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January 16th: Jeremiah 15 & 2 Thessalonians 3

January 15, 2021



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Jeremiah laments his birth. Quiet virtues.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 15 Then the Lord said to me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go. And when they ask you, Where shall we go? You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, and those who are for the sword to the sword, those who are for famine to famine, and those who are for captivity to captivity.

I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord, the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem. Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord.

You keep going backward. So I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you. I am weary of relenting.

I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land. I have bereaved them. I have destroyed my people.

They did not turn from their ways. I have made their widows more in number than the sand of the seas. I have brought against the mothers of young men a destroyer at noonday.

I have made anguish and terror fall upon them suddenly. She who bore seven has grown feeble. She has fainted away.

Her son went down while it was yet day. She has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies, declares the Lord.

Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land. I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. The Lord said, Have I not set you free for their good? Have I not pleaded for you before the enemy in the time of trouble and in the time of distress? Can one break iron, iron from the north, and bronze? Your wealth and your treasures I will give as spoil, without price, for all your sins throughout all your territory.

I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever. O Lord, you know, remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away.

Know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart. For I am called by your name, O Lord God of hosts.

I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice. I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail? Therefore thus says the Lord, If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me.

If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you. For I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Chapter 15 of Jeremiah continues the material of chapter 14 concerning the drought and Jeremiah's prayers for the people which the Lord rejected. The Lord instructed Jeremiah not to pray for the people in chapter 7 verse 16, in chapter 11 verse 14 and in chapter 14 verse 11. The Lord begins the chapter by declaring that even were Moses and Samuel to stand up and pray for the people, he would not listen to them.

Moses and Samuel were the great intercessors of Israel. Most famously, after Israel's sin with the golden calf, Moses had interceded for the people in chapter 32 to 34 of the book of Exodus. This was one of several occasions where Moses stood between the people and the Lord, interceding for them and sparing them from the Lord's destruction.

In 1 Samuel chapter 7 and 12, Samuel serves a similar purpose, interceding for the people before the Lord, that he would deliver them from their enemies. As paradigmatic prophets, Moses was the one by whom Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt and established for the first time as a nation. Samuel was the prophet who stood at the foundation of the kingdom.

In Hosea chapter 12 verse 13, it seems that the prophet is referring to these two characters. By a prophet, the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt and by a prophet, he was guarded. However, on account of their sin, the people are expelled from the Lord's sight.

His heart won't turn to them. The language here is similar to the language of expulsion from Pharaoh's presence in the story of the Exodus. But now they are expelled from the presence of the Lord.

Four forms of destruction are assigned to them. Pestilence, sword, famine and captivity. This is similar to the four horsemen of the apocalypse in the book of Revelation.

There seems to be a connection between the number four and such judgments. We see a similar thing in Ezekiel chapter 14 verse 21. After the four forms of destruction mentioned, there are four destroyers.

The sword, dogs, birds and beasts. With four modes of destruction that they come with. Killing, tearing, devouring and destroying.

Creatures usually ruled or wielded by man are going to turn against their master and destroy. And all of this is occurring on account of the wickedness of Manasseh. This is a common theme in the books of the kings.

2 Kings chapter 23 verse 26. Because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. In 2 Kings chapter 24 verses 3 and 4. In verse 5 the Lord takes up a lament for Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem has rejected the Lord and so he has destroyed them. He did not initiate

the break. They did by their unfaithfulness.

The Lord's hand is now stretched out not in salvation but in judgment upon them. He relented many times to no real change on Judah's part. And now he is weary of doing so.

Verses 7 to 9 present a litany of judgments that the Lord brought upon them. All to no effect. They have been winnowed, bereaved, destroyed.

Their widows have been multiplied. A destroyer has been brought against them. And the effect of this judgment is described in verse 9. The woman with seven children is also used as an image of prosperity in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 5. The barren has born seven but she who has many children is forlorn.

No response of repentance has been made to the judgments of the Lord. And now the complete rejection of correction has brought Judah to the point of national destruction. Jeremiah turns to the Lord at this point.

He regrets his birth. He is a cause of vexation to the land but not in a way that has provoked any repentance on their part. Like another famous sufferer in scripture, Job, in Job chapter 3, he declares a woe upon the day of his birth and the mother who bore him.

He will return to this theme in chapter 20 verses 14 to 18 in even stronger language. Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame? Jeremiah declares himself innocent of any wrong towards his enemies.

He is not a usurer. He is not a debtor who fails to repay. Rather he is the bearer of a deeply unpopular message, a message that is provoking anger and opposition, but the message of the Lord that he is faithfully bearing.

The Lord had appointed him as a prophet for the people's benefit and good. The Lord had delivered him from his opponents as well. Here our minds should be drawn back to the call of Jeremiah in chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. The Lord has stood by Jeremiah against his opposition as he had promised back in chapter 1 verses 17 to 19. But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord,

to deliver you.

The people might be like iron, but Jeremiah is iron from the north, the toughest iron available, iron most likely made in Pontus in northeast Asia Minor. Judah's wealth will be taken by her enemies, as will her sons. This returns to the judgment being declared prior to Jeremiah's lament.

Verses 15 to 18 contain another lament of the prophet, one of the confessions of Jeremiah. Jeremiah acknowledges the Lord's knowledge of him and of his situation, but he calls the Lord to take note of it and in his forbearance to spare him. He wants deliverance from the Lord, but he also wants vengeance upon his enemies.

He is suffering as the Lord's faithful servant, for the Lord's sake. He ate the Lord's words. The Lord had placed his words on his mouth back in chapter 1 verse 9. This is similar to the experience of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 8 to chapter 3 verse 3. But you, son of man, hear what I say to you.

Be not rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.

And he spread it before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.

So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you, and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

The reference to the words of the Lord that were found might be a reference to the words of the book of the Lord discovered in the temple. Jeremiah delighted in the words of the Lord. He was like the righteous man of Psalm 1. He did not sit with the revelers who were celebrating, but he was filled with indignation on the Lord's account, on account of the rebellious people.

And now he turns to the Lord about the pain that he is feeling in his vocation. The word of the Lord has become painful to bear, and no relief seems to be offered to him. Is God's word as a deceptive stream? Has God called him just to increase his pain beyond his bearing? The Lord responds by recalling Jeremiah to his task.

He must return, and he will be restored in his mission. He will stand before the Lord once again as his prophet. He will utter the words of the Lord, and he will be as God's own mouthpiece.

As commentators note, there is a play here upon the term turn. Walter Brueggemann

translates it as follows. If you will return, I will return you, and then they will turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.

The Lord repeats the promise that he gave to Jeremiah at the beginning. He will make Jeremiah to the people like a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against him, but they will not prevail against him.

The Lord has placed his words in the mouth of Jeremiah, and the Lord will stand by his words against all who oppose Jeremiah. Jeremiah may think that he stands alone, but the Lord is with him in his corner, to save him and to deliver him. In some ways we could read the experience here of Jeremiah as an anticipation of the experience of a faithful remnant in exile.

Jeremiah is already in exile. He is cut off from his people. He is facing their resistance and opposition.

But the Lord is with him in this condition, and the Lord stands by him against all these enemies that are arrayed against him. None of them will prevail. A question to consider.

Reflecting upon the pain of the prophet Jeremiah, what might we be expected to learn? 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness, and not in accord with the tradition that you receive from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command, If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

The third and final chapter of 2 Thessalonians begins with a request for prayer. In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul had also requested prayer, and now he gives more detail of what

he wants prayer for. He speaks of the word of the Lord as if it were a runner, and he asks them to pray for its swift movement.

He wants them to pray that it might be honoured and glorified everywhere, as it was and is among them. The word of the Lord is the message of the reign of Christ, and Paul wishes to see it recognised and received for the glorious message that it is. He further asks for prayer for deliverance from the opponents they will face.

The gospel has its fierce enemies, as Paul himself once was, and they need to be rescued from their schemes. Not everyone may have faith, but the Lord is faithful, and Paul expresses his assurance that the Lord will strengthen and guard the Thessalonians from the assaults of Satan. Paul is confident in the Lord and His faithfulness, and that confidence means that he is assured that the Lord will keep the Thessalonians in obedience to their instructions as his messengers.

He also expresses a wish in the form of a prayer, that their hearts would be directed to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. God's love and Christ's steadfastness protect our hearts in times of uncertainty and struggle. They provide a firm and secure stronghold for us.

They give us peace and calm in our hearts and in our minds when so much that is going on around us might unsettle or shake us. The unchanging character of Christ and the deep and unwavering love of God mean that even in the chaos of the world, our hearts can be at rest, as our fundamental standing is unchangeable. In 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 9-12, Paul had already given instructions concerning church members who were idle and lazily dependent upon others.

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you brothers to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders, and be dependent on no one.

This sort of behaviour is clearly a problem in the Thessalonian community, as Paul returns to the matter again here, addressing both the church as a whole and the particular trouble-making members. Paul speaks of a tradition that the Thessalonians received from Paul and his fellow missionaries. The tradition in view here is not a teaching so much as a form of practice.

Paul and his companions did not only give words of instruction, but also set a pattern of behaviour for the Thessalonians to follow. Although the missionaries would have been within their rights to request financial support from the Thessalonians, to whom they were ministering at the time, they forwent that right in order to provide a necessary

example. The able person who resisted working should not be supported in their indolence.

That person should not eat. The model of diligence provided by Paul and the missionaries shows up the failure of those who walk in idleness. Those not busy at work find other people's business to get involved in, and make a nuisance of themselves.

They undermine rather than building up the church. This isn't just less than ideal behaviour. It is something to be dealt with in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is disorderly. It is also something that brings dishonour to the church. The ideal is that people do their work quietly, rather than being lazy busybodies, and that they earn their own living, rather than depending upon others.

The virtues that Paul celebrates here are not the flashy virtues. They are virtues like working diligently, avoiding lazy dependency, earning your own living and paying your way, living a quiet life and patiently doing good. We often imagine the Christian church progressing through more radical and attention-grabbing virtues, but this largely isn't the case.

The letter to Diognetus, a 2nd century description of Christians, speaks of them as follows. They follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives.

They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.

Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. Christians' lives ought to be quietly remarkable.

Paul charges the Thessalonians to recognize those among them who resist the instruction of the missionaries. While not treating them as enemies, they should distance themselves from them, so that they might be ashamed and reform their conduct, and so that their poor behaviour might be seen for the departure from the true pattern of Christian discipleship that it is. The conclusion of the Epistle has similar elements to the conclusion of 1 Thessalonians, most obviously the final statement, but verse 16 is also similar to 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 23.

The peace that Paul declares in the benediction might also answer to the unsettling feelings that they had about the possible arrival of the day of the Lord. Paul also stresses here the fact that the greeting is written with his own hand, rather than using an amanuensis. Similar statements can be found in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 21 and Galatians 6, verse 11.

However, in Romans 16, verse 22, we have the words of an amanuensis. Having Paul's own concluding greeting in his own hand as authentication, the apostolic authority with which the original letter came would be more evident. It would also help to avoid the problem of letters falsely purporting to be from Paul and his companions, a problem that was illustrated in chapter 2, verse 2. A question to consider, what are some other quiet and unassuming virtues that should mark the Christian?