

Can even Grace save us?

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 0 0] Now, we're returning this evening to the book of Jeremiah, and we're going to chapter 13, which is on page 641, if you're using the church Bibles. This prophet is speaking to the people of God in the dying years of the kingdom of Judah before they're taken off into exile in Babylon. His style is often dramatic, both in terms of what he says and what he does, and it's totally fascinating to see how he speaks these words of God, not least in this chapter we are going to read. Chapter 13, and we'll read the whole chapter. Jeremiah said, Thus says the Lord to me, Go and buy a linen loincloth, and put it around your waist, and do not dip it in water. So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the Lord, and put it around my waist. And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, Take the loincloth that you have bought, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock. So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. And after many days, the Lord said to me, Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there. Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. And behold, the loincloth was spoiled. It was good for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Thus says the Lord, Even so will I spoil the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart, and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. But as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen. You shall speak to them this word,

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Every jar shall be filled with wine. And they will say to you, Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine? Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will fill the drunkenness, all the inhabitants of this land, the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord. I will not pity or spare or have compassion, that I should not destroy them.

Hear and give ear. Be not proud, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains. Now how you look for light, he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride.

My eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive. Say to the king and the queen mother, Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head.

[3 : 4 0] The cities of the Negev are shut up with none to open them. All Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile. Lift up your eyes and see those who come from the north. Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock?

What will you say when they set as head over you, those whom you yourself have taught to be friends to you? Will not pangs take hold of you, like those of a woman in labor, if you say in your heart, Why have these things come upon me? It is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, And you suffer violence. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?

Then also you can do good, who are accustomed to do evil. I will scatter you like chaff, driven by the wind from the desert. This is your lot, a portion I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, Because you have forgotten me, and trusted in lies.

I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your loot whorings on the hills in the field.

Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean? Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

[5 : 09] After a passage like this, we must be driven to the rock of ages, To the cure, the double cure for sin, It's cleansing from its guilt and power, and that's what we now sing.

Now, if you could turn again, please, to Jeremiah 13.

And while you're doing so, let's have a moment of prayer. God, our Father, we pray that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, And that you will open our hearts and minds to your word, And lead us to the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Many years ago, in my first ministry, there was a man in the congregation, Indeed, he was an elder, who had welcomed me very warmly when I went to that congregation.

It wasn't long before he started not liking the ministry that was coming from the pulpit. He said to somebody, This man always seems to look for the most gloomy and dismal parts of the Bible.

[6 : 42] I may tell you at that time we were preaching on 1 Corinthians 15, That glorious resurrection passage, And some of the thanksgiving psalms.

You see, the truth of the matter is, If we are determined not to hear the word of God, No part of it is going to be welcome. None of it is going to be embraced by us.

All of it is going to seem condemnatory. Don Carson uses a very helpful phrase about the Bible. He talks about how it sings and stings.

And the singing, of course, we rejoice in, don't we? The wonderful depths of the word, It's wonderful poetry, It's wonderful imagery, And so on. But the stinging, of course, Needs to goad us out of our complacency.

Now, no one can pretend that the passage we have read is other than a passage about judgment. It's a passage that is very difficult to read, Very difficult to tackle, Very difficult to listen to.

[7 : 55] Jeremiah, as we've noticed, Those who have been here, Often deals with variations on a theme. He's got all kinds of ways to hammer the message home.

Symbolism, poetry, Acted parables, Proverbial sayings, On the theme of judgment. God will not let his people be deaf. And to use every method, He possibly can.

But, the second introductory point I want to make is this. This is not a jumble. It's not simply passages thrown together, Without any kind of regard for the overall message.

It doesn't, of course, Have the strong thrust of narrative. That's one of the reasons we enjoy narrative, As the story unfolds, As the characters develop. It doesn't have the logic we often get in the epistles, Particularly Paul's letters.

But, this passage, I want to suggest, Actually gives us the key to understanding it, In verse 13. This gives us the structure of what Jeremiah is saying.

[9 : 00] Look at verse 13. Then shall you say to them, Thus says Yahweh, Behold, I will fill with drunkenness, All the inhabitants of this land. The kings who sit on David's throne, The priests, The prophets, And all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is giving us the structure here. Three groups of people. The priests, The kings, And the prophets. All of whom are collectively leading God's people astray.

Now, I think if we look at the passage closely, We'll find, That's a thread that leads us, Through this rather perplexing material, It has to be said. And then in verse 23, A proverbial saying, Which gives us the essence, Of the meaning of the passage.

23, Can the Ethiopian change his skin, Or the leopard his spots? Then also, You can do good, Who are accustomed to do evil.

This proverbial saying, Sums up the essence, Of the problem. Have the people of God, Gone so far? Have their hearts become so hardened, That like the color of an individual, It cannot be changed?

[10 : 16] It's fixed. That's why I've given this sermon the title, Can even grace save us? That's the question that Jeremiah is wrestling with. That's the question that he, If you like, He sings to the people of God, And wants it to sting them, Not because he hates them, But because he loves them.

He wants them to face up to it. No cosmetic change will do. The people are ripe for judgment. So keeping that in mind then, Let's look at the passage, Using this threefold key.

And first of all, We have disgraced priests, In verses 1 to 11. This is an acted parable. The main point, Is not to work out, Every last detail, But to get the overall thrust.

The commentators, Have endless discussions, What this garment actually was. Was it a loincloth? Was it a belt? Certainly nothing, That would feature, On Katie's pamper evening, We may be absolutely certain, Of that.

Not only on what, The actual garment was, But what is the nature, Of the parable? Did Jeremiah actually go, To the Euphrates? Or to a place called Perath, Which is what is in the text.

[11 : 30] There's a place near Jerusalem, Near Anathoth, Jeremiah's home, Called Perath. Or was this, Like his contemporary Ezekiel, A visionary journey?

That's what Calvin thinks, In his commentary. Euphrates would be significant, Of course this is the place, Of the exile. But what these verses, Seem to me to be saying, Is something, Which doesn't depend, On the actual identification, Of the garment, Nor the location, To which Jeremiah took it.

This is something, About the disgrace, And the degeneration, Of the priesthood. First of all, The important thing, Is this garment, Is linen. Not the actual, Shape of the garment, The fact that it is linen.

Now in Leviticus 16, Verse 4, On the day of atonement, The high priest, Wore a linen garment, Symbolizing penitence, And purity.

Showing the people of God, Are coming before God, In absolute penitence, Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross, I cling, As we sang.

[12 : 41] And indeed, He is the high priest, But all God's people, Even in the Old Testament, Are called to be priestly, That is the point, Of Exodus after all, You are called, To be a nation, Of priests.

Now if it's taken, To the Euphrates, Even in symbol, The point is, That God's people, Have become unfit, To be in his city, And are being banished, To the city of the world.

Remember the tale, Of two cities, That runs through scripture, Babylon, The city of the world, And the city of God, Zion, City of our God, They are unfit, For God's presence, Instead of purity, There is dirt, They are spoiled, They are good for nothing, Rather like, The wicked of Sam 1, They become like chaff, That are blown away.

Here's Jeremiah saying, If you want Babylonian religion, You'll get plenty of that, In Babylon. That's what Amos says, In an earlier stage, About if you want, Assyrian religion, You'll get plenty of it, In Assyria.

So the linen garment, The dirty, Useless, Wasted linen garment, Shows they had no longer, Been priests before God, And secondly, Their faithfulness, Had vanished, The important verse 11, For as the loincloth, Clings to the waist of a man, So I made the whole house of Israel, And the whole house of Judah, Cling to me.

[14:12] The word cling here, Is the word used in Genesis 2, 24, Therefore a man, Will leave his father, And mother, And cling, Be joined to his wife, And this of course links, With the husband, Wife metaphor, Which is at the heart of covenant, Which Jeremiah has used, So often before, And this carries on, Throughout the Bible, This story is going to culminate, In Revelation 19, When the bride, Of the lamb, Is married, To the lamb, And what she dressed with, It was given to her, To wear linen, Pure, And white, You see, The covenant, Has been violated, The pure linen, Has become dirty, And wasted, The relationship, Is spoiled, What was a priest for?

A priest was to bring God, To the people, And the people, To God, That was what, Being a priest, Meant then, And it's what, Being a priest, As we all are priests, We are priestly ministry, To bring God, To the people, And the people, To God, That relationship, Had been spoiled, Very interesting, Isn't it, In Genesis 3, The first sin happens, Not when Adam and Eve, Fall out with each other, But when they join together, Against God, Now Jeremiah is saying, The priesthood is discredited, This filthy linen garment, Which is good for nothing, And can no longer be worn, Which symbolized your love, And your acceptance, With the Lord, That's completely gone, It's drastic, This certainly stings, Doesn't it, And it's just exactly the same, In the New Testament, Isn't it, There's no difference, Be holy, For I am holy, Says the book of Leviticus,

And that's quoted in 1 Peter, Not surprisingly, In a passage that talks about, The priestly ministry, Of God's people, So, The first thing then, We have, That is graced priesthood, You see, The, The real tragedy is, The world no longer, Sees God clearly, Because his people, Have become, So, Become so polluted, They're, They're actually being, A screen between the world, And the Lord, But secondly, We have a discredited king, And it seems to be, These puzzling little verses, 18 and 19, Let's look at these, Say to the king, And the queen mother, Take a lowly seat, For your beautiful crown, Has come down, From your head, Little bit of history, For a moment, If you'll forgive me, Well again, Whether you forgive me or not, Jeremiah, Began his ministry, In the reign of the good king, Josiah, Who carried out,

A thoroughgoing reformation, The tragedy was, That reformation, Was only cosmetic, Not as far as, The king was concerned, The king was utterly sincere, The king was godly, But it was very obvious, That the people, Had only gone along with him, He was succeeded, By Jehoiakim, Who lasted for only, A few months, But now we're, In the reign, Of Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiakim, The names are very alike, Don't mix up, Your Jehoiakims, And your Jehoiakims, And he is taken off, To Babylon, After three months, And you can read all about this, In 2nd Kings 24, I can sense you're just, Itching to get home, You can read 2nd Kings 24, And it's interesting, He is taken to Babylon, After three months, His mother is mentioned, In that passage, Nehushtash, Her name was, The queen mother, And she's obviously, Taken into exile,

As well, See the event, We call the exile, Actually happened in stages, Before the city was destroyed, In 587 BC, The Babylonians, Had been coming, And nibbling away, Taken Jehoiakim, And of course, Young Daniel was taken, And his friends, Were taken to Babylon, Ezekiel, Already in Babylon, So, The exile is already happening, Verse 19, The cities of the Negev, The Negev, Is actually the deep south, Just the extreme south, Of the country, The whole land, Is being affected, All Judah is taken, Into exile, Wholly taken, Into exile, Jeremiah is saying, The city is still there, But, It's inevitable, Well, End of history lesson, Where is the hope, In this?

[18 : 54] Is there any hope, At all? I want to suggest, A couple of things, Verse 13, Again, Back to verse 13, The kings, Who sit, On David's throne, In spite, Of all the unworthy, Disgraceful, Useless, And, Holy, Inadequate people, Who often, Occupied that throne, It is still, David's throne, And the covenant, With David, And later on, In the book, In the new, New covenant, Passage, Jeremiah is going, To compare it, To the covenant, With David, The covenant, With David, Is underlined, Read you, Psalm 89, Verse 35, I will not, Lie to David, His offspring, Will endure, Forever, If his sons, Offend, I will punish them, But, I will not, Lie to David, His offspring, Will endure, Forever,

So here, In the context, Of grim warning, The other picture, Is used here, Of wine jars, Dashed together, A wine pouring out, It is a symbol, Of the drunkenness, And irresponsibility, Of king, And nation, It is still, David's throne, And the Lord, Has sworn to David, That the covenant, Will remain, However inadequate, Individuals may be, And then, If you just turn over, For a moment, Please, To the very end, Of Jeremiah, Chapter 52, If we live long enough, We might come to this chapter, Just in case we don't, Let's look at it now, Interesting, Look at the end of chapter 51, Thus far, Are the words of Jeremiah, The prophecy seems to end there, And then, This chapter, Chapter 52, Which is also, By the way, Second Kings 24, Is repeated,

Why is it repeated? I want you to look at the end, Of the chapter, Verse 31, In the 37th year, Of the exile, Of Jehoiachin, King of Judah, This is the king, Who is mentioned here, In verse 18, Taking a lowly seat, In the 12th month, On the 25th day of the month, Evil Merodach, King of Babylon, In the year, That he became king, Lifted up the head, Of Jehoiachin, King of Judah, And brought him out of prison, And he spoke kindly to him, And gave him a seat, Above the seats of the kings, Who were with him in Babylon, So Jehoiachin, Put off his prison garments, And every day of his life, He dined regularly, At the king's table, And for his allowance, A regular allowance, Was given him by the king, According to his daily need, Until the day of his death, As long as he lived, Back to chapter 13, You see, You see what's happening, Jehoiachin taken into exile, The city destroyed, God's people banished,

And apparently all hope gone, And then in the very middle, Of the exile, It lasted roughly 70 years, The king of Judah, Is given an honored place, Above the other kings, In Babylon, We're not yet at Psalm 72, That the kings of the earth, Will come and bow down, And worship before David's successor, But it's an important staging post, On the road, I will not lie, To David, Says Jehoi, His offspring, Will endure forever, You see, There's the tension, Between the unbreakable, Covenant promises, And the unsatisfactory, Human material, But that's the dynamic, Of the gospel, Isn't it?

The unsatisfactory, Human material, Which God uses, Look around you, Look in the mirror, That's the kind of material, That God uses, While we were still, Sinners, Christ died for us, If we, And if we focus, On the ability, Of the human vessels, To make it, That way lies, Pride, And disillusionment, It's said of one of the better kings of Judah, King Uzziah, You can read his story in 2 Chronicles 26, Really superb story, He had the military prowess of David, He's deliberately, Specifically compared with David, Defeating the Philistines, Building up Jerusalem, And the defense cities of Judah, And he's also compared with Solomon, Economic, Political, Social prosperity, Then there's the chilling phrase, He was wonderfully helped, Until he became strong,

[23 : 47] Brothers and sisters, We need to remember that, Wonderfully helped, Until he became strong, Not that God wants us to be weak, But God doesn't want us to trust, In our own strength, The Davidic kings, Are only going to make it by grace, God's people, Are only going to make it by grace, So we have the disgraced prophets, We have the discredited king, The disgraced priests, Sorry, The discredited king, And now we have the deceptive prophets, Running all behind this chapter, A very common theme in Jeremiah, Is that the people are where they are, Because they have listened to the wrong voices, Once again, Verse 13, And all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Now there's always a two-way dynamic going on, False prophets lead people astray, False teachers lead people astray, But then, After a while, People start wanting false teachers, And false prophets,

And people get what they want, In the long run, Verse 18, Sorry, Verse, Not verse 18, Verse 15, Hear and give ear, Be not proud, For the Lord has spoken, This is your lot, The portion I have measured out to you, Declares the Lord, Verse 25, The people refuse to hear, People refuse to hear my word, That's the point that's being made, You see, What I think is happening here, Is Jeremiah, Rather like Paul, In Corinthians, Is engaging with the false prophets, As he engages with the super apostles, And they're advocating my idolatry, Verse 9, Then says the Lord, I will spoil the pride of Judah, And the great pride of Jerusalem, And in the next chapter, Chapter 14, We'll look at next Sunday evening, Verses 13 and 14, That becomes explicit,

Then I said, Our Lord God, The whole the prophets say to them, You shall not see the sword, Nor shall you have famine, But I will give you assured peace, In this place, And the Lord said to me, The prophets are prophesying lies, In my name, I did not send them, Nor did I command them, Or speak to them, Look at that next week, You see, The false prophets, Are denying, That judgment will come, Verse 16, Give glory to the Lord your God, Before he brings darkness, Before your feet stumble, On the twilight mountains, While you look for light, He turns it into gloom, And makes it deep darkness, Deep darkness, That's the word in Psalm 23, Verse 4, Sometimes translated, The belly of the shadow, Death, Judgment, Destruction, Are coming, But the false prophets, Will not have any of this, The one thing a false prophet, Will never do, Is tell people,

Will they need to change, The one thing a false prophet, Will never do, Is to preach judgment, The false prophet, May try, And make the word sing, He will certainly, Not make it sing, And the way he tries, To make it sing, Will turn out to be, A false hope, Verse 20, The enemies will conquer, Lift up your eyes, And see, Those who came, From the north, Right through this part, Of the book, Like an ominous bell, Tolling, The enemy, From the north, From the north, From the north, The false prophets, Would not accept this, When Jehoiakim, The king I mentioned already, Was taken off to Babylon, Some of the vessels, Of the temple of the Lord, Were taken with him, And they were to be, Next time we hear about them, Is when Belshazzar, The last king of Babylon, Used them at his drunken party, And then we read about them, Being returned, In the book of Ezra, From the early pioneers, The point is, If you read on in the book,

In chapters 27 and 28, People were saying, Well, The king will soon be released, The vessels of the temple, Will be returned, And they were being encouraged, To do that. See, That's what happens today, To people, If they listen, To false teaching.

[28 : 08] For over 200 years, It's been alleged, In certain circles, That liberal theology, Is liberating, Sets people free, From fears, It gets people to come, And it interests people, I've yet to meet, A liberal church, Which is growing, I've yet to come across, A liberal church, Where young people go to, Liberalism, Denying the gospel, Cutting the nerve, Of the gospel, Is simply a pale, Imitation of the world, If we want the world, Then we as well, To have the undiluted thing, Why have the watered down version, That some churches offer, Babylonian religion, Will always end, In Babylon, That is the point, With the city of God, Becoming indistinguishable, From the city of the world, And coming back now, To the verse I mentioned, At the beginning, Verse 23, This proverbial saying, Probably this is a saying,

That Jeremiah incorporates, A proverb, False teaching, Causes no radical change, From that false teaching, And easy teaching, Is it basically says, What people need, Is education, I've been involved, In education, All my life, I profoundly believe, In education, But what people need, Is transformation, And, The voices, Of the false prophets, Don't do that, Because, Those who listen, To the false prophets, Those who worship idols, Become like them, And the punishment, Will be dreadful, And the language, Of course, Is not pretty, Is it?

Verse 26, I myself, Will live your skirts, Over your face, Your shame will be seen, Seeing your abominations, Your adulteries, And names, Your loud whorings, Lewd whorings, On the hills, In the field, It's disturbing, Language, But they are reaping, The reward, They behaved like, Prostitutes, They have abandoned, Their great lover, And run away, After other lovers, And therefore, The doom, Is inevitable, Isn't it?

But there is a little note of hope, Just at the very end of the chapter, How long will it be, Before you are made clean? Now you see, That ties the beginning, And the end of the chapter together, But at the beginning of the chapter, That is grace, Priesthood, And the filthy linen garment, Is that the people of Israel, Had been estranged from the Lord, They had virtually, Not so much, Virtually walked out, On the marriage, And behaved in a shameless way, Like prostitutes, What can make them clean?

There is only one thing, That is going to make them clean, Not listening to pleasant talk, About how things will be better, The vessels of the temple will return, The king will come back, But coming in repentance, And faith, Because it is only grace, Can save?

[31 : 18] Can grace save? Save? The answer is, Only grace can save, It can't be cheap grace, Remember, It was Bonhoeffer, The brave German Christian, Murdered by Hitler, Who used the phrase, Cheap grace, Which he defined as, The gospel, Without the cross, Salvation, Without Jesus Christ, Forgiveness, Without repentance, Can grace save us?

Brothers and sisters, It's the same today, Grace can save us, But only grace can save us, Amen, Let's pray, Lord God, As we read these stories, Of ancient Israel, And we think of the waywardness, As we think of the rebellion, Of our own hearts, Help us to rely, Evermore, On grace, Not to become proud, Like King Uzziah, Not to become, Those who gloss over, The unpleasant parts, Of scripture, But help us to come, In repentance and faith, And to find, The door of mercy open, The door that is open, To those who come back, Believing their only hope, For salvation lies there, We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.