

Proper 20

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September 21, 2003

Prayer of the Day

Lord God, you call us to work in your vineyard and leave no one standing idle. Set us to our tasks in the work of your kingdom, and help us to order our lives by your wisdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jeremiah 11:18-20

¹⁸ It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds. ¹⁹ But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!" ²⁰ But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and the mind, let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Jeremiah 11:18-20 introduces the complaints or laments often called "Jeremiah's confessions," which include material in Jeremiah 11:18-20:18 as well as some material outside this general section. "Jrm's utterance in 11:18-20 is in the form of an individual lament." [1]

18. It was the Lord who made it known to me: 'It' is 'their evil deeds,' a conspiracy among members of Jeremiah's family to kill him (see 19b; 12:6). Jeremiah's actions and words put him in disfavor with those in religious and political power, and that disfavor also affected members of his family, and his circle of friends and associates. The plot to kill him could have gained favor from those in positions of authority and power.

19: Jeremiah has become aware of the conspiracy and even knows the word of the conspirators.

20: Jeremiah expects retribution against those who have plotted against him, as the proper result of his having "committed my cause" to Yahweh. The last part of the verse is repeated in Jeremiah 20:12, where Jeremiah invokes retribution on his close friends, who also seek his destruction.

Or Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22

¹⁶ But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company. ^{2:1} For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, "Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades...." ¹² "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. ¹³ He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. ¹⁴ He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; ¹⁵ the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. ¹⁶ We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. ¹⁷ Let us see if his words are true and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; ¹⁸ for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. ¹⁹ Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance, ²⁰ Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected." ²¹ Thus

they reasoned, but they were led astray, for their wickedness blinded them,²² and they did not know the secret purposes of God, nor hoped for the wages of holiness, nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

1:16-2:1, 12-20: "The arguments of the wicked may be briefly summarized. Death, they claim, is final and our destiny unalterable. Life is a mere chance event; it is short and troublesome and will soon be forgotten. The unavoidable conclusion is self-evident: Let us enjoy while we can, for this is clearly our allotted portion. Moreover since experience shows that might is right, it would be inexpedient to avoid the exploitation of helpless weaklings. Indeed, we must further take the initiative and exterminate men of integrity who espouse ideal principles of justice. It is only proper that these blind fanatics be put to the final test along with their fatuous philosophy of life." [2]

21-22. they were let astray...they did not know the secret purposes of God: The wisdom of worldly philosophers is superficial and ignorant of the true nature of the creation.

the wages of holiness...the prize for blameless souls: Pascal's wager was that one had nothing to lose for being righteous, because if God existed one would be blessed, while if God did not exist one would not have lost anything, while one had everything to lose by following a worldly life-style since one gained little by it, and risked everything if God did indeed exist. That is the situation the ungodly find themselves in.

Psalm 54

¹ Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. ² Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth. ³ For the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life; they do not set God before them. *Selah* ⁴ But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. ⁵ He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them. ⁶ With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good. ⁷ For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

1. Save me...by your name...by your might: "The 'name' is the bearer of the power of revelation of the [gbwrh] ('heroic might') of God active on earth. It is in full independence the sign of Yahweh's relationship to the world and presence in it in his chosen people." [3]

3. insolent...ruthless: The singer's enemies do not "set God before them." They are like Jeremiah's persecutors in the first lesson and the worldly philosophers of the alternate first lesson.

4-5: The psalmist is confident that God will be faithful to his covenant, overcome the persecutors and put an end to them.

6-7: The singer will offer a freewill offering and a thanksgiving because Yahweh had delivered him/her from his/her enemies.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. ^{4:1} Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures....
⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God,

and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

13-17: "The small section 3:13-17 is completely unified: Whoever wishes to be wise cannot be contentious, for if he is contentious, his is an earthly and not a heavenly wisdom, since heavenly wisdom is peace-loving." [4]

18. sown in peace for those who make peace: "Blessed are the peacemakers..." (Matthew 5:9). Righteousness is the harvest of these, rather than disorder and wickedness which are the harvest selfish ambition.

4:1-2: Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from: Jesus taught: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: {15} there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile...." James identifies "cravings," wanting something you do not have, coveting something and not being able to obtain it, as the cause of conflict and dispute within in the church.

3. you ask wrongly to spend what you get on your pleasure: This needs to be kept together with the other passages that deal with "asking," such as Mark 11:24; Matthew 6:8, 7:7, 9:38 and so on. Jesus has promised we shall have everything for which we ask, but there is a qualification, we are not to ask wrongly, to spend what we get on our pleasure. Our asking is to be for the well-being of the community, especially those who are in need.

7b-8a: Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you: "The promise that the Devil will flee is found almost verbatim—and, more importantly it is repeated several times—in the *Test. XII* (*Test. Iss. 7.7*; *Test. Dan. 5.1*; *Test. Naph. 8.4*). In *Hermes*, also, there is a promise very similar in wording to that in *Jas*: "If then you resist him [i.e., the Devil], he will be conquered and flee from you in shame. In the *Test. XII* there are also parallels to the admonition in *Jas 4:8a*—for example *Test. Dan 6.2*.... The promise is stated reciprocally in our verse; this is also the case in the similar expression with the verb 'to return' in *Zech 1:3* and *Mal 3:7*...." [5]

8. Cleanse your hands: This demand is the sort of requirement made for participation in the rituals of worship in the Temple. Here it is applied to one's life. This is the sort of thing the Pharisees did; seeking to live their lives within the purity prescriptions of the Temple.

purify your hearts: The heart is the center of reason and intent; it is the "within" from which Jesus said evil things which defile us come.

"Those who have clean hearts and pure hands" may stand in the holy place and be blessed by Yahweh (Psalm 24:4-5). Psalm 58:2 describes the actions of those who have not cleansed their hearts and purified their hands.

double-minded: Those who have not yet become focused and single-minded followers of Jesus.

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

31. The Son of Man is to be betrayed...they will kill him...he will rise again: This is the second prediction of the Passion. The first prediction appeared in the Gospel last week. The

third prediction appears in Mark 10:32-34 which is omitted from the Revised Common Lectionary.

32. *they did not understand...and were afraid to ask*: After the mutual rebukes of Peter and Jesus in the Gospel last week, it is no wonder the disciples do not want to ask questions even though they do not understand what Jesus is talking about.

35. *Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all*: "Jesus' reversal of the expected pecking order challenges the assumptions of the values of his society in a very fundamental way." [6]

37. *Whoever welcomes one such child...welcomes me*: In this case welcoming a child is held up as an example of how Christians should act. Matthew 10:40-42 provides a more developed version. See also John 13:20; Luke 10:16 for other similar (or contrary) statements. Matthew 25:40 is an independent tradition of the basic principal that to receive the humble or needy is to receive Jesus, set in a description of judgment by the Son of Man.

in my name: To act in the name of another who is more powerful for the sake of one who is weak or humble is to act as a broker who has authority to act for his/her patron. [7] Jesus' name, as Yahweh's name in the Psalm, is his power in the world, and is effective when it is used to serve the weak, humble, oppressed or outcast.

not me but the one who sent me: Jesus acts as a broker for God's blessings. The way people treat Jesus, who is God's agent, is the way they treat God whom Jesus represents.

Reflection

In the lessons the contrast between the righteous person who seeks to do God's will and resists the wisdom of the world and the ungodly who seek pleasure, mock the righteous, and seek to destroy them. While the unrighteous seem to have the upper hand at times, the righteous depend on God that he will save them and punish their persecutors. Jesus knew that he would face the scorn of the worldly and suffer death at their hands.

Such worldly wisdom is attractive even to those who believe themselves to be righteous, who dispute over who is the greatest. Jesus calls us to live as he lived. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Like Yahweh's name, Jesus' name is a source of righteous power. A little child welcomed in "my name," Jesus said, is the same as welcoming Jesus himself. The way of the kingdom is not the way of the world.

In the Gospel Jesus rebukes the ambition of the disciples and their desire for recognition and preferment, and calls them to his goal of service to the lowest. The sayings about the first and the last (Mark 10:31 and others) also reflect Jesus' rejection of self interest as appropriate for the believer.

Hymns [8]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

508 E Come Down, O
126 D Where Charity and
232 P Your Word, O
414 II O God of Love,

363 II Christ is Alive!
122 G Love Consecrates the
230, 430, 422, 364

Prayers of the People [9]

O God of past, present, and future; we see in the texts of this day the wisdom of a woman, the call to humility in James and the struggle of the disciples. Call us away from disputes arising from our own pride and into faithful service rising out of the wisdom from above, the wisdom that comes from your Holy Spirit. Bless us with that wisdom. **God of Christ**

centred faith hear our prayer.

God of our congregations, bless those who celebrate their anniversaries, those who welcome or pray their farewells this day, those who rejoice at a new adventure and those who out of fear stand still. Bless by challenge and resource all of us. Be the God who teaches our mission pastors gathered as Canadian Mission Pastors this weekend in Toronto.
God of Christ centred faith hear our prayer.

Or [10]

Presider or deacon

As we welcome the poor in the name of Jesus, let us offer prayers to God for all in every danger and need.

Deacon or other leader

For this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For all peoples and their leaders, and for justice, mercy, and peace in the world.

For all who work for daily wages, and for their employers and managers.

For abundant fruits of the earth, and for safety from violent storms.

For the sick and the suffering, travelers and the victims of war, prisoners and refugees, and the dying and dead.

For our city and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

Lifting our voices with all creation, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Presider

God of mercy, hear the prayers we offer this day and send on us your wisdom from above, that our lives may be full of gentleness and understanding, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notes

[1] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, p. 368.

[2] David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979, p. 114.

[3] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, p. 515.

[4] Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, p. 208.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 226.

[6] Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 237.

[7] K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Studies and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, pp. 70—80, especially 79-80.

[8] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rc1b9900.txt>

[9] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray_b2.txt

[10] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>