

Playing with fire

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, if I could ask you to turn, please, to the book of Jeremiah. It's on page 630. We're going to read from chapter 4, verse 5, to chapter 5, verse 9. Let me remind you, Jeremiah is called at a time of great crisis to tell the people that unless they repent, they are doomed, that unless they turn to God, judgment is inevitable and judgment will come.
- And so in chapter 4, verse 5, he begins to tell what that judgment will be like. Jeremiah says, Declare in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem.
- Blow the trumpet through the land. Cry loud and say, assemble and let us go into the fortified cities. Raise a standard toward Zion. Flee for safety.
- Stay not. For I bring disaster from the north and great destruction. A line has gone up from his thicket. 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. For this put on sackcloth, lament and wail. For the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned back from us.
- [1 : 2 3] In that day, declares the Lord, courage shall fail both kings and officials. The priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded. I said, O Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people.
- And Jerusalem, saying it shall be well with you, whereas the sword has reached their very life. That time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert, Toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse.
- A wind too full for this comes for me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them. Behold, he comes up like clouds, his chariots like the whirlwind.
- His horses are swifter than eagles. Woe to us, for we are ruined. O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved.
- How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you? Her voice declares from Dan and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim. Warn the nations that he is coming.
- [2 : 2 8] Announce to Jerusalem, besiegers come from a distant land. They shout against the cities of Judah. Like keepers of a field are they against her all around. Because she has rebelled against me, declares the Lord.
- Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter. It has reached your very heart.
- My anguish, my anguish, I writhe in pain. O the walls of my heart, my heart is beating wildly. I cannot keep silent. For I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.
- Crash follows hard on crash. Crash, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste. My curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?
- For my people are foolish. They know me not. They are stupid children. They have no understanding. They are wise in doing evil. But how to do good, they know not.

- [3 : 33] I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form 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 air had fled. I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert.
- And all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord, the whole land will be a desolation.
- Yet I will not make a full end. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark. For I have spoken. I have purposed.
- I have not relented. Nor will I turn back. The noise of horsemen and archers. Every city takes to flight. They enter thickets. They climb among rocks.
- [4 : 31] All the cities are forsaken. And no man dwells in them. And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet? That you adorn yourselves with ornaments of gold?
- That you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you. They seek your life. For I heard the cries of a woman in labor.
- Anguish as of one giving birth to her first child. The cry of the daughter of Zion. Gasping for breath. Stretching out her hands. Woe is me.
- I am fainting before murderers. Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look and take note. Search her squares to see if you can find a man.
- One who does justice and seeks truth. That I may pardon her. Though they say as the Lord lives. They swear falsely. O Lord, do not your eyes look for truth.
- [5 : 30] You have struck them down. But they have felt no anguish. You have consumed them. But they refuse to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock. They have refused to repent.
- Then I say, these are only the poor. They have no sense. For they do not know the way of the Lord. The justice of their God. I will go to the great. And will speak to them.
- For they know the way of the Lord. The justice of their God. But they all alike had broken the yoke. They had burst the bonds. Therefore, a lion from the forest shall strike them down.
- A wolf from the desert shall devastate 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 great. How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me. And have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full.
- [6 : 26] They committed adultery. Untruth to the houses of whores. They were well fed, lusty stallions. Each neighing for his neighbor's wife. Shall I not punish them?
- For these things declares the Lord. And shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? That is the word of the Lord.
- Very powerful. Very penetrating. Very solemn. Now, if you'd have your Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 4 and 5.
- We'll ask the Lord's help as we come to this passage. Let's pray. Father, we believe you have things to say to us. Things that we need to hear.
- And we thank you. You have given to us your word. Your word that speaks with your voice. And you have given to us the gracious Holy Spirit to open that word to us.
- [7 : 28] So we pray now, Lord, that you will open our eyes. And cause us to see clearly. You will cause our hearts to burn. And you will work upon our wills.
- So that we may indeed do what is right. And walk in your ways all the days of our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. A great Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, who exercised such a powerful ministry in London in the middle of the 19th century, came originally from the Fenn country near Cambridge.

And quite often he was invited to return there to preach. And one hot afternoon he went to preach in what he describes as a small stifling tabernacle with a tin roof.

In those days they had services in the afternoon as well as in the morning and the evening. And in front of him, right just almost inches away from him, was a large red-faced farmer who as Spurgeon began to preach fell asleep and started to snore.

[8 : 45] Now, Spurgeon was not the kind of man to put up with that. And he shouted loudly, fire, fire. The farmer woke up in a panic and said, where is the fire?

In hell, replied Spurgeon. And this is still true for sinners who slumber when the Savior is presented to them.

And he went on to do just that, to present the Savior who could save from the fires of judgment. That's what I've given as my title this evening, playing with fire.

These people in Jerusalem are, as it were, dancing on the brink of hell. They are under terrible judgment. And it's a powerful and densely packed passage, full of imagery, full of the sense of the fire of judgment that people are playing with.

Jeremiah needs to be provocative. I said this already. It would make no sense for Jeremiah to come and say, change your ways a little. Just improve things.

[9 : 53] Tighten up things here and there. Jeremiah is saying, you are on the brink of judgment. And you need to listen. Judgment is coming. And there is a dreadful complacency about these people.

Peter, in his second letter in chapter 3, speaks about the terrible complacency before the flood. Noah preached. For decades upon decades, people did not listen.

And he says, as Jesus had first said, this is what it will be like in the days before the coming of the Son of Man. And they ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage.

They paid no attention until the flood came and swept them all away. You see, what Jeremiah is doing is what he was called to do. In chapter 1, verse 17, the Lord says to Jeremiah, you dress yourself for work.

Arise and say to them, everything I command you. And one of the things that Jeremiah was told to say was that the city was going to be plucked up, broken down, destroyed, and overthrown.

[11 : 08] That's not a palatable message, is it? That's a message I'm sure he trembled to give. And from this section, really, and well on in the book, that's the message he's given.

The threat of judgment. You see, Jeremiah appreciates judgment because he appreciates grace. He knows that only grace, only repentance can save from judgment.

But at the very brink of exile, the people do not care. They need a wake-up call. They need somebody shouting, fire, fire. And that's exactly what the prophet is doing.

It seems to me he says three things about judgment. First of all, in chapter 4, verses 5 to 18, he says judgment is fair. Judgment is just.

What kind of a man preaches a message like this? Now, I said already a few weeks ago when we began this series that it was very unfair to call Jeremiah a gloomy and judgmental person.

[12 : 16] He is not gloomy and judgmental. He is not ranting. This is not a moralizing rant. He's doing what the Lord has told him to say. Verse 5, the two words, declare and proclaim.

These are the words of a herald, of a messenger. And Jeremiah has been told he has no right to change these. Now, we have no right either to change what Jeremiah is saying.

We are not Jeremiah, of course. But if we try to expound Jeremiah's words, we try to expound them faithfully and apply them to our situation, we have no more right to change them than Jeremiah did.

And one of two things under this general heading, judgment is fair. It's God himself who brings this judgment. Verse 6, I bring disaster.

Literally, I bring evil from the north. North is the place of the great empires, first Assyria, then Babylon. This is what Daniel says as well at the very beginning of his book.

[13 : 21] The Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon's hand. He sets loose this lion, this ravening beast who is Babylon. Although much later in the book, we learn that Babylon itself will be punished for its cruelty.

Another prophet of this, slightly earlier, Habakkuk, says exactly that. Babylon's raised up to punish my people, but they'll be punished as well. And Isaiah had said the same thing about Assyria.

Assyria was the rod of God's anger. But because Assyria thought they were God, God punished them as well. But the trouble is, verse 7, a line has gone up.

Verse 8, for this put on sackcloth, lament and wail. They are not lamenting and wailing. They are totally and stupefyingly complacent.

They don't care. Remember the church in the seven churches in Revelation, which is most sternly condemned, is Laodicea.

[14 : 25] What was wrong with Laodicea? Laodicea just did not care. We love Romans 8, don't we? If God is for us, who can be against us? This is the grim mirror image.

If God is against us, who can be for us? God himself brings the judgment. And God brings the judgment because of appalling leadership.

Verse 9, we've noticed this already. In that day, declares the Lord, courage shall fail both king's officials, priests, and prophets. They totally lacked courage.

They were jellyfish, and therefore they showed no leadership. That was a vacuum. There ought to have been leadership. Now, this is one of the first occurrences in Jeremiah of the word prophet.

And it's very interesting. Jeremiah uses this word many, many times. Think over 200 times. And almost always it refers to false prophets.

[15 : 26] The false prophets who call themselves prophets. Remember that's what Amos said. I am not a prophet. And I believe that means I'm not one of those charlatans who gets paid to say things, who gets hired by the establishment to say what they want them to say.

Amos contrasts being a prophet with hearing the word of the Lord. And that, I think, explains this curious verse 10. Then I said, O Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people in Jerusalem, saying it should be well with you, whereas the sword has reached their very life.

I think these are not the words of Jeremiah. I think Jeremiah is quoting the words of the false prophets. The false prophets are saying everything is wonderful. Everything will work out just fine.

The king of Babylon will never come. And then, when the king of Babylon is on his way, they say, O the Lord has deceived us. A century earlier, the prophet Micah says exactly the same thing.

These prophets go about uttering windy words and lies. And in the New Testament, doesn't Paul say this? The time will come. Well, they will not endure sound teaching.

[16 : 39] But they will have teachers who will say what they want to say. That's the reason why, in Jeremiah's time, the nation was in such a state.

That's the reason why, in Paul's time, the church was in such danger. And surely that's the reason in our day as well. Keeping up teachers who say what people want to hear.

So, Jeremiah is saying, don't listen to them. They're deceiving you. And what's worse, they're saying God is deceiving you. In verse 11 to 18, this is now the voice of the true prophet.

By the way, the phrase, at that time, means this is not just the judgment of exile. This is pointing forward to the final judgment.

The prophets often do this. They've got various horizons. The horizon of the immediate judgment and the horizon of the judgment of the last day. And a messenger needs to be sent.

[17 : 38] Verse 15, a voice declares from Dan the extreme north and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim. A messenger coming from what's nowadays called the Golan Heights, down through the hilly region of Ephraim, the region around Bethel.

Calling to repent. O Jerusalem, verse 14, wash your heart from evil that you may be saved. There is a way back to God. But it's the way of repentance, not the way of complacency.

Judgment is fair. And look how he sums it up in verse 18. Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. You are to blame for this happening.

Very interesting, actually, how judgment is presented so often in Scripture. Judgment is presented as an action of God. There's also an action that people bring upon themselves.

In the story of the flood, for example, the Scripture says, God said the whole earth has corrupted itself, so I will destroy it.

[18 : 41] Now, in Hebrew, the verb corrupt and the verb destroy are part of the same verb. It's almost as if God is saying the earth has self-destructed. I'm going to underwrite that verdict.

Judgment is fair. That's the first thing. And secondly, in the rest of chapter 4, verses 19 to 31, judgment overturns everything.

Nothing will ever be the same again. And notice in these verses, in verse 19 in particular, Jeremiah exemplifies what the people ought to be feeling.

They are living complacently, apathetically, and Jeremiah is in bitter anguish. My anguish, my anguish, I writhe in pain. His whole, it's as if his whole insides are churned up.

It's a physical thing, not just a spiritual thing. He's totally affected. His stomach is churning. His heart is pounding. The people had not heard the wake-up trumpet.

[19 : 40] I hear the sound of the trumpet, he says, the alarm of war. But they don't. Why is that? Why have they not heard the voice of the trumpet?

Verse 22, for my people are foolish. They know me not. They are stupid children. They have no understanding. See, they've overturned all spiritual and moral principles.

They think they are wise. If they were living nowadays, they wouldn't be foolish in the sense of being stupid. The fool in Scripture is not the idiot.

The fool may be a highly intellectual person. And there are many a fool around in the media and in the upper echelons of the church.

People who speak their own language. People who present their own kind of God. And that's what's happening here. What are they wise at? They are wise in doing evil.

[20 : 41] But how to do good, they do not know. There is a complete moral vacuum here. Because they've turned their back on the word of God. Because they don't listen to the voice of the prophet.

The sound of the trumpet. What's left is a moral vacuum. So if you like the prophet. The prophet is totally churned up inside. Society is churned up inside.

Oh, it doesn't realize it. And look particularly now at verse 20 feet. The very created order itself is overturned. This is the deliberate parody of the very beginning of the Bible.

I looked on the earth and behold it was without form and void. Remember at the very beginning of Genesis the earth was without form and void. And God said let there be light.

It's as if the tape is being rewound here, isn't it? The whole created order is disappearing. The light. God said let there be light.

[21 : 43] What is there in heaven? They had no light. The very mountains. The seas. The whole of the created order is in turmoil.

I think if we're really going to understand what's happening here, we've got to remember just what the exile meant. It's not just a group of refugees going from one country to another, which is bad enough and a sad feature often of tyrannical regimes.

People are dispossessed. The exile overturned everything people believed about God. Every way they understood God.

Every way they understood their history and themselves and the future. My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Well if he made heaven and earth, why can't he even protect his people?

What about Zion? Zion, city of the great king that will never be moved. Never will it be destroyed.

[22 : 48] Zion is gone. Or Zion will be gone. Babylonian armies will break the city walls. They'll burn the houses. And worst of all, they'll destroy the temple and almost certainly the Ark of the Covenant.

What about David's throne? David's throne has gone. What about the promise to David? There will never be a time when one of your sons will not sit on the throne.

And worse still, was Yahweh God of Israel weaker than the gods of Babylon? Can you read the Exodus story? The very part of the Exodus story is when the Lord says, I will pass through Egypt against all the gods of Egypt.

I will carry out judgment. I am the Lord. I am Yahweh. That means the Lord is stronger than the gods of Egypt, stronger than Amun-Ra and Osiris and all the others.

Does this now mean he's weaker than Marduk and Nebo, the gods of Babylon? That is what the exile means. The exile is as if the creation itself had disappeared.

[23 : 52] And it's, of course, anticipating the judgment day. And when God is mocked, when his holiness is flouted, and when his word is disobeyed, this is the kind of thing that happens.

Society completely loses its anchor. Society completely loses the way to go. And there's literally no end to which people can go, no depths to which they will not stoop.

But his grace is treated with contempt. This is a disaster like the undoing of creation. A disaster on the scale of the flood. Because that's exactly what the flood was, an undoing of creation.

At the creation, God separates the earth and the waters. At the flood, they come rushing together again. And God is not going to relent.

Verse 28. I have spoken. I have purposed. I have not relented. And nor will I turn back.

- [24 : 54] We've got to realize just how serious that is. There is a glimmer of hope, isn't there, at the end of verse 27. And yet I will not make a full end.
- God will make, we know, new heavens and new earth. But before that can happen, there's going to be an awful lot of breaking up, of uprooting, and so on.
- The death agonies of Zion in verse 31. The birth image here is negative. See, Jeremiah is using all the resources of language under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- He's using shocking imagery, powerful biblical imagery to say, you need to wake up. Fire, fire. That's what he's calling. Judgment is coming.
- There is no possible way for judgment not to come. Judgment is fair. Judgment is overwhelming. It's not just a patching up.
- [25 : 55] It's not like that kind of job that some unsatisfactory tradesmen do where they simply patch up and where they simply paint over blemishes.
- This is going to be a complete uprooting. The third thing is judgment is specific. That's chapter 5, 1 to 9. You see, judgment is going to be universal.
- But it's not going to be indiscriminating in the sense that God says, look, any honest examination of Jerusalem would see that what I'm saying is right.
- Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look and take note. Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her.
- Now this is once again a deliberate echo of an earlier passage in Scripture, that great passage in Genesis 18, where Abraham preeds with the Lord to save Sodom.
- [26 : 58] And you remember there that God says, I will spare it if there are ten people in the city who are just, who are upright.
- They couldn't find ten. You see, Jerusalem is worse than Sodom. You can't even find one. You remember the passage that Willie was preaching on this morning.
- It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for those who have heard the word and rejected it. It's terrifying.
- Now, linking that with that verse 27b, yet I will not make a full end. You remember Jeremiah is deliberately using the most powerful language he can.
- There are a few people in Jerusalem. There is Jeremiah himself, obviously. There is Josiah. We don't know exactly when this was preached, but Josiah, probably sometime in the early years of Josiah, when the great reforms began and were ignored.
- [28 : 09] There is Baruch, his scribe, and there's the courageous Ethiopian Ebed-Melech, who rescues him from the dungeon much later on in the book. But you see the point that's being made.
- There is no hope for the city as it is. There is hope for the remnant. And as the judgment becomes darker, as the time comes nearer, in the prophetic books the idea of the remnant begins to grow and begins to shine as a glimmer of light in the darkness.
- Remember back to the flood. God saved a remnant, saved eight people through the flood. And through this judgment there will be those who are saved as well, but the city itself will be doomed.
- And who are those who will be saved? There will be those who do justice, who seek truth, and so on. Those who repent. God is looking for faithfulness to his covenant.
- These words, justice, truth, covenant loyalty, which links the Lord and his people. Though they say, as the Lord lives, yet they swear falsely.
- [29 : 19] How easy and glibly the language of piety drips off the lips of those who do not truly know the Lord. The lips of those who love not the Lord himself, but their institutions.

The glib talk about church and so on. Interesting, some people never talk about the Lord. All they have to talk about is the church as an institution.

And Jeremiah is going to talk about that in chapter 7, where he is going to say, don't say this is the temple of the Lord, because it ceased to be the temple of the Lord, since you have so corrupted it.

It's so easy to talk pious talk. And it's always so empty. So the Lord is looking for faithfulness. The Lord realizes this talk is empty.

Like the Apostle James, much later on, he is looking for a faith that manifests itself in works of justice and mercy. And in walking, as Micah also said, what's the Lord your God require of you?

[30 : 28] Walk justly to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. And the passage from Isaiah mentioned earlier in the prayer, to this one will I look, to the one who is humble and contrite, and who trembles at my word.

This is the remnant here. And they are totally ignorant. Once again, he returns to this idea of wisdom. Then I said, they are only the poor.

They have no sense. They do not know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. These are the ordinary punters. They don't really know what they're talking about. I will go to the great and speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God.

But they all alike had broken the yoke. They had burst their bonds. You see, the leaders, the leaders had failed more drastically than the people.

Oh, the people had failed, and they were guilty. It was the leaders who led them astray. And remember, remember, since people ultimately get the leaders they want, ultimately, then if people want false prophets, if people want teachers who will say the things that they please, that please them, then that's what they'll get.

[31 : 41] That's what's happened here. So the great ones, the great here, of course, is an irony in this. We would say the good and the great, the establishment.

They have, they do not know the way either. They alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bond. Suggestion here is not just a failure. It's bad enough to fail to teach the truth.

But they had deliberately gone against it. They had set up idols. They had set up falsehoods. Instead, they are totally ignorant. And the judgment is now depicted in terms of three wild beasts, a lion, a wolf, and a leopard.

God's people, God's sheep, had broken out of the safe pasture. They had broken away from the true shepherd. And because they had done so, they were prey to these wild beasts.

Remember, the shepherd would have rescued them, would have guarded them against these evil beasts. But they had broken away. They'll be torn. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces.

[32 : 46] Those are transgressions of many. Their apostasies are great. Transgressions are deliberate sins, sometimes translated rebellion. Now, to some extent, all sins are deliberate.

But there are those sins which we deliberately carry out even when we know they're wrong. I like the old prayer, Lord, forgive us for negligence, weakness, and our own deliberate fault.

We're all careless. That's negligence. Our weakness, we want to do the right thing and don't do it. Our own deliberate fault is when we know and still do. And that leads to judgment.

An apostasy, they're turning away from the Lord to idolatry. But the key surely is that they no longer love the Lord. It's not, it's never ultimately a question of an intellectual problem.

Of course, there are intellectual problems. Of course, there are difficulties. And of course, it's right to discuss them and to debate them. But you see, it's not that. How can I pardon you?

[33 : 49] Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores. They were well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife.

That is not a pretty picture. That is not easy reading and it's certainly not comfortable reading. They no longer love the Lord.

Remember, once come back once again to the churches in Revelation. Now what the Lord says to the church in Ephesus, I have this against you. You have not the love you had at first.

If you do not repent, I will come and take the lampstand away. That's what's happening here. They've done the opposite. Remember what the young church in Thessalonica did.

They turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God. These people have done the opposite. They've turned from the living God to dead idols.

[34 : 49] They've turned from the living word of God, from the shepherd who will guide them and lead them, from the shepherd who will feed them and care for them. And they've turned to dead idols.

And that's what happens when God's people turn away from the shepherd, when they no longer love him, when they become interested as these leaders in simply building up their own position, bolstering an institution.

That is turning from the living God to idols. That happened in Jeremiah's day and surely it happens in our day as well. Verse 9, Shall I not punish them for these things, declares the Lord?

I shall not avenge myself on a nation like this. As if God is saying, now look, look, you've heard the evidence. The prophet has faithfully presented you as it is.

Now, is this fair? Because that's one of the first points I made. Judgment is fair. Jeremiah has shown you that this will be a situation like a repeat of a flood, like the rewinding of the tape that will turn creation back into chaos.

[36 : 03] And this is specific judgment for specific sins, not indiscriminate. God is totally just. And because he's totally just, he wants people who do justice and seek truth, that he might pardon them.

There is a way back, but there is no way back for complacency and arrogance. No one repents when they feel they are good enough. No one appreciates grace unless they realize that they're a sinner.

So often I've found in my ministry that it is really grace which offends people. One of the things I've discovered heard over the years is people like the preaching of judgment because they always apply it to someone else.

I hope so-and-so was listening. I wish she had been here. She needed to hear that. But grace, of course, grace simply humbles us all, puts us on the same level playing field and calls us to repent.

That's what Jeremiah said to his day and that's what Jeremiah, I believe, is saying to us this evening. Amen. Let's pray. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

[37 : 21] Father, we come to you realizing how sinful we are, realizing there is so much of Jacob in us and therefore trusting in the promise the Lord of hosts is with us.

The God of Jacob is our refuge. Father, take us and day by day transform us from Jacob into Israel. Help us never to be complacent, never to be arrogant, but to trust wholly in your name and wholly in your cross.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Thank you.