

Jeremiah had been set “over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10)

Here at the end of chapter 12,

God shows Jeremiah a small part of what that means.

God’s purposes in his covenant were *never* just for Israel.

The point of the covenant was *always*

that all nations would be blessed in Abraham’s seed.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves!

In Jeremiah 11 we hear the curse of the Law.

Paul speaks of this in Galatians 3:10 –

“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse;

for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide

by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.’”

Galatians 3:10 is pretty much exactly what the LORD says to Jeremiah in verses 1-5:

1. Remember the Covenant with Your Fathers (v1-13)

a. Remember the Covenant – with Its Curses (v1-5)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ³ You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant ⁴ that I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, ⁵ that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day.” Then I answered, “So be it, LORD.”

Jeremiah starts with the words of the covenant.

The language is drawn from the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 27.

In Deuteronomy 27, Moses spoke of how Israel was going into

a land flowing with milk and honey.

And then Moses laid out a list of covenant curses upon those who broke God’s law.

And at the end of each curse, all the people shall say, “Amen.”

And Jeremiah here takes the place of the people, answering, “Amen, LORD.”

Verse 5 reminds us of the “oath” that God “swore to your fathers.”

God had made a promise to Abraham – and he confirmed it with an oath –

Hebrews 6 points out that when God adds his oath to his promise,

that means that there are now *two unchangeable* things (the promise and the oath)

that guarantee “the unchangeable character of his purpose.” (Heb 6:17-18)

So in the Abrahamic Covenant, God promises that he will give the promised land to the heirs of Abraham.

So then, what is the point of the Law?

If God promised the Land to Abraham,
what is the point of the covenant that God made with Israel
when he brought them out of Egypt?

Paul says that the Seed of Abraham is *really* Jesus (Gal. 3:16).

“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,
faith is null and the promise is void.” (Romans 4:13-14)

Hebrews 7 adds that the Levitical priesthood had to offer sacrifices daily
precisely because their sacrifices could not *actually* remove sin.

How do we know that their sacrifices could not remove sin?
Because *those* priests kept dying.

If your priests keep dying, then you know that their sacrifices are not working!

Indeed, this is the point of the resurrection, according to Hebrews:

Jesus “holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost
those who draw near to God through him,
since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb 7:24-25)

The earthly sanctuary and the earthly priesthood were “copies and shadows” of the heavenly.
God gave the Law to Moses in order to show Israel a picture of his Kingdom.

Hebrews 8 even quotes Jeremiah 31 on the importance of the New Covenant.

The new covenant, Jeremiah says, is *not like* the covenant at Sinai.

The covenant at Sinai depended on Israel’s performance, as you see in Jeremiah 11:4-5:

“Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you.

So you shall be my people, and I will be your God,
that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers,
to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day.” (11:4-5)

Jeremiah hears this and replies,

“So be it, LORD” – Amen – that’s what you told us!

Some people have commented on this that this sounds like the Covenant of Works,
where Adam could only obtain life through perfect, perpetual obedience.

And there is *certainly* a clear parallel.

Israel was called to succeed where Adam had failed.

Israel enters the promised land – a land flowing with milk and honey –
Paradise restored!
We have already seen in Jeremiah the echoes of Adam and Eve –
when God spoke in 4:23 about how he would return the creation
to a barren wasteland (“tohu vbohu”).

But the Mosaic Covenant is not a republication of the covenant of works.
After all, at the heart of the Mosaic Covenant are the words,
“when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace.”
At the heart of the Mosaic Covenant is *grace*.

But while there *is* grace in the Mosaic Covenant,
the grace of the Mosaic Covenant was not very effective!

Again, Hebrews is helpful (7:18-19):
The Mosaic law was “weak and useless” (for the law made nothing perfect).
And Christ has obtained a better ministry than the priests of the OT,
“as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better,
since it is enacted on better promises.” (8:6)

The Law *describes* the way that we ought to live –
but the Law does not give the *power* to obey!

Think about how Jeremiah says this in verses 6-8:

b. Remember How Your Fathers Did Not Obey – in Spite of Warnings (v6-8)

⁶ And the LORD said to me, “Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them. ⁷ For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. ⁸ Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.”

God gave Israel the covenant curses so that they might see what sin deserves.
The problem with Israel was that “everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart.”

And yes, there was grace in the Mosaic Covenant –
but the grace of the Mosaic Covenant was largely *external*:
“I brought them up out of the land of Egypt” –
that’s great, but it doesn’t change your heart!
“I warned them, ‘Obey my voice’” –
but that doesn’t change your heart!

The Law tells you to obey.
But the Law does not give you the *power* to obey!

And you see the effect in verses 9-10:

c. They Have Broken My Covenant – the Conspiracy of Idolaters (v9-10)

⁹ Again the LORD said to me, “A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁰ They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.

God had said that Israel should love and serve him alone.
But instead, they have gone after other gods to serve them.
They have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.

God’s covenant in Deuteronomy followed the basic pattern of Ancient Near Eastern treaties.
The Great King establishes his covenant with his vassal states.
They have certain obligations.

If they keep the covenant, then he will do all sorts of good things *for them*.

If they break the covenant, then he will do all sorts of bad things *to them!*

God had established his covenant as the Great King over Israel.

But Israel has broken the covenant.

Indeed, God declares that this is a long-standing conspiracy against him.

In other words, there’s a pattern here.

In the days of the Judges, Israel broke covenant and served idols.

And so God handed them over to their enemies.

But they cried out to the LORD, and he saved them –
finally raising up David to deliver them.

But in the days of the Kings, the Kingdom divided,
and the northern kingdom of Israel broke covenant and served idols.
And so God handed them over to their enemies *and destroyed them*.

By Jeremiah’s day, there had been no Kingdom of Israel for over a hundred years.

And now, Judah has “turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers,
who refused to hear my words.

They have gone after other gods to serve them.”

And God says, “Methinks I see a conspiracy!”

The pattern has become too clear!

Therefore...

d. “Therefore...I Am Bringing Disaster upon Them” (v11-13)

¹¹ Therefore, thus says the LORD, Behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. ¹² Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble. ¹³ For your gods have become as many as your cities, O Judah, and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame, altars to make offerings to Baal.

If you reject the LORD your God and turn to serve other gods,
then you will be destroyed.

In the past, when Israel cried out to the LORD, God *heard them* and delivered them.

But this time, “Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them.”
Let them cry out to the gods in whom they trust!

You need to hear this!

Idolatry is no different today!

We put our hope for happiness in our husband or wife.

What others think of us matters more than what God thinks of us.

We trust in medical technology to save us.

If you want to know what your idols are,
watch your time and your money – what are you spending money on?
What do you spend time doing?

What *really matters* to you?

False gods promise life, happiness, peace – riches.

But false gods only deliver death, misery, conflict, poverty, and disaster.

If you continue to pursue your idols,

then there may come a time when God will say,

“okay, fine – cry out to your gods to whom you make offerings –
see if they will save you in your time of trouble!”

There will come a time when your spouse fails you.

There will come a time when medical technology cannot save you.

There will come a time when all that you trusted comes crashing down around you.

And worst of all, God says that in that time, he *will not listen* –
and so he tells Jeremiah “do not pray for this people”!

2. “Do Not Pray for This People”: The Burning of the Green Olive Tree (v14-17)

a. Do Not Pray for This People – Not Even Sacrifice Can Save Them (v14-15)

¹⁴ “Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. ¹⁵ What right has my beloved in my house, when she has done many vile deeds? Can even sacrificial flesh avert your doom? Can you then exult?”

Here the LORD identifies Jerusalem – the Church – as his Bride.

And he says that she has done so many vile deeds

that no amount of sacrifice can atone for her sins.

As Hebrews 10:3-4 puts it,

“But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.
For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.”
Sacrificial flesh doesn’t actually *work!*

If you reject the LORD, if you turn away from the living God,
then there is no sacrifice for sin.

As Hebrews 10:26 puts it,
“For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth,
there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,
but a fearful expectation of judgment,
and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”

If you will not accept the sacrifice of Christ on your behalf,
then there is no sacrifice for sin.
If you willfully, permanently, and finally reject the sacrifice of Jesus,
then all that is left is idolatry –
and idols cannot save you!

And Jeremiah says regarding Israel:

b. Baal-Worship Has Resulted in the Burning of the Green Olive Tree (v16-17)
¹⁶ The LORD once called you ‘a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.’ But with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. ¹⁷ The LORD of hosts, who planted you, has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.”

Here, Jeremiah switches the image from the Bride to the Tree.
In Hosea 14:6 – a passage that Andrew Deliyannides has taught us to love –
the LORD described Israel:
“his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.”
Before Hosea, David had said,
“I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.” (Ps 52:8)

The LORD of hosts had planted Israel as a beautiful green olive tree.
But when the people of God turn to others gods –
when Israel made offerings to Baal –
they provoked the LORD to anger.
And now the olive tree is being burned to the ground.

There is a very simple structure to what Jeremiah has said:
First, scripture says if you do X, then God will do Y.
Second, this is what you have done: you have done X – over and over and over.
And so therefore, God is now going to do Y.

And this was not a popular thing to say in Judah!

Especially after all of Josiah's reforms!

Judah is doing *better* at following the LORD than *ever before!*

But Jeremiah's assault on the kings and priests and prophets results in a conspiracy against *him*.

3. The Prophet as Case Study (v18-23)

a. "Like a Lamb to the Slaughter" – They Seek to Destroy the Tree (v18-20)

¹⁸ *The LORD made it known to me and I knew;
then you showed me their deeds.*

¹⁹ *But I was like a gentle lamb
led to the slaughter.*

God has just said that sacrificial flesh cannot avert Jerusalem's doom.

And yet now the prophet is becoming a sacrificial victim –
like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.

There is a lot of language that reminds us of Isaiah 52-53.

Before anyone ever applied the Servant Songs to Jesus,
Jeremiah had appropriated some of its language to himself.

But Jeremiah didn't even realize that there was a plot against him –
until the LORD himself made it known to Jeremiah.

*I did not know it was against me
they devised schemes, saying,
"Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
that his name be remembered no more."*

The prophet is now the *tree* – the prophet is a picture of Israel (the green olive tree).
And now, the people of Israel are trying to destroy the picture of Israel (the prophet).

And in verse 20, we hear Jeremiah's appeal to the LORD:

²⁰ *But, O LORD of hosts, who judges righteously,
who tests the heart and the mind,
let me see your vengeance upon them,
for to you have I committed my cause.*

He entrusted himself to him who judges justly!

Jeremiah (perhaps unwittingly) is becoming a picture of Jesus!

And so Jeremiah asks God to show him his vengeance!

Jeremiah understands that we should not take vengeance for ourselves.

"Vengeance is mine," says the LORD, "I will repay."

But that doesn't mean that vengeance is *bad*.
After all, if vengeance belongs to God,
then it is a good thing when God takes vengeance upon the wicked!

And God says that he *will* bring judgment against those who conspire against his prophet:

b. The LORD's Warning to Those Who Conspire against His Prophet (v21-23)

²¹ Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, "Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD, or you will die by our hand"—²² therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: "Behold, I will punish them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall die by famine,²³ and none of them shall be left. For I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment."

Here we discover more details of the plot:

The men of Anathoth – Jeremiah's home town –
were plotting against him.

Their objection to him is that he is prophesying in the name of the LORD.

It's not hard to understand why.

The priests and rulers of Judah were convinced that Josiah's reforms had worked.

We have reformed the sacrificial system.

We are back to doing what God told us to do.

We're doing what God told us – therefore you are a false prophet!

And, since we are following God's law, you must die!

You do realize that this was always the drawback to the law
that said that false prophets should be executed!

If the "bad guys" hold power,

then they can use the Law to execute true prophets –

because the royal/template interpretation of the Law says that we're doing fine.

You disagree – therefore, you are speaking against the Law!

This is why the Church always needs to be *careful* not to "silence" prophets.

There's a pit on either side!

If you follow every wind and tide – you'll wind up wrecked on one side –

but if you insist that "we will never change" –

you'll crash on the other side!

Rome's biggest error was in saying that the Church could never err.

That forced Rome to condemn Luther and Calvin as heretics.

On the other hand, the mainline Presbyterian Church has allowed people to say anything,
which has resulted in moral anarchy and chaos!

Jeremiah sees the same sort of thing happening in his day,
and so in chapter 12, he responds to this.

In verses 1-4 he brings his complaint to God in the form of two questions:

1) Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
And 2) How long will the land mourn?

4. Jeremiah's Complaint/God's Answer (12:1-17)

a. Why Does the Wicked Prosper? How Long Will the Land Mourn? (12:1-4)

*Righteous are you, O LORD,
when I complain to you;*

yet I would plead my case before you.

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why do all who are treacherous thrive?

² *You plant them, and they take root;
they grow and produce fruit;
you are near in their mouth
and far from their heart.*

³ *But you, O LORD, know me;
you see me, and test my heart toward you.*

*Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,
and set them apart for the day of slaughter.*

⁴ *How long will the land mourn
and the grass of every field wither?*

*For the evil of those who dwell in it
the beasts and the birds are swept away,
because they said, "He will not see our latter end."*

The basic point of Jeremiah's complaint seems to be,

"Okay, all this makes sense.

Your covenant has been broken.

You are just, and so you will bring vengeance upon the wicked."

But you, O LORD, know me; you see me, and test my heart toward you.

If I exist,

*a righteous, faithful remnant that believes and follows you,
then how come the treacherous thrive?*

Why is your Law not working?

It's all very nice and good to say that God will make all things right in the end,
but I want to know *why is God not making everything right now!*

God's answer could not have been very comforting:

First,

b. God's Answer (12:5-17)

1) It's Worse Than You Think! (v5-6)

⁵ *"If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?"*

*And if in a safe land you are so trusting,
what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?
6 For even your brothers and the house of your father,
even they have dealt treacherously with you;
they are in full cry after you;
do not believe them,
though they speak friendly words to you.”*

You think this is bad, Jeremiah, just you wait!
You thought it was bad when the men of Anathoth conspired against you –
well, it's going to get worse:
Even your family will betray you.

If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?

But do not think for a moment that God is just a detached observer.
He is not a cosmic sadist –
watching our misery for his good pleasure!

2) The Desolation of God's House (v7-13)

*7 “I have forsaken my house;
I have abandoned my heritage;
I have given the beloved of my soul
into the hands of her enemies.*

The temple where I said I would dwell with my people forever?
I have forsaken.
My beloved bride – the one who I called “my people”?
I have given into the hands of her enemies.

You can hear the grief in the LORD's voice –
even as you hear the anger:

*8 My heritage has become to me
like a lion in the forest;
she has lifted up her voice against me;
therefore I hate her.*

Think about verse 8.

“My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest.”
What does a lion in the forest do – when she “lifts up her voice against me”?
When does a lion roar?
Lions do not roar *before* they pounce.
Lions are silent stalkers.
They only lift up their voice *after* they have subdued their prey!

God has been mauled by his people!
You – and I – mauled God.
Our sin sent Jesus to the cross.
WE might as well have been the ones who spit on him, beat him,
and hammered the nails into his hands!

“Therefore I hate her.”
Wait.
God hates us?
Yes, he cannot help but hate us!
For we have sinned.

But doesn't God love us?
Yes, but that is why he must also hate us.
For we have sinned.

He loves the good that he created.
And therefore he hates that which has marred his good creation.

But take heart, for if God only hates us *because* he loves what he made us to be,
then we can trust him to do what it takes to remove the evil.

Indeed, only a love so deep that it is willing to hate is worthy of being called love!
I knew a man who did not seem to care that his wife had cheated on him.
That man did not love his wife.
A man who loves his wife will *hate her* for cheating on him.
Only such a man will be able to bear the cross needed to restore the marriage!

But notice also that the LORD is concerned not only for his *human* creation.
All creation *groans* when humanity fails –
and God grieves for the *ecological effects* of man's sin!

⁹ *Is my heritage to me like a hyena's lair?
Are the birds of prey against her all around?
Go, assemble all the wild beasts;
bring them to devour.*

¹⁰ *Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard;
they have trampled down my portion;
they have made my pleasant portion
a desolate wilderness.*

¹¹ *They have made it a desolation;
desolate, it mourns to me.*

*The whole land is made desolate,
but no man lays it to heart.*

¹² *Upon all the bare heights in the desert*

*destroyers have come,
for the sword of the LORD devours
from one end of the land to the other;
no flesh has peace.
13 They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns;
they have tired themselves out but profit nothing.
They shall be ashamed of their^{al} harvests
because of the fierce anger of the LORD.”*

Yes, all this language circles around man – around Israel –
but it is this sort of language that will drive Paul to say
that the creation itself groans, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the Sons of God.

And that’s where Jeremiah brings us in the shocking conclusion in verses 14-17:

3) But I Will Have Compassion in the End (v14-17)

14 Thus says the LORD concerning all my evil neighbors who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit: “Behold, I will pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. 15 And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his heritage and each to his land. 16 And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, ‘As the LORD lives,’ even as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people. 17 But if any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the LORD.”

We might expect God to say something about how he will restore Israel.

But instead, the LORD says that *any nation*
that will “diligently learn the ways of my people,”
will be “built up in the midst of my people.”

If God’s people act like the nations, then they will be destroyed.

If the nations act like God’s people, then they will be saved.

No, we’re not yet fully to the New Covenant yet!

For that to happen, the Word must become flesh and dwell among us!

We need God to write his law on our *hearts*
so that grace becomes something that God does *in us*.

But the principles are in place.

“For while we still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person –
though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die –
but God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners,
Christ died for us.” (Rom 5)