

Jeremiah

Chapter 12

Jeremiah's Complaint

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? 2 You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit; you are near in their mouth and far from their heart. 3 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. 4 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.”

12:1–6 The second of Jeremiah’s “confessions,” continuing (and closely related to) the first (11:18–23). Jeremiah speaks in vv. 1–4, and God responds in vv. 5–6. (CSB)

12:1 *righteous are you.* Because God is righteous, he is a dependable arbiter and judge. (CSB)

Yet. He is nevertheless ready to listen to our questions and complaints. (CSB)

Why does ... the wicked prosper? The question is not unique to Jeremiah (see, e.g., Job 21:7–15; Mal 3:15). The Lord replies that ultimately the wicked in Judah will perish (vv. 7–13) and that the wicked invaders who destroy them will themselves be destroyed (vv. 14–17). (CSB)

Though Jeremiah committed his cause to the Lord, he was perplexed by the delay in the administration of divine justice. Jeremiah was not the first nor the last to question whether the prosperity of the wicked can be harmonized with God’s justice. Ger: “[God] does all things justly, though we do not always observe the reason of His justice” (ThC E2 § 242). (TLSB)

How may the fact be explained that the very ones who are guilty of the worst perfidy, who practice the basest knavery, live in peace? The same question occasionally rises in the hearts of most children of God, and it is safe to be always armed with the firm conviction that the ways of the Lord are ever right and good. (Kretzmann)

12:2 *You plant them.* But a sovereign God can always reconsider his intentions if conditions warrant a change (see 18:9–10). (CSB)

In dismay, Jeremiah reaches the point of accusing God. (TLSB)

produce fruit. The wicked flourish, while Jeremiah’s fellow citizens plot to destroy his own “fruit” (see 11:19). (CSB)

their mouths ... far from their hearts. Quoted in part by Jesus in Mt 15:8–9. (CSB)

Judgment on hypocrisy. (TLSB)

12:3 *you O Lord know me* – The prophet freely leaving the judgment regarding himself to the Searcher of hearts, secure in the testimony of a good conscience. (Kretzmann)

test my heart. Wherefore he freely invites a scrutiny on the part of the Lord. By the same token he can call upon the Lord to bring punishment upon the evil-doers. (Kretzmann)

like sheep for slaughter.† Jeremiah asks that his wicked countrymen receive the fate mentioned for himself in 11:19. His request arises not so much out of a desire for personal revenge as for the vindication of God's righteousness. (CSB)

12:4 *withered.* Apparently there was a series of droughts in Judah during Jeremiah's ministry. (CSB)

for the evil of those who dwell in it – The very irrational brutes being placed under the ban of Jehovah on account of the hypocrisy of their masters. (Kretzmann)

He will not see. The prophet's enemies do not believe that his predictions will be fulfilled. (CSB)

Pronoun refers either to God (i.e., "He does not shape our destiny") or to His prophet (i.e., "He will not live to see his predictions of our death come true"). (TLSB)

The wicked Jews trying to persuade themselves that the Lord is blind toward their wickedness, that they may pursue their ungodly ways without interference, safe from the calamity which Jeremiah had threatened. But the Lord answers in such a way as to rebuke the prophet in a gentle manner for the impatience displayed by him, at the same time pointing out that he is due to experience still greater tribulations. (Kretzmann)

12:1–4 Jeremiah struggles to understand how a righteous God can tolerate the wicked and even allow them to prosper. Often we are unable to understand God's justice or reconcile God's providence with the evil we experience. We do not see the big picture, and our own sense of right and wrong gets terribly twisted by sin. Yet take heart. God continually works in the world for justice and for the salvation of people, something He guarantees by the cross of Christ. • Teach us to be patient, Lord, when we do not understand "why." Lead us to the cross of Christ Jesus, and help us trust You always. Amen. (TLSB)

The LORD Answers Jeremiah

5 "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? 6 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." 7 "I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies. 8 My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her. 9 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. 10 Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion; they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. 11 They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no man lays it to heart. 12 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. 13 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." 14 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. 15 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. 16 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. 17 But if any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the LORD.”

12:5 The Lord warns Jeremiah that in the future his troubles will increase (see, e.g., 38:4–6). (CSB)

If he could not endure the comparatively little trouble which had come upon him till now, he would assuredly never be able to stand the great sufferings which would come to him in the future. (Kretzmann)

God does not owe nor does He give Jeremiah a direct answer to his questions of “why?” (v. 1). The problem would not exist if Jeremiah had a firm unquestioning faith in God’s superior wisdom and limitless power to do the right thing at the right time. Jeremiah must learn to trust God’s management of affairs if he is going to survive even more severe tests of faith in the future. (TLSB)

thicket. Providing cover for lions (see 49:19; 50:44; Zec 11:3). If the Hebrew for this word means “flooding” here, an ancient example is described in Jos 3:15. (CSB)

The banks of the Jordan were a dense jungle, a hiding place for Asiatic lions. (TLSB)

Literally, "And in a land of peace thou wast secure, how wilt thou do along the wooded banks of Jordan?" The comparison is between an inhabited district, with its comparative security, and a country of primitive forests and undergrowth, where wild animals abounded, the application being the same as in the first part of the verse. (Kretzmann)

12:6 *house*. Apparently, members of Jeremiah’s own family were included in the “men of Anathoth” (11:21, 23) who wanted to kill him. (CSB)

full cry after you – Pursuing him after the manner of a pack of dogs. (Kretzmann)

do not believe them...speak friendly words – Thus the Lord warns His servant against hypocrisy and coming tribulation, at the same time intimating that the wickedness of the people had not yet reached its highest stage. But eventually the judgment would strike them. (Kretzmann)

12:7–17 The Lord will judge Judah (vv. 7–13) as well as the wicked neighboring nations (vv. 14–17). (CSB)

12:7–8 It grieved God to see the love He showered on His chosen people abused so maliciously that He had to “hate” them for their open rebellion against Him. (TLSB)

12:7 *house*. Judah. (CSB)

heritage. God’s land and people. (CSB)

Repudiating His chosen people, in the midst of whom He had established, and hoped to maintain, His Church. (Kretzmann)

beloved of my soul. This being said of the exile with which He intended to punish His disobedient people. (CSB)

12:8 *I hate her*. I will withdraw my love from her by giving her “into the hands of her enemies” (v. 7; see Mal 1:3). (CSB)

His former love having departed from it on account of its obstinate opposition to His will. (Kretzmann)

12:9 *birds of prey* – A bird of prey with its plumage striped brown and gray, or an albino. (Kretzmann)

other birds of prey ... wild beasts. Judah's enemies (see Isa 56:9 and note). (CSB)

Pouncing upon such a bird in either case with the greatest rage. (Kretzmann)

bring them to devour – The whole sentence may also be rendered in the form of a question stating the situation as it actually was found when the heathen nations began their attacks upon Judah. (Kretzmann)

Judah is like a carcass; its bones will be picked clean. (TLSB)

12:10 *shepherds.* Rulers. (CSB)

The very ones who were expected to give the Church the proper spiritual care. (Kretzmann)

my vineyard. Judah. (CSB)

12:11 *desolate.* A total of seven *s*-sounds and seven *m*-sounds in the Hebrew of this brief verse provides a striking example of Jeremiah's literary gifts. (CSB)

12:12 *barren heights.* Places of idolatrous worship (see 3:2; Nu 23:3). (CSB)

destroyers. The Babylonians. (CSB)

sword of the LORD. Symbolizing God's instruments of judgment. (CSB)

The war which the Lord would send upon Judah as a just punishment. (Kretzmann)

from one end ... to the other. In this case the entire sinful population of Judah. (Kretzmann)

no flesh has peace. Lit. "there will be no peace for anyone." (CSB)

12:13 The people of Judah, have undertaken many things in the pride of their hearts, but shall reap thorns, the very opposite of what they expect. Exhausting their strength and almost tormenting themselves in the endeavor to gain their proud ends, but shall not get the results which they had anticipated. They shall be ashamed in the small amounts which they actually produced. The Lord's anger would not permit their proud plans to mature. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (Kretzmann)

12:14–17 The enemy nations who ravish the Promised Land of God's people will be subjected to the same judgment in store for Israel. Yet they, too, will be included in the worldwide salvation to be mediated by Abraham's offspring Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). If these nations accept the ways of the God of Israel, they will be incorporated into the people of God, a spiritual community without racial distinctions or geographical boundaries. So all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, will be saved (cf 16:19). (TLSB)

12:15 The exiles from Judah, and those from the neighboring nations, will eventually be brought back to their respective lands (see v. 16; 32:37, 44; 33:26; 48:47; 49:6). (CSB)

12:16† See Isa 56:6–7. The Messianic age of the Israel of the new covenant is in view (see Isa 2:2–4). (CSB)

ways. The true and only religion. (Kretzmann)

12:17 *utterly pluck it up and destroy* – For sin is a reproach to any people and will be treated accordingly by the just God. The passage clearly has a Messianic trend, referring to that period of time when people from every nation would find their way into the Church of Christ. (Kretzmann)

12:5–17 God delays punishment of His people, allowing them plenty of time and opportunity to repent and return to Him in faith. Failing that, He will give them over to their enemies, and justice will be served—the land will be laid waste and its inhabitants exiled. God cannot be mocked. Sinners who resist His grace will face judgment and eternal condemnation. God is not slow to act but patiently waits for people to turn to Him and be saved. His pleasure is in our salvation. • Anchor us in Your love, O Lord, and teach us the wisdom of obedience to Your will. Amen. (TLSB)