

### The Age-Old Question

#### Jeremiah 12

**Jeremiah 12:1-6** – *“Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? <sup>2</sup> You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth but far from their mind. <sup>3</sup> But You, O Lord, know me; You have seen me, and You have tested my heart toward You. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter. <sup>4</sup> How long will the land mourn, and the herbs of every field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed, for the wickedness of those who dwell there, because they said, “He will not see our final end.”*

*<sup>5</sup> “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan? <sup>6</sup> For even your brothers, the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you. Yes, they have called a multitude after you. Do not believe them, even though they speak smooth words to you.”*

#### Background Notes

In Jeremiah 11 the prophet began a sermon to Judah about the “broken covenant.” This covenant was the Mosaic Covenant that God made with His people Israel at Mount Sinai after their Exodus from slavery in Egypt. The people of Israel had broken this covenant by turning away from God, breaking His Law, and worshiping idols. In Jeremiah 11:11-23, Jeremiah’s “Broken Covenant Sermon” was interrupted by a report and explanation of a plot against Jeremiah’s life. God encouraged him not to worry because the Lord Himself would deal with these evil men.

The interruption of Jeremiah’s “Broken Covenant Sermon” continued in Jeremiah 12:1-6. Then rest of the chapter concluded Jeremiah’s sermon about the broken covenant.

In verses 1-6 Jeremiah asked the Lord the age-old question: What about the wicked? Even though the Lord was going to deal with the evildoers, such as the men of Anathoth, why had they been permitted to prosper in the first place? Why does it seem that the wicked always appear to prosper much more than the righteous? Have you ever asked that question? What’s the answer, anyway? That brings us to our doctrinal points.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. God does not fully answer the age-old question about the wicked.

*“Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?” (v1)*

Jeremiah knew that God was righteous, so why would He allow wicked people to prosper - to be happy and at ease? In verse 2 he said that the Lord even allowed the wicked to become established and “bear fruit” (but not spiritual fruit, of course). The idea was that the wicked prosper like fruit trees, even though they barely acknowledged the Lord: *“You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth but far from their mind.”*

Meanwhile, said Jeremiah, You know that my heart is right toward You, Lord (v3). Jeremiah suggested that the just and proper action for the Lord to take would be to drag the wicked away to destruction and leave the righteous in the Land. As it was, the righteous continued to suffer, and the wicked continued to they think they could hide their sins (v4).

What's the answer to this age-old question? Why are the wicked allowed to prosper, since God is perfectly righteous? Does God give us an answer? That question is not fully answered - neither here, nor anywhere else in Scripture.

Habbakuk (a contemporary of Jeremiah) asked essentially the same question. The Lord told him that conditions would get even worse - but in the end the wicked would be judged. In the meantime, God said, ***“The just shall live by faith.”*** As believers, we must trust in the sovereign wisdom and righteousness of God - even though we don't have the full answer as to why the Lord allows the wicked to prosper at this present time.

Notice how the Lord answered Jeremiah: *“If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?” (v5)*. In essence, the Lord told him: Conditions are going to get worse, not better. There will be more questions about why I allow evil at the present time. Even your own relatives will talk behind your back and betray you.

So God did not give Jeremiah a full answer as to why He allows wicked people to prosper, or why He allows any form of evil to exist at the present time. The Bible does give some answers to this question, but it doesn't give a full answer.

- One part of the answer is that ***God provides common grace to all people***. In Matthew 5:45 Jesus said, *“God makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust.”*

- Another part of the answer is that while God is not the source of evil, **God can use evil to accomplish His sovereign plans and purposes.** In Psalm 76:10 we read, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise you.”
- And we know from Scripture that **the wicked will not prosper forever.** All evil will ultimately be removed.

But in the meantime, “*the just shall live by their faith.*” We must **trust** in the sovereign wisdom and perfect plan of God, and in His righteousness, because at the present time, God does not fully answer the age-old question about the wicked.

## 2. God does fully answer the age-old question about Israel.

**Jeremiah 12:7-17** - “*I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies. <sup>8</sup> My heritage is to Me like a lion in the forest; it cries out against Me; therefore I have hated it. <sup>9</sup> My heritage is to Me like a speckled vulture; the vultures all around are against her. Come, assemble all the beasts of the field! Bring them to devour! <sup>10</sup> “Many rulers have destroyed My vineyard. They have trodden My portion underfoot. They have made My pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. <sup>11</sup> They have made it desolate. Desolate, it mourns to Me. The whole land is made desolate, because no one takes it to heart. <sup>12</sup> The plunderers have come on all the desolate heights in the wilderness, for the sword of the Lord shall devour from one end of the land to the other end of the land. No flesh shall have peace. <sup>13</sup> They have sown wheat but reaped thorns. They have put themselves to pain but do not profit. But be ashamed of your harvest because of the fierce anger of the Lord.”*

*<sup>14</sup> Thus says the Lord: “Against all My evil neighbors who touch the inheritance which I have caused My people Israel to inherit—behold, I will pluck them out of their land and pluck out the house of Judah from among them. <sup>15</sup> Then it shall be, after I have plucked them out, that I will return and have compassion on them and bring them back, everyone to his heritage and everyone to his land. <sup>16</sup> And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, to swear by My name, ‘As the Lord lives,’ as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they shall be established in the midst of My people. <sup>17</sup> But if they do not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation,” says the Lord.*

These verses, along with the rest of Scripture, clearly answer the age-old questions that have been raised about the nation of Israel.

Is God finished with Israel? No! Has He written Israel off? No. Is the present-day Church the “New Israel”? No! Are all God’s promises made to ancient Israel to be spiritually applied and fulfilled in the Church? No.

In these verses God said that He would have to let His people reap what they had sown, because they had broken the covenant. He would have to temporarily abandon and forsake His inheritance, “His dearly beloved” (v7-8). As a speckled vulture becomes the target of other birds of prey and wild beasts, so Israel will be devoured by the foreign nations (v9). The unrighteous rulers of Israel were like careless shepherds who had trampled through vineyards and fields and left the

nation desolate (v10-11). The “sword of the Lord” – the Babylonian army - would be wielded against Israel because of the Lord’s anger at the people’s disobedience and idolatry (v12-13). All the surrounding pagan nations that had attacked Judah would be uprooted as well (v14).

But now the good news! In verses 15-17 the Lord revealed that Israel would be restored - and the other ancient nations would be restored as well! *“Then it shall be, after I have plucked them out, that I will return and have compassion on them and bring them back, everyone to his heritage and everyone to his land. <sup>16</sup> And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, to swear by My name, ‘As the Lord lives,’ as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they shall be established in the midst of My people. <sup>17</sup> But if they do not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation,” says the Lord” (v 15-17).*

This prophecy was partially fulfilled when the Jews returned from their seventy-year captivity in Babylon. Under the “Edict of Cyrus” in 539 BC, the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem, and other captive nations were permitted to return to their homelands as well.

But verses 15-16 will ultimately be fully fulfilled with the return of the Lord and the establishment of His earthly millennial kingdom. Then Israel will be restored – and not just as a secular nation in their ancient homeland as they are today. At that time they will be spiritually restored to the Lord as well! The other ancient nations will also be restored and blessed, as long as they recognize the state of Israel and the God of Israel. See more about these conditions of our Lord’s earthly kingdom in Zechariah 14. God does fully answer the age-old question about Israel!

## Practical Application

### Trust the Lord with your hard, unanswered questions.

In this chapter we’ve seen that Jeremiah had an unanswered question: why do wicked people seem to prosper more than righteous people? ***Jeremiah did the right thing. He brought his question to the Lord!*** And when the Lord did not fully answer the question, he ***continued to trust*** the Lord.

Jeremiah and Habakkuk learned that the just shall ***walk by faith*** – continuing to trust in God’s righteousness and His sovereign plan, even when we have difficult, unanswered questions. And we should do the same.

We should bring our questions to the Lord. He may give us some insights into our questions. But even if you don’t get the full answers to your questions, don’t lose heart. And don’t lose faith! Continue to trust the Lord with your hard, unanswered questions.