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How Can You Run with the Horses?

12: 5-17

How can you run with the horses? DIG: What is the point of the comparison in verses 5 and 6? What comfort can Jeremiah take in that? What is God's warning to Judah? How does the prophet feel? How is this an answer for Yirmeyahu? What is ADONAI's warning to Judah's wicked neighbors? What Good News do you see here for the exiles, both Jewish and Gentile (compare to Isaiah 2:2-4 and 56:6-7)? What about the Gentile nations that occupied Judah after the exile? What will determine how God treats them?

REFLECT: What was God's response to Jeremiah's complaint? What would our life be like if God instantly punished every sin? Are you on foot running with the horses? Or, are you stumbling in safe country? How do you prepare for tougher times? Who can assist you? To whom would you turn?

At the end of Josiah's reign



In the tradition of **Job**, ADONAI's reply to **Jeremiah's** complaint (to see link click [Bk - Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Why Do All the Faithless Live at Ease?](#)) began with a question designed to strengthen **the prophet** for the more difficult burdens **he** will have to bear in the future. **This is presented in different ways by a series of metaphors, the first one being athletic prowess: If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete (Hebrew: *charah*) or run with the**

horses? If you stumble in safe country (if you lack security during these peaceful days), **how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan (12:5)?** This refers to a narrow strip of land on both sides of **the Jordan River** that have heavy **brush**. It was also a place where wild animals lived, especially lions (**Jeremiah 49:19, 50:44; Zechariah 11:3**). If you think it's bad now, how are you going to react when Nebuchadnezzar and his army arrive? If **the LORD's** response to the conspiracy at **Anathoth** (see [Bj - The Plot Against Jeremiah](#)) was reassuring, **His** response to **Jeremiah** here is alarming. **ADONAI** was telling **him** through this metaphor that because **the prophet is God's** mouthpiece **he** would suffer even more plots against **his** life. This was only the beginning!

Yirmeyahu's response should now be not to question **God**, but to remain faithful. **The prophet** needed to remember what **he himself** had said earlier: **You are always righteous, ADONAI, when I bring a case before You (12:1)**. **God's righteousness** would work itself out, not by **Jeremiah's** timetable (or ours) but in **His** perfect timing. **God** is never late.

Though weary then, **Yirmeyahu** would become wearier still, and **YHVH** simply told **him** what **he** probably already knew: It was not only the men of **your** village who are after **you**, no, **your relatives, members of your own family - even they have betrayed you; they have raised a loud cry against you. Though they speak well of you to your face, they plot against you behind your back. Do not trust them (12:6)**.

Using the second metaphor of a house or inheritance, **YHVH** laments over **His** looming judgment over **Y'hudah**. **I will forsake My house, abandon My inheritance (12:7a)**. **Isra'el** is the **inheritance of ADONAI (Deuteronomy 4:20 and 9:26)**. The word that stands out here is **inheritance (verses 8, 9 and 14)**. This is what makes the upcoming destruction of **Judah** so terrible to **ADONAI**. It is **His inheritance, His** heritage, **His** legacy, and **His house [Temple]** that will be torn down. It is what **He** shares with **His people. I will give the one I love [beloved] into the hands of her enemies (12:7b)**. This emphasizes the relationship of **Isra'el** to **God** as **His wife (Jeremiah 3:14; Hosea 2:16-22)**.

The metaphor changes: **My inheritance has become to Me like a lion in the forest. She roars in defiance at Me; therefore, I hate her (12:8)**. **The Targum reads, "I expel her," so as not to conflict with the one I love of the preceding verse. But the clause means that God will treat the nation as though she were the object of His hate. Ha'Shem likens the open hostility of the people towards Himself to the angry roar and fierce attack of a lion raging in the forest. ADONAI therefore withdraws, and**

leaves it as some savage beast to the solitude that it has created for itself.

Another metaphor: Has not My inheritance become to Me like a speckled bird of prey that other birds of prey surround and attack? A gaudily colored bird of prey appears in a flock of other birds of prey, which attack her and mutilate her. Those nations that the highly favored and beautiful Jewish nation mingled against God's will, shall now attack her and pluck her to pieces. From near and far her enemies will come, the wild beasts of the field (Babylon and her satellites) will devour what remains (12:9).

False shepherds are used for God's fifth metaphor. The LORD declares: Many false shepherds will ruin My vineyard (see the commentary on [Isaiah Ba - The Song of the Vineyard](#)) and trample down My field; they will turn My pleasant field into a desolate wasteland. The emphasis is on the guilt of the leadership of the Temple for destroying God's vineyard. This is a common motif in the TaNaKh. Therefore, God's judgment will come. [Judah] will be made a wasteland, parched and desolate before Me; the whole Land will be laid waste because there is no one who cares to obey ADONAI (12:10-11).

Over all the barren heights in the desert destroyers [the Gentiles] will swarm, for the sword of ADONAI will devour from one end of the Land to the other; no one will be safe. The Israelites 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 (12:12-13). The verbs are in the prophetic future. It was as if this had already taken place. They will be judged as a result of a self-inflicted wound . . . the worshiping of idols. The people of Judah would be shamed when their harvest of idols cannot protect them when judgment strikes.

Although these Gentile nations were God's instruments for the execution of His purpose, they would be punished for destroying Isra'el. Their punishment will only be temporary if they repent (**shuwb**), but permanent if they persist in their evil ways. Exactly the same prospect is held out to Isra'el in the Bible since God is an impartial Judge (Acts 10:34). From this it may be seen how false the interpretation of "chosen people," applied to Isra'el, as "favored people."

Then the word of the LORD came regarding the [Gentile] nations. This is what ADONAI says: As for all my wicked neighbors (the Egyptians, Assyrians, Edomites, Moabites, Amorites, Arameans and Babylonians) who seize the inheritance I gave My people, I will uproot them from their lands (12:14a). Their sin was that they had touched the Land that God had intended for Judah. As soon as she was taken into exile,

the Samaritans, the Edomites, the Moabites and Amorites began settling in the vacated **Jewish** territory.

And I will uproot the people of Judah from among them. Although enjoyment of **the Land** was conditional on obedience, ownership of **it** was not. **But after I uproot them, I will return (shuwb) and have compassion and will bring each of them back (shuwb) to their own inheritance and their own country (12:14b-15).** This is not only a picture of **their return** from Babylon, but also their final restoration in the messianic Kingdom.

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 to Ba'al (12:16a).** **The Gentiles** that occupy **Judah** after the exile will receive blessings for obedience if **they** learn the ways of **the Jewish people**, which involved swearing by **God's** name (to be in submission to **Him** because in the past **they** had sworn to **Ba'al's** name showing submission to **him**). **Zechariah 8:23** develops this theme even more than **Jeremiah**. Also in **Zechariah 14:16-19**, **the prophet** describes during the messianic Kingdom, **the Gentiles** will be obligated to observe the Feast of Sukkot. If **they** obey, **they** will be blessed. If **they** disobey, **God** will curse **their** land with a drought. **Then they will be built up, or established among My people (12:16b).**

But if any nation does not listen, I will completely uproot and destroy it, declares **ADONAI (12:17).** Rejection of **God's** sovereignty whether by **Judah** or by any other **nation** could only end in disaster. Not even **Y'hudah**, the beloved of **YHVH**, could escape that fate.

Eugene Peterson portrayed Vitezslav Gardavsky very elegantly in his book *Run With the Horses*. The Czech philosopher and martyr who died in 1978, took **Jeremiah** as his "image of man" in his campaign against a society that carefully planned every detail of material existence but eliminated mystery and miracle, and squeezed all the freedom out of life. The terrible threat against life, he said in his book *God Is Not Yet Dead*, is not death, nor pain, nor any variation on the disasters that we so obsessively try to protect ourselves against with our social systems and personal strategies. The terrible threat is "that we might die earlier than we really do die, before death has become a natural necessity. The real horror lies in just such a premature death, a death after which we go on living for many years."

In this **12:5-17** we see **Jeremiah** worn down by the opposition and absorbed in self-pity, **he** was about to give-in to such a premature death. **He** was ready to abandon **his** unique calling by **YHVH** and settle for merely being a **Yerushalayim** statistic. And at that critical moment **he** heard the reprimand: **If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you [compete] or run with the horses? If you stumble in safe country,**

how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan (12:5)? Biochemist Erwin Chargaff updates the questions: “What do you want to achieve? Greater riches? Cheaper chicken? A happier life, a longer life? Is it power over your neighbors that you are after? Are you only running away from your death? Or are you seeking greater wisdom, deeper piety?”

Life is hard, **Jeremiah**. Are **you** going to quit when things get tough? Are **you** going to retreat when **you** find that there is more to life than finding three meals a day and a dry place to sleep at night? Are **you** going to run home the minute **you** find that the mass of men and women are more interested in keeping their feet warm than in living at risk to the glory of **God**? Are **you** going to live cautiously or courageously? **I** called **you** to live at your best, to pursue righteousness, to sustain a drive toward excellence. It is easier, I know, to be neurotic. It is easier to be parasitic. It is easier to relax in the embracing arms of **the Avenger**. Easier, but not better. Easier, but not more significant. Easier, but not more fulfilling. I called **you** to a life of purpose far beyond what **you** think of **yourself** capable of living and promised you adequate strength to fulfill your destiny. Now when opposition raises its ugly head **you** are ready to quit. If **you** are fatigued by this run-of-the-mill crowd of apathetic mediocrity, what will **you** do when the real race starts, the race of the swift and determined **horses** of excellence? What is it you really want, **Yirmeyahu**, do you want to shuffle along with this crowd, or **run with the horses**?

It is understandable that there are retreats from excellence, veerings away from risk, and withdrawals from faith. It is easier to define oneself minimally and live within that definition than to be defined maximally and live adventurously in that reality. It is unlikely, I think, that **Jeremiah** was quick to respond to **ADONAI**'s question. The ecstatic ideals for a new life had been splattered with the world's cynicism. The euphoric drive of **his** youthful enthusiasm no longer carried **him**. **He** weighed **his** options. **He** counted the cost. **He** tossed and turned in hesitation. The response, when it came, was not verbal but biographical. **His** life became the answer: **I'll run with the horses!**⁹⁰