

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON OUR SITUATION

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Jeremiah 5

¹ Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
look around and take note!
Search its squares and see
if you can find one person
who acts justly
and seeks truth—
so that I may pardon Jerusalem.

² Although they say, 'As the LORD lives',
yet they swear falsely.

³ O LORD, do your eyes not look for truth?
You have struck them,
but they felt no anguish;
you have consumed them,
but they refused to take correction.
They have made their faces harder than rock;
they have refused to turn back.

⁴ Then I said, 'These are only the poor,
they have no sense;
for they do not know the way of the LORD,
the law of their God.'

⁵ Let me go to the rich
and speak to them;
surely they know the way of the LORD,
the law of their God.'
But they all alike had broken the yoke,
they had burst the bonds.

⁶ Therefore a lion from the forest shall kill them,
a wolf from the desert shall destroy them.

A leopard is watching against their cities;
everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces—
because their transgressions are many,
their apostasies are great.

⁷ 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,
they committed adultery
and trooped to the houses of prostitutes.

⁸ They were well-fed lusty stallions,
each neighing for his neighbour's wife.

⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things?

says the LORD;
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this?

¹⁰ Go up through her vine-rows and destroy,
but do not make a full end;
strip away her branches,
for they are not the LORD's.

¹¹ For the house of Israel and the house of Judah
have been utterly faithless to me,

says the LORD.

¹² They have spoken falsely of the LORD,
and have said, 'He will do nothing.
No evil will come upon us,
and we shall not see sword or famine.'

¹³ The prophets are nothing but wind,
for the word is not in them.

Thus shall it be done to them!

¹⁴ Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts:

Because they have spoken this word,
I am now making my words in your mouth a fire,
and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them.

¹⁵ I am going to bring upon you
a nation from far away, O house of Israel,

says the LORD.

It is an enduring nation,
it is an ancient nation,
a nation whose language you do not know,
nor can you understand what they say.

¹⁶ Their quiver is like an open tomb;
all of them are mighty warriors.

¹⁷ They shall eat up your harvest and your food;
they shall eat up your sons and your daughters;
they shall eat up your flocks and your herds;
they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees;
they shall destroy with the sword
your fortified cities in which you trust.

¹⁸ But even in those days, says the LORD, I will not make a full end of you.

¹⁹ And when your people say, 'Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?' you shall say to them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours.'

²⁰ Declare this in the house of Jacob,
proclaim it in Judah:

²¹ Hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
who have eyes, but do not see,
who have ears, but do not hear.

²² Do you not fear me? says the LORD;
Do you not tremble before me?

I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
though they roar, they cannot pass over it.

²³ But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;

they have turned aside and gone away.

²⁴ They do not say in their hearts,
'Let us fear the LORD our God,
who gives the rain in its season,
the autumn rain and the spring rain,
and keeps for us
the weeks appointed for the harvest.'

²⁵ Your iniquities have turned these away,
and your sins have deprived you of good.

²⁶ For scoundrels are found among my people;
they take over the goods of others.

Like fowlers they set a trap;
they catch human beings.

²⁷ Like a cage full of birds,
their houses are full of treachery;
therefore they have become great and rich,

²⁸ they have grown fat and sleek.

They know no limits in deeds of wickedness;
they do not judge with justice
the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the needy.

²⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things?

says the LORD,
and shall I not bring retribution
on a nation such as this?

³⁰ An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:

³¹ the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule as the prophets direct;
my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when the end comes?

On Tuesday of last week (October 8), a member of our congregation sent me the following email message.

Now in its eighth day, the government shutdown has already kicked 7,000 children out of Head Start, and endangered 9 million women and children on WIC, including 2,000 newborns in Arkansas that [may not](#) receive nutritional formula if the shutdown persists.

Add women fleeing domestic violence and sexual assault to the list of vulnerable populations that the shutdown puts at greater risk. On Friday, a domestic violence program in DC called Survivors and Advocates For Empowerment with an intake center just blocks from the Capitol [announced](#) that it needed to raise \$19,000 in a week in order to provide shelter, emergency lock changes at victims' homes, staff for the hotline and court advocates during the shutdown.

That's because the federal agencies that administer funding for domestic violence programs have ceased operations, cutting shelters' access to cash and to the Grants Management System that they use to allocate resources and communicate with grant managers. Typically, shelters are reimbursed at the end of the month for the services they provided; any of September's expenses not paid out last week will remain on the books until Congress passes a budget resolution. Without federal funds, shelters are dependent on state governments and private donors, and many won't be able to stretch this money past the next payroll.

The painful realities that I've just read show what is happening across the United States. Allow me to speak about those realities from the perspective of the Scriptures. And from that perspective, what we find at Jeremiah 5 tells us that the "state of our union" is neither strong nor sound.

Jeremiah served as the spokesperson for God in the face of troubling events in his time and place. God was vexed about the way those in power behaved. Did you notice this passage in the text?

²³ But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.

²⁴ They do not say in their hearts,
‘Let us fear the LORD our God,
who gives the rain in its season,
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Like the politicians of our time, the politicians of Jeremiah's time weren't concerned about the impact of their conduct on women, children, the elderly, weak, and the poor. The rulers went about their business in comfort while the most vulnerable people in their society struggled to survive.

And the religious community went along with the rulers. *An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct ...* The people who usually make such a big deal about "family values" during election years haven't been criticizing the politicians who refused to enact legislation to keep the U.S. government running. Instead, Tony Perkins, leader of the Family Research Council, has called Senator Ted Cruz "the head of the GOP." As in the time of Jeremiah, many religious leaders appear to be sided with the oppressors.

I think Jeremiah's prophecy offers good guidance on how people of faith should behave.

Criticize those responsible for oppressive conditions and situations. Jeremiah was a social and political critic, make no mistake. He did not go along to get along. He was not interested in being invited to fundraisers, receptions, and other events put on by the political insiders of his time. Jeremiah spoke for God in denouncing the way the rulers of his time and place were acting. Jeremiah talked about the suffering of the poor, children, women, and others who were vulnerable.

I encourage you to criticize the politicians who are behind the government shutdown. Yes, criticize the politicians from Arkansas who are leaving Head Start programs unfunded because they object to the Affordable Care Act.

Criticize the politicians who dare to talk about caring about "family values" as they voted to strip funding for the food stamp program from the farm bill.

Criticize the fact that up to an estimated eight million people will get no help at all from the Affordable Care Act because 26 states have refused to expand their Medicaid programs as called for by that law. These people earn too little to buy subsidized coverage under the new insurance exchanges yet earn too much to qualify for Medicaid because they live in states that won't expand their programs.

As the New York Times reports in an editorial today, "Many of the excluded are poor children and their parents. Most, however, are childless adults, generally defined as those age 19 to 64 without dependent children. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, at least four million childless adults living near or below the poverty line will be denied coverage in the holdout states. Of those, 60 percent are men. They are part of a population of 26 million impoverished adults in the United States, of whom 16 million are children."

Shame on us if we do not criticize this injustice!

Protest the injustice! There are people affected by the government shutdown in many congregations. I hope New Millennium will join others in protesting the shutdown. On Tuesday of this week (October 15), I intend to join others at 1501 N. University and call on Congressman Tim Griffin of Arkansas to support passage of legislation to fund the U.S. government. I hope some of you can join us.

It is not enough for people of faith to shake our heads and wring our hands about the government shutdown. We must also raise our voices and boldly protest the actions of our rulers who have orchestrated the shutdown. All four Members of Congress from Arkansas joined the effort to shutdown the government. It is up to us to tell them they are wrong. It is our duty to demand that they change course.

Warn the rulers about the moral and theological meanings of our situation. The news media and political pundits have been treating the government shutdown as a contest between President Obama and

those within the Republican Party who oppose the Affordable Care Act. They are watching to see who will "win" and who will "lose" in this political contest.

But there is much more at stake than the political polling numbers of Congress, President Obama, or the politicians hoping to gain an advantage in some future political campaign. As the email message I quoted earlier shows, the government shutdown affects people who need help escaping and recovering from domestic violence. It affects children who need early childhood education and nutritious meals. It affects parents who need safe places for their children to be while they are looking for work, going to work, and doing their work.

It is sinful for social policies to oppress people who are vulnerable. Yes, I used that "sin" word. It is wicked for people in power to run roughshod over those who are vulnerable in order to score political points.

We should warn our rulers that God will not forever tolerate such hatefulness. God will not ignore it. God will not bless it. God will not uphold it. God does not condone it. No! God will punish it! Let us warn our rulers in the hope that they will repent from the wicked path they have chosen. Let us protest the unjust situation our rulers have created. Let us criticize them for deliberately manufacturing this situation.

And when people complain that our prophetic denunciations, criticism, and protests are out of character with the gospel of Jesus, tell them to look up the twenty-third chapter of the first book in the New Testament. Tell them to read verses 23 and 24. Here is what they will read at Matthew 23:23-24.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law:

justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Our situation calls for people to stand in the shoes of Jeremiah, Jesus, and other prophetic souls who have denounced political and social injustice. Let's take and make that stand in the power of God's grace and truth. Amen.