

IS THERE JUSTICE?

One of the solutions we hear about to solve our economic problems is to tax the rich more heavily. It sounds easy, but the problem is that if you raise their taxes, they put their money in tax shelters and you actually raise less tax revenue than if you taxed at a lower rate. It seems so unfair that if you can pay for the lawyers, then you can get out of paying the heavy taxes. So who ends up paying for it? So the rich get richer and the poor poorer.

We see how companies go bankrupt. People lose their jobs, but the executives who have been making huge salaries have benefits saved up for them. So who has to pay for it? It seems like the workers who lost their jobs.

Our country made big sacrifices to stop the spread of communism. But when the Iron Curtain broke down we found that new “bad guys” have taken over in place of the old communist regimes. Or as in Russia the leaders there are often leftovers from the Soviet Union who changed their outward allegiance.

As the vaccine gets distributed we hear of rich or privileged people who can “bump” into the line of waiting for their shots, just as the privileged got better care if they got Covid-19.

We see in all these examples that “It is not fair!” We echo the words of Jeremiah who says:

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

Jeremiah sounds a lot like the Psalmist Asaph who said in Psalm 73:

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

In 11:2 Jeremiah says about those who were plotting against him, “Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut Jeremiah off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.” Here these evil people are plotting to kill Jeremiah because he spoke God’s Word. How could God let that happen? It was not fair!

Jeremiah points the blame to God—“You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit.” He is saying, “You allow them to exist in the first place.” Jeremiah wants this result from God:

Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. 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."

Jeremiah gets God’s answer much later. At the end of his book we read the story of the fall of Jerusalem which is identical to what we read at the end of the book of 2 Kings:

And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it. And they built siege works all around it. So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled and went out from the city by night by the way of a gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, while the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. And all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, and he passed sentence on him. The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and also slaughtered all the officials of Judah at Riblah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in chains, and the king of Babylon took him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death.

In the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month - that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon - Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, who served the king of Babylon, entered Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down all the walls around Jerusalem. And Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive some of the poorest of the people and the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the artisans. But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

The answer to all the unfairness that we experience is that Jesus promises that He will come again to destroy evil. There will be no escape, no finagling out of it. In the book of Revelation we hear this scene described:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their^[g] wrath has come, and who can withstand it?"

But in the meantime we have to live in a world of "no fair." But that is because God wants to give us a future. If he destroyed evil now, we would be destroyed. Instead He waits so that we and others can be included in the saving work of Jesus. If we really want to know what is unfair, it is that Jesus, the one who is truly innocent and without evil, died on the cross in our place.

Something strange takes place in the middle of all that is going wrong for Jeremiah. We hear this story from chapter 32:

And Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle will come to you, saying, "Buy my field which is in Anathoth, for the right of redemption is yours to buy it." "'Then Hanamel my uncle's son came to me in the court of the prison according to the word of the LORD, and said to me, 'Please buy my field that is in Anathoth, which is in the country of Benjamin; for the right of inheritance is yours, and the redemption yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

"So I bought the field from Hanamel, the son of my uncle who was in Anathoth, and weighed out to him the money - seventeen shekels of silver. And I signed the deed and sealed it, took witnesses, and weighed the money on the scales. So I took the purchase deed, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open; and I gave the purchase deed to Baruch the son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, in the presence of Hanamel my uncle's son, and in the presence of the witnesses who signed the purchase deed, before all the Jews who sat in the court of the prison.

There are places in the country where real estate is outrageous. It is no wonder in those areas that there is a lot of homelessness. But it is not that way in rural communities like in Iowa. If the town is not near a major area of business and growth, those towns are dying. People with decent houses in those towns have a difficult time getting a good offer for the houses they want to sell. And unless you know of future growth in the area around that town, why would you want to buy a house in one of those shrinking towns? You hope that your house will appreciate to get a decent return for your investment. But to buy a house when you know it will be going down in value?

That is what is like for Jeremiah to buy that field. The land is about to be ravaged by the Babylonians. When you move a large army into an area, the great problem is always feeding them. Real soldiers will tell you that, “Amateurs talk about tactics (how you move troops around), while professionals talk about logistics (keeping them supplied).” In the ancient world without trucks one major way of keeping the army fed is called “living off the land.” The soldiers “liberate” all the food available in the area. It means that fields are cleared of grain for food. And since the fighting can last a long time as a city like Jerusalem would be put under siege. The last thing you want to do is invest in a field in that ravaged area.

But Jeremiah does it. Why? Because he is placing his future with God. The prevailing wisdom of his time is to flee the land of Judah and go someplace like Egypt to start a new future. You trust in your ability to make do and survive. But despite all the signs around him that said otherwise, Jeremiah places his future, his trust in God.

Back earlier in the Old Testament Joseph was preparing to die in Egypt. He had risen from a slave to the number two man in Egypt, the mightiest power in his day. Yet, he requested that he be buried in the land of Canaan (modern day Israel), the land promised to his great grandfather Abraham. It would seem to be an unwise choice since Egypt was far more prosperous than Canaan and he had great power in Egypt, but not in Canaan. In fact it would be 400 years later when his bones would be carried out of Egypt during the Exodus to the Promised Land in Canaan. But that is where his future lay with God, even if that was hard to see 400 years earlier.

Jeremiah’s plot will be ravaged by the Babylonian invasion. But years later God will let the Persians conquer Babylon and allow the people to return from captivity. The land will be restored. God’s promises will hold.

That is the future we have. From where we are things can look so unfair, that God is on vacation. But we are looking from our perspective. I think of two of the greatest generals of all time—Alexander the Great and Napoleon. Their biggest victories were Arbela and Austerlitz respectively. In each case these generals did things that looked foolish to their subordinates. They did not see how their leaders had anticipated the enemy and did something seemingly foolish to turn apparent defeat into victory. In wrestling you call it a reversal. The greatest “reversal” of all time is what we will hear later tonight in the story of the death of Jesus. God allowed the greatest injustice, but turned it into the greatest defeat of evil. No, it wasn’t fair, and God isn’t fair. But God has in store always what is best for us.