The Search For Decency In The Middle Of Depravity  
Jeremiah 5:1-31

Introduction

In chapters 3-6 Jeremiah deals broadly with the themes of divorce (3:1-25); destruction (4:1-31; 6:1-3; 8-10); and disobedience (5:1-5; 7-13; 20-31). Here in the 5th chapter Jeremiah declares Israel’s terrible sins; sins of dishonesty; among the poor and the ignorant (vv. 1-4); among the leaders (v.5); and the ongoing problem of idolatry and immorality (vv.7-10). No matter what kind of revelation or discipline the people continue to worship idols and visit brothels. Included in the laundry list of sin are treachery (vv.11-13); they lie about the Lord; spiritual bankruptcy, the people have a stubborn and rebellious heart (v.23); the rich know no boundaries when it comes to wickedness (v.28) and the spiritual leaders are corrupt (v.31).

Because of these sins God will visit a terrible punishment; (5:6; 14-19); the people will be set upon by wild animals (v.6); a lion, a wolf, and a leopard will tear them apart. The people of Jerusalem and Judea will be attacked and defeated by hostile enemy armies and God will bring disaster on the people and will make them serve foreigners because they refuse to listen to Him. And so it is when we refuse to listen and act on God’s warnings. We find ourselves slaves to our passions and addictions.

Now Jeremiah invites us to imagine a city where there is not a single godly or righteous person. No one keeps God’s law. No one keeps God’s commandments. Everyone ignores the Bible. Imagine the impact on Government, Education, Social Services, the economy, churches and homes. Imagine a world where all moral restraints are lifted. Imagine the lawlessness, the violence, the immorality, the sexual assaults, the abuses and theft. Absent righteousness, absent moral boundaries, everyone free to do or not do whatever they wanted. Imagine the utter chaos. Without Biblical and moral boundaries a culture becomes utterly corrupt.

You might think--wow--that sounds like our culture or at least parts of our culture! This is the world in which Jeremiah lives. Jeremiah serves as God’s spokesman and issues an indictment against the people in chapter 2; we have read over and over again Jeremiah’s plea for the people to turn from their sin before its too late (chapter 3:6-4:4). Now Jeremiah reveals God’s love and willingness to pardon; he invites Jeremiah to find just one man, one person, who is godly in the city of Jerusalem so He can postpone judgment, or forgive the City its iniquity.

What an amazing thought! God finding one righteous man in order to post-pone judgment for all. What will Jeremiah find? Jeremiah finds gross wickedness (vv.1-6); Jeremiah finds evidence of apostasy, of forsaking the God of their Fathers and ongoing adultery (vv.7-10). Jeremiah finds unfaithfulness, the outright rejection of God’s Word and the persecution of God’s prophets (vv.11-19). Jeremiah finds evidence of spiritual blindness, and deafness, the inability to see or listen to the message God has given Jeremiah. What happens when people stop listening to God and God’s spokesman? In the case of Jeremiah he will begin a series of living drama’s--acting out--Jeremiah will act out God’s messages! This is the first of a series of action adventure sermon’s for the prophet Jeremiah!
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Take Your Breath Away Wickedness (vv.1-6)

Jeremiah 5:1 (NKJV)  Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem;
                     See now and know;
                     And seek in her open places
                     If you can find a man,
                     If there is anyone who executes judgment,
                     Who seeks the truth,
                     And I will pardon her.

The Lord invites Jeremiah to search the streets of Jerusalem for one righteous person. In that search Jeremiah discovers the people were guilty of gross wickedness. An enormous chasm separated the wicked people from the Holy God. The people had slipped far away from the Lord.

In spite of their wickedness God loved them. The people in Jerusalem had sadly not served the Lord for generations. The threat of judgment loomed large on the horizon. But in God’s love and grace and mercy; He was willing to postpone judgment and spare the people if the prophet could find just one person living a righteous life. One person who would be willing to deal honestly and justly with all people. As Jeremiah launched the search he soon comes to some quick conclusions; the people were involved in breath taking wickedness.

Truth (emunah) it means more than verbal accuracy; it means fidelity towards God; integrity before other human beings; and a genuineness with one’s self.

Jeremiah 5:2 (NKJV) 2  Though they say, As the Lord lives,
                     Surely they swear falsely.

The people were guilty of perjury. Lying under oath. People were given to embellishment and exaggeration. Everyday conversation had become a series of lies.

“Sometimes the lies you tell are less frightening than the loneliness you might feel if you stopped telling them” wrote Brock Clark.


Ephesians 4:25 (NKJV) Therefore, putting away lying, Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.
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Jeremiah 5:3 (NKJV)  O Lord, are not Your eyes on the truth?  You have stricken them, But they have not grieved;  You have consumed them, But they have refused to receive correction.  They have made their faces harder than rock;  They have refused to return.

The people refused to respond to discipline. The people have refused to repent after warnings. God looks for truth in men--and he sees beyond the sham and the pretense. In what way has God stricken them? Perhaps the drought mentioned in verse 25. Correction (musar) this is what a parent does for a child, or a leader for a nation or God for His people. The correction can mean physical punishment, stripes, or discipline, or admonition or strong warning; instruction or example.

Jeremiah 5:4 (NKJV)  Therefore I said, Surely these are poor.  They are foolish;  For they do not know the way of the Lord,  The judgment of their God.

Jeremiah could find no suitable candidates among the poor. Jeremiah concluded it was their lack of spiritual training or religious instruction.

Jeremiah 5:5 (NKJV)  I will go to the great men and speak to them,  For they have known the way of the Lord,  The judgment of their God.  But these have altogether broken the yoke And burst the bonds.

Now Jeremiah searches among the nobility and the religious leaders. Jeremiah discovers they know the Bible, the promises and the commandments but look for ways to ignore the laws demands. In spite of a diligent search, Jeremiah could not find a single person who was honest and truthful. Here the yoke is the yoke of the law. The bonds were ropes used to tie the yoke to the neck of the ox.

The Lord decides He will allow the invaders to enter the land.

Jeremiah 5:6 (NKJV)  Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them,  A wolf of the deserts shall destroy them;  A leopard will watch over their cities.  Everyone who goes out from there shall be torn in pieces,  Because their transgressions are many;  Their back-slidings have increased.

Jeremiah likens the people to animals who are tied up, by their master. But when the animal is allowed to roam free, the become easy prey for the wild animals. The animal had gotten free only to be set upon by a lion, or to be met by a wolf, or torn to pieces by a leopard.

What kind of freedom does sin offer? The freedom to die from a sexually transmitted disease? The freedom to be ravaged by drugs or alcohol or sexual addiction?

The Abandonment of God And Attachment To Pleasure (vv.7-10)
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Jeremiah 5:7 (NKJV)  How shall I pardon you for this?       Your children have forsaken Me And sworn by those that are not gods.       When I had fed them to the full,       Then they committed adultery       And assembled themselves by troops in the harlot’s houses.

The Lord asks two questions; why should I forgive you? And later in verse 9 “Why shouldn’t I punish you?”

The Lord supplied all their needs; yet they used God’s gifts to commit sin and serve idols! The kindness and goodness of God was always intended to bring us to repentance. But the people were ungrateful! The Lord exposes the people to be ungrateful, unthankful. The Lord names three transgressions; forsaking God, swearing by false gods, and adultery!

Jeremiah 5:8 (NKJV)  They were like well-fed lusty stallions;       Every one neighed after his neighbor’s wife.

When people think of themselves and others as animals, they begin to act like animals.

The people of Canaan had influenced the people of Judea and Jerusalem to embrace the fertility gods. Sexual expression had religious stamps of approval.

Jeremiah 5:9 (NKJV)  Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord.       And shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?

In the ancient world they believed Baal was the god of the storm, and Baal brought the rain. When God withheld rain the people would turn to their pagan neighbors and their belief systems to bring the much needed rain. Josiah had gotten rid of the temple prostitutes but the people still found ways to satisfy their lusts. Does it shock you or surprise you that in the ancient world the people worshipped sex and believed there was nothing wrong with unbiblical sexual expression?

In the modern American culture we believe the opposite. God won’t punish people for sexual immorality. God made us sexual beings. Some people are oblivious to the fact that immoral sexual behavior has consequences. There are physical, social, psychological consequences. But those consequences pale in comparison to the spiritual implications and consequences.

What does the Bible mean when it uses words like punish and avenge to describe the way God acts towards His people?

Jeremiah 5:10 (NKJV)  Go up on her walls and destroy,       But do not make a complete end.       Take away her branches,       For they are not the Lord’s.

God answers the question by telling Jeremiah to destroy the vine-rows, but not completely.
Promiscuous Rebellious Pugnacious (vv.11-19)

Jeremiah 5:11 (NKJV)  For the house of Israel and the house of Judah  Have dealt very treacherously with Me, says the Lord.

God’s people have been faithless. The people have departed from God. Not God from the people.

Jeremiah 5:12 (NKJV)  They have lied about the Lord, And said, It is not He. Neither will evil come upon us, Nor shall we see sword or famine.

What kind of God allows evil or suffering to fall upon His people? The people argued, “God has promised to defend us, not destroy us.

Jeremiah 5:13-14 (NKJV)  And the prophets become wind, For the word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them.

Jeremiah was almost alone. We know about Zephaniah and his message of judgment and abut the prophetess Huldah whom Josiah consulted concerning the Temple reforms. There seems to be others who were contemporaries of Jeremiah, who spoke faithfully for God and whose warnings were rejected.

14Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts: Because you speak this word, Behold, I will make My words in your mouth fire, And this people wood, And it shall devour them.

The people have rejected the message of God. Therefore God will make them wood, and Jeremiah’s word’s fire. The title “The Lord God of hosts” speaks of God’s sovereign power to accomplish His will and execute His judgment.

Jeremiah 5:15 (NKJV) 15 Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel, says the Lord. It is a mighty nation, It is an ancient nation, A nation whose language you do not know, Nor can you understand what they say.

The House of Israel includes the whole family of faith. The description is general, it could apply to Babylon, or Assyria, or Egypt.

Jeremiah 5:16 (NKJV)  Their quiver is like an open tomb; They are all mighty men.
The quiver is loaded with death.

Jeremiah 5:17 (NKJV) And they shall eat up your harvest and your bread, Which your sons and daughters should eat. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds; They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; They shall destroy your fortified cities, In which you trust, with the sword.

Jeremiah 5:18 (NKJV) Nevertheless in those days, says the Lord, I will not make a complete end of you.

Jeremiah 5:19 (NKJV) And it will be when you say, Why does the Lord our God do all these things to us? then you shall answer them, Just as you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve aliens in a land that is not yours.

Blind And Deaf (vv.20-31)

Jeremiah 5:20 (NKJV) Declare this in the house of Jacob And proclaim it in Judah, saying,

Investigation; none godly; condemnation; the people ungrateful; devastation they were unfaithful; proclamation;

Jeremiah--tell them the truth about their sinful condition.

Jeremiah 5:21 (NKJV) Hear this now, O foolish people, Without understanding, Who have eyes and see not, And who have ears and hear not:

Do you think Jeremiah’s description of the people angered them? Annoyed them? Do you think Jeremiah’s description will shake them out of their indifference, or move them from their apathy, or cause them to wake up?

Jeremiah’s profile of his people: foolish, senseless, blind and deaf.

Jeremiah 5:22 (NKJV) Do you not fear Me? says the Lord.

Will you not tremble at My presence,
Who have placed the sand as the bound of the sea,
By a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass beyond it?
And though its waves toss to and fro,
Yet they cannot prevail;  
Though they roar, yet they cannot pass over it.

The mighty oceans obey God. But they people of God will not obey God. The sand seems an unlikely barricade against something as awesome as the ocean.

*Jeremiah 5:23 (NKJV)*  
But this people has a defiant and rebellious heart; They have revolted and departed.

The people were able to do what the seas could not do. Resist God.

*Jeremiah 5:24 (NKJV)*  
They do not say in their heart, Let us now fear the Lord our God, Who gives rain, both the former and the latter, in its season. He reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.

We see the word “heart” three times in four verses. Rain is a symbol of good and blessing. This is the autumn rain and the spring rain; necessary for the growth of crops. The Harvest season was late April and May usually dry; rain at the season would ruin the ripe grain. God shows His care by sending the rain at the right time, and withholding the rain at the right time.

*Jeremiah 5:25 (NKJV)*  
Your iniquities have turned these things away,  
And your sins have withheld good from you.

*Jeremiah 5:26 (NKJV)*  
For among My people are found wicked men; They lie in wait as one who sets snares; They set a trap; They catch men.

The expression “My people” is a form of personal tenderness. The people were supposed to encourage one another not ensnare one another. The sense seems to be there are rich people who have acquired their riches by deceit and craftiness.

*Jeremiah 5:27 (NKJV)*  
As a cage is full of birds, So their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich.

The dishonest, the con-man, can make lots of money on the naivete and gullibility of God’s people.

Multi-level can easily be of the devil.
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Jeremiah 5:28 (NKJV) They have grown fat, they are sleek; Yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; They do not plead the cause, The cause of the fatherless; Yet they prosper, And the right of the needy they do not defend.

The rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Fat here isn’t overweight--but rather an expression of people who have grown large on others ill-gotten gains. The term “sleek” means shiny but in the way that grease makes hair shine, greasy is a good word--“Their greasy faces glisten”. And yet they prosper. How do you explain people who rob, cheat, steal, and manage to take a widow’s social security and still prosper? Israel is called to seek the welfare of the needy and express social justice.

Jeremiah 5:29 (NKJV) Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord. Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?

Jeremiah 5:30 (NKJV) An astonishing and horrible thing Has been committed in the land:

What the people think is “normal” is astonishing and horrible in the sight of God.

Jeremiah 5:31 (NKJV) The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?

The courts were corrupt, the prophets lied, the priests went along with it; and the people approved what was being done! Rule by their own power “probably instruct according to their own authority” (Moffatt).

Criminals sometimes delude themselves into thinking they will get away their crimes. And sometimes it appears that they do get away with crimes. Sinners sometimes delude themselves into thinking they will get away their sin.

Conclusion

What does Jeremiah’s investigation and search yield? The people were ungodly (vv.1-6). Investigation led to condemnation--the people were ungrateful (vv.7-9). Investigation, condemnation led to devastation; the people were unfaithful (vv.10-19). Jeremiah’s message, Jeremiah’s proclamation left the people unmoved (vv.20-31).

The false prophets claiming to speak for God; but in reality only projecting the people’s wishes are guilty. Is it Jeremiah or God who says My people love to have it so?