

# A LOOK AT A BOOK: Jeremiah

## March 30, 2014

### Real Justice

Some things seem innately wrong to us. Consider the news stories you may have seen on television or read in a newspaper in the last few weeks. I imagine that you read at least one story in which you found yourself feeling deep down inside that “this is wrong” and “it should not be this way.”

I wonder if you know what a “quisling” is? Vidkun Quisling was a member of the Norwegian army who founded the National Socialist party in Norway in 1933. Six years later he met with Adolf Hitler and urged Hitler to invade and occupy Quisling’s own homeland, Norway. Four months later, in April 1940, Hitler did just that. The Germans invaded Norway, thus giving Germany strategic sea and air bases for their operations against the United Kingdom. The invasion was quick, but it was not bloodless. The little nation of Norway suffered a great cost, and many Norwegians would lay Norway’s suffering at the feet of Quisling. He served in the puppet government that Germany installed. From that position he became responsible for many atrocities, among them sending Jews to concentration camps. When Norway was freed from German rule in May of 1945, Quisling was immediately arrested, tried, found guilty of treason, and executed. You might have heard of him because his name has since passed into infamy in more than one language. “Quisling” can now be found in the English dictionary. It means “traitor,” particularly one who collaborates with an enemy to destroy one’s own nation – like “Benedict Arnold” in American English.

It is a sad tale, but then Quisling got justice, right? For a time, it looked as if he wouldn’t. The might of the German nation supported him and his position in government. But in the end, we can all see, he got justice.

But, there *were* all the people who died in prison camps. And there *were* all the people who lost their lives in the invasion. You begin to wonder if one man’s execution can really pay for so much suffering and misery. You might even begin to wonder, what hope is there for real justice?

That’s a good question. What hope is there for justice – real justice! – in a world of slashings and robberies, burnings and bombing, as well as unseen cruelties that are not a crime in any human court. Isn’t such justice unattainable and unrealistic?

## **Introducing Jeremiah**

We will consider the overwhelming picture of God's justice found in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah has fewer chapters than Isaiah, but the text is longer.

Jeremiah is a collection of speeches, interspersed with several historical episodes in the prophet's life. These speeches, or prophecies, have been compiled and are chronological only in the roughest sense. Chapter 1 presents Jeremiah's original call to prophesy, and chapter 44 records his last prophecy down in Egypt. This book is a collection of speeches, arranged thematically.

Jeremiah is basically God's message to his people of coming justice. Whenever we are tempted to feel cynical or jaded about the world we live in, Jeremiah might be good for what ails us. Its message about coming judgment is important for those who long for justice. And it may be even more important for those who have *not* longed for justice, because Jeremiah tells us that justice is coming.

## **Justice for God's People (Chapters 1-45, 52)**

The first forty-five chapters of Jeremiah clearly focus on God's coming justice against his people.

Jeremiah lived about one hundred years after the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah at the same time the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, which occurred in 722 B.C. The Assyrians continued to harass the southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem through the end of the eighth and much of the seventh century. Yet Assyria gradually declined in power until it was toppled by the Babylonians in 612 B.C. In the midst of Assyria's decline and before Babylon's full maturity, however, Judah took advantage of the situation to regain strength. Josiah became king in 640 B.C., and, as a godly king, he used this power vacuum to help the nation of Judah reform its religious life. He also ended the practice of paying tribute to the emperor of Assyria, because Assyria no longer had the power to back up its demand for tribute.

Yet even if Assyria would fall, Babylon would quickly prove to be an even greater foe. For a time, Egypt seemed to experience a renaissance of its own, and many in Judah began looking to Egypt for protection from Babylon. Yet at the end of the seventh century even Egypt would suffer an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. And Babylon would eventually sack Jerusalem itself.

It was amid these tumultuous times that God brought Jeremiah along.

God's great prophets often came amid decay among and around God's people. Whenever the world began to show its passing nature, whenever the supposedly permanent things of life began to fray and crack, that's when God in his mercy would typically provide a glimpse at the things that are lasting.

The people had enjoyed a great king about a hundred years earlier in Hezekiah, during the days in which Isaiah prophesied. But Hezekiah had been followed by several horrendous kings. Then they had a great king again in Josiah, but Josiah was never able completely to reform the nation. And after his death, the nation quickly lurched back into sin, even terrible sin!

In many ways, the first forty-five of the book's fifty-two chapters read like one long suit for a divorce. God is passionately angry with his people. He promises at one point, "I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my Name" (25:29). Do you see the tragedy here? God decides to bring justice on the very people who bear his name!

### *The Cause of Judgment*

What were the charges? The book lays them out at great length. In the very first chapter, the Lord says, "I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made" (1:16). Jeremiah is called to prophesy precisely because God's people have broken their covenant with the Lord. They have forsaken him. They have worshiped idols. That is God's suit against them. Or, to use his ironic words here, they have worshiped "what their hands have made."

"What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me?" the Lord asks. "They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves" (Jeremiah 2:5).

The Lord then breaks this accusation down into two specific charges: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (2:13). They have, first, forsaken him and, second, dug their own useless wells of life.

God describes that all this means with a shocking image: they are like prostitutes! "On every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute" (2:20). Clearly, God's words here are stinging. But he continues making his case.

Jeremiah 2:23-28

Jeremiah 3:1-5

The book of Jeremiah goes on like this for forty-five chapters! God is clear with his people: They have become brazen in their sin. They have no shame. They have become so accustomed to prostituting themselves to other gods that they don't even know how to blush. And when they claim to be devoted to the Lord, they lie. More than once he tells them, "You have as many gods as you have towns!"

Jeremiah 5:7-9

When God's people call for God's justice, they call his judgment down not only on those evil people *out there*, but on themselves. "Forget about the other guys," the Lord says, "why should I forgive *you*?"

The whole nation had sinned against God. Even their religious devotion was wrong. In what is known as Jeremiah's temple sermon, God mockingly repeats the people's claims to feel safe because the temple of Yahweh is in their presence. Surely, nothing could happen to them in the temple, right? All the while, Babylon draws closer with its army. The Lord scolds them through Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 7:9-11

They were even burning their sons and daughters in the fire in worship of Molech, offering up human sacrifices of their own family members in their false and detestable religion!

They had reached a terrible impasse in which God did not care about their hollow religious worship. They entered the house of Yahweh and sometimes did the right thing, but he knew everything else they were doing. He knew they did not care about his Word (6:19-20). In fact, his Word had become "offensive" to them (6:10).

What happens when God's Word becomes offensive to God's people? They pick teachers and prophets who will teach them something else. God observes, "A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way" (5:30-31a).

Prophets, the spokesmen for God, prophesying lies? Priests, the mediators for Yahweh, living immoral lives? And God's people loving it this way?

### *The Promise of Judgment*

God sent Jeremiah to bear the message of coming justice, even against those people who bore God's name.

How exactly would God judge his people? Part of the answer included things like false prophets and famine. But primarily, God would answer his people's disobedience with an army: he would destroy the nation. The Lord symbolizes this destruction with a clay pot he instructs Jeremiah to purchase and then smash in front of a crowd while saying, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed" (19:11).

A number of so-called prophets may have been running around saying, "peace, peace," but there was no peace (6:14; 8:11). Instead, God would give his people over to the ones they really trusted. He would exile them to Babylon for seventy years. In the final chapter of Jeremiah (chapter 52), we read the historical account taken directly from the book of 2 Kings (24:18-25:21), describing Jerusalem's fall, King Zedekiah's capture, the destruction of the temple and the city walls, and finally the exile of the people: "So Judah went into captivity, away from her land."

Some people like to present God as a formless ocean of love, engulfing our every part. But the Bible nowhere presents God's love so amorphously. God has revealed himself in the book of Jeremiah and elsewhere as a personal God who is holy and who cares.

### *The Priority of Judgment*

Suppose for a moment, however, that the story ended here. Suppose that God used Babylon to chasten his people in love, and then the story stopped. What would be wrong with that picture?

The question that at least Jeremiah would ask is, what about Babylon itself? Would Babylon escape judgment? If you stopped reading at chapter 45, you might think so. And that doesn't seem fair? Jeremiah raises this topic with the Lord back in chapter 12. Most of the book, you might notice, consists of the Lord speaking through Jeremiah. But here is one place where Jeremiah gets a word in edgewise: "You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"

Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (12:1). This inspired prophet of God asks God quite honestly why the wicked prosper. It does not seem just, but they do!

Will they always so prosper? The answer is: not forever. God *will* ultimately bring judgment on all the wicked. And we’ll get to that in a moment.

God wants to make sure his people understand the priority he places upon their (*our* – if we are Christians) judgment. Only then will he move to those who are not his people. First things first. The apostle Peter understood this dynamic perfectly. In his first letter, he observes, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.” Then he continues, “And if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”

There is a powerful picture here for us. If Jeremiah spends forty-five chapters focusing on the faults of God’s own people, should we spend most of our spiritual lives focusing on the faults of all those around us? On the faults of non-Christians or society at large? On the faults of other members of our own family? No, we should begin as individuals by observing our own hearts and lives, just as God begins with his own people. We should also begin as a church by seeking to be open to the Lord’s correction, and not by focusing on how everyone else is wrong and we are right.

Jeremiah gave the messages, but he did not invent or generate them. Still, his job did cause him no small amount of consternation and strife. At one point, he laments.

Jeremiah 20:7-10

### **Justice for Babylon and the Nations (Chapters 46-51)**

Thus far, we have been looking only at God’s judgment of his own people, in the first 45 chapters of Jeremiah. In chapters 46-49, it’s as if God says, “Don’t think I have forgotten the rest of the world.” Then in chapters 50-51, God turns his eyes onto Babylon itself.

If you start in chapter 46 and then glance through the headings of the next few chapters, you will see that Jeremiah begins with the promises of judgment upon Egypt and then sweeps eastward, speaking out judgment on nation after nation. Apparently, no one will be left out: Egypt, the Philistines, Moab, Amman, Edom, Damascus, Kadar, Hazer, and Elam. Then, most extraordinary, he takes the most space, in chapters 50-51, to make a final, ultimate, climactic declaration of

impending judgment. And who is the recipient of this promised condemnation? Babylon, the very nation that Jeremiah's contemporaries thought he was collaborating with.

In these two chapters, God clearly makes the point that the Babylonians were only a tool in God's hand. The nation that once looked so magnificent and majestic and mighty turned out to be a pawn in God's plan to humble his own people. Everything the Babylonians accomplished was accomplished at God's behest, at his pleasure, for his purposes. Apart from him, they could do nothing.

At the beginning of chapter 50, the Lord says through Jeremiah, "Announce and proclaim among the nations, lift up a banner and proclaim it; keep nothing back, but say, 'Babylon will be captured; Bell will be put to shame, Marcum filled with terror. Her images will be put to shame and her idols filled with terror'" (50:2).

Jeremiah 51:58

These are strong words, coming from one little prophet in a failing country against the superpower of the day – which is about to conquer his nation?

Jeremiah was the employee of no person or state. He was not the mouthpiece of any political party. And he was not part of some cynical operation to undermine his country. Instead, he was God's spokesman who spoke God's truth in judgment and love to God's creation. He was a prophet of God.

As Christians, we do not tell the good news of Christianity because it initially pleases everyone. There are parts of our message that people often do not like. We tell it, rather, because it is the true message of God. It is the message of the Lord that has come to us and that we give to others, not in pride but in humility. Jeremiah showed such humility when he stood and told his king that he would go into captivity. He showed such humility when he stood and told the Babylonians that they too would perish in God's judgment. In neither case did Jeremiah assume any of this would be done by his might, or that these things would happen through any insight of his own. He simply said what God told him to say.

We have been given a message that is not our own. We did not make it. We cannot tailor it. God has given it to us to tell the world. What's that message? We have all rebelled against God and deserve his eternal condemnation. We deserve to go to hell. Yet God in his kindness and mercy sent his son Jesus to live a perfect life and die on the cross for the sins of all who would ever repent and believe in

him. In Christ alone can we find forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God. The Bible now calls us to repent of our sins and trust in Christ.

If everyone receives justice, what then is the difference between God's people and other people? The difference is mercy.

The book of Jeremiah is not entirely a book of gloom. If you are looking for a little sunshine, read through chapters 30-33.

Jeremiah 32:37-40

To make this hope more concrete, God instructs Jeremiah to buy a piece of land even though the collapse of the domestic economy appears imminent (32:7-9). It's as if God is saying to Jeremiah, "Show the people that you are willing to put your money where your mouth is. Show them that you are serious when you say that my word has come to you and that I will restore my people."

God promises judgment, but he also promises hope.

It is also interesting to note that God saves one person, Ebed-Melech, out of this condemned city of Jerusalem, "because," God says to Ebed-Melech, "you trusted me" (39:16-18). A whole city stood under judgment, but there was mercy for this one who trusted God!

Though justice is what we want, though justice is what we often demand, consider Portia's words to Shylock in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice:

"Though Justice be thy plea, consider this,  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy" (IV.i.182).

Do people have a natural sense of justice? What evidence do you see? What biblical support can be given for this idea?

Does the punishment one human being will receive for a crime that he or she commits against another human being bring complete justice to that situation? If not, what will?

Why, amid a world of evil, rebellion, and moral decay, is the message of God necessarily an offensive message that will turn people off?



Should Christians, who have been the recipients of God's mercy and grace, desire for God to bring his judgment upon his enemies? How can this longing coexist with a right understanding of God's grace?

Should we be concerned about a church that is unwilling to offend either members or outsiders with its message (as opposed to offending them with their personality, their culture, their sin, or their traditions – which, hopefully, everyone agrees a church should try to avoid)?

Following up on the previous question, Christians, let's consider your own practices of evangelism: how willing are you to say things (with gentleness, respect, and love) that people will take offense at? If you are not willing, what is preventing you from doing so?

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Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)