

Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Why Do the Faithless Live at Ease? Jeremiah's Third Complaint

12: 1-4

DIG: How was Jeremiah's theological dilemma similar to the problem of wicked people that believers have wrestled with throughout the ages? What is Jeremiah's main point of contention with God? What does the prophet want ADONAI to do? Why is Yirmeyahu so brutal? Why are the faithless so carefree? Was this a crisis of faith for Jeremiah? Why or why not? How did he ultimately respond to the situation?

REFLECT: Have you ever felt the unfairness of life as keenly as Jeremiah? In your experience, have the wicked prospered? Has this thought ever crossed your mind? How so? Why does Ha'Shem delay in executing justice? Do you believe that evil will ultimately be punished (see the commentary on Revelation Fo - The Great White Throne Judgment)? Have you ever complained to God as honestly as the prophet did?

At the end of Josiah's reign

Famous people arouse curiosity. What are they like on the inside? What do they do when they aren't being watched? What goes on in their private lives? Our appetite for gossip, for confessions, for inside information never ends. For every person who reads the front page story on a politician's speech there are twenty who will read the gossip column that describe in delicious detail his companion at dinner the night before. We want, we say, to know what the person is really like. We are not content with the public image, the outer event, the external happening. We pounce on any detail, however insignificant, that might reveal what goes on behind the closed door of the heart.

What was Jeremiah really like? What did he do when he was alone? When no one was watching, how did he conduct himself? Where there was no audience to address, how did he act? What did the prophet do when he was not staging confrontations with the religious leaders? What did Yirmeyahu do when he was not standing the people on their ears with his thundering prophecies? What did he do when he wasn't colliding with Temple officials and upsetting the status quo? What did he do when he was not making headlines?

There is a single, clear, straightforward answer to these questions: **he** prayed. Sometimes during those prayers **he** complained, but they were prayers full of frustration and emotion. There are seven passages in the book of **Jeremiah** labeled complaints or confessions: (1) **Ax - Oh, Adonai ELOHIM, Surely You Have Deceived This People**; (2) **Bj - The Plot Against Jeremiah**; (3) **Bk - Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Why Do All the Faithless Live at Ease?**; (4) **Cm - Woe to Me, Mother, That You Gave Me Birth**; (5) **Cs - Heal Me ADONAI, and I Will Be Healed, Save Me and I Will Be Saved**; (6) **Cx - Jeremiah's Response to a Threat Against His Life**; and (7) **Db - You Deceived Me, LORD, and I Have Been Deceived**. In each of these **Yirmeyahu** speaks in the first person. **He** opens his heart. **He** reveals what is going on inside while the fireworks are going off outside. We hold our breath on the brink of these most private revelations. We have so often been disappointed, even disillusioned, when we have gained access to the diaries, letters, tapes of great and admired people. How many public reputations could survive a thorough investigation of the inner life? Could you?

Jeremiah's inner life is revealed in these confessions/complaints/prayers . . . but we are not surprised or disillusioned. When **the priest from Anathoth** was out of the public's eye **he** was passionate with **God**. **He** confessed/complained/prayed like we all do. This was **his** secret life. This was a man of prayer.⁸⁵

Jeremiah's complaint: After the plot against **Yirmeyahu** was revealed (see **Bj - The Plot Against Jeremiah**), **the prophet** reflected on **his** own ministry and on the meaning of human existence in general. **He** started by saying: **You are always righteous, ADONAI, when I bring a case before You. Yet I would speak with you about Your justice. The prophet's** complaint begins with the age-old question: **Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease (12:1)?** **Jeremiah** acknowledges **God's righteousness**. But **he** sees certain inconsistencies in the Land in spite of **His righteousness**. There are still some questions **he** needs some answers to. How can the **justice** of **ADONAI** permit such obvious injustice (see **Psalms 37** and **73** for the answer)? Since evil continues to exist, it is obvious either **YHVH** cannot or will not do away with it. If **He** cannot, **He** is not all-powerful. If **He** will not, **He** is not supremely good. Like **Yirmeyahu**, we all struggle with such antinomies. Since the sovereignty of **God** and the free will of human beings are both true, they must remain in paradoxical tension.

Philosophical dualism is not the answer, since the end is not in dispute: righteousness will ultimately win the victory and overcome the world. In the meantime, our small peephole will keep us from clearly seeing the big picture, and we will continue to look for better - if only partial - answers (for example, that the patience and mercy of **God** give the evildoer time to repent). Perhaps we can learn to rest in the realization that although we may not understand, it should be enough for us to know that our loving **heavenly Father** understands.⁸⁶

Yirmeyahu makes an accusation against **God** that anticipates action. It is **YHVH** who causes the unjust to prosper: **You have planted these wicked people, and they have taken root; they grow and bear wicked fruit. You are always on their lips but far from their hearts (12:2).** The prophet wasn't talking about the Gentiles, but members of his own people, who constantly used **God's** name. Hearing **them** speak, one should think that **they** were close to **God**. Yet **their** knowledge of **the LORD** goes no further than **their** mouth. **Their** knowledge is not living knowledge. It is a matter of intellect, the mind, and the mouth.⁸⁷ **Their simulated piety was sheer hypocrisy. But yet they are granted continued blessings and success!**

The prophet is contrasting his situation with the one so confidently portrayed in the very first psalm. **Blessed is the one who does not walk in the step with the wicked or stand in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in ADONAI's Torah, and who meditates on His Torah day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither - whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For ADONAI watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction (Psalm 1:1-6).**

But **Jeremiah's** experience is the opposite of this. It is **the wicked** that seem like **they** are **planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season.** Who are these **wicked people** and what is **their** motive? **His relatives in Anathoth** were probably just the tip of the iceberg (12:6). The whole culture of Judah was corrupt. The pro-Egyptian faction of the government continued to think that Egypt could be an ally against Babylon while maintaining **their** positions of power and authority. Then there were the false prophets who said that Babylon would be defeated because **God** would intervene just like **He** did in the days of Hezekiah. Comfortable in their false confidence and encouraged by false prophets, the leaders lived in a fool's paradise, certain nothing would happen to **them** or their **City**. After all, **they** were up to **their** eyebrows in sin. What could go wrong?

Yet you know me, LORD; you see me and test my thoughts about you. Continuing his complaint against his **enemies** with dogged persistence, **Jeremiah** pleads with **God** to **drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of slaughter (12:3)! This was an impassioned plea for the destruction of his persecutors, the men of Anathoth.** On the one hand, **it raises moral question; but even the prophets, though fully dedicated to YHVH, are portrayed as human beings with their common weaknesses and failings. In his anguish at discovering that his own townspeople, even his own family**

(12:6), **desired his death, Yirmeyahu gave way to his outraged feelings and prayed for their complete destruction.**

Since **they** had refused to be set apart for **the LORD's** glory, **they** should be set apart for **the LORD's** wrath.⁸⁸ **The persecutors** who would seek to harm **Jeremiah** were really seeking to harm **God**. The hour called for a display of **YHVH's** sovereignty over those who persecuted **His servant**. It was not the case of a petty vendetta waged against **Yirmeyahu's persecutors**, but rather a display of **Ha'Shem's** positive action to restrain **the evildoers** and to enable **His servant** to continue the task to which **the LORD** had called **him**. It was, after all, for **God's** sake that **the prophet** suffered the rejection of **his persecutors** . . . There is a boldness about such words that only those in a very close relationship with **the Almighty** may show.⁸⁹ The implication of **his** prayer is that **Ha'Shem** should be destroying **the wicked**. But instead, **he** was suffering!

And because **God** has permitted these **wicked ones** to remain, the result is that **the Land** also suffers judgment. **How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished (12:4a).** **Ha'Shem** brought judgment upon the nation because of **the wickedness of the people** in general, but specifically **the wickedness** of the rulers. But from **Yirmeyahu's** point of view it was **ADONAI** who had put the rulers in their position of power. As if **He** intended to do so to have a reason to destroy **the Land**. Pretty bold accusation.

The LORD had judged **the nation** because of the sins of **the wicked**, but the righteous of the TaNaKh also suffered in this judgment. **The prophet** was not contradicting what **he** had just said about the prosperity of **the wicked** in 12:1. The thought is probably that even in times of difficulty **the wicked** seemed to come through better than the **righteous**. **YHVH** had sent a drought to judge the nation (14:1-6) so that **the land was parched and the grass was withered**. Yet **the wicked people** refused to acknowledge **Ha'Shem's** hand of judgment. **They** believed that **God** was indifferent to **their** sin. **Moreover, the people are saying: He will not see what happens to us (12:4b).**

It was as if **the prophet's own brothers and family (12:6)** were saying, "**Jeremiah** will not see us die because we intend to kill **him** first." Or **they** ridiculed the idea that **Yirmeyahu's** prophecies would actually be fulfilled, saying, "**Jeremiah** will not see **our** end because **his** stupid prophecies will never really be fulfilled." On the one hand **they** didn't think **they** had anything to worry about, but on the other hand **Jeremiah's** complaint ends with the implication that **ADONAI** was indifferent to **their wicked** plans.