

# OpenTheo

## January 13th: Jeremiah 12 & 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

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**Alastair Roberts**

Why are the wicked prospering? Concluding exhortations.

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

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## Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 12. Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you, yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them, and they take root.

They grow and produce fruit. You are near in their mouth and far from their heart. But you, O Lord, know me.

You see me and test my heart toward you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for the day of slaughter? How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither for the evil of those who dwell in it? The beasts and the birds are swept away because they said, He will not see our latter end. If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan? For even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you.

They are in full cry after you. Do not believe them, though they speak friendly words to you. I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage, I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.

My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest. She has lifted up her voice against me, therefore I hate her. Is my heritage to me like a hyena's lair? Are the birds of prey against her all around? Go, assemble all the wild beasts, bring them to devour.

Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness, they have made it a desolation. Desolate it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart.

Upon all the bare heights in the desert destroyers have come. For the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other. No flesh has peace.

They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns, they have tired themselves out but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Thus says the Lord concerning all my evil neighbors who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit.

Behold, I will pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them. And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again, each to his heritage and each to his land. And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, as the Lord lives, even as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people.

But if any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the Lord. Jeremiah chapter 12 begins with a powerful question of theodicy, the question of God's justice in the face of evil. Issues of theodicy are very much at the centre of the book of Job but the issue is also raised at several points in the Psalms and also in the Prophets.

Here the issue of theodicy takes the very particular form of asking why the wicked prosper. This is a question that we find raised by some of the Psalmists. Psalm 37 verses 1-11 for instance.

Fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath.

Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more, though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant peace. In this psalm, although the wicked are prospering, the message of the psalmist is fundamentally optimistic, confident that such a situation is short-lived and that the Lord will soon reverse it. The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 verses 1-14 is slightly more challenging.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pangs until death, their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are, they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace, violence covers them as a garment.

Their eyes swell out through fatness, their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice, loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongues strut through the earth.

Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. The experience of the psalmist in Psalm 73 is a lot closer to the experience of Jeremiah here. This passage follows on the heels and probably continues the complaint of Jeremiah concerning his opponents in Anathoth, his own hometown.

They have engaged in a conspiracy against him. But the point here seems to be concerned with something broader than just the conspiracy, it's the prospering of the wicked more generally. Jeremiah begins by affirming the righteousness of the Lord, that is the basic premise of everything that follows.

But yet he raises a complaint immediately following, an accusation. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are all who are treacherous thrive? And the point is made keener in the verse that follows. God is the one that plants them.

They do not just happen to thrive. The prophet believes that the Lord is sovereign in the events of history. And so when they thrive and produce fruit and grow and spread out, the Lord is not just passively letting that happen.

He is providing and maintaining the conditions by which that situation can be the case. They are wicked, they are treacherous, and also they are duplicitous. God is in their mouths, they confess his name, but their hearts are far from him.

By contrast, the prophet knows that his heart is set upon the Lord and the Lord knows his heart. He calls for the Lord to act against them. He has been brought as a sheep towards the slaughter, unknowingly being caught up by their plots before the Lord made it known to him.

He calls for them to be pulled out like sheep for the slaughter, that what they sought for him, that it might come back upon their own heads. The whole land is suffering on account of these people's sin. Jeremiah calls for the Lord to act in this situation, to vindicate his righteousness.

There is, as long as this situation continues, some cognitive dissonance that the prophet feels. The Lord is righteous, as he has proclaimed at the beginning of the chapter, but yet the Lord is overseeing a situation that is clearly not just. As long as such a situation continues, the prophet will feel the great tension.

Having heard Jeremiah's complaint, what might we expect next? Maybe a comforting word from the Lord that he will bring justice to bear upon these unfaithful people, that he will vindicate his righteousness and avenge his servant. But that is not what we hear. Rather, the prophet's discomfort will be intensified.

If he feels as though he is in a wearying foot race with human beings, he must brace himself to compete with horses. If he is struggling in a safe land, how will he cope when he is placed in the jungle with the wild beasts? The men of Anathoth have conspired against him. But it is not just the men of Anathoth.

His own brothers and members of his own father's household have risen against him. They have joined the conspiracy. He is left altogether without anyone to trust, and he must cast himself wholly upon the Lord.

As in the book of Job, the questions of theodicy placed before the Lord are not actually answered. Rather, the believer needs to learn to trust God in the continuing and deepening darkness. There is no assurance of near relief.

Some response to the concerns of the prophet are found in the next speech. In verses 7-13, the Lord announces judgment upon his people. These verses open with a threefold statement.

I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage, I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies. There is an escalation here. A movement from forsaking the house, the temple, abandoning the heritage, the land, and the people, and then giving up the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.

With that last in the sequence, we feel something of the divine pathos. The Lord has given up his very bride into the hand of those who would destroy her. Why has he done this? We are made to feel something of the pain of the Lord in the verses that follow.

His inheritance, his people, his bride, has become to him like a lion in the forest. She roars against him like a wild beast seeking to take another's life. In verse 9, Judas compared either to a hyena's lair or to a speckled bird.

If it is a reference to a speckled bird of prey, then there is a neat reversal in the statement that follows. Are the birds of prey against her all around? The birds of prey, her natural companions, are now turning against her. And just as she was compared also to a wild beast, a lion of the forest, now the wild beasts are assembled against her, brought in to devour her.

All of this is an expression of the fact that the Lord hates his people because of their sin. They have become like a predator towards him, and so his wrath turns against them, and he brings judgment upon them. Many shepherds have come to destroy his vineyard.

While this might be a reference to the kings of Judah who have been unfaithful and destroyed the vineyard of the Lord's planting, it might rather be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar and the kings and officials accompanying him in the first attack upon Jerusalem in 597 BC. The result of this attack is to render Jerusalem and the land a desolation. It's preserved in this desolate state.

But yet, even though the Lord's hand was involved in all of this, Judah has not reflected upon the lesson brought by this judgment or sought to repent. The result of the Lord's judgment is a sort of reversion to chaos. They sow wheat and they reap thorns.

The land does not yield its fruit in the way that they would hope. They have been cut off from the blessings of the Lord. This chapter ends with a remarkable oracle.

Although it seems to be placed far later in Jeremiah's ministry, it continues the theme of heritage that we've seen in the chapter to this point. It refers to the fate of both Judah and the other nations after Judah's exile has been completed. At the start of Jeremiah's ministry, he was told, See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

That statement in Jeremiah 1.10 is not hard to see in the background of this great statement concerning the uprooting and replanting of nations. Those who have been involved in the uprooting of Judah will themselves be uprooted, and Judah will be

uprooted from among them and brought back to their own land. However, a return to the land is not for Judah alone.

Other nations will also be blessed with a return to their lands, and there will be a reversal of the course that history had taken to that point. Prior to that point, Israel and Judah had learned the ways of the nations and as a result had gone into exile. Now the nations would learn the ways of the Lord's people.

They would learn to swear by the Lord's name, where once the nations had taught Israel and Judah to swear by Baal. Taught in such a way, they would be built up if they were faithful. If they were not faithful, they would be utterly and completely plucked up and destroyed.

Here we can see an analogy with the way that the Lord dealt with the nations that were planted in Israel after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. Although those nations ended up adopting a form of syncretism, the Lord dealt with them in a way that, in the longer term, would encourage them to learn something of the way of his people, to enter into some form of relationship with him. Such grace would be shown to various other nations, with the intended result that not only Israel and Judah would be restored, but many other nations around them and through their influence.

Zechariah chapter 14 verses 16-19 also speaks of a grander restoration. Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, there will be no rain on them.

And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain. There shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.

A question to consider, where in the book of Jeremiah to this point have we seen other such statements of grace towards the surrounding nations? 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 12-28. We ask you brothers to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves and we urge you brothers admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything, hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, He who calls you as faithful, He will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. The conclusion of 1 Thessalonians is mostly a punchy series of final instructions.

Paul begins by exhorting the Thessalonians to respect their leaders, not just to submit to them, but to honor them and the labor that they perform and to hold them in the highest loving regard. They labor among them, they care for them in the Lord and they admonish them. Paul's primary reference here is not to ministers so much as ministries.

The people in question are probably not all ordained guardians of the church either. Paul probably has the women who labor in the life of the church no less in mind than the male pastoral guardians. Romans chapter 16 might give us more of an idea of the sort of group of which he is thinking.

The task of the leaders of the church is primarily that of caring for those committed to their oversight. They must protect them from error, they must build them up in the truth, they must unite them in fellowship and take concern for their needs both spiritual and material. Earlier in this letter we saw the way that Paul challenges the way that we can set sender, messenger, message and recipients over against each other as detached and sometimes in opposition.

In Christ and the gospel these things are bound together. The messenger of the gospel for instance gives himself to those to whom he delivers the message and he becomes a form of the message himself as do those who receive it. Here Paul also challenges some of the ways that we can instinctively regard the relationship between those in authority and those under authority.

Rather than chafing at their authority we are to be thankful for the care that they show, to recognize authority as a good thing that far from weakening us can make us stronger. Leaders in the church are not a special higher class of persons, they are our brothers and we need to esteem them highly and love. We do this not so much because of the mere authority vested in their positions but because we recognize the goodness and the value of the work that they do among us.

The emphasis is very much on what they do over the offices that they do or do not hold. We submit in love wishing their labors among us to be fruitful much as we recognize that they desire that we are fruitful. The Thessalonians are charged to be at peace among themselves.

God has brought us into peace by the sacrifice of his son and we must inhabit this peace together. Paul gives a series of rapid fire imperatives to the Thessalonians. The initial imperatives, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all, might seem to relate especially to the work of those in leadership.

However they are also the responsibility of everyone else. The leaders lead the way in the work of the entire body. Paul returns to the concern he raised earlier in chapter 4 verses 11 to 12 about idle members of the community who were sponging off others.

They should be admonished and taught to be self-sufficient. Those whose hearts were failing them were to be encouraged. How? Probably by focusing on the future coming of Christ.

In chapter 4 verse 18 and chapter 5 verse 11 Paul had already charged them to encourage each other in this manner. The weak must be assisted as they have their need. The vision here is of a congregation in which people and their leaders are very attentive to each other, recognizing and ministering to the various needs of people in different situations.

They are instructed to show patience with all. Patience is one virtue whose absence makes it difficult to practice any of the others. People are difficult.

They can be resistant to correction. They can be unresponsive to encouragement and our efforts to help them can often seem futile and fruitless. It is only with a loving patience that we will persevere with them.

Without patience community is almost impossible. The Thessalonians then must minister to and nurture each other in these ways. The Thessalonians are warned against repaying evil for evil.

Christians must reject the way of retribution. Perhaps particularly important for a church that is undergoing forms of persecution, they must seek to do good. They don't merely refrain from evil but positively seek out creative and appropriate ways in which they can do good.

We might be reminded of Jesus' teaching concerning the fulfillment of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is fulfilled in proactive and transformative love, not in mere sin avoidance. Paul's instructions here are similar in form to those that we find in places such as Romans 12 verses 9 to 18.

Reading Paul's staccato list, we might recall the ways that he has already exemplified these practices in this letter in his own way of behaviour. For instance, chapter 1 verse 2, Always, for all of you, constantly. And chapter 3 verses 9 to 10, All of these charges involve a call to consistency.



Always, without ceasing, in all circumstances. As we are people determined by realities, principles and truths deeper than our situations, we won't waver in the same way as others do. The final imperatives could arguably be said to focus on the Spirit and on His work.

The Spirit is the animating flame of God's presence within us. And we must fan this flame to greater life and not quench it. The Thessalonians must live holy lives as temples of the Holy Spirit.

They need to value the words of prophets, testing what they say, discerning and holding fast what is good, and discerning and rejecting all forms of evil. And doing this would equip the Thessalonians in their future growth. The chapter and the epistle ends with a benediction, a brief encouragement, some brief exhortations and a concluding benediction.

Paul began the letter with grace and peace and now he ends it with them. He directs the Thessalonians' attention once more to the much-awaited day of the Lord's coming and now calls for God to establish them in the blamelessness of holiness to which they are called. God's faithfulness is the grounds of our hope in this regard.

He will bring to completion what He has started in us. He began with prayers for the Thessalonians and now He asks the Thessalonians to pray for Him and His missionary companions. They are also instructed to greet each other with a holy kiss as a sign of close familial affection and to have the letter read aloud to the entire congregation.

A question to consider, why does Paul so often emphasize constancy in rejoicing?