



METAPHORS OF JUDGMENT

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 Jeremiah 4:5-6:30
 Sixth Message
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Into Thin Air, the book by John Krakauer about an ill-fated expedition to Mt. Everest in 1996, is one of the most fascinating and riveting stories of recent years. The thing that is so tragic about the account is that seasoned climbers ignored all the warnings and danger signs: there were too many people on the expedition; the time at which they had to turn around, no matter what their position on the mountain, was ignored; people who were sick still attempted the climb; there was not enough oxygen; empty oxygen tanks were mistaken for full tanks, etc. When a sudden storm struck, the entire expedition was trapped on Mt. Everest. They had ignored all the warning signs.

In his day the prophet Jeremiah was called by God to speak to a nation that was similarly ignoring numerous warnings and danger signs. Judah was a bride gone astray, and God a tormented husband seeking to win back his spouse. But God's warnings kept falling on deaf ears. Judah insisted on rushing into relationships that were unsafe, unwise and unprofitable. She was like a brazen woman who felt no shame.

Judah imagined that God would not be angry forever and that he would save her in the end. That philosophy of life does not work on Mt. Everest and it doesn't work with God. When we fail to heed warnings and submit to forces larger than ourselves, we can be certain of dire consequences and judgment. The prophet's words are harsh, almost cruel. They make us uncomfortable, but they are designed to do so. They proclaim that God will not allow his people to stray endlessly. God is an anguished father and a jilted lover, but we cannot ignore the fact that he is also a righteous judge.

Our study this morning brings us to chapters 4-6 of Jeremiah. This long poetic section makes up one unit of study. While I am not going to attempt to cover all of these verses, I want to get us far enough into the text so that we can follow it with a degree of insight and understanding. I will highlight its major themes, centering on the concept of judgment. Our study will complement the pathos-filled summons to repent that we looked at two weeks ago.

The text opens with the announcement of a terrible judgment coming on Judah. Three times God draws attention to an invader from the north. Jeremiah 4:5-6:

**Declare in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say,
 "Blow the trumpet in the land;
 Cry aloud and say,
 'Assemble yourselves, and let us go
 Into the fortified cities.'
 "Lift up a standard toward Zion!
 Seek refuge, do not stand still,
 For I am bringing evil from the north,
 And great destruction. (Jer 4:5-6 NASB)**

This enemy from the north is referred to again in 5:15:

**"Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar,
 O house of Israel," declares the LORD.
 "It is an enduring nation,
 It is an ancient nation,
 A nation whose language you do not know,
 Nor can you understand what they say.
 "Their quiver is like an open grave,
 All of them are mighty men.
 "And they will devour your harvest and your food;
 They will devour your sons and your daughters;
 They will devour your flocks and your herds;
 They will devour your vines and your fig trees;
 They will demolish with the sword your fortified
 cities in which you trust. (Jer 5:15-17)**

There is a further reference to Israel's enemy in 6:22-23:

**Thus says the LORD,
 "Behold, a people is coming from the north land,
 And a great nation will be aroused from the remote
 parts of the earth.
 "They seize bow and spear;
 They are cruel and have no mercy;
 Their voice roars like the sea,
 And they ride on horses,
 Arrayed as a man for the battle
 Against you, O daughter of Zion!" (Jer 6:22-23)**

God says he will bring a nation from the north, Babylon, an ancient, powerful and mighty people, to destroy Judah and bring his judgment, his rod of discipline, upon his people. Indeed, shortly after this prophecy Babylon conquered Palestine and took the people of Judah into exile.

Why did Judah warrant such terrible judgment and destruction of their homes and cities? We have already seen that the nation played the harlot and pursued the gods of the Canaanites. Let us look at some of the things that God says about Judah. First, the nation had no understanding of God. Chapter 4:22; 5:21-22:

**"For My people are foolish,
 They know Me not;
 They are stupid children,
 And they have no understanding.
 They are shrewd to do evil,
 But to do good they do not know." (Jer 4:22)**

God's people had become foolish, not thick-headed but wrong-headed. They had become like the idols they served: they had ears but they didn't hear; they had eyes but they didn't see (Psa 115:5). When it came to evil they were clever, but when it came to knowing God and doing good, they lacked all understanding.

Second, their condition was even worse than that of Sodom:

**“Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
And look now, and take note.
And seek in her open squares,
If you can find a man,
If there is one who does justice, who seeks truth,
Then I will pardon her. (Jer 5:1)**

In Genesis 18, Abraham pleaded with God to spare Sodom. The patriarch had to find ten righteous people in order for Sodom to be saved, but, so degenerate had Jerusalem become in Jeremiah’s day, Yahweh would settle for just one who did justice.

Third, God describes his adulterous people as “lusty horses”:

**“Why should I pardon you?
Your sons have forsaken Me
And sworn by those who are not gods.
When I had fed them to the full,
They committed adultery
And trooped to the harlot’s house.
“They were well-fed lusty horses,
Each one neighing after his neighbor’s wife. (Jer 5:7-8)**

In the Old Testament, horses are associated with the powerful who assert their might and seize the initiative. This is a metaphor for shameless self-assertion. Judah is full of herself. God had given them everything, still they were restless in their pursuit of illicit passions. They were never satisfied. When John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money was enough, he is said to have replied, “Just one dollar more.”

And fourth, their leadership was self-serving. Jer 4:9; 5:30-31; 6:13-14:

**“For from the least of them even to the greatest of them,
Everyone is greedy for gain,
And from the prophet even to the priest
Everyone deals falsely.
“And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially,
Saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ But there is no peace. (Jer 6:13-14)**

Kings, princes, prophets and priests – all of them were out for their own gain, proclaiming peace where none existed. They would have done well as political spokesmen, spin doctors, in a modern presidential campaign. Rather than proclaiming peace, however, they should have been mourning for the sins of the nation.

God doesn’t pull any punches. He calls Judah’s sin for what it is. They had no understanding of God. They were an adulterous people with hard and stubborn hearts, unwilling to listen and be corrected. They were self-serving, ignoring the needs of the poor. Their leadership was corrupt. They offered sacrifices to God but offered nothing of their hearts. No matter their spiritual heritage, their place in God’s history and their access to truth, they were clearly guilty and deserving of God’s judgment.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: Do we too deserve God’s judgment? When we read of the sins of Judah, do we recognize ourselves to be co-conspirators? Or have we fabricated a fantasy tale of peace that insulates us from the reality that God hates sin and judges it? Do we see the world as wicked and evil, deserving of judgment,

but fail to recognize that we too are guilty? Jeremiah’s word penetrates our hearts. Before the good news can be regarded as that, it is first bad news: we stand hopeless and helpless before the throne of a righteous God, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

Now if that were not enough to get Judah’s attention, God describes the coming judgment. Here in the heart of the text we come face to face with the power of the poem. God makes use of a number of metaphors to paint a sobering picture so that they might stop and heed the warnings. It is one thing to announce judgment, but quite another to get a glimpse of the fury that is unleashed at God’s command. The first metaphor is that of wild and savage animals. Chapter 4:7; 5:6:

**“A lion has gone up from his thicket,
And a destroyer of nations has set out;
He has gone out from his place
To make your land a waste.
Your cities will be ruins
Without inhabitant. (Jer 4:7)**

**“Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them,
A wolf of the deserts shall destroy them,
A leopard is watching their cities.
Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces,
Because their transgressions are many,
Their apostasies are numerous. (Jer. 5:6)**

Babylon is like a lion that will descend on Judah and tear it to pieces; a leopard that crouches in wait, ready to spring on any that try to escape. Thus God describes his judgment coming upon Judah.

The second metaphor is that of fierce winds and natural disasters:

In that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, “A scorching wind from the bare heights in the wilderness in the direction of the daughter of My people—not to winnow, and not to cleanse, a wind too strong for this—will come at My command; now I will also pronounce judgments against them. (Jer 4:11-12)

**“Behold, he goes up like clouds,
And his chariots like the whirlwind;
His horses are swifter than eagles.
Woe to us, for we are ruined!” (Jer 4:13)**

Judgment is like a scorching wind that sweeps across the desert. This is a new but at the same time ancient definition of “desert storm.” This wind is not the gentle breeze that aids the winnower at harvest time. It is a blast, a cyclone that strikes down everything in its path. The forming clouds tell of the impending darkness and devastation.

Growing up in the Midwest, this was part of my experience. I recall the large thunderheads forming in the sky, the eerie darkness that fell suddenly, and then the trip to the basement to wait out the tornado watch. God’s judgment is like the fury of the storm.

And now perhaps the most powerful description of God’s judgment: the metaphor of a reversed creation:

**I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless 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 heavens had fled.
I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a wilderness,
And all its cities were pulled down
Before the Lord, before His fierce anger. (Jer 4:23-26)**

The connection between these verses and Genesis 1 is unavoidable. Four times in the text the poet looks and sees the conditions of the universe prior to creation. The earth is formless and void; there is no light in the heavens; there is neither man nor bird. All that exists is barrenness and wilderness, the murky conditions of the beginning. The destruction of Jerusalem is likened to the creation coming undone and returning to a state of chaos. That which was proclaimed good by God is now evil. All of creation will pay the price for Judah's sin.

This description characterizes the flood in the days of Noah and the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. This prophecy was not totally fulfilled then, however. These words also speak of a final judgment, the day of the Lord, when the entire creation will indeed be done away with. Listen to these words of Peter:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (2 Pet 3:10)

The next metaphor is the image of a consuming fire:

**Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of hosts,
"Because you have spoken this word,
Behold, I am making My words in your mouth fire
And this people wood, and it will consume them."
(Jer. 5:14)**

God's judgment is likened to the horror of raging fire.

And finally, the image of a grape gatherer, a picture that has come to stand for judgment:

**Thus says the LORD of hosts,
"They will thoroughly glean as the vine the remnant of Israel;
Pass your hand again like a grape gatherer
Over the branches." (Jer. 6:9)**

God has had enough. Judah has ignored all of his warnings. Judgment is certain; it has already been set in motion and cannot be avoided. Death is coming soon. God's judgment is like a lion, a tornado, and a consuming fire. It is likened to the gleaning of grapes off the vine, to the created order ending and returning to complete chaos.

Walter Brueggeman comments that the poem is an "attempt to engage this numbed, unaware community in an imaginative embrace of what is happening. The world is becoming unglued. The poet has the awesome burden of helping his people sense that their presumed world is in jeopardy, because God's holy patience is fully ended. When that patience is exhausted, creation is not permitted to continue its disobedient course. The verdict of initial creation was, 'It is very good' (Gen. 1.31). Here the verdict is 'It is very evil.' Such evil finally must be answered for."¹

Judgment is a very unpleasant thought. Like death and taxes, it is a subject we want to avoid at all costs. We want to pretend that the world will get better and will continue

on forever. But no. Our life will end, and this creation, this heaven and earth, will pass away. The God who judged Judah promises a final judgment upon all creation.

What else should we expect? Would we want a God who doesn't judge? Most people expect a final accounting, a balancing of the books. That makes sense. It seems right. We wouldn't want a God who is wishy-washy, a God who doesn't care how we behaved. When we see injustice and evil going unpunished, we are appalled. We cry out and demand that it be dealt with, that the moral order make things right. We think that people who violate ethics, law, and the rights of others should be called to account. Our desire for justice reflects our desire for a God of justice because we are made in his image. We don't like the idea of judgment, but we want it nonetheless.

This is the tension we live in. We hate the idea of personal judgment, but we think it is an excellent thing for the rest of the world. Here the prophet gets our attention. Through the power of metaphor he forces us to realize, recognize and acknowledge that we deserve the same judgment that we demand for others. We can't exclude ourselves. It is all or nothing. If judgment doesn't apply to us, then it should not apply to the worst offender. So we have to acknowledge that we deserve death.

God exists with the same tension: He doesn't like judgment either. We see this reflected Jeremiah's emotional words:

**My soul, my soul! I am in anguish! Oh, my heart!
My heart is pounding in me;
I cannot be silent,
Because you have heard, O my soul,
The sound of the trumpet,
The alarm of war. (Jer 4:19)**

Jeremiah is intensely troubled. He is anxious, frightened to the point of having heart palpitations. He is writhing in pain, convulsed by what will happen to Jerusalem. Rembrandt's great painting of Jeremiah depicts the prophet sitting in agony, his head leaning on his hand, while in the background Jerusalem is engulfed in flames.

Jeremiah's agony reflects God's agony. God lives with great heartache and turmoil. He doesn't like the idea of judgment, but he is holy and committed to making a holy people. He is anxious that his people obey him, and he can't overlook their sin.

But just when all seems lost there is a hint of hope expressed in the text. Three different times God says that he will not execute a complete destruction on the land.

**For thus says the LORD,
"The whole land shall be a desolation,
Yet I will not execute a complete destruction. (Jer 4:27)**

**"Go up through her vine rows and destroy,
But do not execute a complete destruction;
Strip away her branches,
For they are not the LORD's. (Jer 5:10)**

**"Yet even in those days," declares the LORD,
"I will not make you a complete destruction. (Jer 5:18)**

A remnant will remain; God will have his holy nation. God draws back, because he still yearns for his people. Judah is still precious in his eyes. But any hope for salvation rests in God alone, not in Jerusalem.

At the point of deepest darkness, despair and hopelessness, God does the unexpected. Grace overcomes and God saves. Jerusalem will go up in flames, but all is not lost. God will save his people.

This is what we need to remember. The world is passing away. There is coming a day of the Lord, a day that will return this present creation to the state of being formless and void. We deserve the judgment that is coming, the very thing that caused Jeremiah to lament and wail. But into this darkness God's grace explodes in the person of Jesus Christ to give us life. Now hope dawns for those who had no hope. And it is not a false hope, a pretend hope, a fantasy that ignores the judgment we deserve. It is the hope that deals with the reality of our deep depravity. This is what makes God's grace so remarkable. When we behold the face of the lion about to tear us apart, the fire ready to consume us, the whirlwind gathering to blow us off the face of the earth, the horror of God's judgment, then we can begin to see the beauty, sweetness and glory of God's grace that sent his Son to take our place. God will have his people. It will not be a complete destruction. He has chosen you and me to be in Jesus.

How should we respond to these metaphors of judgment? First, we need to recognize that, like Judah, our hearts can turn away from God. We are like lusty horses. We are foolish people. We need to see where we will end up without the Lord. We need to confess our sin continually, to return to the God who promises to heal our unfaithfulness.

Second, we need to accept God's discipline. God's judgment works in our lives to purify us and cleanse us. It is really for our good. This is what the psalmist teaches:

**My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD
Or loathe His reproof,
For whom the Lord loves He reproveth,
Even as a father, the son in whom he delights.** (Prov 3:11-12)

And from the New Testament:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be

the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Pet 4:17)

And third, we need to set our sights on the new heavens and the new earth, living today as if they were already in existence.

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet 3:11-13)

Jeremiah looked to the end of creation; Peter looks ahead to the beginning of a new heavens and new earth.

Last week, I traveled back to Nebraska to attend the funeral of my 86 year-old aunt, a wonderful woman of God, a woman of character and integrity. A year ago this weekend, my brother was killed in an automobile accident. One death made sense, the other made no sense at all. We can't ignore the reality that this life is ending. Life is short. Life is passing away. We have a hard time letting go of it, but the Bible is clear: we shouldn't plan on settling down here for too long. That is why we should live each day looking forward to and hastening the day of the Lord. For the Christian, that will be a glorious day, not a day to be feared. Then, the New Jerusalem will descend from the heavens and we will be caught up with our Lord Jesus.

Our Christian hope is that we can look past the lion, past the scorching wind that sweeps across the desert, past the formless and the void to see the dawning of a glorious new day when we will be delivered out of judgment into life.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 61.

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