

OpenTheo

January 12th: Jeremiah 11 & 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11

January 11, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The broken covenant. Awaiting the final resurrection.

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

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 11. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant, that I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your guard, that I may confirm the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, So be it, Lord.

And the Lord said to me, Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. Hear the words of this covenant, and do them. For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice.

Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not. Again the Lord said to me, A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refuse to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.

Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I am bringing disaster upon them, that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go and cry to the gods to whom they made offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble.

For your gods have become as many as your cities, O Judah, and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame, altars to make offerings to Baal. Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. What right has my beloved in my house, when she has done many vile deeds? Can even sacrificial flesh avert your doom? Can you then exult? The Lord once called you a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit, but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed.

The Lord of hosts who planted you has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking me to anger by making offerings to Baal. The Lord made it known to me, and I knew, then you showed me their deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.

I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more. But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, and say, Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand.

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will punish them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall die by famine, and none of them shall be left. For I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth, the year of their punishment.

In Jeremiah chapter 11 the covenant comes into the foreground. As the early chapters of Jeremiah make plain, there were prevailing notions of the covenant in his day that fueled presumption rather than faithfulness. Mere possession of circumcision, the law, the temple, and sacrifices gave Judah a mistaken sense of its immunity from the Lord's

judgment.

The opening of this chapter is reminiscent of Jeremiah chapter 7 and Jeremiah's temple sermon. Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 21-26 read, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, but this command I gave them, Obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.

But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day, yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffen their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

In Jeremiah chapter 11 as in chapter 7 there are several recollections of the book of Deuteronomy in the language that is used and also the theological emphases. For instance this is one of the other occasions in scripture where the language of iron furnace is used of Egypt. The most notable occurrence of this language is found in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20, But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.

Three oracles open the chapter, in verses 1 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 13. These especially look back to the Exodus and refer to the covenant. Not that long previously Josiah's men had discovered the book of the law in the temple, and Josiah had led the people in a covenant ceremony in 2 Kings chapter 23 verses 1 to 3. Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him.

And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book.

And all the people joined in the covenant. Some scholars have debated the relationship between the covenant that Jeremiah refers to here and the covenant of Josiah. Jeremiah's covenant seems to be connected with the Exodus from Egypt, but reading the account of 2 Kings it should be clear that the covenant of Josiah was not a different covenant.

It was a renewal of the covenant of the Exodus, and more particularly the covenant of

the book of the law, the book of Deuteronomy, that they made as they entered into the land. Jeremiah is instructed to hear the words of the covenant, and to speak them to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The words of verses 3-5 are a praise of the entire covenant statement.

It has the form of Deuteronomy chapter 27 verses 15-26 and the curse is there. In verse 26 of that chapter, cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say Amen.

The covenant emphasised the necessity of hearing and doing the word of the Lord over everything else. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 3, Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. At the heart of the statement of verses 3-5 is the covenant formula, So shall you be my people, and I will be your God.

The fulfilment of this promise would occur as Israel listened and obeyed. The formula is an important one, it is found at several points throughout scripture, but especially in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Exodus chapter 6 verse 7, I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Leviticus chapter 26 verse 12, And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. Ezekiel chapter 11 verses 19-20, And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes, and keep my rules, and obey them.

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. The Lord here declares the covenant curse, summing up material of the book of Deuteronomy, a curse for which Jeremiah provides the Amen. The curse is going to come to pass upon the people, as they have rejected the covenant.

The second oracle in verses 6-8 commissions Jeremiah to go out again. Within it the Lord stresses the covenant call to obey his voice, and the fact that persistently the people rejected his voice and turned away in their stubbornness. Time after time he warned them, but they refused to hear.

The third oracle of the chapter describes a conspiracy of rebellion of the people of Judah. They have willfully turned away from the Lord and after other gods. This is why the Lord is bringing a disaster that they cannot escape upon them.

As the people would not listen to the voice of the Lord, in verse 14 they receive poetic justice. The Lord will not listen to the cries made on their behalf. They refused to listen to

his messengers, now he will refuse to listen to theirs.

Jeremiah is once again forbidden from praying for them. Some of the fundamental images of the book of Jeremiah return at this point. Israel is the unfaithful bride of the Lord, presuming to have special rights in his house, yet having done so many vile deeds.

Arboreal imagery reappears here. Judah was once a fruitful olive tree, bearing much good fruit, however now it is worthless and fit only to be burned. On account of their service of the Baals, the Lord is bringing judgment upon them.

Walter Brueggemann writes, The chapter ends with a prayer of Jeremiah and the Lord's response. This is a complaint of the prophet, one of a number of such prayers in the book that have been called his confessions or his lamentations. The language he employs throughout is very reminiscent of that which we find in the Psalms.

The image of the sacrificial lamb taken to the slaughter might remind us of Psalm 44 verses 11 and 22. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Even more famously, that language, along with the language of cut off from the land of the living, is found in Isaiah chapter 53 verses 7-8, in Isaiah's famous prophecy of the suffering servant. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, and his work is filled with tears, with complaints, with dirges, and with lamentations. He is a traumatized and a suffering man. To borrow the language of Isaiah's prophecy, he is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Once again we should keep in mind that Jeremiah is not just a message bearer, he is one who personifies the suffering servant of Israel, he is one who personifies the true remnant. Here he is about to be caught in some scheme, of which he is totally ignorant, until the Lord brings it to his awareness. In Matthew chapter 13 verse 57, Jesus said, A prophet is not without honour except in his hometown and in his own household.

Here Jeremiah's life is sought by people of his hometown of Anathoth, possibly members of priestly families. They wish to cut him off completely to ensure that no offspring of his remain. His name, they hope, will go unremembered.

Jeremiah, like the psalmist in many places, commits justice to the Lord. He calls for the Lord to act in vengeance upon them, and the Lord responds with the assurance that

those who sought to kill him and to wipe out his name, would themselves die by the sword with their children. The Lord stands by the prophet Jeremiah and does not allow his word to be silenced.

A question to consider, how does the prominence of the covenant within this chapter help us better to understand the role played by the prophet? 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 13 to chapter 5 verse 11. But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Therefore encourage one another with these words. Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you, for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pangs come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief, for you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him.

Therefore encourage one another, and build one another up, just as you are doing. In the second half of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, we arrive at some of the main teaching of the letter. As Gordon Fee observes, there are suggestions that this teaching, or at least aspects of it, is being received by the Thessalonians for the first time.

Paul doesn't use the language of reminder, or suggest that they do not need further teaching, as he does in chapter 5 verse 1. Rather, his concern is that they are not uninformed. The matter in question concerns the resurrection of the dead in Christ. It is possible that the Thessalonians interpreted their present sufferings as the sufferings leading up to Christ's coming.

Indeed, Christ would come in judgment in Jerusalem in AD 70 and establish his kingdom to a new degree. However, the death of some members of the Church before this time would clearly be a cause of great distress and uncertainty for the Thessalonians. The expectation of the near return of Christ, in some manner, might provoke these concerns on the part of the Thessalonians.

Although there doesn't seem to be desperate anticipation, and expectation of the full eschatological reality dawning in that moment in time, they are awaiting something, and are uncertain of how to relate to the deaths of some of their members before that time comes. Now, AD 70 clearly did not realize the hope of the future resurrection of the dead in Christ. Anyone who would have placed all of their eschatological hopes on that event would have found themselves sorely disappointed, despite the great significance of the event.

In Scripture, there are anticipations of final judgment in the middle of history. In these events, the great and final horizon comes into view, often in a way that relates it directly to events on the nearer horizon. We could perhaps compare this to the way that looking out from an elevated vantage point, distinct mountain ranges many miles divided from each other can seem to be as one.

In like manner, more imminent fulfillments of prophecy confuse on the horizon with more distant ones. This isn't just a misperception. Earlier deliverances in history actually foreshadow later ones, and if we think that the fulfillment of a prophecy entirely terminates on its most immediate referent, we will often not only be disappointed, but be under-reading the text.

The Exodus, for instance, foreshadows later and greater exoduses. It foreshadows the return from exile in the time of the prophets. But the force of the prophecies concerning a new exodus do not exhaust themselves in the return from exile.

They also await the death and resurrection of Christ. And then they also await AD 70 and the final coming. The New Testament often interprets Old Testament prophecies in this way, recognising that several successive mountain ranges of fulfillment can be present in the horizon of a single prophecy.

That single prophecy may refer to a more immediate event, but it refers to it in a way that does not give full resolution of this prophetic force in that coming event, but awaits further events beyond that for its fuller fulfillment. That death can be spoken of as an event of falling asleep. It's truly remarkable to think about our death as a falling asleep, but as we know that we will one day be woken up, it is appropriate to do so.

For this reason, we do not grieve as those without hope. We still grieve, but we grieve as people who have hope and expectation of a final resurrection. Paul gives them a word of Christ himself.

He might have received this teaching from those who had witnessed Jesus during his ministry, or he may be referring to something he received by a special revelation. The teaching that Paul gives comes directly from Christ himself then. Death does not disadvantage those who die before the coming of Christ.

Rather, the resurrection will be a reunion of the dead and those still alive. Paul describes on the basis of the Lord's own teaching, the coming of the Lord in a way that reminds us of Old Testament events. For instance, Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 to 20.

On the morning of the third day, there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire.

The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.

This theophany at Sinai provides something of a paradigm for thinking about the coming of Christ. The Lord descends and Moses ascends and they meet in the air at the top of this mountain. We might also think of passages such as Psalm 47 verse 5. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

Jesus also has taught concerning this event in John chapter 5 verses 25 to 29 for instance. Truly, truly I say to you an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live for as the Father has life in himself so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself and he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

In that passage Jesus connects two sorts of resurrection events, the raising of people from spiritual death with the word and the final resurrection by the summons of Christ and such a passage I believe helps us to understand the way that events can become fused on the eschatological horizon. When you read an hour is coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live you think this is the final resurrection but then as part of that I've missed out some words and is now here. There is something already happening that is bringing this event to pass and that event is not actually the final resurrection it's an anticipation of it and there's a future hour coming that Jesus also speaks about and so the initial referent of these words is one that anticipates a greater fulfillment at some point in the future.

The trumpet call is associated with the year of jubilee it is also associated with the return from exile or with deliverance. See for instance Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13 and in that day a great trumpet will be blown and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem and in Zechariah chapter 9 verses 14 to 16 then the Lord will appear over them and his arrow will go forth like lightning the Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south the Lord of hosts will protect them and they shall devour and tread down the sling stones and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine and be full like a bowl drenched like the corners of the altar on that day the Lord their God will save them as the flock of his people for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. We might also think the way that the coming of Christ in judgment in AD 70 is described in Matthew chapter 24 verses 30 to 31 then will appear in heaven the sign of the son of man and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other.

Now if this sounds like the last coming of Christ the final judgment and the resurrection of all to us we could clearly be excused. It certainly does sound like that yet in the context it can only refer to an event that occurs within the generation that that prophecy is given and as we look back in the Old Testament we can see similar language being used of events that were fulfilled in known history so it's clearly not the final judgment but yet it does anticipate the final judgment. It's described in a way that is so powerful and charged with cosmic import that it seems to demand something more than just the destruction of AD 70 for its fulfillment.

Now the initial fulfillment is the destruction of AD 70 but the horizon that we are seeing there expands to include the greater horizon of the end of all things. The coming of Christ in the clouds is also related to the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. This is also reminiscent of Jesus' own ascension in Acts chapter 1 verses 9 to 11.

And when he had said these things as they were looking on he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight and while they were gazing into heaven as he went behold two men stood by them in white robes and said men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven this Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. The final resurrection involves a participation in Christ's own ascended rule. It doesn't say that we are caught up to heaven rather there is a meeting of ascending earth and descending heaven in the air.

Heaven and earth are united. Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 4 speaks of this. Paul then addresses them concerning times and seasons about which they had already been taught.

The day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. It's a robbery. It's a disruption of people's false sense of peace and security.

It takes from them all the things that they have invested their life in. It's something that snatches people away. One is taken the other is left.

It is described as a sort of pain that can come upon them like labor pangs for a pregnant woman. There is a new age about to be born and this new birth will occur through birth pangs through pain and suffering and tribulation and people must be prepared for that so that it does not come upon them suddenly and unexpectedly. Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they are the children of the day.

The day that is coming is our day. It is the day of the Lord and we are the people of the Lord. As a result we are wakeful people not sleeping in the insensitivity of sin and dissipation.

We are sober people not people who are drunk and people who have lost their senses. We keep our wits about us. In sobriety and alertness we await our deliverance.

We await the coming day. The day that belongs to us and the day to which we belong. We are children of the light.

As children of the light we bring something of the light of this coming dawn. This coming day in the way that we behave. We are as light in a dark place as we bear the light of Christ within us and we testify to the coming dawn that he will bring.

Seeing us people should know what to expect. On the basis of our belonging to the day Paul teaches us that we must be sober and then he offers a military and perhaps also a priestly image. We put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

This might be related to the clothes of the high priest. It's also the military garment that someone would wear going into battle. God himself dresses in such a way to act on behalf of his people.

In Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17 he puts on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. Just as we are light in the world reflecting the fact that God himself is light so we are those who dress for battle as our Lord dresses for battle to bring salvation for his people.

We are the army that will be joined with him on that great day caught up in that summons to meet him in the air. God has destined us to receive salvation on the coming day. We can take great assurance in this fact.

It is his purpose that we make it through tribulation that we end up joined with him and the saints raised up celebrating in joyful military assembly the return of his son. The future reality of this day this dawning that we are waiting for is something that governs all of our life here and now. It's the orienting reality of the entirety of our existence.

As a result we must always be building up and encouraging each other always directing each other to this coming day. This is what we're waiting for. This is what we're about.

We should also observe that the way that we are dressed is one that integrates the three core Christian virtues faith, hope and love. These are the things that will prepare us for that day. These are the things that will help us to stand firm here and now so that we are both ready for anticipating and reflecting the reality of that day that is to come.

A question to consider what are some ways in which we can follow Paul's instruction here and be encouraging each other even more than we do with the light of the coming day of the Lord's return.