

# OpenTheo

## January 9th: Jeremiah 8 & 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

January 8, 2021



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Is there no balm in Gilead? Presenting a trustworthy message.

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

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## Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 8. At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs. And they shall be spread before the sun and the moon, and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped. And they shall not be gathered or buried.

They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, and all the places where I have driven them, declares the Lord of hosts. You shall say to them, thus says the Lord, when men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit.

They refuse to return. I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken

rightly. No man relents of his evil, saying, What have I done? Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle.

Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming. But my people know not the rules of the Lord. How can you say, We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.

The wise men shall be put to shame. They shall be dismayed and taken. Behold they have rejected the word of the Lord.

So what wisdom is in them? Therefore I will give their wives to others, and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain. From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace.

Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen.

When I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord. When I would gather them, declares the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

Why do we sit still? Gather together. Let us go into the fortified cities and perish there. For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish, and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord.

We looked for peace, but no good came, for a time of healing. But behold, terror. The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan.

At the sound of the neighing of their stallions, the whole land quakes. They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who dwell in it. For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, declares the Lord.

My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick within me.

Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images, and with their foreign idols? The harvest is past. The summer is ended.

And we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the

daughter of my people not been restored? Jeremiah chapter 8 verses 1 to 3 concludes the Temple Sermon of chapter 7. At the end of chapter 7 the bodies of the slain littered the valley of the son of Hinnom, defiling it and being food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. The beginning of chapter 8 describes the extension of this judgment to include those who had formerly been buried. The bones of rulers formerly buried with the highest of honors will be disinterred and will be scattered upon the ground, bleached white beneath the heat of the sun.

Kings, officials, priests and prophets who had formerly worshipped the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven would have their bones placed out before them, their bones scattered like dung upon the surface of the ground. They would steadily be bleached by the creations that they once served. Disinterment of bones is a profound form of dishonoring, a taking back of honors formerly given and a refusal of the rest of the burial place.

Perhaps in the most famous instance of this, Josiah of Judah disinterred the bones of false priests and prophets and burnt them on the altar of Bethel to defile it. The final state of the people is described in the grimmest of terms. They will prefer death to life in what can be seen as a fulfillment of the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 64 to 68.

Chapter 7 and the first three verses of chapter 8 were predominantly prose, now it returns to poetry and the first three verses play upon the word for turn in Hebrew. Using several related forms of the verb it gives ironic comment upon the state of Israel. Whereas people typically pick themselves up if they fall down or turn around if they have gone in the wrong direction, Judah is incorrigible in their rebellion and backsliding.

They will not return, they will not repent. While one might accuse them of being fickle, they prove steadfast in their holding to deceit. Earlier Jeremiah accused them of being like a well that kept its evil fresh.

Like a horse racing into battle, they plunge headlong into their error and will not be turned aside from it. Compared to wild animals that faithfully keep to their ways and their migratory patterns, Judah's obstinate unfaithfulness is shameful. Such an unfavourable comparison with animals can also be found in Isaiah chapter 1 verses 2 to 3. Just as the people might protest their performance of the sacrifices and their possession of the temple of the Lord, here they claim that they are wise and that they have the law of the Lord with them.

Presumably referring to the leaders of the people, they pride themselves on their possession of the insight that the Torah gives them, and yet they both fail to observe it and they pervert it in their teaching. They make it into a lie. The wisdom that the people of God were promised in Deuteronomy chapter 4 was the law, but now they have rejected the word of the Lord.

They have no wisdom in them. They have become unfit for their purpose and so they will be cast out. Returning to the statements of chapter 6 verses 12 to 15, the Lord declares that they will suffer from the covetousness that they have practiced.

Their wives, their fields, their possessions will be given into the hands of others who desire them. Once again, poetic justice. As Walter Brueggemann notes, there are three indictments in verses 11 to 13.

First, the leaders, the priests and the prophets who should have been speaking truthfully about the sick condition of the people have failed to do so. They have not blown the warning trumpet. Rather, they have wrongly reassured the people that they are living in times of peace.

But there is no peace. The judgment of the Lord is upon them. Second, they have become shameless.

They had lost the ability to be embarrassed at their sin. They felt no sense of the judgment of the Lord and the holiness of the Lord before which they stood. Third, they failed to produce the fruits that the Lord wanted from his people.

Israel was like a vine, the planting of the Lord that was supposed to yield its fruit in its season. And yet when the Lord came to inspect it, there were no fruits. The moral fruits of a faithful society were not found in her.

Indeed, her very leaves had withered. The imagery of the Lord judging his vine might remind us of Isaiah chapter 5 or Psalm 80. While Israel might think of itself as having special claim upon the Lord, that the Lord is on their side, that the Lord is in their pocket even, the imagery here shifts things around.

They are the vine of the Lord's planting, which he has planted in order that it might bear fruit. If they do not bear fruit, then they are fit only to be burned. Verses 15-16 describe the approaching judgment.

They had been led to expect peace. But now judgment is coming upon them and its terror with it. The snorting of powerful military horses is heard in the northernmost territory of Dan.

The land itself shudders as it awaits the inevitable doom that is coming upon it. The land itself will be devoured before them and all its inhabitants. From the stamping and the snorting of the horses descending from Dan, we move to a different image of serpents that the Lord has sent among his people, serpents like those sent among the people in Numbers chapter 21 as a result of their rebellion in the wilderness.

These serpents, however, will not be able to be charmed. There will be no bronze serpent to look to this time. They will be poisoned by this approaching army.

In verses 13-17, the speech of the Lord flanks the speech of Jeremiah in the middle. In verses 18-21, this order is reversed. Lamentations of Jeremiah flank his speaking on behalf of the people.

And in the middle of the entire section, the Lord speaks. Jeremiah laments over the people. The imagery at this point turns more to the themes of sickness.

His heart is sick. The daughter of his people have a great wound that cannot be healed. Dismay takes hold of the wounded prophet's heart.

The people themselves lament from the city. They wonder where the Lord is. Is he not the king of the people? They have been reassured by their religious leaders that the Lord is on their side unconditionally.

They have the temple. They have the law. They have the sacrifices.

Surely God is for them. And yet God is nowhere to be found. The official theology has proven to be a dangerous lie.

Besieged by their enemies, the harvest passes, the summer ends and all the fruits that will be gathered in within it. And yet they are not delivered. They are going to face famine for the winter and will not be able to sow for the coming year.

At the center of this section, the question of the Lord rings out. Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols? The people wonder where God has gone. But they have defiled his land and filled the very city where the Lord has placed his name with their idolatries.

Why would the Lord not judge such a people? Once again the pathos of the prophet who laments the state of a people that he has been forbidden to pray for and of the indignation of the Lord over their treachery is powerfully illustrated in these verses. The people have been described as sick and wounded. The final verse of this chapter ends with a threefold rhetorical question.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Gilead was a region in the Transjordan that was famous for its balm. Balm was used as perfume, as body oil or as medicine. Gilead also seems to have been a place where healers were to be found.

There is plenty of balm in Gilead. There are physicians there too. But the health of the people of Judah has not been restored because they have rejected their true healer, the Lord.

A question to consider. What can we learn from the way that the prophecy of Jeremiah, like so many other prophecies, intersperses the words of the prophet himself, imagined words of the people and the word of the Lord? What purpose might this be serving? 1

Thessalonians 2 verses 1-16 2 Thessalonians 2 verses 1-16 2 Thessalonians 2 verses 1-16 2 Thessalonians 2 verses 1-16 his discussion of the way that he and his fellow missionaries acted among the Thessalonians when they were with them. Through elaborating the nature of their ministry among the Thessalonians, Paul can contrast them with the sorts of false teachers that might come along to the Thessalonians afterwards.

There are four successive four statements in which Paul does this. The first begins in verse 1, the second in verse 3, the third in verse 5 and the fourth in verse Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the manner of their arrival there. They had been badly treated at Philippi, where they had been mistreated and imprisoned.

However, when they came to the Thessalonians, their coming was not in vain. Their message was characterized by great boldness even in the midst of conflict. Paul is here most concerned that the Thessalonians appreciate the way that their behavior as missionaries served properly to showcase the message that they declared.

Gordon Fee helpfully presents Paul's argument in the form of a series of related not, nor and but statements. Paul's intent here is by careful description to demonstrate the garrulous and self-giving character of their ministry, a ministry faithful to the message that it served, in such a way Paul can distinguish himself from other teachers and philosophers. Paul describes himself and his fellow missionaries as driven by a strength beyond their own.

Despite fierce persecutions, they have courage in God to declare the gospel against great opposition, knowing that its effectiveness depends not upon their own force of personality or rhetorical skill, but upon the power of the God who entrusted them with it. As Paul describes the situation elsewhere, as the emissary of the gospel message, he is less the bearer of a message than one born along by it, as God leads his marvelling apostolic co-workers in triumphal procession through the world. Paul proceeds to present the unfeigned and pure motives from which they acted in declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians.

In his apostolic ministry Paul was not driven by a desire for personal gain or for public praise, but by a weighty responsibility to God who had committed the gospel message to him. He declares himself to be a tried and true servant, one whose heart is tested by God, whose ministry is approved, presumably through the many trials and forms of persecution that he endured. Unlike the charlatans who were characterised by the vices of deceit, impure motives and trickery, Paul and his companions were the genuine article.

Summoning both the Thessalonians and God as his witnesses, Paul insists that he was unmotivated by a desire for human praise or material gain. His only intent was to acquit himself well as a servant pleasing to the God who sent him. Consequently, the message

of Paul and the missionaries with him to the Thessalonians was not marked by the artful flattery typical of sham teachers, nor perverted by attempts to use his message as a means of personal gain.

Indeed, even though he was in a position that would have enabled him to make self-serving demands of them, Paul's actual conduct was in the most startling contrast to such exploitative behaviour. Rather than taking advantage of his power in relationship to the Thessalonians, Paul and his team not only went to considerable lengths to avoid placing any demands upon them, but also gave of themselves in ways that invite the most arresting imagery. There is a difficult textual issue at this juncture as some Greek manuscripts have a word meaning infants while others have a word meaning gentle.

The weight of the arguments on both sides are quite finely balanced. The liveliness and fluidity of Paul's imagery in this context is something that is worth noting. He moves from comparing himself and his team to nursing mothers in verse 7, to fathers in verse 11, to orphans in verse 17 in their relation to the Thessalonians, all in the span of a few verses.

This makes the possibility that he might be referring to themselves as infants more likely than it might have been elsewhere. If this were the meaning, it would powerfully illustrate the guilelessness and the completeness of their self-bestowal to the Thessalonians. In a striking comparison, Paul likens his missionary team to nursing mothers.

The Apostles' surprising use of such a maternal image for their ministry is not unique to this context. In Galatians 4, Paul speaks of himself as a mother struggling to give birth to her children again. The image is a fitting one.

It expresses the Thessalonians' dependence upon Paul and his fellow workers, and the loving self-donation of the missionary team to the infant believers. Paul is not merely conveying a message, but is like a mother begetting, nursing and cherishing the children formed by that message, who have the most intimate of bonds with him. The image also represents Paul's longing for and intimate involvement in the Thessalonians' wellbeing and growth.

While the charlatan might value the self-serving praise of men, or the wealth that might be deceitfully gained from them, Paul values the Thessalonians themselves, as a mother values her own infants. As he expresses it in verse 19, From the image of the maternal affection and bond, Paul later progresses to one of the father in his role of preparing the child for life in the wider world. Using both the maternal image and the paternal image that succeeds it in verse 11, Paul demonstrates the depths of his personal investment in the life, the health and the growth of the Thessalonian Christians.

Paul's representation of his ministry in these opening chapters of Thessalonians

dramatically challenges many of the assumptions that we can bring to acts of communication. While our understanding of the acts of communication can often very sharply distinguish between senders, messengers and the recipients, Paul systematically unworks each of these oppositions in relationship to the Gospel message. Drawing the minds of the Thessalonian Christians back to the founding events of their church, Paul speaks of the Gospel as God's self-communication by the Spirit, of God working through and in his messengers, of the emissary of the Gospel as one born along by the message that he bears, of the message as something that is powerfully at work in its recipients, and of the recipients as children of the message, begotten and nourished by the messenger.

At each point, Paul reveals that the oppositions that can serve as occasions for deceit, for perverse motives and for distrust are destabilised by the very character of the Gospel. In the Gospel there is the tightest of possible connections between the one who sends the messenger and the messenger themselves, between the messenger and the message and the one who sends the message and the message, and then between the recipients and the ones who bring the message to them and then the message and the sender. All of these things are tightly bound together in a way that makes them inseparable.

One of the most significant features of Western society today is the breakdown of public trust in various authorities, in politicians, in governments, experts, scientists, in church leaders, in journalists and the media, in constitutional documents, national principles, governmental agencies and sometimes even the very basic principles of our society themselves. And this loss of trust penetrates down to the very founding events and principles of our societies and nations, events and principles that are deemed fatally corrupted by guile, deceit, self-serving power and all these other corrupting forces. Once we strip away the mask of our feigned values, what we find is dishonesty and untruth and attempts just to bolster power.

Scandals, revelations of abuse, manifest corruption, incompetence, self-interest in office and all these sorts of things lead to growing distrust and that metastasises into more general suspicion. As the healthy movement of truth in the body of society depends upon a circulatory system of trust, the breakdown of trust will produce the crisis of truth that we currently face. Arresting the progress of this disease is an immense challenge.

Reaction against dysfunction seldom straightforwardly yields healthy functioning. After merely producing new or exacerbated problems in the place of those it once opposed, without a clear vision and a model of genuine, forthright and trustworthy discourse and of the sort of robust and healthful social relations that can bear the weight of truth, it can be very difficult to address such social sickness. Yet this vision of society, marked by the strength of trust and truth, is what Paul is presenting us with in 1 Corinthians 2. This is a society seen in God's entrusting of his truth to human messengers who entrust



themselves in turn to the recipients of their announcement.

It is a society seen in and revelatory of the power of the communication of truth itself as a social bond. The genuine communication of the truth requires the communication of ourselves, reinforcing the trust that allows it to circulate. Just as untruth and distrust can cause a society to disintegrate, so truth and the mutual trust and entrusting it produces are health to society's flesh and marrow to its bones.

To those who might have accused Paul of using his message as a mask for greed, he reminds the Thessalonians of the way that he and his fellow missionaries worked tirelessly so as not to place a burden upon the converts. In Acts 18, verse 3 we discover that Paul was a tentmaker, which seemed to be a way in which he supported his missionary work so as not to put a burden upon converts and to protect himself from the false charge that he was engaged in his missionary labours for personal gain. Paul and his fellow missionaries were marked by unimpeachable character among the Thessalonians and also by holy conduct.

They acted towards the Thessalonians like a father with his children, exhorting, encouraging and charging in a paternal manner. If they were like nursing mothers in sharing and giving their very selves to the converts as a woman might give her breast to her infant, they are also like fathers in their authoritative paternal guidance, their direction, their encouragement and their oversight. The power that a father has to encourage and build up his son, to give his son confidence, was something that they showed towards the Thessalonians along with the authoritative instruction and direction that fathers can provide.

Paul renews his expression of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' conversion at this point. This is something that confirms his ministry among them. When they received the Gospel from Paul and his companions they received it as a word from God, not merely as a word of men.

In verse 6 of chapter 1 Paul described the Thessalonians becoming imitators of Paul and his companions and of the Lord. Here he speaks of them becoming imitators of the churches in Judea. Much as the Judean churches were persecuted by their Jewish compatriots, so the Thessalonians were persecuted by the Gentiles around them.

Jew and Gentile Christians are here united in a shared experience of suffering for Christ's name. Paul lists the sins of the Jews which had been brought to a climax in the crucifixion of Christ after their killing of the prophets. They had also rejected the message of the Spirit through the church and had sought to prevent that message from being brought to the Gentiles.

In the Gospels Jesus spoke of Jerusalem filling up the full measure of its sins and full judgment falling upon that generation. Paul here describes the same thing. Jerusalem

and Judea faced God's wrath at last in the coming destruction of AD 70.

A question to consider, Paul closely connects the truth of the Gospel message with the guileless and trustworthy way in which it is brought by the Lord's ministers. How can we make the truth of the message of the Gospel clearer by the ways in which we present it?