



BETHEL  
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# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## When the Righteous Become a Critic of God, Part 2

Jeremiah 5:1-6, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; See now and know; And seek in her open places If you can find a man, If there is anyone who executes judgment, Who seeks the truth, And I will pardon her. 2 Though they say, ‘As the LORD lives,’ Surely they swear falsely.” 3 O LORD, are not Your eyes on the truth? You have stricken them, But they have not grieved; You have consumed them, But they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; They have refused to return. 4 Therefore I said, “Surely these are poor. They are foolish; For they do not know the way of the LORD, The judgment of their God. 5 I will go to the great men and speak to them, For they have known the way of the LORD, The judgment of their God.” But these have altogether broken the yoke And burst the bonds. 6 Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay

them, A wolf of the deserts shall destroy them; A leopard will watch over their cities.

Recently at a prayer time, one individual prayed, (obviously speaking to God), “Many times we don’t like the decisions You make.” While that statement may be shocking to hear, nevertheless it has been the conviction of many in the Bible. Abraham questioned God about the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18:32-33). Moses on many occasions questioned God’s decision, beginning with His choice of who should be His spokesman in Egypt (Exodus 4:10-13). Job struggled with God’s providence (Job 3). Asaph questioned God about His generous dealings toward the non-Christian (Psalm 73). Peter questioned God’s will (John 21:21). Martha and Mary struggled (John 11). Cleopas struggled (Luke 24). And at times even Paul had his doubts (2 Corinthians 12:7-8)!

That is why Jeremiah 5 is so important! It details a struggle that Jeremiah had with God concerning the Lord’s will for Israel. Jeremiah 2, 3, & 4 contain in graphic detail the horrible fate that awaited the people of God in Jeremiah’s day. And as this most likely was the first time Jeremiah had to process this information, he particularly struggled!

Jeremiah 4:10, “Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Surely Thou hast utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, “You will have peace”; whereas a sword touches the throat.’”

And then later in the chapter he wrote this:

Jeremiah 4:20-21, “Disaster on disaster is proclaimed, for the whole land is devastated; suddenly my tents are devastated, my curtains in an instant. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?”

In other words, “*God! I don’t want to see the vision any longer! Please, stop giving it!*”

It is in this context that we read Jeremiah 5 where God puts Jeremiah in the driver’s seat, essentially saying, “*O.K. You don’t like the way I’m handling My people; you be the Judge. You tell me what should be done!*” For every child of God who has ever wanted an audience with the Lord to share their criticism of the way God has deigned to handle their life, this passage is for you. Jeremiah got that opportunity here.

Jeremiah 5:1, “Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and look now, and take note. And seek in her open squares, if you can find [one] man, if there is [just] one who does justice, who seeks truth, then I will pardon her.”

Heretofore Jeremiah obviously was looking at the outside of the cup. And what he saw no doubt impressed him, Judah was in the midst of a “revival”. The temple and high places were full to overflowing! Excitement and zeal for God seemed to be at an all-time high! Money was pouring into the temple treasury! And with the shocking discovering of the lost scroll, the book of Deuteronomy, attention and zeal for the word no doubt also was at an all-time high! The king on the throne was righteous Josiah who was leading the charge for reformation! And not since the days of Uzziah, you couldn’t have chosen a better time to live!

Yet, none of this impressed God! Still the negative visions kept coming. The Day of Judgment had not been delayed! So Jeremiah struggled with God’s providence, and yet God in His grace indulged him! *Jeremiah, I am commissioning you to be Judge for the day. But you must base your judgment NOT on appearance, BUT reality. The standard against which you will judge your generation will be the Covenant ethic of love, integrity, and the care of the weak and hurting among you. If you can find ONE person in Jerusalem who therefore has merited grace by his actions, I will pardon the nation!* You must see that God truly is being gracious.

Think of it. First and foremost we are talking here about the CAPITAL CITY, the hub of Judaism; it is where the temple was! If there is a man or woman of God in the kingdom, they will be here!

Secondly notice that God did NOT demand 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or even 10 righteous individuals (like Abraham suggested in Genesis 18). NO, GOD ONLY REQUIRED JEREMIAH TO PRODUCE ONE RIGHTEOUS INDIVIDUAL! If he could do this, then the judgments of this entire book would be taken away! So Jeremiah did a thorough search of the city and what he discovered no doubt shocked him.

Jeremiah 5:2, “And although they say, ‘As the Lord lives,’ surely they swear falsely: what Jeremiah discovered is that the religious revival that was going strong was shallow and simply a veneer! True brokenness and repentance had not taken place. No one cared for each other. Covenant love and kindness were non-existent! In fact, if you could have chosen to live either in Sodom/Gomorrah or Jerusalem, Sodom and Gomorrah would have been the more righteous cities!”

Around this same time, God spoke through Ezekiel concerning Jeremiah’s generation.

Ezekiel 16:48, “‘As I live,’ declares the Lord God, ‘Sodom, your sister, and her daughters, have not done as you and your daughters have done.’”

Talk about a shocking discovery! This no doubt is how Jeremiah arrived at the conviction he espoused in Lamentations.

Lamentations 3:39, “Why should *any* living mortal, or *any* man, offer complaint in view of his sins?”- truly, the nation had no leg to stand upon. Whatever bitter providence that lay in the future, Jeremiah now saw was deserved!

And so for the moment that he was Judge of the universe, Jeremiah discovered a shocking reality: none are worthy of God’s grace! In the words of Paul when he performed a similar search, “There is none righteous, not even one...” (Romans. 3:10-18)!

Yet Jeremiah’s moment in the Judge’s chair was not finished; it had just begun! Notice his second discovery about God was shocking based on the prophet’s prior assumptions!

Jeremiah 5:3, “O Lord, do not Thine eyes look for truth? Thou hast smitten them, *BUT* they did not weaken; Thou hast consumed them, *BUT* they refused to take correction.”

This passage tells us two things about God and His will for His people. First, unlike the gods which we have fashioned in our own imaginations (like Zeus or Apollos), the God of the Universe does not in boredom torment man for fun. Rather, God is after integrity of heart! Micah asked and answered his own question:

Micah 6:8, “...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Secondly, when His people do not reflect this, God disciplines them in love, that is the idea behind the word “correction”! But they refused to take correction

Jeremiah discovered that God was not against Israel for their sin, but for them against their sin! Yet the nation flatly rejected the vehicle of God’s grace (bitter providences)! Instead they were moved to anger, wondering why God wouldn’t let them have full access to their sin! And this brought Jeremiah to a third

realization, the people refused to repent.

Jeremiah 5:3, “They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent.”

Not only had God’s people fallen short, but it wasn’t on accident. They willingly indulged in sin! Baalism had subverted the religion of Israel. The external forms and rituals of Israel were maintained, BUT now they were about satisfying the worshipper’s lust for pleasure! Accordingly, God’s people dove headlong into sin! In fact they, “...wear[ied] themselves committing iniquity!” (Jeremiah 9:5). With this, you’d think Jeremiah would have had enough and so yield the chair and gavel back to God. Yet, being the Judge of the earth is not an everyday thing. Accordingly, Jeremiah in his capacity as Judge took it to another level- which exposed his bias (and really our bias) as a mortal being.

Jeremiah 5:4-5a, “They are only the poor [the focus in the Hebrew is NOT a poverty of riches or one involving social class, BUT being “impoverished” when it comes to knowledge], they are foolish; for they do not know the way of the Lord *or* the ordinance of their God [IOW, they haven’t been educated!]. I will go to the great [that is, those who have a wealth of knowledge and understanding when it comes to the word of God] and will speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, *and* the ordinance of their God.”

Herein lies the problem in a nutshell from Jeremiah’s perspective: *it is that the general population of Jerusalem were ignorant of the way of the Lord! Accordingly, all we need to do is find someone who has been instructed in the way of the Lord and we most certainly will see a passion for obedience and service. In these courts we will find at least one man who has done good!*

Any of you see a bias here? Jeremiah at this point clearly has not come to grips with the depravity of man, “*Man is not depraved! No! He is just deprived! Point him in the right direction and he will walk in the proper path.*”

It is with this bias that we most often criticize God when it comes to His providence! In a natural disaster, we like to believe we are dealing with “good people” who if given the chance would choose to serve the Lord and honor him! These people aren’t murders and thieves. So why is God hurting them?!

Yet we know that this assumption couldn’t be further from the truth! Paul with clarity and great passion has instructed us on the heart of the natural man; something which Jeremiah learned.

Romans 1:21-23, “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

From this we have seen that the “noble savage” in the deepest, darkest jungles of Africa is NOT by his religion trying to get to God the best way he knows how. RATHER, he is running away from God as fast and as diligently as he can! Truly, their religion is an attempt to run *from* God not *to* Him! This is no doubt why we read this of Christ:

John 2:24-25, “But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them [not the adoring crowds, but ones who had believed in Him!!], for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.”

Man’s natural bias is to assume man is just and that God is unjust! It has always been this way. It clearly was the case when it came to Jeremiah! He intuitively thought that man was basically good and that if they

simply were instructed they would do what is right. Yet to his shock and surprise, he discovered that even well-educated men hate God.

Jeremiah 5:5, "...But they too, with one accord, have broken the yoke *and* burst the bonds"

The description is of a rebellion which surpasses that of the general sinner referenced in vv. 1-2. This is active, purposed rebellion! This is knowing the word of God and using it to advance a sinful agenda! J. A. Thompson put it this way:

The picture is one of rebellion and defiance and seems to have in mind the ox, who is normally yoked to his plough and draws the plough with the aid of its traces. The picture changes to one who is not only an unwilling servant but actively rebels, breaking the yoke and bursting the thongs. (Thompson, 1980, p. 238)

With this final gaze upon the supposed "godly" in the land, Jeremiah is brought to resignation. He was living in a generation of rebels who neither loved the Lord nor wanted to serve Him! Shockingly, the bitter and difficult days which God recently had ordained for His people for their good did not soften them. Rather, it made them rebel and accuse God of wrong-doing. In fact, recall the description of the sinner in hell, they are NOT pining away wishing that God had given them another chance. Rather, they are gnashing their teeth in hatred toward Christ

Matthew 13:41-42, "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

With this Jeremiah's bias, our bias is exposed; mankind is displayed in the raw without God's grace. Man is not noble or good! The sinner hates the Lord and if given the chance will attack God and endeavor to destroy Him. In fact, hell doesn't even quench the desire! With this sober reality, Jeremiah's last act at "Judge for the Day" was to condemn the people of God which in essence vindicated God as Judge.

## A Vindication of God

Jeremiah 5:6, "Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them, a wolf of the deserts shall destroy them, a leopard is watching their cities. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces..."

This is Jeremiah's judgment! The picture here is of a rebellious ox which breaks his bonds and so wanders "free" in the open land (recall the metaphor of v. 5). What happens to this animal? Any and all familiar with Palestine at the time knew the answer: they would become prey to wild animals. If the lion did not attack it, then a pack of wolves would. If the wolves missed it, the ox certainly would be stalked by a leopard.

Such were the hazards awaiting a rebellious ox in the day it broke loose from its bonds (v. 5)! Applied to God's people, the "lion, wolf, and leopard" were a metaphor for the Babylonians which as an army would have the power of a lion, the organization of a pack of wolves, and the cunning of a leopard. No one would escape! Notice as Jeremiah continues:

Jeremiah 5:6, "Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are numerous."

The word for "torn in pieces" is graphic; it means "to seize a creature with predaciousness, tear the flesh, and consume it." There is nothing gentle or kind about it!

A few years back an environmentalist who lived in Alaska and fancied himself as the friend of the grizzly bear. He believed men and grizzly bears could live together and he attempted to prove this by living with grizzly bears. We know about him because he video-taped his interaction with the bears as well as his thoughts. Yet in the end he was eaten by one of the bears! When he was attacked by the bear, he dropped his video recorder which continued to roll. It could be heard off-camera the bear eating the man while he groaned in pain!!

That was Jeremiah's determination for the people of God after serving as Judge for just one day. God's people deserved NO MERCY, but the terrifying death of being eaten alive by wild animals!

Do you think he is being a little harsh?! Yet that is what happens when a sinner is placed in the Judge's seat! Remember Jonah? He wasn't placed in the Judge's seat; he took it! And what did he deserve was the only just recompense for Nineveh's sin? Condemnation (Jonah 4)! In fact, you want to talk about injustice? Let a man be placed in a position of absolute power and you will see it! The history of the world is filled with such examples and yet, we have the gall to criticize God for His dealings with man!

In contrast to Jeremiah's judgment, what was God's judgment? What did God do with these people? He disciplined them with exile, BUT they were NOT destroyed. Throughout the rest of this book and most if not all the prophets, God spoke of a remnant whom He would preserve and with whom He would rebuild His Kingdom!

Jeremiah 5:18, "'Yet even in those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will not make you a complete destruction.'"

God expanded upon this theme in many places in this book, but listen to...

Jeremiah 31:1-4a, 'At that time,' declares the Lord, 'I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people.' Thus says the Lord, 'The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness- Israel, when it went to find its rest.' [Recall that the wilderness in Scripture is NOT the place God sends His people when He is sick of them. RATHER, it is the place where God leads His people and us when He wants them all to Himself! This is where God brought Israel...] The Lord appeared to him from afar, *saying*, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness. [that is what the bitter providences were all about!] Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel!...'"

What a striking contrast! Jeremiah's sentencing of God's people would have resulted in their complete and total destruction. Yet God's judgment, no doubt bitter and seemingly harsh at the time was to result in the welfare and good of His people!<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the exile, God the Judge said this:

Jeremiah 29:11-14, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'"

Do you see what God has in mind when He does that which we do not like? Our best! Our glory! Our spending the rest of eternity in a love-relationship with Him! In light of this, Peter wrote these words to a persecuted church who at times no doubt wondered what God was doing:

1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls

["entrust" is a banking term referencing the deposit of a treasure for safe-keeping; it is the same word that Christ used on the cross, Lk. 23:46, "...into Thy hands I commit my spirit..."] to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

This is what Jeremiah was to do in the face of the horror that awaited him and the nation. This is what we must do in light of the difficulty that will come upon us in life.<sup>2</sup> We must NOT be as Jeremiah, who at the beginning of this chapter was hyper-critical of God and yet at the end was hyper-critical of man!<sup>3</sup> Rather, our posture must be that of Habakkuk, who knowing the ill that awaited the nation, entrusted His soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

Habakkuk 3:16-19, "I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise *who* will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, *though* the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places."

There would come times in Jeremiah's life when he forgot what he learned here. At those times- you must see that he wasn't condemned before God. Rather, he was left to suffer alone having rejected the only safe harbor for the soul: trusting a good God to see him through!

May God give us the grace to learn this truth once and for all and so avoid the pitfall into which Jeremiah occasionally descended in the course of his ministry!

## Bibliography

Thompson, J. A. (1980). *A Book of Jeremiah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> And herein we see the necessity for the confession of our sins one to another. David publically confessed his sin so that the world would see that in the bitterness of God's disciplining hand, it wasn't God who was to blame, but David (Psalm 51:4)! Such was the concern of Joshua when Achan was about to be judged for his sin (Joshua 7:19). How is it that Achan glorified God in his confession? When he was disciplined for his rebellion, the world would know that all blame rested at the foot of the sinner and not God!

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John 16:33, "...in the world you will have tribulation!"

<sup>3</sup> Do you understand what happened from v. 1 to v. 6? Jeremiah went from being shocked over God's judgment to being shocked that it wasn't more severe!

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### **About the Preacher**

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