

## **Jeremiah 11:18-12:17 The prophet's complaint**

### **Introduction – facing opposition when trying to do the right thing**

In the 2017 General Election, Liberal Democrat party leader Tim Farron faced repeated questions about how he could lead the party given his Christian convictions. The result was that the Lib Dems party message failed to get out and they lost seats, followed by Tim Farron stepping back as leader. He said he was, “torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader.”

In 2023, Kate Forbes competed against Humza Yousaf to lead the SNP in Scotland, and so become First Minister in Scotland. While Humza's Muslim faith was respected, Kate's Evangelical Christian faith was considered a barrier, and a fair target for attack, and she lost the vote.

You don't have to be a leader of a political party to experience this sort of frustration. Many of us will have examples where we're working hard trying to do the right thing, and we find some people trying to take us down, opposing us, frustrating us. And many of us have had the experience of finding the opposition comes from an unexpected direction- from people we expected to support us. We're trying to limit our online use and our own family drag us back online. We're trying to share the gospel at work, and it is a colleague who goes to church who tries to stop us talking, and spreads rumours about us being prejudiced. We're trying to help serve the local community or care for the local ecosystem, and people who do nothing criticise and obstruct. We're trying to do the right thing, and other people try to take us down.

And that is what Jeremiah is experiencing, as he serves God as God's messenger in Jerusalem.

## **Setting the scene- his own village is trying to kill him 11:18-23**

We know Jeremiah comes from Anathoth, because he is introduced that way in the first sentence of the book. It is a priestly village, and Jeremiah is from a priestly family. So you might expect them to be his greatest supporters when he is called by God as a prophet, as a messenger to speak God's word. They are his relatives, and they are priests of God. But in 11:18-23, we find that they have been plotting against him.

In verse 18 God shows Jeremiah what they were plotting. They were plotting to kill Jeremiah. Vv19, 21a *I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realise that they had plotted against me, saying, 'Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.'* 21 *Therefore this is what the Lord says about the people of Anathoth who are threatening to kill you.* That is pretty shocking isn't it. They want to kill Jeremiah.

And the reason they want him dead is because they don't want to hear God's word. They are fed up of Jeremiah speaking God's message. They don't want God's word, and so they want to get rid of the messenger. 21b. *saying, 'Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands'* Again, that is shocking because these are the religious leaders. But perhaps it is not so surprising that the leaders who benefit from a corrupt society don't want to be challenged by God's word.

Jeremiah appeals to God, the one who judges righteously and tests the heart and mind, to bring vengeance on those plotting to kill him. And God says that a year is coming when Anathoth will be wiped out by the sword.

We're going to spend time looking at Jeremiah's complaint to God in this situation. But before we do, I want us to see the way Jeremiah is a picture

of Jesus. We started thinking about our own experience of opposition when we try to do the right thing. Jeremiah connects with us in that- and takes it up a level- people trying to kill him, because he is God's messenger. But Jesus takes it even further.

The link is hinted at in v19 *I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter*. In Isaiah 53:7, the suffering servant is described as a lamb led to slaughter. The one who speaks God's word is killed. Jeremiah is suffering- but he is rescued from the slaughter by God showing him the plan. But go forward to Jesus, and he is truly the suffering servant, the lamb led to slaughter. Jesus was opposed by his brothers, who thought him mad, and rejected in his home town. He was persecuted by the leaders of Israel- priests, teachers of the law, elders, and king. The leaders of Israel worked together to silence him. And though Jesus had done nothing wrong, they had him killed, and he did not defend himself- though with a word he could have called down heavenly armies to annihilate all opposition. Instead, Jesus is the true Lamb of God, who dies to take the sin of the world, who dies in our place. The opposition to Jesus is even more unreasonable than the opposition Jeremiah faced. For Jesus is God the word become one of us, our brother. He brings the fullness of God's message, faithful and gracious. As he tells Pilate, he comes to speak truth. He is without sin, so the powerful and religious of his day opposed him, because his goodness exposed their selfishness. They plotted together and with the Romans- let's get rid of him, let us silence God's voice so that we may rule. And Jesus in his trial is often silent, a repeated theme, so that Pilate is amazed- Jesus willingly accepts the death unjust leaders have plotted.

The opposition Jeremiah faces as he speaks God's word makes him a picture, a type, of Jesus. This is what faithful ministry as God's messenger

looks like, and so Jesus experiences it to the maximum. We, if we are trying to follow Jesus, will also face unjust opposition and suffering as we try to do the right thing, and especially as we try to share the good news of Jesus. That is to be expected.

But in The Bible God not only tells us what to expect. He also gives us people who voice our concerns and complaints. Job, Habakkuk, the Psalmists and Jeremiah all complain to God. Yet God includes their complaints in his word. God wants us to have models of taking our concerns to God in prayer, even our complaining to God. The thing that is dangerous is grumbling and complaining about God- but many godly characters in the Bible complain to God. And that gives God a chance to address their hearts and minds, and so to address our hearts and minds when we find things hard.

### **Jeremiah's complaint**

So let's look at Jeremiah's complaint in 12:1-4.

What truths about God does Jeremiah affirm?

What complaints does Jeremiah have?

What does Jeremiah ask God to do?

So God answers Jeremiah. As with Job and Habakkuk, the answer is bracing and not exactly the answer we'd like. But God does tell us

something important- God tells us that his plans to judge and rescue are far bigger than the immediate troubles we are complaining about.

### **God's answer: part 1**

#### **God destroys wickedness more thoroughly than we ask vv5-13**

So remember Jeremiah has complained to God that the wicked prosper. Jeremiah is serving God and facing trouble. But the wicked from his hometown, who reject God, who are trying to kill Jeremiah, are enjoying life. They are getting promotions, renovating their house, going on nice holidays, getting their kids into good schools- life just seems to be working for them. So Jeremiah wants to know- when are you actually going to judge the wicked?

And God's answer starts with a gentle pushback- are you sure, Jeremiah, you really want me to start destroying the wicked? 12:5 <sup>5</sup> *'If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble<sup>[a]</sup> in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by<sup>[b]</sup> the Jordan?* Jeremiah is complaining about living in a society with wicked people, with his own relatives wanting him dead. That is the racing with men, that is the safe country. And he has stumbled and been worn out by that. So, God says, how will cope when I judge this wicked society with the wicked Babylonians. How can you compete with horses- the cavalry of the Babylonians invading. How will you manage the thickets by the Jordan- a place refugees might flee in time of war. Jeremiah, you think living in a society where wicked people thrive is bad- wait until I judge your society with war. <sup>5</sup> *'If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?*

And I know some of you, dear friends, have experience of that today. Ukraine was a corrupt state with problems- but being invaded by Russia was worse. Going back over the last few decades, to Syria, and Iraq and Libya- their dictators were wicked, but life was worse in the wars that followed their downfall. This month, Christians and Alawites have been massacred in Syria- minorities that had been protected by former president Assad, wicked though he was.

So things are going to get worse for Jeremiah when God judges the wicked in Judah. V7 <sup>7</sup> *'I will forsake my house, abandon my inheritance; I will give the one I love into the hands of her enemies.* God's people have deserted God, and so God will let Judah be conquered. V8 tells of how the people he loved became like lion roaring defiance at God. v9 speaks of some sort of speckled bird of prey- the idea seems to be a bird of prey that is not right and so is attacked by others. God's people are not right with him, and so the nations will destroy them. V10 speaks of shepherds trampling God's vineyard- shepherds being language for kings, here kings of other nations. God's vineyard is his people, Israel.

The point for Jeremiah and for us is that God really will judge the wicked. No one who opposes God, no one who does evil, will escape. Judgement will really fall. But that judgement will be bigger and more complete than we will find comfortable. Jeremiah had a few key individuals in mind, when he asked God to act against the wicked. God says he is going to take out the whole wicked society. And so the same answer comes to us, when we say to God- why don't you judge quickly and take down the wicked who cause us trouble. God's reply- a day is coming when I will judge every sin fully, when every wicked person will be dealt with.

If we go back to Judah and the capital city Jerusalem being invaded, we get a picture of final judgement on the earth. <sup>11</sup> *It will be made a wasteland, parched and desolate before me; the whole land will be laid waste because there is no one who cares.* <sup>12</sup> *Over all the barren heights in the desert destroyers will swarm, for the sword of the Lord will devour from one end of the land to the other; no one will be safe.* <sup>13</sup> *They will sow wheat but reap thorns; they will wear themselves out but gain nothing. They will bear the shame of their harvest because of the Lord's fierce anger.* The whole land affected- the earth we are meant to care for brought to destruction because no one cares. Destroyers swarming with swords so no one will be safe. **<Recording ends here>** And we've watched enough action films and disaster movies to assume that we could sort out a rescue plan as humans. Isn't that the little idea at the back of our minds- in a disaster we'd be the ones who'd read the signs, be smart, and get out safely. But God says- people will sow wheat but reap thorns, they will wear themselves out but gain nothing. Human strength and cleverness will not save when God decides to judge wickedness. Those who sow wickedness will reap shame and God's anger. With no escape.

Jeremiah complained that God didn't seem to care about wicked people flourishing and doing evil. God's response is- will Jeremiah be able to cope when God really deals with wickedness in his nation? It will be a thorough destruction of wickedness. It was wicked of Jeremiah's family to betray him as verse 6 describes- to raise a cry against Jeremiah, to try and kill him, to put on a front of friendliness while trying to kill him. God is rightly angry at that. God is angry at wickedness, at the killing of the innocent, including if we deliberately kill the frail and elderly as the assisted suicide bill proposes. God is angry at the mutilating of bodies, at the sexual exploitation and rape, at the way the rich get richer while the poor

struggle. God is angry at racism and at classism. God is angry at abuse. Indeed, God is fiercely angry- controlled anger waiting for the right time, but absolutely determined to judge.

And so again God answers us- I will destroy the wicked, far more thoroughly than you expect. Jesus, like Jeremiah, promises a day of judgement when he will root out all evil: Matthew 13:40-42 <sup>40</sup> *As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.* <sup>41</sup> *The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.* <sup>42</sup> *They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* God cares more about wickedness than we do, and he is determined to destroy all wickedness- do we know and accept that?

And if Jeremiah wants to know how God can use wicked Babylon in his judgement, God answers that concern too- and in the process gives us hope.

### **God's answer: part 2**

#### **God plans judgement and compassion for all nations vv14-17**

<sup>14</sup> *This is what the Lord says: 'As for all my wicked neighbours who seize the inheritance I gave to my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands and I will uproot the people of Judah from among them. Babylon and its allies will be judged in their turn. They are instruments God uses in judging Jerusalem. But they are wicked, selfish and cruel, and God will judge them in turn. They will be uprooted. We know from history that Babylon will end up being defeated by the Persians. And then many people of Judah will come back to Jerusalem. So God will judge every wicked nation.*

But then remarkably God tells us that he will have compassion on every nation. <sup>15</sup> *But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to their own inheritance and their own country.* And this compassion on the nations will be linked to people from every nation learning from God's people and worshipping the true God- Yahweh, the LORD. <sup>16</sup> *And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, "As surely as the Lord lives"— even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal – then they will be established among my people.* The nations will turn from their gods, like Baal, and come to worship the true God, the Creator, the LORD of Israel. People from every nation will join the people of Judah in one people of God.

This happens in Jesus. As Ephesians 2:11-13, 15b-16 <sup>11</sup> *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands) – <sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

God is telling Jeremiah the gospel outcome in advance. The nations will come to join God's people. This is what Jesus does. God's compassion reaches out to all nations, and invites people from every nation to know him. In Jesus, everyone is offered perfect forgiveness for their wickedness, so that no divine anger at our sin is left. The cross reconciles us to God as equals- equal sinners and equally forgiven and loved by God. There is no

first class Christian- those who grew up in Christian homes or Christian nations. We are all equally welcomed by God's compassion and grace. Every nation represented here is a nation God wants in his everlasting kingdom. And God wants every nation not yet represented here to receive that invitation too.

In Jesus we also get the Spirit to help us defeat wickedness in our lives. We are invited into the loving relationships of God, and so we are empowered to lay aside selfishness, pride, greed, lust, laziness, and lies. We can lay aside our old gods and idols, and instead worship God as supreme, using his good gifts to serve as well as to enjoy. When many people in a nation follow Jesus, the very character of a nation can be reformed in ways that bring great blessing. If you have trusted Jesus to save you, are you also walking daily with him, enjoying his compassion, and following his ways. Trusting Jesus while not listening to him in the Bible, not praying, not remembering his cross and so rejoicing, not seeking his help to live his way, is to miss out on the fullness of life he has for you. It is like trying to keep one foot in the old boat, and one foot in the new boat. If you jump from one punt to another on the river Camb, you have to step over briskly- if you try to keep a foot in both boats they pull apart and you fall in the water. So step fully into enjoying Christ and walking his way.

God tells Jeremiah, and us, that the invitation to be God's people goes out to people of every nation. But people have to accept that invitation. And those who do not accept Jesus will in the end face God's fierce anger at sin. <sup>17</sup> *But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot and destroy it,' declares the Lord.* If you are here exploring Christianity, this message is very relevant to you. God offers you compassion and escape from judgement in Jesus. But you must trust Jesus as God and rescuer,

you must receive his compassion and follow him. Otherwise you will be caught up in God's judgement, the uprooting and destruction of all evil. You can choose even today to trust Jesus, and be sure of eternal compassion and life.

Though in Jeremiah's day, God was focusing only on his people in Judah, God already planned to save and judge the nations. And so as we pray for God to deal with the wicked, we must always remember Jesus' command to pray for our enemies. It is not wrong to pray for justice, and God will one day judge every wicked tyrant, every brutal warlord, every soldier who commits war crimes, every corrupt official, every slanderous individual, everyone who lies, and everyone who exploits others, and everyone who steals...

But as the list of wickedness goes on, we must remember we ourselves need mercy and forgiveness. We need Jesus to take God's anger at our sin on the cross. And if we have been shown mercy, so we may hope for mercy to be shown to others. As we pray for justice for the wicked- whether leaders of countries or the family member or colleague who is malicious to us- let us also pray for mercy for them. Let us pray they trust Jesus, and know their sins forgiven, and begin to change now, on a journey following Jesus that will lead to eternal glory. Let us pray for them to trust Jesus and know God's anger and judgement at their sins was taken fully by Jesus on the cross.

God gives us permission, through Jeremiah, to complain to him about injustice, and the way the wicked flourish for a time. But his answer is not always the immediate answer we want- specific wicked people quickly removed or suffering. Rather, God's answer helps us see a much bigger plan. God destroys wickedness more thoroughly than we ask in the end.

God plans judgement and compassion for all nations. So we can be sure of our eternal good- rely on God's compassion in Jesus. So we can pray for mercy for the nations.

Prayer