

## A Tale Of Two Complaints (Part Two)

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In Part One, we looked at Jeremiah 12, where we find the narration of the prophet's complaint that the wicked prosper, even though they destroy the land God gave to Abraham and His descendants as an eternal possession. God assures Jeremiah that He will punish the perpetrators of irresponsible environmental policies and practices.

Chapter 15 records Jeremiah's second complaint. Here, the prophet experiences a crisis as major—if that could be—as the crisis Judah's king and people were experiencing. Jeremiah's was a crisis in belief so dangerous that it threatened his position as God's prophet. Chapter 15 opens with what can only be characterized as a sensational word-picture of God's rejection of Judah:

Then the Lord said to me, "Even if Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My mind would not be favorable toward this people. Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth. And it shall be, if they say to you, 'Where should we go?' then you shall tell them, 'Thus says the Lord:

"Such as are for death, to death;

And such as are for the sword, to the sword;

And such as are for the famine, to the famine;

And such as are for the captivity, to the captivity.'"

"And I will appoint over them four forms of destruction," says the Lord: "the sword to slay, the dogs to drag, the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. I will hand them over to trouble, to all kingdoms of the earth. . . ." (Jeremiah 15: 1-4)

Indeed, only a man after God's own heart, with a super-robust conviction of God's ultimate beneficence, could stomach such a mammoth calamity, seeing God's hand in it. Notice the intensity of the rhetoric of verses 6-8:

Therefore I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you;

I am weary of relenting!

And I will winnow them with a winnowing fan in the gates of the land;

I will bereave them of children;

I will destroy My people,

Since they do not return from their ways.

Their widows will be increased to Me more than the sand of the seas.

### **Depression—and More**

The intensity of rhetoric like this, the horrific images it evokes, brings Jeremiah to experience profound depression, as verse 10 indicates.

Woe is me, my mother,

That you have borne me,

A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth!

I have neither lent for interest,

Nor have men lent to me for interest.

Every one of them curses me.

Jeremiah is not even a banker, yet people all around him condemn him!

Consider that, to this point, God has as yet done nothing more than what He told Amos He would always do: He would do nothing until he has revealed His secret to His servants the prophets (see Amos 3:7). Yet, the information He has provided Jeremiah has overwhelmed him. The prophet mouths the same formula Baruch would later utter, “Woe is me.” Is there anyone on “the whole earth” who understands what Jeremiah has gone through and who appreciates the work he is doing for God? Is he, like that mariner of old, alone in the wide, wide sea?

God’s response contains three elements:

1. A message of hope, assuring the prophet that he is not alone (verse 11).
2. A powerful rebuke, complete with a threat (verse 19).
3. A reminder of the grace He has afforded Jeremiah from the start (verses 20-21).

God starts out with a message of hope, promising Jeremiah that He will provide a remnant, a group of people who will survive the siege and the destruction of Judah. Jeremiah is not alone and will never be alone.<sup>1</sup> By His use of the term “your remnant,” God indicates that Jeremiah will “own” this group; he will be its leader. “Surely it will be well with your remnant; surely I will cause the enemy to intercede with you in the time of adversity and in the time of affliction” (verse 11).

### **Will God Be as a Failing Stream?**

But Jeremiah is not satisfied. In verses 15-18, the prophet retorts with words bespeaking the depth of his dejection, the seriousness of his crises of belief:

O Lord, You know;

Remember me and visit me,  
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.  
In Your enduring patience, do not take me away.  
Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke.  
Your words were found, and I ate them,  
And Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart;  
For I am called by Your name,  
O Lord God of hosts.  
I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers,  
Nor did I rejoice;  
I sat alone because of Your hand,  
For You have filled me with indignation.  
Why is my pain perpetual  
And my wound incurable,  
Which refuses to be healed?  
Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream,  
As waters that fail?

Jeremiah reminds God that he has taken of God's Word and rejoiced in it; he has called on God's name and avoided the gainsayers. Yet, his pain is ongoing. Like Baruch, he finds no rest (see Jeremiah 45:3). Will God be with him to the end? Will God abandon him? The *Jubilee Bible 2000* renders verse 18 this way: "Why was my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? Wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar and as waters that fail?"

Strong words! Like Asaph, whose "feet had almost stumbled" and whose "steps had nearly slipped" when he became envious of "the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:2-3), Jeremiah is clearly experiencing intense spiritual doubts. Can God use such an individual as His spokesman, His prophet, especially in this time of national emergency, the approaching "worst of times?"

At this point, God continues His response to the prophet with a stunning rebuke, one which contains more than a veiled threat:

If you return,

Then I will bring you back;

You shall stand before Me;

If you take out the precious from the vile,

You shall be as My mouth.

Let them return to you,

But you must not return to them. (Jeremiah 15:19)

This translation masks the moment—the import—of God’s words. He is warning Jeremiah that he must return, that is, repent, abandoning “this mistaken tone of distrust and despair,” as *The Amplified Bible* glosses verse 19. God promises He will restore him as His prophet, the “mouth” of God, *only if* he comes to understand the difference between the precious way of God and that vile way of the wicked.<sup>2</sup>

*The Living Bible* better conveys the import of God’s comments to Jeremiah with this paraphrase of verse 19:

Stop this foolishness and talk some sense! Only if you return to trusting me will I let you continue as my spokesman.

*The Message* handles the same passage this way:

Take back those words, and I’ll take you back.

Then you’ll stand tall before me.

Use words truly and well. Don’t stoop to cheap whining.

Then, but only then, you’ll speak for me.

The *Good News Translation* presents this paraphrase:

If you return, I will take you back, and you will be my servant again. If instead of talking nonsense you proclaim a worthwhile message, you will be my prophet again.

It is clear that God is not mincing His words. In this time of crisis for Judah, God demands a servant in whom He can have confidence, one who will fearlessly warn in the face of persecution and who will remain committed to carrying out His work to its conclusion—no matter where that work may take him. God needs an individual of resolute and indefatigable faith.

Actually, God is telling Jeremiah that his office of prophet is on the line. He absolutely *must* overcome his doubts of God’s fidelity. He must not fall back into the ways of the people of Judah. He can only continue to be separate from them by believing God.

As God so often does, He attaches encouragement to His rebukes:

And I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall;

And they will fight against you,

But they shall not prevail against you;

For I am with you to save you

And deliver you, says the Lord.

I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,

And I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible. (Jeremiah 15:20-21)

God is in fact reminding the prophet of his original commission, as recorded in Jeremiah 1:18-19:

Today I have made you an armed city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the entire land—the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and all its people. They will attack you, but they won't defeat you, because I am with you and will rescue you. (*Common English Bible*)

It was the worst of times back then, yet not so bad as the coming Tribulation that we face today. God *demand*s that His people be faithful. Should we come to doubt God's reliability and His faithfulness—should we come to feel He has abandoned us, His people—we may want to think hard about God's words to Jeremiah: "If you change your heart and return to me, I will take you back. Then you may serve me" (Jeremiah 15:18, *New Century Version*).

The ever-faithful God will not forget His plans for us, even though we may come to forget His promises to us.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> God's assurance of communion here is similar to His better known comment to the prophet Elijah, recorded in I Kings 19:18: "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

<sup>2</sup> Compare this to the work of the Millennial priests, who teach "My people the difference between the holy and the common, and explain to them the difference between the clean and the unclean" (Ezekiel 44:23).