

Jeremiah Chapter 12

Verses 1-4

Like Job (Job 21:7-12) and Asaph (Psalm chapter 73), Jeremiah asked God, “Why” do “the wicked prosper?”

They were the ones who seemed to be thriving, despite giving lip service to God but keeping Him “far from their reins”.

Jeremiah 12:1 “Righteous [art] thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of [thy] judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? [wherefore] are all they happy that deal very treacherously?”

“Wherefore ... ?”:

The issue of why the wicked escape unscathed (for a time) has often been raised by God’s people (compare Psalm chapter 73; Hab. 1:2-4).

The problem that the “wicked” seem to “prosper” is discussed often in the Scriptures (compare Job 21:7-16; 24:1-16; Psalm 73:2-14).

No definitive answer is given except that, according to God’s most wise and holy purposes, all things are under His control (compare Job 37:5; Isa. 46:10; Matt. 5:45; Acts 17:24-28).

And that He will deal justly with the wicked in His appointed time and “way” (compare verse 13; Job 27:13; Psalms 1:3-6; 49:16-20; 73:17-22).

It is enough for the believer to leave things in God’s hands (Psalm chapter 37), and let Him truly be God of his whole life (compare Job 34:29; 42:1-6; Psalm 73:28; Isa. 26:3-21; Hab. 3:17-19; Rom. 12:1-2).

In the previous lesson, we saw the grief of Jeremiah over what was happening to these people.

Jeremiah recognizes the fact at the beginning of this verse, that the LORD is Righteous.

God will allow us to ask questions, but not to question His judgement.

Notice in the following Scripture, that the judgements of the LORD are righteous.

Revelation 16:7 “And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous [are] thy judgments.”

It seems to Jeremiah that the heathen (wicked) of the world are the ones who prosper.

Many of us have thought the same thing from time to time.

The reason we feel this way is because we do not see the end, we just see the present.

The end of Babylon is much worse than the destruction which comes on Jerusalem and Judah here.

Jerusalem and Judah are restored from the remnant God left.

Babylon will never be the same again after its destruction.

God is loving, kind, gentle and forgiving, but He is also just in His judgement.

These Hebrews have committed spiritual adultery and they must be punished.

Men may cry for justice, but what they truly want is mercy.

Jeremiah 12:2 “Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou [art] near in their mouth, and far from their reins.”

In the land of Canaan, God fixed the bounds of their habitation, giving them a firm and comfortable settlement.

For all the good things, even of the wicked, come from God.

“Yea, they have taken root”:

Everything that is planted does not take root; but these did.

Though it was downwards in the earth, on which their hearts were set, and so were strengthened and established in their worldly circumstances.

“They grow, yea, they bring forth fruit”:

To themselves, not to God.

Not fruits of righteousness or good works; they grow, not in grace or holiness, but in their worldly substance.

And they brought forth fruit, not such as were satisfied for repentance; but they had great riches, and numerous families.

And so the Septuagint and Arabic versions state, “they produce children, and bring forth fruit.”

The Targum says, “they become rich, yea, they possess substance.”

“Thou art near in their mouth”:

They often made use of the name of God, either in swearing by it, or praying to Him in an external manner.

They called themselves the LORD’s people, and boasted of being His priests, and employed in His service.

They took His covenant, and the words of His law, into their mouths, and taught them to the people.

And yet had no sincere regard for these things.

“And far from their reins”:

From the affections of their hearts, and the desires of their souls.

They had no true love for God, nor fear of Him, nor faith in Him.

The Targum clarifies, “near are the words of Thy law in their mouth, and far is Thy fear from their reins.”

Being “far from their reins” just means that they are not being directed of God.

The reins direct a horse where he should go.

The control here is of the heart.

The heart is really what a person is.

They do not have God in their hearts.

All mankind was created by God.

In that sense God planted them.

They have grown, but it is a physical growth not a growth in God.

Jeremiah 12:3 “But thou, O LORD, knowest me: thou hast seen me, and tried mine heart toward thee: pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter.”

“Pull them out ... for the day of slaughter”:

The prophet here turned from the sadness of pleading for his people to calling on God to punish them.

Such imprecatory prayers are similar to prayers throughout the Psalms.

Jeremiah is aware that God knows all about him.

He had been obedient to the call God had made upon his life.

Jeremiah is very angry with the Babylonians, who come and do this terrible thing.

Jeremiah is saying, LORD sacrifice these evil ones and not Your family.

He does not understand that the problems that have come on Judah and Jerusalem are to make them return to God.

Jeremiah 12:4 “How long shall the land mourn, and the herbs of every field wither, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein? The beasts are consumed, and the birds; because they said, He shall not see our last end.”

“He shall not see our last end”:

Here is the foolish idea that God was wrong and didn’t know how things would happen.

Jeremiah wants to see immediate restoration to the lands of Judah and Benjamin.

He is pointing out to God the great destruction that took place, as if God did not already know.

This destruction of the crops perhaps, had something to do with a drought as well as being overrun by the Babylonian army.

Verses 5-6

God reminds Jeremiah that current difficulties were like a casual jog in the park compared with the race against “horses” that later struggles would require.

He would be unable to trust even his own family.

God does not hesitate to ask believers to do difficult things because He promises to help them accomplish them.

Jeremiah 12:5 “If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and [if] in the land of peace, [wherein] thou trustedst, [they wearied thee], then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?”

“Thou hast run”:

The LORD asked Jeremiah what he would do if he should grow faint with lesser trials, and feel like quitting when the battle got even harder?

“Then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan”:

The river in flood stage overflowed its banks into a plain that grew up as a thicket.

The point is that Jeremiah needed to be ready to deal with tougher testing, pictured by the invaders overwhelming the land like a flood, or posing high danger as in the Jordan thicket where concealed wild animals could terrify a person.

It appears that Jeremiah had gotten weary before the race was over.

I hear many people today, complaining about their troubles.

The little inconveniences and troubles we are having now will pale in comparison to the great tribulation.

This is the very same thing as in the verse above.

The “swelling of Jordan” is speaking of an even more difficult time.

It was sometimes a dangerous thing to cross Jordan: the possibility of lions attacking, coupled with the threat of flood waters increased the danger.

If they or any other person cannot handle the little problems of life, how can they handle the big ones?

Jeremiah 12:6 “For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee; yea, they have called a multitude after thee: believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee.”

“Even thy brethren”: Jeremiah met antagonism not only from fellow townsmen (compare 11:18-23 and see note there), but from his own family as well!

He was separated from them (verse 7).

We see in this Scripture that Jeremiah had members of his own family who did not believe he was a prophet.

They said they loved Jeremiah, but they did not support his choice to follow God.

In this aspect, Jeremiah's situation was quite similar to that of Jesus.

Jesus' half-brothers also did not believe Jesus was the Messiah until He arose from the grave.

Verses 7-13

God describes His plans for His people in terms of a patriarch giving up his heritage.

The grand estate upon which He had lavished such care was ruined.

It had become as wild as a "lion" and drawn to carrion like a "speckled bird".

Jeremiah 12:7 "I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies."

The temple, where the LORD took up His residence, and revealed His presence to His people.

This was fulfilled in the first temple, when it was destroyed by the Chaldeans.

And more fully in the second, when Christ took His leave of it (Matt. 23:38).

And when that voice was heard in it, a little before the destruction of Jerusalem as Josephus relates, "let us go hence."

So the Targum says, "I have forsaken the house of My sanctuary."

"I have left Mine heritage":

The people whom He had chosen for His inheritance, whom He prized and valued, took care of, and protected (see Deut. 32:9).

"I have given the dearly beloved of My soul":

Whom He heartily loved and delighted in, and who were as dear to Him as the apple of His eye.

"Into the hand of her enemies":

The Chaldeans.

This prophecy is declared as if it was already done, because of the certainty of it, and to awaken the Jews out of their lethargy and indifference.

And the description which the LORD gives of them reveals the ingratitude they had been guilty of, and that their ruin was owing to themselves and their sins.

There is a definite break in this from the last few verses.

This is the LORD saying He has forsaken His house.

His heritage is His people.

He has given His people over into the hands of their enemies.

“Enemies” is plural so this indicates more than one country.

Jeremiah 12:8 “Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.”

“As a lion”:

Jeremiah’s own people, collectively, are like a lion acting ferociously against him.

The lion in the forest attacks.

This is what God’s people have done unto Him.

They have sought other gods.

They have been unfaithful to Him.

They have not feared or revered God.

They have attacked the very character of God.

He is suddenly feeling wrath toward them.

I believe the “it” is speaking of their slander of God.

God never stopped loving His people.

He removes His special care of them for a time to cause them to seek Him again.

Jeremiah 12:9 “Mine heritage [is] unto me [as] a speckled bird, the birds round about [are] against her; come ye, assemble all the beasts of the field, come to devour.”

“As a speckled bird”:

God's people, speckled with sin and compromise, are despised by other birds of prey, i.e., enemy nations.

A speckled bird would be like one of no special species.

This would be the case, because God's heritage had given up exclusive worship of Jehovah for worship of many false gods.

An oddly marked bird will cause other birds to attack it:

This is the case here.

The surrounding nations (birds) come against Jerusalem and Judah to destroy them.

The beasts of the field come to devour; they are the heathen nations that come to destroy.

Jeremiah 12:10 "Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness."

This is a metaphor which is often used of the people of Israel and Judah (see Psalm 80:8).

The pastors that destroyed them are not their own governors, civil or religious, but heathen princes, Nebuchadnezzar and his generals.

So the Targum paraphrases it, "many kings slay my people;" likewise do Kimchi and Ben Melech.

"They have trodden my portion under foot":

The Jewish people are His portion, and earlier called His heritage, whom the Chaldeans subdued, and reduced to extreme servitude and bondage.

And were as the dirt under their feet, greatly oppressed and despised.

"They have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness":

By pulling down stately edifices, the destruction of the walls and towers, and destroying men, so that there were none to manure the fields, to dress the vineyards, and keep gardens and orchards in good condition.

But all were come to ruin and what before was a delightful paradise was now like a heath or desert.

We discovered in a previous lesson that the pastor was a tender of the flock (see the note on 10:21).

It also means a keeper of the sheep.

God's people are His vineyard.

Those God had left in charge over His vineyard have literally destroyed it.

It is the very same thing as the shepherd God had left caring for the sheep not feeding them the right food.

These pastors have not advanced the spiritual hunger of these people for God.

They have in fact, destroyed the people's relationship with God.

The 34th chapter of Ezekiel speaks of the same thing.

I will give you just one verse, but be sure to read it all.

Ezekiel 34:2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe [be] to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"

This speaks of the problems during Jeremiah's time, but it also refers to the problems in our churches today.

Pastors should feed spiritual food to God's congregation; they need a relationship with God, not religion.

Jeremiah 12:11 "They have made it desolate, [and being] desolate it mourneth unto me; the whole land is made desolate, because no man layeth [it] to heart."

Which is repeated to denote the certainty of it; the astonishment, and that it might be observed.

"And being desolate it mourneth unto me":

Not the inhabitants of it for their sins, the cause of this desolation; but the land itself, because of the calamities upon it.

It is crying to God in its own way, for a restoration to its former beauty and glory.

"The whole land is made desolate":

This was not only the case for Jerusalem, and the parts adjacent, but even for the whole land of Judea.

“Because no man layeth it to heart”:

No one took any notice of the judgment threatened that was foretold by the prophets, nor repented of their sins, for which they were threatened with such a desolation.

Nor even were properly affected with the destruction itself.

The earth seemed more sensible of it than they were, expressing the outright ignorance and indifference of the people.

The moral sickness in our land today and in Israel then, is the same.

Someone has to raise the standard of righteousness.

There was no one who did that then.

I pray that someone will come forth who will do something now.

Our land is sick.

The only cure is national revival.

Someone has to lead the way.

Are you that one?

Jeremiah 12:12 “The spoilers are come upon all high places through the wilderness: for the sword of the LORD shall devour from the [one] end of the land even to the [other] end of the land: no flesh shall have peace.”

“Sword of the LORD”:

God’s strength can be for defending (compare 47:6; Judges 7:20), or in this case, condemning. The Babylonians were God’s sword doing His will.

The “Sword of the LORD” is the Word of God.

The vengeance of God was carried out by the Babylonians, but it was really God.

All of the false worship in the high places was totally destroyed.

Do you get the picture?

The Word of God can clean out all corruption in our land as well.

It is the most powerful weapon there is against all enemies.

Crucify the flesh that the spirit might live.

Jeremiah 12:13 “They have sown wheat, but shall reap thorns: they have put themselves to pain, [but] shall not profit: and they shall be ashamed of your revenues because of the fierce anger of the LORD.”

If these words be understood literally, they only signify that God would nullify the labors of the husbandman (farmer), and curse them in the field.

The earth’s bringing forth thorns and thistles was part of the curse for the first transgression of man (Gen. 3:18).

God’s blasting the labors of husbandmen is often forewarned as a punishment of sin (see Lev. 26:16; Deut. 28:38).

If it be taken metaphorically, it is expounded by the next words:

“They have put themselves to pain, but shall not profit”:

That they shall labor in vain, all the works of their hands, all their counsels and deliberations, shall be of no profit or avail unto them.

“They shall be ashamed of your revenues because of the fierce anger of the LORD”:

The fierce anger of God against them shall be revealed in the returns of their labors or estates.

The profits of their trades, etc., shall be so small that they shall be ashamed of them.

Nothing prospers without the blessings of God.

You can plant a seed in the ground, but it is God that causes it to grow.

When God is angry, let us come to Him in repentance with a broken and a contrite heart (Psalm 51:17) lest He should destroy us because of His fierce anger.

Verses 14-17

Jeremiah is assured that although Judah and Jerusalem must be punished, God's judgment will also extend to their "evil neighbors".

Here we find a strong missionary appeal that to the Gentiles, too, is offered the hope of salvation (compare 16:19-21; Isa. 2:1-4; 19:20-25; 45:22; 66:23; Hosea chapter 12; Obad. 1:20-21; Zech. 8:20-23; 14:8-9, 16).

Verses 14-15

Despite the prospect of God's anger and the "evil neighbors" who would "touch the inheritance" and take them into captivity, both the land and the people would remain His possession.

God's compassion on His people will never end (Zech. 2:8).

Jeremiah 12:14 "Thus saith the LORD against all mine evil neighbors, that touch the inheritance which I have caused my people Israel to inherit; Behold, I will pluck them out of their land, and pluck out the house of Judah from among them."

"Evil neighbors":

Nations which hurt Israel will, in their turn, also receive judgment from the LORD (compare 9:26; 25:14-32; Chapters 46 to 51).

This looks ahead to the time that the LORD will come against the enemies of His people.

God will destroy their captors and restore Judah and Jerusalem to His people.

God will take vengeance on the heathens who took them captive.

It is God who will deliver His people from their heathen captors.

Jeremiah 12:15 "And it shall come to pass, after that I have plucked them out I will return, and have compassion on them, and will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land."

"Bring them again":

God will restore His people to the land of Israel in a future millennial day, as indicated in chapters 30 to 33.

God does not tell them when, but He does tell them He will forgive them and bring them back into the Promised Land.

All who have lived through the captivity and all of their children, will be forgiven of God and restored to their land.

God is a God of judgement, but He is also a God of forgiveness and salvation.

This promises unmerited favor from God.

Verses 16-17

Here we glimpse God's global purposes even though the chosen people so poorly communicated the wonders of the true God to the rest of the nations.

Israel's hope was offered to those who were not chosen.

The LORD was willing to extend His mercy even to the Canaanites who had taught Israel to worship Baal.

Jeremiah 12:16 “And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, The LORD liveth; as they taught my people to swear by Baal; then shall they be built in the midst of my people.”

Not their evil ways of sin or superstition they sometimes stray into, but the ways which God has prescribed to them, and has directed them to walk in.

And in which they do walk; and which are to be learned of the LORD, by a diligent attendance with His people on His word and ordinances (see Isa. 2:3).

“To swear by My name, the LORD liveth”:

That is, to worship and serve the living God, a self-existent Being, who has life in Himself, and of Himself, and not another.

And is the fountain, author, and giver of natural life to all creatures, and spiritual and eternal life to His true worshippers. “Swearing” here, relates to the whole of religious worship (as in Deut. 6:13).

“As they taught My people to swear by Baal”:

To worship him, and other idols.

“Then shall they be built in the midst of my people”:

Become part of the spiritual building, the church.

Being laid upon the same foundation of the apostles and prophets, and built up a holy temple; a spiritual house for the LORD to dwell in.

Partaking of the same privileges and ordinances as the people of God.

Being fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ by the Gospel (Eph. 2:20).

It denotes the settlement and establishment of the Gentiles with the Jews in a Gospel church state.

As the Targum says, “and they shall be established in the midst of My people.”

We see in this that God offers forgiveness to the heathen, as well as His people, if they will turn from the worship of Baal to worshipping the One true God.

This is an opening to God for the Gentiles.

Jeremiah 12:17 “But if they will not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation, saith the LORD.”

Or “hear” the word of the LORD, and hearken to the ministers of the Gospel, and be subject to the ordinances of it.

Or as the Targum says, “will not receive instruction:”

“I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation, saith the LORD”:

Root it up from being a nation, strip it of all its privileges and enjoyments, and destroy it with an everlasting destruction (see Zech. 14:16).

God is unquestionably merciful towards all mankind.

He offered salvation to them.

God will not impose His will on others.

It is their own choice to follow Him or not.

If they choose not to follow God, He will destroy them.

The nation that refuses to worship God, will be destroyed.

Jeremiah Chapter 12 Questions

1. What is the first thing Jeremiah recognizes about God in verse 1?
2. God will allow us to ask questions, but He will not allow us to question His _____.
3. It seems to Jeremiah that the _____ of this world are the ones who prosper.
4. Why do we feel this way sometimes, too?
5. Men cry out for _____, but what they truly want is _____.
6. What does “being far from their reigns” mean?
7. What does Jeremiah not understand about the Babylonian attack?
8. Jeremiah had gotten _____, before the race was over.
9. The little problems we face now will pale in comparison to the _____.
10. Who, in verse 6, are opposed to Jeremiah?
11. God’s heritage is compared to what animal, in verse 8?
12. Why does God remove His special care from His people for a while?
13. An oddly marked bird will cause the other birds to do what?
14. Who is God’s vineyard?
15. What chapter in Ezekiel speaks of shepherds who have not cared for their sheep?
16. The moral sickness in our land today is the same as what?
17. Are you the one to do something about it?
18. What is the “Sword of the LORD”?
19. What causes a plant to grow?
20. What happens to the enemies of God’s inheritance?
21. After God has allowed them to be punished, what wonderful thing does He do for them?

22. Who does God offer forgiveness to, besides His heritage?