilead. Jesus is the medicine and the great physician who heals the wounds of God's people.

Jesus heals not just for this lifetime, but also provides a future home for us in heaven where there is no deception and lying. There the tree of life has leaves which are for the healing of the nations. (Rev. 22:2) The balm or medicine of healing is provided to us by Christ for all of our wounds. God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes. (Rev. 21:4)

Conclusion:

SI - Once, when a stubborn disputer seemed unconvinced, President Lincoln said, "Well, let's see how many legs has a cow?" "Four, of course," came the reply disgustedly. "That's right," agreed Lincoln. "Now suppose you call the cow's tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have?" "Why, five, of course," was the

confident reply. "Now, that's where you're wrong," said Lincoln. "Calling a cow's tail a leg doesn't make it a leg."

1. Stay alert to the sea of deception around us, and grieve it all. One of the chief duties of believers in declining times is lamentation. We learn this from Jeremiah, who also wrote the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah is a prophet for post-Christian times, and post-Christian times call for lamentation and grieving. Every time we have a campaign season, it is a season of lies, we grieve. But we are awak to the fact that politics is no different in the corporate culture or the advertising industry, or the field of education or medicine, or in the churches of our country, for that matter. We need truth in every field at all times. Every time our society says that people can live as though they are married when they are not married, it is a lie. The truth is that fornication is destructive on many levels. Every time our society says that abortion is the choice of the mother, it is a lie. The truth is that is murder, and the co-conspirators are the mother, the father, and the doctor. The ending of a human life is a public matter, that impacts all of us. Every time our society says that breaking the marriage covenant is okay, and divorce is acceptable, it is a lie. The truth is that God calls a man and a woman together, and it is God makes the two into one flesh union that must not be broken. Every time our society says that homosexual relationship is a marriage, it is alive. The truth is that homosexuality is an abomination to the creator, and damaging on so many levels, that it is challenging to describe it briefly. Every time our society says that a man can become a woman, or a woman become a man, it is a lie. The truth is that God gives us each a gender, and that gender is ours all the way down to our DNA. Our role is to submit to our assigned gender, and live that out in submission to God's laws, to the glory of God. Every time you think that you can get through your day without God, it is a lie. The truth is that we need God desperately in order to go through this day. Truth is the basis of our society. We need truth in our marriages, our families, our extended families, our churches, our workplaces, our businesses, our hospitals, our stores, and our governments. Understand the widespread damage of deceit, and grieve it.

2. Repent of your own deceptions. We are in danger of getting smug. We are in danger of being satisfied with ourselves. Consider what the prophet Isaiah said, "*I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.*" (Isaiah 6:5) We are not better than Isaiah. We are not better than our fellow citizens. Our lips are no cleaner than those who live around us. We need to repent of the deceptions we speak and the deceptions we tell ourselves.

3. Love the truth and rejoice in it. Lamentation and grieving does not mean we go around grumpy or weepy, or that we perpetually pine for the good old days. No. Despite our grieving, we live as joyful people, because of Christ. We are full of hope, and we rejoice in the beautiful truth that God has given us. We don't just lightly agree that truth is good. We love the truth. We commit ourselves to be persons of truth. Not harsh truth. Rather, gentle and compassionate truth. Not half-truths. Rather, the whole truth. Not a mixture of truth and lies. But instead, all truth all the time. This is God's way. Being polite, but not truthful, is not acceptable for Christians. Being truthful but not polite, is not acceptable for us. We must remain devoted to a daily diet of consuming the truth of God's Word, for it is the way that we grow more like Christ. John 17:17, Jesus prays for us, "*Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.*" We must keep our promises, even in small matters. We must keep our marriage vows, our baptism vows, and our ordination vows, and any other vows we have made. We must honor our parents. We must speak truth to our children, our siblings, our fellow church members. We must love the truth in all of our circles, and in all of our dealings. We rejoice that there is a healing medicine, which is speaking the truth in love. Jesus Christ is the balm of Gilead. Jesus wept for His people, and Jesus died to heal us of the wounds of deceit. Jesus is the great physician, and every place that we hurt from lies, Jesus heals with the truth. Just as Jeremiah was not alone in his suffering and grief, but discovered that God was right there with him, so also we are not alone. We have the presence of the Spirit of Christ, and in that truth we rejoice also. The Spirit of God comforts us in our sorrows. There is a balm in Gilead.