

Taking Your Complaints to God

Jeremiah 12: 1-4

Dale Evans

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Russ established a sermon series to look at various aspects of “complaining.” There is a subtle distinction in the Biblical record between bringing a complaint and complaining. Is it a question regarding the nature of things that seem to be not right or is it grumbling because things are not working out in one’s favor? It matters most significantly when the complaint is directed to God or rather is about God. Some of the sermons helped us know the difference, others let us see how to change when the complaining is mere grumbling. There are those whose routine response to injustice, sin, calamity, or struggle is to say to themselves, “so what”. Doris Day’s song that came first from the Hitchcock movie “The Man Who Knew Too Much” and then used as the theme song for her television show, “Que Sera, Sera”, sums up these people’s approach to life well. This is different than looking for the “silver lining in the black cloud.” These people just don’t seem to be moved by what is swirling around them. Others are on the extreme to the other end. Every struggle is for life and death. Emotions run high and hot over any issue. Yet, there is a message in the Bible that indicates both ideas need modified and moved together. We should care and care deeply about sin and injustice, death and desolation. And then we should be calm and trusting, patient and long-suffering in the face of such concerns. So tonight, we are looking at how we should think when we take our complaints to God. My angle is probably not where Russ was going with this text and title but let’s see how this goes.

Jeremiah’s place and purpose

Turn in your Scriptures to the book of Jeremiah and chapter 12. Jeremiah, like the other major writing prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel are a bit hard to read. We commonly mine them for theological nuggets, sayings that have deep meaning or application, but rarely read them through well enough to grasp their overall meaning and how that meaning unfolds. Personally, I am still wrestling to have a better grasp of these books. So, when we fall into a single chapter in one of these books to mill around and find some thematic substance, we run the risk of not reading that book correctly or doing justice to the context of the passage. Indeed, that is close to the case tonight. So, with that, let’s begin with at least a preliminary understanding of the setting and overall message of the prophecy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah (with the other writing prophets) in the Hebrew Bible follows the historical books Joshua through Kings. The story of the Israelites after the Exodus is one of ultimate failure. They incompletely move into the land, try their hand at a human monarchy and eventually fail the covenant made at Sinai and affirmed across the Jordan such that the Deuteronomic curses fall on the nation ending in exile.

Jeremiah is writing just before and then immediately after the fall of Jerusalem and is explaining the exile to his audience. But he does more than that, he points out that God’s

program extends beyond this calamity and looks to the future when God will do something glorious and wonderful. In chapter 11, right before our passage for the evening, God instructs Jeremiah to remind the people of the covenant that made them who they were to start with:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² “Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ³ You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant ⁴ that I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, ⁵ that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day.” Then I answered, “So be it, Lord.”

He goes on later in this chapter to say:

¹⁶ The Lord once called you ‘a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.’ But with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. ¹⁷ The Lord of hosts, who planted you, has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal.”

But we all know where the book goes when we come to chapter 31. The entire chapter is a great read, but we will only point out the most familiar verses down in verse 31:

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

But knowing the “why” of the exile and future working of God for his people still creates an unsettling in Jeremiah’s soul. He examines the world around him and can’t quite make it all make sense. So, we have for us in chapter 12 a record of his struggle and some of its answer from God. Let us read from verse 1 all the way through verse 12 but I will focus on the first 4 verses for tonight’s conversation.

*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."
"I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage;
I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.
My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest;
she has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her.
Is my heritage to me like a hyena's lair?
Are the birds of prey against her all around?
Go, assemble all the wild beasts; bring them to devour.
Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion;
they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.
They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me.
The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart.
Upon all the bare heights in the desert destroyers have come,
for the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other;
no flesh has peace.
They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns;
they have tired themselves out but profit nothing.
They shall be ashamed of their harvests
because of the fierce anger of the Lord."*

In verse 1 he makes his plea, his complaint.

*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?*

I want you to take the "handout" for tonight and write out 3 or so complaints you have right now that you want to express concretely to God. Jeremiah expressed his concern in two questions that may have applied to what he saw among the Israelite leadership and what he knew regarding the coming Babylonians. Either way, he was struggling with something real,

tangible, and visible in his life. What do you have that seems to be a problem? We are not going to share them, but I wanted to give you time to be concrete with expressing your heart.
<Pause>

Put those down and we will come back to them later. For now, notice that Jeremiah began this oracle, his complaint, with a statement about God. He said he was righteous. That causes us to ask this fundamental question, to whom are we coming when we bring our complaints to God?

Let's just look at the surrounding context and see what else Jeremiah thought about God as he brought this complaint.

God judges/is righteous

Jeremiah leads off in this text stating that God is righteous. In verse one of our chapter (12:1) Jeremiah stated: "*Righteous are you...*" Righteousness is something that is correct, just, and good. It is clean and pure. It aligns itself with the perfect expectation. One author then says this about how it applies to God (who is the standard and perfect expectation): "The whole Bible is based on this premise. It means that the God who makes promises will keep them and will intervene in powerful ways when the promise runs amok." God is right and will make right all "unrighteousness". But how can he do this?

God is creator/is powerful

In chapter 10 he stated there that God has power. Such power that he was able to create the entire world, even all we know that exists by the utterance of his voice. We read in chapter 10, verses 12 and 13:

*It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
When he utters his voice,
there is a tumult of waters in the heavens,
and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth.
He makes lightning for the rain,
and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses.*

God rules/ordains

And because this is his universe, he has ordained its order and rules over that order to guarantee its proper and intended operation. In verse 2 of chapter 12 Jeremiah recognized that the even the evil ones were put there and operate by his decree. He said, "You plant them..." And back in chapter 10 again in verse 10 he affirmed: "*But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King.*" God designs, determines, and rules his world.

God sustains/is wise

But he also does this in the best and wisest way. Again, back in verse 7 of chapter 10 he said: *“Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you.”* He is wise that all of us and has established exactly what he wants to happen because it is the best. But what if he were mean, capricious, and downright evil?

God knows/loves/cares

Jeremiah knows that God knows and loves his people. He cares for his creation. He did not wind it up and walk off. He affirmed this in verse 3: *“But you, O LORD, know me....”* And similarly in verses 23 and 24 of chapter 9 where he wrote down God’s statement:

“Thus says the Lord:

*“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom,
let not the mighty man boast in his might,
let not the rich man boast in his riches,
but let him who boasts boast in this,
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.
For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”*

God plans/redeems

And because of this love and care. Jeremiah knows that God has plans for redemption and restoration of this people, even forgiveness of their sins and failures. Going back to Jeremiah 31: 7-10

For thus says the Lord:

*“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
‘O Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel.’
Behold, I will bring them from the north country
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble,
for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.*

“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’

So, let’s summarize, God is just and righteous and can carry out his plans because he is powerful and wise. He does so in a manner that demonstrates true love and compassion because he has plans to bring some into close relationship because of the new covenant (which we understand comes through the person and works of Christ) for all eternity. The situations that we face are not to be brushed aside nor elevated to ultimate calamities but to be acknowledged, struggled with and given to God, trusting him to be “righteous.”

We often complain to others, our family and friends. But these complaints are merely times of grumbling. We are not speaking to the one who knows, understands, and even plans for these concerns. We are truly just voicing our thoughts to idols, those who have no power or authority to make change and likely make us look good in our own eyes.

Do we really come to God with understanding? Do we remember him as the powerful creator, the perfectly righteous one, the only God, king, and judge of the universe? Do we trust him as the all-wise planner and sustainer of this world, the one who has purpose and direction? And do we clearly and confidently know he loves us, cares for us and is bringing us into a closer relationship with him to last for all eternity? Are these thoughts real in your life?

Let’s go back to our handouts and turn the page over. Now, write out a sentence to God that brings those complaints on the other side to him as God.

<Pause>

It is because of the work of Jesus in bringing the new covenant that Jeremiah spoke of that allows us to bring our hearts to God. The book of Hebrews, that great new covenant text in chapter 10 encourages us in this way as we close:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

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Sunday evening, October 17, 2021

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