

# OpenTheo

## January 5th: Jeremiah 4 & Galatians 5

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Disaster and decreation! For freedom Christ has set us free.

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

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## Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 4. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging. Thank you for joining us today. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging.

I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging. How long must I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet? For my people are foolish, they know me not.

They are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are wise in doing evil, but how to do good they know not. I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void, And to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, And all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and behold, there was no man, And all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert, And all its cities were laid in ruins, Before the

Lord, before his fierce anger.

For thus says the Lord, The whole land shall be a desolation, Yet I will not make a full end. For this the earth shall mourn, And the heavens above be dark. For I have spoken, I have purposed, I have not relented, nor will I turn back.

At the noise of horsemen and archer, Every city takes to flight. They enter thickets, they climb among rocks, All the cities are forsaken, and no man dwells in them. And you, O desolate one, What do you mean that you dress in scarlet? That you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold? That you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself, Your lovers despise you, they seek your life.

For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, Anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, The cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, Stretching out her hands. Woe is me, I am fainting before murderers. Judah has rebelled against the Lord.

Israel, their sister nation, was sent away into exile On account of their unfaithfulness. However, the Lord offers the prospect of forgiveness And restoration together as one new people in his land, To both of them, if only they will repent. Even when things have gone so far, There remains a way back for them.

The Lord, in the face of all their countless infidelities, Still holds out his hands to Judah. The offer of restoration to a penitent nation Continues at the start of chapter 4, Which later moves into the darker discussion Of the devastation that awaits the impenitent nation That Judah actually is. Verses 1 and 2 present three conditions Upon which restoration could occur.

First, Judah must return to the Lord. Second, they must remove their idols from his land And not waver in their rejection of idolatry. Judah's fickleness and their inability to commit themselves To the Lord with an undivided heart Had marked their apparent, yet short-lived And shallow repentances to this time.

Third, their confession of the Lord's name Should be married with commitment to truth, justice and righteousness Throughout their communal life. They had come to treat worship as a sort of attractive facade Masking all the gross injustices that pervaded The edifice of their society. If only they performed the sacrifices, Sang the psalms and said the prayers, The Lord might not notice the way that they were oppressing the poor Or doing injustice to their neighbours.

The covenant always aimed at deep integrity of heart and action And of word and behaviour. If Judah amended its practice in these respects, Turning back to the Lord with their whole hearts, Not only would they be restored, But the blessing would extend beyond them to the nations around. Israel had been established to be a light to the world, But in its unfaithfulness it performed the opposite function.

It caused the name of the Lord to be blasphemed among the nations. However, if they were to repent of their sin and change their behaviour, The surrounding nations would honour the Lord, Glorifying him on account of his reflection seen in his people. The life of the covenant would flow out beyond the borders of Judah Into the wider world.

Verses 3 and 4 further develop the conditions of Judah's return to the Lord Using two images, an agricultural and a covenantal one. The agricultural imagery of ploughing and sowing Is also found in Hosea chapter 10 verses 12 to 13. Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love, Break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, That he may come and reign righteousness upon you.

You have ploughed iniquity, you have reaped injustice, You have eaten the fruit of lies. Jeremiah has also used the imagery of first fruits back in chapter 2 verse 3. Judah needs to bear fruit to the Lord, And this requires renewal, the reclaiming of land that has lain fallow. They have backslidden and they need to return to what they formerly did.

If there is to be a good harvest in the future, It requires devotion to the difficult task of renewal here and now. The second image is that of circumcision. While circumcision was of the foreskin, it was the sign of the covenant.

It took an often wayward organ that is perhaps most powerfully symbolic of the boasting of the flesh, of man's power and virility, by which he seeks to form the world in his image, and pruned it for the covenant, marking it out with a sign indicating God's power and promise. In the process it rendered the organ functional as it ought to be functional. As an analogy, this could be extended to other organs.

Hearts and ears are also wayward organs that need to have the flesh pruned and to be devoted to their appropriate purpose in obedience to the Lord of the covenant. Deuteronomy 10.16 uses this imagery. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn.

In Deuteronomy 30.6 the imagery reappears but now in the form of promise. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live. Deuteronomy emphasised the necessity of obedience of the law coming from the heart.

The law was to be fulfilled by loving the Lord with the entirety of heart, soul and might. Here in Jeremiah 4 the imagery is used as a charge, attached with a warning of the Lord's wrath if they do not repent. Later in the book the Lord will declare his promise to write his law upon the hearts of his people.

In chapter 1 in the vision of the boiling pot facing away from the north given to Jeremiah, the threat that faces Judah from the north was presented. Here that threat appears again as the passage moves from the theme of repentance and restoration with which the

opening verses of the chapter had been concerned, moving on to the theme of judgement. Verses 5-10 portray a situation of emergency.

Judah is being invaded from the north and everyone must flee to the fortified cities. This invasion is arriving at the Lord's own direction to judge his people for their gross unfaithfulness to the covenant. In 597 BC the Babylonians would come upon Judah from the north.

However as Jack Lundbom observes, the north also had associations with powers of destruction more generally. Babylon is the lion that has emerged from its thicket. Egypt and Babylon were already depicted as roaring lions back in chapter 2 verse 15.

This lion is described as a destroyer of nations. He will lay Judah waste. Behind the lion is the Lord himself who roars with his fierce anger against the sin of the land.

All the leaders of the people will be dismayed as the day of the Lord's judgement comes upon them. Jeremiah's own voice comes in at this point, reflecting upon the way that the Lord has blinded the people to their precarious state. The Lord had warned his people on numerous occasions.

However as his people preferred the comforting lie over the truth, the Lord gave them over to their delusions. In chapter 6 verses 13-14 the Lord describes the behaviour of those who were charged to act as the watchmen of Israel. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace. Jeremiah marvels that even when the sword is up against their throat, Judah is utterly oblivious to the severity of their situation. Verses 11-18 dramatically describe the onslaught of judgement upon Judah.

The pace is moving, quickly. It will arrive like a scorching wind from the desert. Not as the gentle wind that grants relief, or as the wind that separates the wheat from the chaff at the time of harvest.

This is a cruel wind of divine judgement. The enemy advances on Judah like clouds and like a whirlwind, with horses who move as swiftly as eagles. They are destroying everything in their path, and as the hero's imagination is caught up in the image of this advancing judgement, as the terrified messengers bring news, as the watchmen strain for sight of the approaching enemy, and as the fearful people prepare for the moment when the attack will hit, the Lord delivers another last-ditch call to the people to repent, so that they might be spared such an awful fate.

And then they are plunged into the vision of approaching judgement once more. Messengers race down from Dan, then from Mount Ephraim. The enemy is rapidly

approaching, and will all too quickly engulf them.

Soon they are surrounded on all sides. This is a judgement they have brought upon themselves through their own deeds. Here the prophet's voice appears again.

His heart is racing. He feels the approaching terror, and he knows its outcome. He has a sort of pre-traumatic stress, the terrifying din of war and its devastation battering his imagination, waking him up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, or causing him to break down in anguished tears.

His mind is bombarded with the sights and sounds and smells of warfare. The earth quakes with the force of approaching horses and chariots. Weaponry and armour catches the sunlight.

Swords cleave limbs from bodies. Horrific cries of orphaned children and of women robbed of their husbands rend the air. In his mind's eye he sees bloodied and torn standards flying over mangled bodies of the slain.

There is the deafening crash of falling masonry as walls are breached and houses brought down. Every breath is attended by the taste of burnt or rotting flesh. The prophet is a mouthpiece of the Lord, but also a model for the people in appropriate response to and sensitivity to the word of the Lord.

Here in the prophet we see a response that sharply contrasts with the blithing sensibility of the nation that he is addressing. Jeremiah's prophecies are filled with drama, with passion, pathos and colour, as the Lord and his prophet Jeremiah try to shake a sin-drunk people to a sense of their terrible situation. The Lord's voice returns in verse 22.

The people are insensible and stupid. What wisdom they seem to possess is merely cunning in the ways of wickedness, but they are utterly incapable of doing good. Jeremiah lamented in the immediately preceding verses, and now this might be regarded as the Lord's own lament over his people.

In verses 23-28 we find a remarkable piece of poetry as Jeremiah describes in prophetic hyperbole the aftermath of the coming judgment in terms that unmistakably darkly echo the creation account of Genesis chapter 1. The Lord's judgment is returning the land to its primeval formless and empty state. Jeremiah writes, Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 reads, What introduces God's creative work in Genesis follows his destructive work in Jeremiah. If Genesis chapter 1 is the account of how the Lord renders the world a habitable land, these verses in Jeremiah are about how he renders it desolate and beyond habitation, turning out the lights over his rebellious people.

As Lumbum observes, as the very mountains quake, However, even in this powerful image of decreation, there is a glimmer of hope. The Lord will not make a final end. The possibility of some restoration is held open.

The three verses with which the chapter concludes move through three images of Judah and Jerusalem in their plight. First, we hear the noise of the approaching horsemen as people desperately take flight from the doomed cities, climbing on rocks, hiding in thickets. Second, there is the image of Jerusalem as a prostitute, foolishly dressing itself for seduction, when her lovers are turning on her to kill her.

She is pitiable, even in her perversity. Perhaps we might here recall the behaviour of Jezebel at the approach of Jehu, moments before she suffered a bloody death. The final image is that of a pregnant woman, about to give birth.

Walter Brueggemann describes this powerfully. In verse 31, the metaphor is again dramatically shifted. Out of the resolve of Yahweh, the army still approaches, but now Judah is not an alluring prostitute.

Now Jerusalem is cast in a new role as a helpless, exposed woman in labour. What catches the ear of the poet, and any who will hear, is the cry of pain. The cry sounds like a labour pain.

Only labour pains are to give birth, the work of newness. The poet listens more carefully. The cry of the city is in fact a cry for help, a death cry, for the invaders, sent by Yahweh, are about the predictable business of rape and murder.

The metaphor belongs in the same trajectory with the image utilised in chapter 2 verse 2 as bride, in chapter 3 verse 1 as faithless wife, in chapter 4 verse 30 as prostitute. Jerusalem is a street woman who gives birth, and is overwhelmed by the army in what should have been a moment of joy. The poet presses to find a metaphor raw enough to carry the truth.

Jerusalem is under judgement, about to be done in. Jerusalem may not know it, but the city is as shameful as a prostitute, as helpless as a woman in labour, exposed and endangered now, because the betrayed husband has had enough of fickleness and will tolerate no more. Death must come.

No one stands with Jerusalem to grieve or to rescue. A question to consider. What lessons might we learn from the extensive use of rhetoric in conveying the prophetic message? Galatians chapter 5 For freedom Christ has set us free.

Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision, that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed.

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are evident, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the spirit, let us also keep in step with the spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Galatians chapter 5 begins with a verse summing up the force of the argument of the preceding chapter. Christ has set us free for freedom.

And freedom is of little use if you use it to place yourself in slavery. The Galatian Christians had once been in slavery to idolatry and the physical elements in pagan religion. However, they had been set free by the spirit of sonship.

They ought not to turn to the Jewish law as an alternative master. It may not be as cruel as the bondage of paganism, but it remains a sort of bondage. Indeed, now that Christ has come, turning to the Torah is much worse, because what was once a guardian, instructing and constraining a sinful people prior to the advent of Christ, actually now functions as a rival to him.

For the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to commit themselves to Torah observance as the way to enjoy standing with God, would be to cast away Christ and all that he represents. They would have chosen to place their standing with God on a completely different foundation than that which was graciously given to them in Christ. They would have turned to the foundation of observant Judaism, cutting themselves off from Christ.

And they would have committed themselves to observe the commandment, which ultimately would place them under the curse. However, the true heirs wait for the hope of righteousness. They look forward to the vindication of God, and they do so through the Spirit, by faith.

The reality that gives us standing before God is not the law or Jewish identity. It's the work of the Spirit, and the way that we live out this identity is not by Torah observance, but by faith. For those in Christ, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, is ultimately irrelevant.

Neither of these are the foundation upon which our standing with God rests. Paul doesn't condemn Jews for continuing to practice circumcision. However, while circumcision was once the mark of a privileged Jewish status before God, in Christ it no longer functions that way.

Both Jews and Greeks, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, stand before God on the same ground of God's grace in Christ. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything in Christ, because God's grace is given without respect to either. The Judaizers have diverted the Galatian churches from the right course that they were on.

Their false teaching threatens to corrupt everything, as a little leaven can leaven an entire lump of dough. And Paul hopes by this point that the Galatians will recognize the danger of the Judaizers and remove them. It seems that some had suggested that Paul himself still advocated circumcision.

This was probably because word of the events of Acts 16, verses 1-3 had travelled around. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek.

He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. The fact that Paul would circumcise Timothy seems strange to us, given all that he has taught in Galatians to this point.

However, his actions can readily be understood as an attempt to avoid placing an unnecessary stumbling block before the people to whom he was ministering. He had



described this missionary policy in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23. Though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ. That I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Timothy was Paul's son in the gospel, his close assistant.

Like Paul, Timothy was prepared to become like the Jews for the sake of winning them to the gospel. However, in getting circumcised, he was not seeking to found his standing with God upon the Torah and Torah observance. Paul's whole point is that circumcision and uncircumcision are ambivalent matters with regard to our standing before God.

So if getting circumcised will help you win over a few more to the gospel, which teaches that standing with God is not on the basis of the Torah, then go right ahead, there's no problem with it. Provided that you aren't putting a stumbling block in the way of uncircumcised persons by doing this, there's no problem whatsoever. Because circumcision doesn't matter and uncircumcision doesn't matter.

Paul makes clear that even if he is prepared to have someone like Timothy circumcised, the fact that he is being persecuted on account of his message of the cross is proof that he isn't preaching circumcision. If he were, he would just be a good observant Jew with a few divergent viewpoints and would be of little threat to anyone. Paul expresses the wish that the Judaizers, so eager to cut off foreskins, would go all the way and completely emasculate themselves.

In so doing, they would come under the disqualification from the assembly of Deuteronomy 23, verse 1. No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord. Their situation, then, would better testify to their state relative to the people of God. Paul reiterates and sharpens the point with which he opened the chapter.

The Galatians were set free for freedom. Christians have been released from bondage to the elements of the world by the Spirit and need to use that freedom in a loving manner. Indeed, the law, with respect to its moral instruction, a moral instruction designed for a willful and flesh-governed people, is fulfilled in the positive command to love your neighbour as yourself, and it is this love that the Spirit works in us.

We should note here that Paul, while declaring the end of the Torah as something that sets Jews apart from Gentiles, is teaching that the Spirit fulfills the Torah in some other respects. There is a movement from the external law addressed to rebellious flesh to a

law written on the hearts that is now lived out as the positive expression of liberty. This is akin to the movement from the restrictions that someone feels when they first learn a musical instrument, where they have to play particular notes and they're given scales to practice and all these sorts of things, and it feels like an external obstacle, an imposition upon the will.

But yet, as that instrument is learned, the freedom of the virtuoso can develop, for whom the logic of the music and the instrument he is playing is a means of freedom itself. It's a way in which he can willingly express his interiority. The debate about the Torah occurs against the backdrop of the fact that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, a statement with which Paul opened the Epistle in chapter 1 verse 4. The whole of the old order, whether lived out under the Torah or far from God in paganism, is lived out in the flesh, under the elementary principles.

It's a realm characterized by sin, by death, by the passions, and by the incapacity to bring about life or righteousness. Christ brings the new age of the spirit, where people can be liberated from the power of the flesh, whether experienced in bondage to the guardian of the Torah or as Gentiles. And the result of this liberty is a new way of life.

There are ways, of course, that this is anticipated within the Old Testament. The law first comes in a primarily prohibitive and prescriptive form, but yet the people are told that they must meditate upon it, that they will learn wisdom from it. And as they do so, a law that was primarily external to them, prohibitive, constraining, and an imposition upon their willfulness, becomes something that is within them.

In the Psalms we see this expression of the law from within. The law is no longer an imposition, but it has become the delight of the heart and is expressed freely from within. In the wisdom literature we see a movement from the law as primarily external commandments, to the principles of justice and the insight of those commandments being internalized and now expressed through insight into the way that the world works.

In the prophets we see something even further. For the prophet, the word of God can be eaten, digested, taken into themselves, and then expressed like a burning fire from within. What was once words on tablets of stone outside condemning, something that stood opposed to the willfulness of the person, has now become part of the person and a free expression.

The prophets, of course, particularly in places like Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, promise that the Lord will one day write his law upon the hearts of his people, that that law will no longer be an external commandment condemning them, but it will be one freely obeyed from within. And this is what Paul is talking about here. We should also observe the movement in the form of rhetoric between the Old Covenant and the New.

Prohibition is the rhetorical form of the law, but the rhetoric of the Spirit is one of

persuasion, because the law is being written on our hearts by the Spirit, and persuasion is a form of rhetoric that addresses people who have a strong apprehension of the good within themselves. Life in the flesh is characterized by rebellion, and by all the impulses of untamed sinful nature. It's driven by our desire to dominate others, for instance.

When people live in such a manner, they will bite and devour each other. However, such people must beware, as those who live by the sword will die by the sword. If they bite and devour others, they are at risk of being consumed themselves.

The order of the flesh is a social, not merely an individual order. It's an order that creates and sustains divisions, whereas the Spirit overcomes and traverses them. It is an order of dissipation and degeneracy, where people are enslaved to their lusts and passions.

It's an order of hatred and anger. As those given the Spirit, Christians must walk in the Spirit. They must starve the flesh.

The Spirit and the flesh are two powers to which we must relate, but the Spirit, of course, is the greater of the two. If we follow the Spirit, we will not just do whatever we want, as the Spirit will direct us so that, although we are not under the law, we will be marked by the Spirit's fruit. The flesh, the animating principle of the evil age from which we have been delivered, whether we were living under the law as Jews or apart from the law as Gentiles, has its distinctive and its characteristic works.

These are the works that the law constrained, but also in other ways provoked and revealed. Many of the works that Paul lists here are works that reveal people's lack of self-control. People who remain under the rule of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

The fruit of the Spirit, by contrast, is completely different. Although we are set free by grace through faith, the liberty that we have received is lived out and demonstrated in a transformed manner of life that comes from the work of the Spirit that we were given apart from any status that gave us claim on God. There is a movement from unruly passions to self-control.

Once again, these are not just about individuals. Communities that operate in the Spirit will be characterised by these virtues, as we will see in the next chapter. The law has nothing to say to these fruit of the Spirit.

They are not produced by the law, but neither are they condemned by the law. Indeed, they live out the life to which the law always testified and pointed and declared, but which it could never achieve or give. The flesh is decisively dealt with in the death of Christ.

Christians should die with Christ, so that, as Paul said of himself, it is no longer they who live, but Christ who lives in them. A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in

which the rite of circumcision itself, rightly understood, anticipated and pointed towards Paul's message in Galatians?