

Running with Horses

Text:

Jeremiah 11:18-12:6

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

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

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.

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"-- 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, and none of them shall be left. For I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment."

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?

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

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.

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."

"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?"

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."

Introduction:

Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" with good reason. It was not an easy call that he had received from God. He was an announcer of doom. Judah had sinned beyond hope of return. His call was to announce the coming of the Babylonians. No one likes bad news. People will always choose good news over bad news, even when there is little or no reason to believe the good news is true. So the people of Judah chose to listen to the false prophets; to believe that in spite of their horrible idolatry and failure to keep God's covenant, God would still protect them. They considered Jeremiah a traitor, unpatriotic. The true prophet of God was treated as an imposter and a false prophet. It is no wonder that he weeps. What a lonely man. He knows that he has received his message from God, but no one wants to listen. Instead of listening to him, they hate him, and even seek to take his life. Jeremiah weeps first for himself; later he will weep for the beloved city, Jerusalem. In fact an entire book of the Old Testament will contain his lamentations for her. It begins with these tragic words:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.

She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. (Lamentations 1:1-2).

But before Jeremiah weeps for Jerusalem he weeps for himself. The book of Lamentations is not his first lament. The passage we have read as our text is the first of five passages in the book of Jeremiah that contain the personal laments of Jeremiah. Passages where he complains to God, where he tells God he has had all he can stand. The most pathetic is the last of the five, which is found in chapter 20 verses 14-18. It begins with the words: "Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!" It concludes with the question: "Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" Few have struggled with the problem of the suffering of the righteous the way Jeremiah did; yet the questions he asks in his complaints to God are questions that most of us ask. We may formulate them less eloquently, but we still ask them.

I. Jeremiah's Complaint

All of these questions are prompted by the conviction of 12:1 "Righteous are you, O Lord". If God were not righteous, or if he were not at all, we would not expect the righteous to be rewarded and the wicked to be judged. But as soon as we confess that God is righteous and holy we expect him to govern the world according to his nature, and when it seems to us that he doesn't, we, like Jeremiah, give voice to our complaints.

In the beginning of the passage we read, Jeremiah is complaining to God. Not only has Judah sinned and deserves God's judgment, but when he had announced that judgment to them, rather than heed his words, they had begun to plot against him, to say: "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" (Jeremiah 11:19). Jeremiah reacts as many of us would, not by taking vengeance himself, but by asking God to take vengeance upon them.

He then asks the question all of us ask at some time in our lives: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (Jeremiah 12:1). His further explanation in verse 2: "You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit; you are near in their mouth and far from their heart", seems especially compelling. No text was better known to the people of his time than Psalm 1, and yet what is happening to Jeremiah seems to be turning Psalm 1 upside down. He, above all, has been faithful to God and to his *Torah*, yet it is the wicked, those who are persecuting him that seem to be planted by the waters, that appear to be bringing forth fruit in their season, while he feels like a piece of chaff in the wind.

That is the question. What is the answer?

II. God's Answer

The first thing we can say about God's answer is that it is neither easy nor simple. Some might say that it is no answer at all. He simply says to Jeremiah not to complain because things are only going to get worse, that those closest to him will turn against him. Is there anything we can learn from God's answer?

A first observation is that just as the wicked benefit from God's goodness, so the righteous at times suffer alongside the wicked. If all of Judah had been like Jeremiah, the Babylonians would have never come, there would have been no captivity, but they weren't. The majority were rebellious, covenant breaking idolaters. God's patience with them eventually reached its end

and he allowed the Babylonians to come and lay Jerusalem waste and take them into captivity. When the Babylonians came to exercise God's judgment, the faithful suffered alongside the unfaithful. Just as God makes the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust; so disaster sometimes falls equally upon both. What we sometimes forget is the patience of God. How often we ignore his goodness until the trials come. Most of us experience far more good days in life than bad. We learn to take them for granted; to consider them normal. Then when the bad times come we, like Jeremiah, cry out to God.

We can take this idea a bit further and say that God's patience with the wicked can increase the suffering of the righteous. In verse 4 of chapter 11 Jeremiah says that even the birds and the animals suffer because of the unrighteous. He is making reference to a drought sent by God to judge Judah. The whole land, even the innocent animal life suffers because of the wicked. God, "who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance", in being patient with the wicked does not make life easier for the righteous. We would prefer a world where the wicked were immediately rewarded for their wickedness; where we did not feel the evil effect of their wickedness. But this is not the case. God is patient and we live in a world that is the object of his patience. Like Jeremiah, we sometimes wish that he were less patient, but when we do we need only remember his patience towards us.

A final thing we can learn from God's answer to Jeremiah is that God gives us good times to prepare for the bad. In fact, he answers him with a question: "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?" Often we take the wrong approach. We do everything in our power to shelter ourselves from disaster, rather than to prepare ourselves for disaster. Now if we are wise we will plan ahead and do what we can to prepare for the future, but if we are really wise we will know that the only sure way to face the future is by cultivating an unshakable relationship with God. Crisis does not create faith, but it reveals faith. No one is more amazed than the person himself who has spent his life building a living faithful relationship with God when the time of crisis comes and they find that God is still there. All of us say to ourselves: "I don't know how I could face that." Then when we are called upon to face it we find that the faith we have nurtured in the land of peace sustains us in "thicket of the Jordan."

While we are in the land of peace we must not make the mistake of believing that the "thicket of the Jordan" does not exist. We know that it does. If we have not seen it with our own eyes, we have heard enough reports from others to know that it exists. Neither should we suppose that we will never be called upon to pass through it. I am no different from others, if God has called some to pass through it, then, there is no reason for me to think that I am exempt. Rather than hide my head in the sand, I should so live while I am in the land of peace, that

when the time comes for me to face the lions I will be able to say God has been with me thus far, and I am confident that he will be with me now. The Christian life is a life of faith. We should waste no opportunity to grow our faith, so that when our faith is tried it will not be found wanting.

We will be like Jeremiah, who as he sits and weeps over the ruins of Jerusalem, has not lost his confidence in God. The city is destroyed; the temple is a pile of rubble; the citizens lay dead in the streets; the stench of death is in his nostrils. Read the Lamentations of Jeremiah. They are one of the most moving descriptions of human tragedy and suffering in all of literature. Yet in the midst of his great lamentation, Jeremiah is able to say:

“And thou hast removed my soul far off from peace: I forgot prosperity.

And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD:

Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.

My soul hath *them* still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.

It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

The LORD *is* my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.

The LORD *is* good unto them that wait for him, to the soul *that* seeketh him.

It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne *it* upon him.

He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope.

He giveth *his* cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach.

For the Lord will not cast off for ever:

But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies.

For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. (Lamentations 3:17-31).

