

Psalm 35 – perhaps in the light of recent events we are beginning to learn how the imprecatory Psalms should be sung!

When I was in college, I participated in an annual Mexico missions trip called “Potter’s Clay.”

It was great.

I think it was an excellent program.

The leadership always emphasized how we were clay in the potter’s hand –
how we should always be ready to become whatever God made us.

But I don’t think that anyone ever talked about Jeremiah 18.

Undoubtedly Jeremiah was familiar with Isaiah’s use of the image of the potter in Isaiah 45.

God is the potter.

Israel is the clay.

God can do anything he wants with Israel.

That was the theme of the annual Mexico Missions trip:

God is the potter – we are clay in his hands –

Let God make something special of you!

So when Jeremiah gets sent to the potter’s house,
undoubtedly Jeremiah knows what to expect!

But *watch the potter* –

1. What Does God Say that We Should Do? (v1-11)

a. Watch the Potter (v1-4)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

When a potter sees that the vessel he is making is not working,
then he reworks it into another vessel, as it seems good to the potter.

As Jeremiah watches the potter, the word of the LORD comes to him:

b. The Principle of the Potter and the Clay (v5-10)

⁵ *Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.*

Yes, God is sovereign.

He may do with the clay whatever he wishes.

This is certainly the point of Isaiah 45,

when Isaiah speaks of the potter and the clay.

But keep watching the potter – because there is more to the picture than that.

We normally think of clay as passive.

But if God wanted to use a passive image
he should have used a different craft.

Of all the crafts in the ancient world,
the potter is the one whose medium is most active.

The clay is spinning on the potter's wheel.

True, the potter is the one who spins the wheel!

But the clay is moving, reacting –
and sometimes the clay doesn't do what you want!

This is the strange and beautiful interplay of the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man.

God is the one moving the wheel – God is the one molding the clay –
and yet God treats us as clay.

When we say that God is sovereign, that does not mean that he is arbitrary.

He doesn't put apples on a potter's wheel –
he uses clay!

He is the Maker of all things –
and so he uses all things according to the nature that he gave them.

And sometimes, when the potter is working the clay,

the clay doesn't do what the potter wants,
and so the potter goes with the flow and does something else.

You might say, "Whoa, wait a second! Isn't God sovereign?!"

But remember the covenant that God made with Israel!

Israel was supposed to love and obey the LORD – and live forever in the land!

That's what God had *said* that Israel was to do.

So the clay (Israel) did *not* do what the potter (God) wanted the clay to do.

And so now God will do something else!

That's what God says in verses 7-10:

⁷ If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.

God had told Jeremiah back in chapter 1,

"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." (1:9-10)

When God says that he will destroy a kingdom,
there is still hope!
 If they turn away from their evil and do good,
 then God will relent of disaster – and the nation will be spared.
But when God says that he will build up a kingdom,
they should not become complacent!
 If they turn away and *do evil*,
 then God will relent of the good
 that he had intended for that nation.

This is the familiar pattern of God’s covenant with man.

Again, we need to distinguish between God’s *decree*
(wherein God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass),
and God’s *covenant*.

Jeremiah is not saying that God is *surprised* by any of this.

Rather, God has covenanted to act in a certain way.

 The general principle is that if you act in accord with the way God made things,
 then – generally speaking – good things will happen to you.

 If you act contrary to the way God made things,
 then – generally speaking – bad things will happen to you.

And particularly, God has promised to do good to nations that obey him.

 And God has promised to destroy nations that disobey him.

And further, it is important to note that God is speaking here of “a nation.”

 While Judah is the particular nation in view here,
 the principle applies to any nation.

 If a nation turns away from evil and does good, then God will prosper them.

 If a nation turns away from good and does evil, then God will bring disaster on them.

This is a general principle of human society that applies to all nations.

 Do good and God will prosper you.

 Do evil and God will bring disaster.

And if you think about it, this makes sense.

 God made the world to operate in a certain way.

 When we live in God’s world according to God’s principles,
 then things tend to go pretty well.

 But when we insist on living *contrary* to God’s principles,
 then things tend not to work as well.

This is part of why I think that in the current political situation

 we would do better to focus on *living well* according to God’s principles.

Over time, people will see the difference!

And so Jeremiah cries out to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

c. The Call to Repentance (v11)

¹¹ *Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’*

This is the normal covenantal call to repentance
that you see in every covenant lawsuit.

The prophet warns of coming judgment:

here Jeremiah uses the potter’s language of ‘shaping disaster’ –
the divine potter is molding and shaping disaster against Jerusalem –
and calls Jerusalem to return to the LORD and amend their ways.

This is the normal call –
but Jerusalem is no longer listening:

2. What Does God Do to Those Who Hold Fast to Their Stubborn Ways? (v12-17)

a. The People Reject the LORD (v12)

¹² *“But they say, ‘That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’*

I don’t know that this is a direct quote.

I suspect that it is more a summary of the attitude of God’s people.

Remember that!

Because here we are *not* talking about a godless nation like Nineveh.

We are talking about Judah – we are talking about the people of God – the church.

God’s people have decided that there is no point in following God.

“We will follow our own plans,
and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.”

This morning we talked about the importance of church discipline.

We saw that church discipline is the responsibility of the whole church.

If you are not showing your brother his fault –

if you are not forgiving one another 70 x 7 –

then you are acting according to the stubbornness of your evil heart.

b. And So God Turns His Back on Israel (v13-17)

¹³ *“Therefore thus says the LORD:*

Ask among the nations,

Who has heard the like of this?

The virgin Israel

has done a very horrible thing.

¹⁴ *Does the snow of Lebanon leave
the crags of Sirion?^[a]*

*Do the mountain waters run dry,^[b]
the cold flowing streams?*

What happens when snow leaves the mountain tops?

It melts and feeds the cold flowing streams.

If all the snow melted, then the mountain waters would run dry.

Why does Jeremiah use this as an image of such horror?

Think about the Land of Promise.

Canaan has lots of wadis – lots of narrow valleys that are dry most of the year,
except when the rains come.

Only the tallest mountains have snow all year round –
and only the streams that flow from the tallest mountains
have sufficient water to flow all year round.

If the snow leaves the crags of Sirion, and the mountain streams run dry,
then there will be no water in the Promised Land.

But that is what has happened to the people of God!

¹⁵ *But my people have forgotten me;
they make offerings to false gods;
they made them stumble in their ways,
in the ancient roads,
and to walk into side roads,
not the highway,
¹⁶ making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.
Everyone who passes by it is horrified
and shakes his head.*

Israel has rejected the ancient roads – the path of life –
they have forgotten and forsaken the living God.

God's people have forgotten their God
and have turned aside to worship false gods –
false gods who made them stumble in their ways.

Jeremiah had spoken earlier in 6:16 of the importance of walking the “ancient path” –
the good way – the way of life.

But when you turn aside from the ancient paths and walk in side roads,
you will stumble –

everyone who has been hiking knows this!

The old paths are there for a reason!

If you want to get from point A to point B, then you want to follow a well-used path.

There's a reason why we use the term “rabbit trails”

to refer to aimless diversions from the main point of a conversation.
God had shown Israel the good way – the ancient path – that would lead to life.

But Israel has followed rabbit trails.

The same thing has happened today.

God's people have turned aside from the ancient paths to follow rabbit trails.
We live in a day where people crave *experience* – and do not care about *truth*.
As long as we *feel* good, we're good.

This is not merely true of our culture – but also of the church.

We do not care who God *is* – or what God *says* –
we only care how God makes me *feel*.

Why do I say this?

Just look at how many churches have de-emphasized truth
in order to focus on feelings!
Experience and feelings are important –
but it needs to be the experience of the *true God!*
And how do you know whether your experience is true or not?
How do you know whether your feelings are good?

Remember the LORD – walk in the ancient paths.

What has God *said*?

You need to know the scriptures –
and what do the scriptures principally teach?

“The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God
and what duty God requires of man.”

You need to know who God is and what God has done.

And you need to know what God requires of you –
to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength,
and to love your neighbor as yourself.

If you don't –
if you just follow your feelings –
then God says:

*¹⁷ Like the east wind I will scatter them
before the enemy.
I will show them my back, not my face,
in the day of their calamity.”*

The east wind is the wind of judgment.

The east wind blows hot and dry off the desert.
The east wind *never* brings rain.

Have you ever been in that situation?

In the day of calamity – when everything was going wrong –
you looked to God, and God turned his back on you!

“Where is God when I need him?!”

Never mind that you had refused to love and serve God!

How do you respond when God turns his back?

If your response is to get angry and throw a fit at God,
then you are demonstrating *why* God has turned his back.

If you refuse to listen to God, then God will refuse to listen to you.

And notice what happens next.

The people do not like the message, so they go after the messenger:

3. How Should You Respond to Christians Who Refuse to Listen? (v18-23)

a. Verbal Assaults and a Refusal to Listen (v18)

¹⁸ *Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.”*

Notice how the people use *scripture* to silence Jeremiah:

“for the law shall not perish from the priest,
nor counsel from the wise,
nor the word from the prophet.”

According to God’s covenant, these offices were supposed to continue forever.

The priests had been appointed as custodians and teachers of the Law (Lev 10:11).
The wise had given counsel to the king ever since the days of David and Solomon.
And the prophets had spoken the word of the LORD for generations.

Jeremiah has regularly said that these institutions had been judged by God and found wanting.

So, according to the logic of the priest, the wise, and the prophets,

Jeremiah is preaching contrary to God’s covenant promise.

Therefore, if we are going to be faithful to God, then we need to ignore Jeremiah!

This is the same logic that you hear today from those who don’t want God to judge wickedness.

In Jeremiah’s day, they wanted to ignore the prophet’s warning of judgment.

“Let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.”

You see the same thing today.

People who claim the name of Christ are setting aside the word of Christ
and are not paying attention to the warning of Jeremiah.

God has said that sexual relations belong in marriage –
and marriage can only be between male and female,
because only male and female can “be fruitful and multiply.”

And yet the mainline denominations are more than willing to ignore the word of the Lord
and encourage wickedness to flourish.

So how do you respond when Christians ignore the word of the LORD?
Jeremiah’s prayer of complaint offers us a helpful model:

b. Jeremiah’s Prayer of Complaint (v19-23)

¹⁹ *Hear me, O LORD,
and listen to the voice of my adversaries.*
²⁰ *Should good be repaid with evil?
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.
Remember how I stood before you
to speak good for them,
to turn away your wrath from them.*

Jeremiah asks God to listen to both sides.

Hear me.
Listen to them.
And see the difference between us.

They have dug a pit for my life.
But I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them.

Why has Jeremiah come under attack?
Because he is trying to save their lives.

Now, pay attention to *what* Jeremiah has been doing!
Jeremiah has been *preaching* the word of the Lord.
Jeremiah has been interceding for Jerusalem –
at least, until the Lord told him to stop!

But now, when the people declare that they will not listen –
and when they decide to “strike him with the tongue” –
to plot against him to destroy him,
Jeremiah replies like this:

Verse 21 speaks of the same three powers of death that we have often seen in Jeremiah:
famine, the sword, and pestilence.

²¹ *Therefore deliver up their children to famine;
give them over to the power of the sword;
let their wives become childless and widowed.*

*May their men meet death by pestilence,
their youths be struck down by the sword in battle.*

Men, women, and children are all afflicted by the coming judgment.

Verse 22 then speaks of the reciprocity of God's judgment:

²² *May a cry be heard from their houses,
when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them!
For they have dug a pit to take me
and laid snares for my feet.*

There are many Psalms that speak like this.
The only shocking thing for Jeremiah's hearers
is that Jeremiah is identifying *them* as the wicked !

²³ *Yet you, O LORD, know
all their plotting to kill me.
Forgive not their iniquity,
nor blot out their sin from your sight.
Let them be overthrown before you;
deal with them in the time of your anger.*

This morning we saw how Jesus taught us to forgive 70x7.
How can Jeremiah say, "Forgive *not* their iniquity"?

Some people take immediate recourse to the line, "Ah, that was just the Old Testament..."
But Paul uses the same sort of language in 2 Thessalonians 1 –
"God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us,
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
with his mighty angels in flaming fire,
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."
(2 Thess 1:6-8)

And the saints under the altar in Revelation 6:10 cry out,
"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge
and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth."

It may sound strange at first,
but you *do not want* God to forgive these people!
Because they have *refused* to repent.
This morning I said that it was a *good thing*
for the Charleston victims to forgive the shooter.
And it was!

But the shooter is in custody – and from all that I can see,
there is no danger that he will be released any time soon!

They have expressed their *disposition* of forgiveness toward the shooter.
But none of them said,
“Your honor, please release this fellow. He is now forgiven.”

The Charleston shooter is *not* forgiven!
Unless there is genuine repentance on his part,
the transaction of forgiveness is *not* complete.
And so the nine souls under the altar still ask,
“How long, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true,
how long until you avenge our blood?”

They will be satisfied with the blood of Jesus!
So if the Charleston shooter repents and believes in Jesus, they will rejoice!

But if he does not repent and believe in Jesus,
they will continue to cry out for justice – until the Lord Jesus brings justice.

But the day is coming when Jesus will return,
and when he returns he will judge the world.

He will make all things right –
which means that those who refuse to repent will be destroyed.