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Criticizing God

Jeremiah 5:1-6, "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; See now and know; And seek in her open places If you can find a man, If there is anyone who executes judgment, Who seeks the truth, And I will pardon her. 2 Though they say, 'As the LORD lives,' Surely they swear falsely." 3 O LORD, are not Your eyes on the truth? You have stricken them, But they have not grieved; You have consumed them, But they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; They have refused to return. 4 Therefore I said, "Surely these are poor. They are foolish; For they do not know the way of the LORD, The judgment of their God. 5 I will go to the great men and speak to them, For they have known the way of the LORD, The judgment of their God." But these have altogether broken the yoke And burst the bonds. 6 Therefore a

lion from the forest shall slay them, A wolf of the deserts shall destroy them; A leopard will watch over their cities.

Recently at a prayer time, one individual prayed, (obviously speaking to God), “Many times we don’t like the decisions You make.” There is no question that this was the opinion of Jeremiah. He is called the weeping prophet for good reason. He not only was moved by the condition and suffering of the people of God, but he clearly struggled with God’s dealings when it came to His people. Jeremiah prayed:

Jeremiah 12:1b, “...I would plead *my* case with Thee; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with Thee...”

Then later, when persecution was upon him for doing what was right, Jeremiah complained:

Jeremiah 20:7, “O Lord, Thou hast deceived me and I was deceived; Thou hast overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.”

In fact, that is the very context of Jeremiah 5. Jeremiah 4 takes place early in the ministry of Jeremiah. There would come a time when he would be a seasoned veteran; but not here, not now. It shows us Jeremiah’s struggle with God’s providence as the horror that awaits God’s people on account of their sin is graphically depicted. So, in a couple of places Jeremiah complains against God, His plan, and what He was doing with His people:

Jeremiah 4:10, “Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Surely Thou hast utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, “You will have peace”; whereas a sword touches the throat.’”

And then later in the chapter he wrote this:

Jeremiah 4:20-21, “Disaster on disaster is proclaimed, for the whole land is devastated; suddenly my tents are devastated, my curtains in an instant. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?”

In other words, *“God! I don’t want to see the vision any longer! Please, stop giving it!”*

It is in this context we read Jeremiah 5. God puts Jeremiah in the driver’s seat, essentially saying, *“O.K. You don’t like the way I’m handling My people, you be the Judge. You tell me what should be done!”* If you ever wanted an audience with the Lord and the opportunity to share your criticism on account of the way God has deigned to handle your life, this passage is for you. Jeremiah got that opportunity here.

God’s Merciful Charge

Jeremiah 5:1, “Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and look now, and take note. And seek in her open squares, if you can find [one] man, if there is [just] one who does justice, who seeks truth, then I will pardon her.”

If this sounds at all familiar that is because a similar conversation occurred between Abraham and God clear back in Genesis 18 concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. The conversation began with Abraham inquiring of the Lord that if a certain amount of righteous men could be found in Sodom, would He please spare it. Listen to how the dialog ended:

Genesis 18:32, “Then [Abraham] said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?’”

This is the sixth time Abraham spoke to God in this way; he began with 50, then 45, 40, 30, 20, and now 10! Notice God’s response:

Genesis 18:33, “And [God] said, ‘I will not destroy *it* on account of the ten.’ And as soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the Lord departed; and Abraham returned to his place.”

Obviously there weren’t even ten righteous men in Sodom and so the city was destroyed!

A similar standard is given to Jeremiah here, but there are significant differences. Unlike Abraham who pled for the welfare of a *pagan city* if *ten righteous men* could be found, Jeremiah was to approach *the holy city of God*, Jerusalem, the capital city of the Theocratic Nation, and so THE center of their religious passion and devotion; and produce NOT ten, BUT just *one righteous man*. Jeremiah was to look for just one man who “...does justice [and] seeks truth...”

These are covenantal expressions which constitute the heart of a love-relationship with God. Recall, God is a compassionate; gracious Being who in His redemption has deigned to create a family in which each member is called to live for the welfare of the other.

Romans 15:1-2, “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.”

Don’t ever forget that the weak and hurting are our most important treasures that we must serve. Again when is Christianity at its best- in its purest form?

James 1:27, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father [In other words, this is Christianity at its best...], to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

In fact, it was for this reason Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed!

Ezekiel 16:49-50, "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw *it*."

Accordingly, God calls Jeremiah to search out the Capital city and see if there is just one man/woman/child that could be considered faithful to the covenant calling to uphold the rights/privileges of the needy amongst God's people. Now, Jeremiah did this and what he discovered no doubt shocked him.

Jeremiah's Shocking Discovery

Jeremiah 5:2, "And although they say, 'As the Lord lives,' surely they swear falsely: after Jeremiah walked the streets of Jerusalem for who knows how long (yet we presume it would have been a thorough search; after all it isn't just any day the sinner is placed in the position of Judge and given the chance to do things their own way), after searching far and wide for just one righteous man, woman, or child, Jeremiah concludes, "Surely all swear falsely..."

Did you get that? He couldn't even find one! All their religious affection and devotion was a sham! Recently we talked about this principle in Scripture. While we tend to bifurcate our living such that what we do Monday through Saturday is distinct from Sunday, in the Bible the life you live Monday through Saturday constitutes the worship you offer to God on Sunday! .If you have consumed people and bloodied your hands during the week, these very hands will be what are raised to God in your worship on Sunday.

Isaiah 1:15, "...when you spread out your hands *in prayer*, I will hide My eyes from you, Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. [Why?] Your hands are covered with blood."

This is why Samuel warned Saul:

1 Samuel 15:22-23, "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *and* to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from *being* king."

We see it in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 2:22-23a, "'Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me,' declares the Lord God. How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals'? Look at your way in the valley! Know [confess/accept] what

you have done!...”

It was this disparity that Jeremiah observed when he examined the citizens of Jerusalem on the day he assumed the judge’s chair. They worshipped well (meaning, they flocked to the temple, raised their hands in adoration, made multiple and numerous vows of love, service, and devotion saying, “As the Lord lives [I will do this and that]...”) BUT then they turned around and, with the very hands with which they worshipped God, they choked the weak and the hurting for the penny that was owed them! Talk about a sober reality check! In fact, it was so bad that God considered Israel at the time to be more vile and wicked than the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah!

Ezekiel 16:48, “‘As I live,’ declares the Lord God, ‘Sodom, your sister, and her daughters, have not done as you and your daughters have done.’”

Martin Luther as a monk went on a pilgrimage to Rome in hopes that this pilgrimage would calm his troubled soul. And yet what he saw; the trinkets sold in the name of God, the unholy priests and church leaders, the lack of compassion for the hurting and weak, literally turned his stomach. Luther did not return in peace. He returned more at war with what then was passed off as “Christianity!”

And so it was when Jeremiah was placed in the seat of the Judge and told to render judgment! And like Luther, what he saw turned his gut (you can read about it from vv. 7-13). Talk about baptism by fire! That no doubt is why he wrote these words in Lamentations:

Lamentations 3:39, “Why should *any* living mortal, or *any* man, offer complaint in view of his sins?”

In other words, there is nothing WE experience as sinners that we can say, “I don’t deserve!” All have sinned and the wages of this sin is death! (Romans 3:23; 6:23) And so for the moment that he was Judge of the universe, Jeremiah discovered a shocking reality, none are worthy of God’s grace!

Christian, through Jeremiah you too are invited to do the same search of this generation and see if you can find one righteous man, woman, or child who is worthy of the mercy and grace of God! Start at your home church (Bethel) and see if you can produce just one in your argument against God’s dealings with mankind! Yet you won’t... because you can’t! Paul took up the challenge and searched out his generation and this was his conclusion:

Romans 3:10-18, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, add the path of peace have they not known. There is no fear of God before

their eyes.”

Face it! When it comes to any criticism that you might be tempted to raise against God and His dealings either with you or this world, there is nothing substantial that you can give in light of man’s sin! Yet Jeremiah’s moment in the Judge’s chair was not finished; it had just begun! Notice what he discovered about God; it too was shocking!

Jeremiah 5:3, “O Lord, do not Thine eyes look for truth? Thou hast smitten them, BUT they did not weaken; Thou hast consumed them, BUT they refused to take correction.”

There are two issues here. First, what is it that God is after? Is He like Zeus, bored and so moved to torment man for fun (cf. Psalm 50:21a)? Based on this passage, Jeremiah was shocked to discover that God wasn’t after the torment of Israel because He was bored. God was after integrity/truth on the part of His people! Secondly, notice WHY God therefore ordains the bitter providence for His people: “...Thou hast smitten them, *BUT* they did not weaken; Thou hast consumed them, *BUT* they refused to take correction.” Truly, God ordained the difficult providences of Jeremiah 2, 4 so correct His people. In other words, He ordained the bitterness for their integrity!

Hebrews 12:5-7a, “You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.’ It is for discipline that you endure...”

That was the purpose and point of the bitter providences which had come upon Jeremiah’s generation! God had “smitten them” (not in pleasure, but to sober them), but “they did not weaken” in their love of sin. God had “consumed them, but they refused to take correction!” J. A. Thompson put it this way:

One might have expected that when some punishment fell on a man because of his breach of covenant he would learn a lesson and mend his ways. That was the divine intention. But stubborn Jerusalem had refused to come back. (Thompson, 1980, p. 237)

What an incredible realization on the part of Jeremiah! God was not against them for their sin, but for them against their sin! Yet Israel flatly rejected the vehicle of God’s grace! Instead they were moved to anger wondering why God wouldn’t let them have full access to their sin! That is why God frequently gave the warning to His people. This is beautifully captured by Ezekiel a short time later.

Ezekiel 33:11, “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’”

What a fantastic discovery on the part of Jeremiah! Yet still he was not finished. Jeremiah’s

“Day in the Life of THE Judge” also produced a third realization, once again involving the people of God.

Jeremiah 5:3, “They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent.”

This is NOT “more of the same” (and so a repetition of Jeremiah 5:1-2), BUT a shocking revelation of truth. It wasn’t that God’s people didn’t know any better; it is not that they were doing their best, but didn’t know how to serve the Lord. Here Jeremiah states it plainly: they didn’t want to turn from their sin; they loved their sin! They had become addicts!

Again, we are talking about Baalism and the nasty effects upon its participants. The false religion literally changes the tastes of the worshipper much like “Turkish Delight”, no amount of true worship, true service, or true fellowship can compare to this intense, passing pleasure of the sin! God/Jeremiah would later describe the nation in these terms.

Jeremiah 9:2b-5, “For all of them are adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men. And they bend their tongue *like* their bow; lies and not truth prevail in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me,” declares the Lord. ‘Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; because every brother deals craftily, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. And everyone deceives his neighbor, and does not speak the truth, they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity.’”

I’m not sure if there is a more apt description of our generation than this: “...they weary themselves committing iniquity.” Yet that was the generation in which and to which Jeremiah ministered. They not only had rejected the worship and service of Christ, but they were in love with pleasure, ease, prosperity, the “good life” so much so that they would NOT turn back to God. This more often than not is the problem when it comes to a believer’s sin: they love it so much!

In counseling when it comes to issues like anger, pornography, lust, deceit, conflict, and the like, I always include a calling for the participant to repent of the pleasure they are deriving from their sin. For many of the struggle you and I have with sin is that we love it so!

As you reflect upon that which we have seen, do so mindful of the grace and mercy of God in Christ which results in His tempering of us for our good and His glory. As this is the case, don’t leave this passage burdened by the Lord or the truth of this text. Rather, know the love of Christ which will not give us free and full access to our sin!

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About the Preacher

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