

# Jeremiah 12

## Complaining Prayer and God's Answer

### Lesson Summary

Jeremiah comes to God with an honest complaint: Why do the wicked prosper while those seeking to live faithfully suffer? He takes his case to the highest court, confident that God is righteous but puzzled by what he sees around him. God answers, although not as Jeremiah might have hoped. If running with footmen has exhausted him, he must prepare to run with horses. Then the chapter turns unexpectedly from Jeremiah's lament to God's own lament over his beloved people. Yet judgment is not the final word. God promises compassion even toward the nations he uproots. Jeremiah 12 invites us to bring our questions honestly to God while trusting that he sees the whole story.

### Big Idea

Faith does not require us to pretend that suffering and injustice make sense. Jeremiah complains because he believes God is righteous and is willing to hear him. God does not answer every "why," but he reveals something greater: he is present in the suffering, he grieves over his people, and his purposes extend beyond the circumstances Jeremiah can presently see. We may see only the footmen while God knows about the horses ahead. We may see wicked people prospering while God sees their end. Faith keeps us talking to God—and trusting him—while the story is still unfolding.

### Jeremiah's Complaint

Jeremiah 12 begins with one of the oldest and most persistent questions of faith: Why do people who do wrong seem to prosper while those who seek to follow God seem to suffer? Jeremiah is not asking the question as a detached philosopher. This is personal. He has obeyed God, preached an unpopular message, and discovered in the previous chapter that people from his own hometown, Anathoth, were plotting to kill him. Some of those closest to him would prove treacherous as well. So Jeremiah does what people of faith have done for thousands of years: he brings his complaint directly to God.

Notice where he begins: "Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead my case with You; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You" (Jeremiah 12:1).

The language takes us into a courtroom. Righteous are you. That could mean "you are the one who always wins in a court of law" or "You are the one who is innocent of wrongdoing?" I think it's the former. This is legal talk. This seems to be concerning the righteous lament of Jeremiah in chapter 11:20. God is the One who can make the rules and who determines the victor at the High Court. More legal language: "plead my case." *Mishpatim* (judgments) or "matters of justice" This sounds like Job who wants his day in court as well. And so many of us in our complaints in these days. People often look to government to solicit legislation and courtroom activity to make life better for them and the nation. So Jeremiah does as well. He goes to the High Court in heaven.

Jeremiah does not begin by accusing God of being unfair. He begins by affirming exactly the opposite. God is righteous. Jeremiah knows that, and strangely enough, that makes his problem harder rather than easier. If God is righteous, why does unrighteousness seem to work so well? The language takes us into a courtroom. Jeremiah wants to plead his case and discuss matters of justice—*mishpatim*. Like Job, Jeremiah wants his day in court. He has looked at the evidence, and what he sees does not seem to match what he knows about the Judge.

This reminds me of Philip Yancey's book *Disappointment with God* where he discusses at length and with typical raw considerations, "Is God unfair? Is he silent? Is he hidden?" Job and Jeremiah could have submitted chapters to Yancey for his manuscript. (see Job 12, 21, Psalm 37, 49, Habakkuk 1, Malachi 2.17, 3.15)

## When the Wicked Flourish

Jeremiah's complaint is not simply that wicked people exist. His problem is that they seem to flourish. God has planted them, they have taken root, they grow, and they produce fruit. Even worse, these people know how to talk religiously. God is "near to their lips" but "far from their mind" (Jeremiah 12:2). They know the vocabulary and apparently know when to say the right things about God. Hypocrisy is particularly offensive because the hypocrite has not simply rejected God; he knows how to sound as though he belongs to God.

Jeremiah contrasts them with himself: "But You know me, O LORD; You see me" (12:3). You can almost hear his frustration. God, you know me. You know what I have done. You know I have spoken what you told me to speak. You also know what they are doing. So why aren't you doing something about it? Jeremiah is hardly alone in asking that question. Job asks it. Habakkuk asks it. Malachi raises it. Psalm 37 addresses it, and Psalm 73 virtually makes Jeremiah's complaint its theme. In that psalm, Asaph looks at the prosperity of the wicked and admits that his feet almost slipped. Why bother living faithfully when the people who disregard God seem to be having the better life? These questions sound theological until you are the one suffering. Then they become very personal indeed.

Jeremiah then points beyond himself. The consequences of sin are not confined to the sinner. The land mourns, the grass withers, and animals and birds disappear. That is worth noticing. Human rebellion has consequences that spread outward. We like to imagine that our sin is private—"It's my life; it doesn't hurt anyone else"—but Scripture repeatedly challenges that idea. What we do affects families and communities and sometimes even the land itself. Jeremiah can see the damage. What he cannot understand is why God seems to tolerate it. He wants justice, and preferably he wants it immediately.

## God Answers Jeremiah

One of the remarkable things about Jeremiah 12 is that God actually answers him, but it is probably not the answer Jeremiah wanted: "If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, then how can you compete with horses?" (12:5). What an answer! Jeremiah comes to God saying, in effect, "This is too hard," and God tells him that greater challenges are still ahead. If running against men has worn him out, what will he do when the horses arrive?

God does not dismiss Jeremiah's suffering or tell him that he has exaggerated the problem. Neither does he explain every detail of why these things are happening. Instead, he prepares Jeremiah for what is coming next. Even members of Jeremiah's own family will deal treacherously with him. If Jeremiah's faith depends upon circumstances becoming easier, he will not survive what lies ahead. Sometimes we want God's answer to suffering to be the removal of suffering. Sometimes his answer is the strength to continue through it. The footmen have been difficult enough, but Jeremiah is going to have to learn how to run with horses.

There is another issue underneath Jeremiah's complaint: timing. We see injustice and want God to fix it immediately. That seems perfectly reasonable. If God sees evil and has the power to stop evil, why doesn't he stop it now? But we see the moment; God sees the whole story. Centuries later Peter addresses something similar when people wonder why God seems slow in fulfilling his promises. What looks to us like delay can actually provide room for repentance—what Christopher Wright calls “space for grace.” God's timetable is not ours, and delayed judgment is not the same thing as absent judgment.

## God's Lament

Then the chapter takes an extraordinary turn. Until now Jeremiah has been lamenting to God, but suddenly God begins lamenting too: “I have forsaken My house, I have abandoned My inheritance; I have given the beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies” (12:7). Notice the repeated language: “My house,” “My inheritance,” “My vineyard,” “My field,” “My pleasant field.” And perhaps most movingly, “the beloved of My soul.” Judah is not simply a troublesome nation whose file God has opened in some heavenly administrative office. These are his people. He loves them, and judgment is painful because relationship matters.

That changes the way we hear the whole chapter. Jeremiah is suffering, certainly, but God is not an indifferent observer standing somewhere far away saying, “Well, they brought it upon themselves.” God grieves. His inheritance has become like a lion roaring against him. Then the picture changes and his beloved inheritance becomes like a speckled bird surrounded by birds of prey. Shepherds have ruined his vineyard, and his pleasant field has become a desolate wilderness. The repeated idea is desolation. Judgment is coming, but there is no delight in it.

## God Sits Shiva With Us

That gives us another way of thinking about suffering. We often want an explanation. Why did this happen? Why did God allow that? Why didn't he prevent this? We want the theological pieces arranged neatly enough that the pain will finally make sense. There is certainly a place for biblical answers, but sometimes another answer is simply presence. God is with us, and as a Jewish person I might put it another way: God sits shiva with us.

Shiva is the Jewish period of mourning following the death of a close relative. The Hebrew word means “seven,” because traditionally the bereaved sit shiva for seven days. Friends and relatives come to the home, and one of the lessons of shiva is that you do not have to fix grief. You sit with people in it. Job's friends got this right at first. They saw his terrible suffering and sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word because they saw that his pain was very great (Job 2:13). Their problems really began when they started talking and explaining

the rationale for the troubles in which Job found himself. There are moments when presence says more than explanation, and Jeremiah discovers here that he is not the only one lamenting. God laments too. The God to whom Jeremiah complains is not untouched by what has happened to his people.

## Until I Entered the Sanctuary

Psalm 73 is an important companion to Jeremiah 12. Asaph has essentially the same problem. He looks at wicked people prospering and faithful people suffering, and he cannot make the arithmetic work. He even wonders whether keeping his heart pure has been pointless. Then comes the turning point: “Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end” (Psalm 73:17). We are not told that the wicked suddenly stopped prospering or that Asaph’s troubles suddenly disappeared. His perspective changed. He entered the sanctuary and saw the present in light of the end.

Jeremiah needs that same perspective. The prosperity of the wicked will not last forever. God tells him that those who have harmed his inheritance will themselves be uprooted. Jeremiah sees today; God sees the end. We often judge God’s faithfulness from the middle of the story, and that is a dangerous place from which to draw final conclusions. Jeremiah’s question is partly answered not by changing what is happening today but by showing him that today is not the end of the story.

## Compassion After Judgment

But here is what I find particularly remarkable: even judgment is not the final word in Jeremiah 12. Beginning in verse 14, God speaks about the wicked nations surrounding Judah. They have harmed his inheritance, and God says he will uproot them. That sounds like the ending we might expect, but it isn’t. After uprooting them, God says, “I will again have compassion on them.” The people who have harmed Judah are themselves offered compassion.

If those nations will genuinely learn the ways of God’s people and listen to him rather than teaching Israel to swear by Baal, God says they can be “built up in the midst of My people” (12:16). That is extraordinary. The God of Israel judges the nations for what they have done to his people, but he does not therefore declare those nations beyond his mercy. Babylonians and pagans are not beyond God’s reach. The nations are not merely scenery in Israel’s story. God cares what they do, judges their evil and nevertheless extends compassion to them.

As a Jewish believer in Yeshua, I cannot read that without seeing something that becomes wonderfully clear later in Scripture. God’s particular covenant purposes for Israel and his compassion for the nations are not enemies. Jew and Gentile alike need God’s mercy, and God is willing to give it. Judgment and compassion are therefore not opposites in this chapter. God takes evil seriously because he is righteous, but judgment does not somehow cancel his compassionate character.

## When God’s Timing Is Not Ours

So we return to Jeremiah’s original question: Why do the wicked prosper? Jeremiah does not receive a neat three-point explanation that solves the problem of suffering, and neither do we. Sometimes I suffer because of my own choices. Sometimes I suffer because of somebody else’s

choices. Sometimes suffering comes simply because we live in a world that is not yet what God intends it finally to be. Paul talks about that in Romans 8:18–22.

There Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.” Creation groans, and we groan with it, waiting for the completion of God’s work.

God is not too busy. He is not overwhelmed by the number of people on the planet, and he has not divided humanity into important people whose prayers get his attention and insignificant people who are left to chance. He sees and he knows, but his timing is not ours. The restoration for which creation longs is coming. Isaiah anticipates it, Revelation pictures it, and Yeshua promises it. When Yeshua returns and establishes his eternal kingdom, suffering and death will not have the final word. Until then, sometimes faith means saying exactly what Jeremiah says at the beginning of this chapter—“Righteous are You, O LORD”—and then asking the difficult question anyway. That too is faith.

## Takeaways

- 1) Conversation with God involves honesty and at times complaints. Jeremiah takes his questions to God precisely because he believes there is a God who hears him. Biblical faith is robust enough for difficult questions.
- 2) God’s answers to our questions may not be what we expect. At times we see circumstances change and sometimes we don’t.
- 3) Jeremiah discovers that he is not grieving alone. God laments over his people. Judgment grieves him, compassion remains part of his character, and even the nations that come under his judgment are offered the possibility of restoration.
- 4) God’s desire is that we will continue to listen to and trust Him while the story is still unfolding.

## Memory Verse

“Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead my case with You; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You.”

Jeremiah 12:1

## WATCH

Watch the original live teaching of Jeremiah 12: [WATCH Jeremiah 12](#)

## WHAT’S NEXT?

Jeremiah 13 takes us from a prayer to an object lesson. God tells Jeremiah to buy a linen waistband and wear it. The garment becomes a picture of Israel itself. God intended his people to cling to him

and to be for “renown, praise and glory.” The question is not merely, “What are you wearing?” but something more provocative: Who is wearing whom?

Then the beautiful garment is ruined. Israel, created to display the beauty and reputation of God before the nations, has failed in that calling. The chapter moves through a series of vivid images—clothing, drunkenness, darkness, captivity, tears and finally exile. Before Jeremiah can take us to the great promises still ahead, he insists that we experience the sadness of what has been lost.

Next: Jeremiah 13 — Who Are You Wearing?

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