

Competing with Horses

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[0 : 00] Okay, with me to Jeremiah chapter 12. Jeremiah 12, let's read again the first verse.

We're on page 640 of our Bibles. For Jeremiah, this is the second of what we call his complaints, his petitions before God, and he begins the second complaint with these words, Why 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? Why righteous are you, O Lord?

You know, the occasions when the Christian, when the believer asks the Lord, Why? These times when we come before God, ask him, Why?

These times aren't uncommon. In fact, you know, the questions that you ask God in times of perplexity, there are many occasions, many, we might say many occasions for asking these questions.

[1 : 16] such as, why does God permit suffering in the world? Why does he permit even his own people to suffer in ways that are in many ways extreme?

Why do the wicked flourish? Why does God appear so distant from me when I need him the most? And it's these kind of questions that, well, they're not new in the experience of the believer.

You know, when your faith in the one true God and our sovereign God, when that faith is tested and you ask why, it's not new. These are not just new questions. You go to Scripture and you see these questions being asked, directed by the Lord's people to the Lord.

Psalms 10, for example, Why, O Lord, do you stand afar? Why do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Or Job, and we'll come back to Job and we'll see, particularly here, many times when he asked, or certainly there were times when he asked God, Why?

But Job, why did the wicked live on? Growing old and increasing in power. Or in what's been described as the bleakest psalm in the whole psalm book, Psalm 88, Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

[2 : 39] Think of Jesus on the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Maybe you're asking questions like the ones that we've been hearing already.

Questions maybe about God in relation to your own life. Maybe questions in relation to the church, or maybe questions even in relation to the world.

And you're asking, Lord, where are you? Why? Why are you so far from helping me, or helping the church, or helping the world? The why of perplexity.

But yes, but remember, as we see here in Jeremiah 12, it's not the why of unbelief. It's the why of the believer who still trusts in the one true God, who still trusts in the sovereign God of all, God of all power, all knowledge, all truth.

Yes, we call upon the God whom we know is there. And yet, we call upon the God who at times, in His own perfect choosing, in His own perfect wisdom, will hide His faith from you.

[3 : 54] Why? To strengthen your faith. To develop your faith. To enable you, to draw you to trust in Him the more. To have that trust, that faith deepened in Him.

And to strengthen your confidence in Him. Because, we come to Him by faith. And we know that He alone, to paraphrase Kuyper's, we know that He's the one who alone, can fully interpret, all the frowning providences, that He permits you to endure.

Think of all the frowning providences, that are backed, by the smiling face of God. Yes, there are times of bewilderment.

Every Christian goes through these times, at one time or another. And yet, you have, and still have, retained that knowledge. Even the faintest of knowledge, that God is with you.

He's sovereign. He's in control. As we've been singing, that He'll never let the righteous fall. The ones who trust in Him, for His grace, you will never fully fall, even in these times of asking why.

[5 : 07] And, you know, this example that we see here in Jeremiah, it's a very striking example, of the believer, who comes before God, in bewilderment. This is the prophet Jeremiah, we've read here in chapter 12.

This is the prophet, we might say, not for the first time, has He brought a complaint before God? Those of us who were here last Lord's Day evening, remember the previous chapter, He was, He was aware of that plot against Him, from His own townspeople in Annathau.

It's a plot that He at first had known nothing about, until it had been revealed to Him. God had revealed that plot to Him. We can reckon by it through an intermediary. And, remember that plot had been devised against Jeremiah, because the people had heard Jeremiah proclaim the truth of God's word against them.

And, Jeremiah called upon God, that God have vengeance upon these people. But remember, that vengeance that Jeremiah was crying out for, wasn't for his own sake.

It wasn't a cry for personal vengeance. But it was for the Lord's sake. Because it was the word of the Lord that was being maligned, and it was God Himself who's been dishonoured.

[6 : 25] Dishonoured. And remember, God answers that vengeance is His. God will act in judgment, and He will act against all who've wronged Him.

Those who sought to silence the voice of His prophet. But, but no longer, well, no longer, but no sooner do we see one complaint, as it were, dealt with, than immediately we see another one.

Jeremiah comes before God with this second. of his complaints. We might say the complaint of the confused. And you can see the confusion in Jeremiah's mind.

Because, on the one hand, yes, the first line of this chapter tells us, he does recognise that God truly is righteous. He does recognise that He's calling upon the God of justice.

He knows that all of God's ways are right. He knows that God's not an arbitrary God. You know, God doesn't do anything that contradicts who God is.

[7 : 31] God doesn't contradict His goodness or His righteousness, His holiness. And Jeremiah knows that, and therefore, Jeremiah, he's got a problem.

Someone said he, he can't reconcile his personal experience with these truths about God. He knows whom He's addressing. He knows that God is the Lord.

He knows that He's calling upon the sovereign God of His people. He knows that God's faithful. He knows that, you know, He knows that He's calling upon the covenant God of Israel.

the God whose faithfulness is grounded, is rooted in His steadfast love for those whom He's blessed in that covenant relationship. But Jeremiah's perplexed.

And he can't work things out, certainly not by his own reasoning. He can't resolve the problem that he faces. See, there's confusion.

[8 : 32] If God's a God of righteous justice, then as Jeremiah says, the second part of verse 1, why does the wicked prosper? Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive, prosper?

I mean, you know, you know what it's like. You know, you recognize that God is the one true God. You know that His standard is absolute holiness. But there are situations in your life and the life of others, these times that trouble you.

And you want answers and very often want immediate answers. maybe it's something that relates to you personally, individually. Maybe that's a particular sore providence in your life that's something that's afflicting you continuously.

And you ask, why, why, Lord, is this happening? Why am I enduring this painful providence? Why is God allowing this pain to persist? And you might be tempted, tempted to say, it seems so unjust.

Or maybe, as in Jeremiah's case here, the apparent, the apparent injustice of unrighteous people flourishing, making it in the world and those who are so, so iniquitous.

[9 : 51] When the world seems, you know, more and more abandoning God's word and God's law and you see it all around and you're perplexed. You ask, how can a righteous God, how can he allow this to happen?

How can a God of justice permit unrighteous leaders, unrighteous rulers, pass particular laws that are so contrary to God's law? And when we see the name of Jesus trampled in the mud, even by those who profess the name of Jesus, and we can be confused and we can ask why.

Well, there's no different for Jeremiah. There's his confusion. And you see how he is confused. I mean, he asked twice there in verse 1. The very fact that he's asking this double question, if you like, emphasizes how confused he actually is.

The wicked. The wicked. Why is that life prospering when, if he says, it ought to be restrained? He's confused. You see the confusion then.

On the one hand, Jeremiah feels that, you know, God's righteousness should ensure that wickedness doesn't prosper. And that those who have no faith, have no faith in God, that he says, they shouldn't live without a care in the world.

[11 : 18] And this really troubles Jeremiah. And it troubles him so strongly that, you know, he feels justified in calling upon God and calling upon the righteous God to, well, to explain to him this anomaly, this apparent anomaly.

And, you know, the very way that, the way that Jeremiah forms his language, you can see how, you know, how confused he is. I mean, it's very strong, very stark language.

He's actually accusing God. He's accusing God of actually planting these wicked people into the world and God allowing them to prosper. And you see the words that Jeremiah uses to, you know, almost accuse God of allowing this to happen.

Look at the words like plant or take root and grow and produce fruit. I mean, these are metaphors, but yeah, they're metaphors of success, of prosperity.

You might say undeserved well-being. Jeremiah can't fathom this. Especially when, you know, it says at the end of verse 2, you're near in their mouth, but far from their heart.

[12 : 25] Another way of putting it is you're always in their lips, but far from their hearts. In other words, Jeremiah is saying, look at these religious hypocrites. They're pretending to be holy.

They're pretending holiness. But in actual fact, they're so far from you, Lord. The false believer that has all the head knowledge in the world of the faith.

Yes, he says all the right things, all the right words, and yet his heart is so far from following the one true God. That lies, that falsehood, that hypocrisy that Jeremiah is saying, well, shouldn't that be immediately punished?

Why does God allow this state of affairs to happen? And then, you know, we're still focusing on his confusion. You see the first part of verse 3, and Jeremiah is contrasting his own situation with the unrighteous of verse 2.

See what he says, but you, Lord, know me. You know, he said, Lord, I have a covenant relationship with you. God has established that relationship with Jeremiah.

[13 : 34] Even before Jeremiah was born, as we were told in chapter 1, God consecrated Jeremiah as a prophet. And so, Jeremiah knows that he's got this living, saving relationship with God, and yet he's the one who's suffering.

He knows that he's God's child. He's separated for God, he's separated by God to serve there in Judah, to serve God in Judah, but yet he says, well, I'm the one who's suffering, I'm the one who's enduring the pain of hatred and I'm wrestling with this, a part of this prevailing wickedness in the object of hate, he's been the victim and it seems others have just, well, as we said, not got a care in the world.

Maybe you felt like that, not like Jeremiah. Have you ever brought that kind of complaint before God? You know, when you see those who have no love for God's word or no love for the cause of Christ prospering and what do we see?

We see our parliaments, whether our national parliament, whether our parliament at Westminster or Holyrood passing laws that flout God's law and we ask why?

We hear voices persistently in the media, whether it's regarding church, whether it's regarding believers, it's there all the time, just log on to BBC News and you see the victimization, you would almost say, of Christians and yet this is what, you say, why Lord, why has this been allowed to develop and flourish?

[15 : 08] Yesterday morning in the car I was listening to a sports program and one of the presenters we were talking about funerals and one of the presenters, I mean, bear in mind there's a sports program on radio, he, I'm not out of the blue, but he suddenly started to praise humanist funerals.

You know, he said, oh, they're so warm, they don't, you know, deal with all the grief in the morning that these other funerals deal with and so he was saying, well, when I die, I want this humanist funeral but it was this sort of, this sort of, just pushing forward a particular point of view detracting the Christian perspective and promoting that which, you know, so contrary to God's word and being allowed to happen and you ask why?

Why does God permit this kind of thing to happen? And, you know, the perplexity of the saint, of the Christian, the believer when he seeks to reconcile Scripture, what Scripture says that's around him, at least we do turn to Scripture and we're told, we're given that perspective, we're given God's perspective.

That's why we're singing in some of these psalms to show the perspective of God because, for example, one of the psalms, we didn't sing but Psalm 1, the Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish.

That gives you that stability, that strength even in your perplexity. The Lord's watching over you who know him. that we're told that the way of the wicked will perish, will perish.

[16 : 45] But, you know, then you think, well, why don't we see this happening immediately? But we don't. We don't see immediate fulfillment of the truth even of these words in Psalm 1.

You love the Lord, you profess His name, and you can still be tempted to ask, why isn't God acting immediately? Why do they, the unrighteous, or why does unrighteousness seem to triumph all the time?

I mean, these are just human perspectives. But we are assured by God's word that His way is right, that wicked will perish. It's God's way, God's timing, God's purposes, God's overall strategy.

God is sovereign. We'll come back to that later. But, you see, in Jeremiah's case, his complaint certainly was pertinent. I mean, the people of Judah, Jerusalem, they weren't turning back to God.

The people at this time were flouting God's laws, and yet, they appeared prosperous. They appeared just as unconcerned with their own spiritual well-being and their nation's well-being under God.

[17 : 55] And at the same time, as Jeremiah is seeing this apparent flourishing of those who were calling against God, Jeremiah sees the pain of his own rejection, being rejected and suffering and wondering why.

And again, we bring this so often to ourselves, you know, you who know God as Lord, that God sees you and God will test you. And yes, there will be hardships.

And yes, it will appear that that is in such a contrast to others. Don't wallow in self-pity. No. No. We're going to sing Psalm 73 at the end of the service.

And the psalmist had the same issue. for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

They're not in trouble as others are. They're not stricken like the rest of mankind. Think about Job, how he brought forth this perspective.

[19 : 02] We mentioned earlier, Job, in chapter one, why do the wicked live, reach old age and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence. Their descendants before their eyes.

Their houses are safe from fear. And no rod of God is upon them. In a few verses later he says these words, they spend their days in prosperity and in peace they go down to Sheol.

They say to God, depart from us. We don't desire the knowledge of your ways. What is the Almighty that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?

Have you ever felt like Job? You're following Jesus, you're serving him, you're praying fervently and you're tempted. The temptation is there and the tempter tempts you to see that all this is just futile.

You're the one to take the knocks in life and maybe your non-Christian friend, non-Christian neighbor just seems to get along so well. You're tempted to think that it's so unfair.

[20 : 05] But is it? Is God unjust in your life, my life, the life of his people? Are you the object of God's injustice? Was Jeremiah going to get an answer that immediately satisfied his question?

Well, we're going to see in a moment. We're not finished with Jeremiah yet because he really is perplexed, he's struggling and he actually forms a petition from verse 3.

Because certainly when we read the complaint in verses 1 and 2 it's strong, it's startling we might say. But then when he brings out this petition, this request in verse 3 it really opens our eyes and we say wow, pull them out like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart from the day of slaughter.

again as we were saying last Sunday evening, here's Jeremiah asking God to punish these tormentors. And we're certainly not going to go back and repeat everything we said last week about that kind of request, what we noticed in chapter 11 when Jeremiah was calling on God to exercise his vengeance against those who were plotting to kill him.

But I think we do again need to emphasize and keep emphasizing that Jeremiah is not seeking personal vengeance. He's not asking God to do this against those who are his afflictors.

[21 : 37] He's not seeking any kind of personal vengeance on those who appear to escape from God's justice. No, he's simply asking God to be true to God's righteous nature and that God exercise his righteous justice and that those who are sinning against God face the justice of God.

Yes, the language is strong, this very graphic sheep being sent to the slaughter. But you have to measure the language that Jeremiah uses.

You have to do that in relation to the scale of wickedness and sinfulness against God and his word. And God is just, he's all just, he's all righteous. God is offended by sin and God has every right to do as he does in justice, in punishing sinners.

What Jeremiah is asking is no different to, for example, to what you find in Revelation chapter 6, the Christian martyrs crying out to God, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood and those who will dwell in the air.

It's truly right and righteous to have that kind of righteous indignation. You know, when you truly are righteously indignant at the wickedness that goes on in the opposition to God and his word and his truth.

[23 : 05] You're right, in fact, maybe even testing your own relationship to God in terms of how indignant you are against what you see, yes, within your own heart, my heart, but you see in others in opposition to God and his word.

Because if you do love the Lord, if you do want to serve him, if you want to be like Christ, then it is important to be indignant, to be righteously angry when we hear the name of the Lord Jesus blasphemed, when we see the word of God rubbished.

And yes, of course we leave space for God's wrath, that we simply cannot allow injustice or anti-Christian hatred to have that free reign in our land.

I mean, notice in verse 4 what Jeremiah says, there's consequences to all that's going wrong in the hearts of the people because the free reign of wickedness does have consequences.

In Judah's case, you see in verse 4, you can work out there were obviously droughts and poor harvests and Jeremiah is linking these natural disasters to the wickedness that was happening in the land of Judah.

[24 : 31] And we have to say this, there's no doubt that when evil is allowed to flourish, there will be consequences. Whether it's in the realm of political turmoil, economic turmoil, whether it's in the realm of breakdown in society, there are consequences when God's law is flouted, when his word is flouted, because God will remind us that he cannot and he will not be mocked.

We still have to come back to Jeremiah and the question why. He asks, for example, in verse 5, how long? Verse 4, rather, how long?

How long? Well, what do we find? God will answer him. God answers him. You see that in the first part anyway in verses 5 and 6.

In fact, the answer that goes right through to the end of the chapter. But before we look at the answer, I think we have to just look at the general picture before we look at the words that God gives to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah has brought this complaint before God. Verses 1 to 4. And notice immediately God replies. God replies. And this surely teaches us that God responds and God answers to every prayer, every petition that you make.

[26 : 00] There's nothing to separate verse 4 and verse 5. Jeremiah has complained before God, he's petitioned God, and God answers his cry. Why?

Because God's prayer hearing and prayer answering God. When you come before him with your deepest needs, you know that you're coming before a God who hears you, who answers you.

God will not close his, as we say metaphorically, will not close his ears to your plea. God may appear silent, but so often, as you know, and we'll say it again and again so often, his immediate reply to you, is to wait and to trust and to obey.

Because you know, as I know, there are many times when we cry to God for his mercy, for his answer, and it appears that God is silent, but God's never silent.

We've told them that God neither slumbers nor sleeps. And it's often when you feel the most bereft of his presence, you feel so utterly alone that God is strengthening you the most.

[27 : 15] Think of Elijah, remember when he thought he was all alone against Jezebel and Ahab, remember all these prophets of Baal, and yet remember all the time God had told Jeremiah he'd hidden 7,000 prophets who were true to God, but Jeremiah was not alone.

Then think of Jesus on the cross, and Jesus uttered these words, why? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Of course, the Father had never forsaken the Son as such.

Not a moment of abandonment on the cross, when Jesus bore the sin of the world, God never stopped loving his Son. God didn't abandon fully his Son.

And you know the very fact that Jesus cried out, my God, yes, tells us that he continued to trust in God even when he asked that question, why?

And, you know, that surely brings, bring you that great comfort. That God, that God never stopped loving his Son, he never stops loving you, his Son, his daughter and the Lord.

[28 : 28] Even when you feel utterly bereft of God's love. God, well, that's the kind of general background, I suppose, to verse five, certainly from verse five and six, but look at what God replies when he replies to Jeremiah, if you have raced with men on foot and they wearied you, how will you compete with horses?

And if in a safe land you're so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan? It will not have been what Jeremiah expected to hear, and maybe not what any of us expected to hear.

Because so often, even in this world we're living in, we expect something immediate. We live in a society that demands immediate answers. Everyone's on their phones, they want immediate answers, but no, no, God is God and God will give his response in the way and the time of his own choosing.

But look at the language, the way that God speaks here. He's using military language here. He says, Jeremiah, you've just barely coped as a foot soldier.

You've been in conflict with those on your own level, other foot soldiers. You've been competing, as it were, man to man. What are you going to do when you have to fight against a bigger number, a bigger power?

[29 : 46] What are you going to fight just like a foot soldier against the cavalry? You're going to find this difficult. You're going to be like when the going gets really tough.

God emphasizes this. You see in verse 6, he tells Jeremiah, even your own family are going to be treacherous, act treacherously against you.

And the scale of this, the suffering that Jeremiah is going to face is under God's sovereign purposes. Now we asked at the start, well, near the start, how will God, is God just?

Of course God's just. God's never unjust, he's never unrighteous. And Jeremiah certainly recognized that when he said, oh righteous, righteous God.

But God's coming to Jeremiah as he comes to you through his word. And he comes and he brings you a truth that can often feel like a difficult truth.

[30 : 49] But it's one that we cling to in faith. That God is under no obligation to provide these, if you like, these immediate fixes for his children.

But that God gives you that space and that time to wait in him. And yes, to remain obedient to him. And to trust in him and to keep trusting in him.

Yes, even in the middle of all these puzzles that you have in the circumstances that God permits you to endure, we're called to remain faithful to him. Yes, even in these times of perplexity.

But remember, he never leaves you. Yes, when you're weak. Then in your weakness you still look to him by faith.

When you're sinking, sinking through the onslaught that you're enduring. Remember Peter when he was sinking as he got out of that boat when he wanted to walk to Jesus. Well, listen to the voice, the voice of Jesus that spoke to Peter.

[31 : 55] Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt? And if you're going to be sincere in your following Jesus, then yes, we are to be prepared even to be foot soldiers against the cavalry.

But what's so important is your attitude. attitude. Because when you're enduring as a foot soldier against the cavalry, against what seems to be an overwhelming opposition, then see beyond the immediacy of that circumstance and look to the Lord Jesus, look to the Saviour.

He is the victor. He's the one who's triumphed over the evil one. You know, we so easily forget the big picture. Jeremiah forgot the big picture. I mean, Jeremiah had been reminded even as his ministry had begun, you go back to chapter one, God had said to him, they'll fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you to deliver you.

And, you know, even in the chapter we read last week, God's telling Jeremiah that he's going to punish his tormentors. And then later in chapter 12, you go from verse 7 down to verse 13 and, you know, God speaks about the punishment that he's already inflicted on the people for their disobedience to him.

And so there's a lesson here. There's Jeremiah in the midst of his suffering. And he may well have to suffer more as he remains faithful to the one true God.

[33 : 28] God has given him a particular task to perform there amongst the people in Judah, these people that have turned their backs on God. but Jeremiah is going to have to continue to obey and to remain loyal to God, to remain faithful to God, even through these most difficult of times.

And I'm sure you've heard the analogy before, but even just let's remind ourselves again the analogy of the tapestry. You know, the tapestry that has two sides, and the back side, the side you don't see, just appears, just a tangle of threads.

There seems no coherence at all, just like even in life at times it seems there's no coherence, no structure, no form, but in glory, even it will take till glory to see that perfect picture that God had provided for you in his goodness and his grace.

So when you're tempted to despair, tempted to, yes, to be bewildered, in the way that God is dealing with you, with the world even, will you cling to Jesus?

As we were reminded this morning, Jesus, the man of sorrows, the man who was acquainted with grief, the man, the God-man who was rejected by men, but he continued in his resolution to serve God, to serve his Father.

[35 : 02] And yes, continue, in faith, to continue trusting in the Lord, the God, the maker of heaven and earth. And when you are tempted to think that it's just too tough out there, too much for you or the church to handle, you be reminded that Christ has triumphed over the world and you be reminded that there is that promise of the new heaven and the new earth to come, when there will be no more tears and no more pain, there will be no more complaints before God.

And you'll never ever again have to ask why, because Jesus will have answered every question that you have. He will answer it with his love, with his grace.

And so may God bless to us his word. Amen. Let us pray. Lord, we bless you for your word and we pray that truly we will know that you are the one whose time-ing is perfect, you're the one who holds us in the palm of your hand, that our times are in your hands.

And so Lord, teach us, we pray, to trust in you and to keep trusting in you, to trust you even in the midst of the sorrows of life, that may we know that you are the one who gives, that you are the one who takes away, and we can still say, blessed be the name of the Lord.

And so we pray then for that increase of faith, that we cry out to you, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. So Lord, continue, we pray, it with us all, be with us, go before us, provide for us, in all our needs, and we pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.