

A Tale Of Two Complaints (Part One)

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In the previous issue, we saw that Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe and companion, was affected by the winter of despair that had settled over Judah in the days before its fall to the Babylonians. He groaned and complained. Did that pandemic of despair affect Jeremiah as well? Did he also come to complain to God about his lot in these "worst of times"?

The Scriptures narrate at least two complaints that Jeremiah issued to God. In this article, we will look at the one recorded in Jeremiah 12 (compare Moses' complaint, recorded in Numbers 11:11-15). Here, the prophet treads gingerly:

Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You;

Yet let me talk with You about Your judgments.

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?

You have planted them, yes, they have taken root;

They grow, yes, they bear fruit.

You are near in their mouth

But far from their mind.

But You, O Lord, know me;

You have seen me,

And You have tested my heart toward You.

Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,

And prepare them for the day of slaughter.

How long will the land mourn,

And the herbs of every field wither?

The beasts and birds are consumed,

For the wickedness of those who dwell there,

Because they said, “He will not see our final end.” (Jeremiah 12:1-4)

Jeremiah, like Baruch, has become discouraged by the turbulent maelstrom of events around him, the confusion and destruction that always accompany the unraveling of a nation. Yet, the prophet’s complaint is more focused than that of his scribe’s. Moreover, Jeremiah’s complaint does not betray the self-absorption that Baruch’s grumbling exhibits. Instead, Jeremiah’s complaint is oriented outside himself. It is a “green” complaint, as we would say today: The land, he declares, mourns, the herbs everywhere wither, the animals and birds are gone because the residents of the land are evil.

It is clear that the natural environment of Judah was languishing as a result of mismanagement at the hands of selfish, exploitive people. Jeremiah did not limit culpability to Judah’s leaders, but speaks more generally of the “wicked” (verse 1) or of “those who dwell there” (verse 4), who have “taken root” (verse 2), that is, become established to the point that they are prospering due to their environmentally destructive activities.

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

Jeremiah’s complaint, therefore, has at its heart the issue of prosperity on the part of the wicked, people without scruples who take advantage of others and circumstances for their own gain. Why does God permit the wicked to prosper? The psalmist Asaph broached this issue in Psalm 73. Notice verses 1 through 9:

Truly God is good to Israel,

To such as are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;

My steps had nearly slipped.

For I was envious of the boastful,

When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pangs in their death,

But their strength is firm.

They are not in trouble as other men,

Nor are they plagued like other men.

Therefore pride serves as their necklace;

Violence covers them like a garment.

Their eyes bulge with abundance;

They have more than heart could wish.

They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression;

They speak loftily.

They set their mouth against the heavens,

And their tongue walks through the earth.

In verses 12 through 15, the psalmist continues his recital about the “benefits” that accrue to the wicked, who, he claims,

. . . are always at ease;

They increase in riches.

Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,

And washed my hands in innocence.

For all day long I have been plagued,

And chastened every morning.

In verses 18-19, 27-28, however, Asaph comes to understand the end of the ungodly. It is not nearly as rosy as their earlier prosperity had hinted:

Surely You set them in slippery places;

You cast them down to destruction.

Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!

They are utterly consumed with terrors.

. . .

For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish;

You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.

But it is good for me to draw near to God;

I have put my trust in the Lord God,

That I may declare all Your works.

Asaph comes to understand that a time will come when, “in a moment,” God will “destroy those who destroy the earth,” as John states it in Revelation 11:18. Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 8:11, “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of

men is fully set in them to do evil.” Sooner or later, though, their sins and crimes catch up to them, and divine justice—destruction and death—follow.

If You Think It's Bad Now . . .

God, in His response to Jeremiah, replies in a similar key. We will get a running start in Jeremiah 12: 5:

If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you,

Then how can you contend with horses?

And if in the land of peace,

In which you trusted, they wearied you,

Then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?

God begins by asserting, in effect, “If you think it’s bad now, wait until I’m done with Judah. The worst of times are yet to come!” Jeremiah has only done battle with those in Jerusalem in a time of relative calm—the calm before the storm. The going would get *really* tough outside Judah, in the countries where God would eventually send the prophet, in Egypt, Spain, and Ireland.

As in His response to Baruch, God here reminds Jeremiah that he was not living in normal times but turbulent ones: “I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies” (verse 7). When God lifts His protective hand from His people, all sorts of terrible things are likely to ensue. The wolves will pounce.

God goes on to state His agreement with His prophet that the land has suffered from mismanagement. In verses 10-11, He claims that “many rulers” (the word in Hebrew more specifically denotes “shepherds”)

. . . have destroyed My vineyard,

They have trodden My portion underfoot;

They have made My pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.

They have made it desolate;

Desolate, it mourns to Me;

The whole land is made desolate,

Because no one takes it to heart.

God had surveyed His land and had seen the horrendous devastation wrought upon it by self-serving, uncaring, unappreciative people, leaders of the nation who should have known better. The result of the environmental degradation will be a lot of work—but not much in the way of harvest. Note verse 13:

They have sown wheat but reaped thorns;

They have put themselves to pain but do not profit.

But be ashamed of your harvest

Because of the fierce anger of the Lord.

In verse 14, God reiterates that He will in no way be deterred from His purpose of uprooting Judah. The wicked in Judah will ultimately not prosper, and they will assuredly reap what they have sown. He stresses here that He will also destroy Judah's "evil neighbors," who have attacked her over the years:

Against all My evil neighbors who 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.

Jeremiah took God's words to heart and went beyond his "attitude"—only to become beset by more serious doubts, a real crisis in his faith. Next month, we will take a look at Jeremiah's other complaint.