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Jeremiah & Lamentations and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction to Jeremiah and Lamentations

The fundamental issue in the book of Jeremiah is whether the people will be faithful to God in the midst of a difficult environment. Jeremiah is concerned with faithfulness in every aspect of life, including religion, family, military, government, agriculture and other spheres of life and work. We face a similar issue as workers today. We're called to be faithful to God in our work, but it's not easy to follow God's ways in many workplaces.

Jeremiah had to deal with the unfaithfulness to God of virtually all of the people. From kings and princes to priests and prophets, all were unfaithful to God. They still, on the whole, came to the temple, offered sacrifices and called on the name of the Lord, but failed to acknowledge God in the way they lived the rest of their lives (Jer. 7:1-11). This is not unlike those today who attend church on Sunday, place their offerings in the collection plate, but live the rest of their lives as though God were not involved.

Within the framework of faithfulness to God, Jeremiah offers a number of passages directly related to work and many other passages that deal with faithfulness to God in the wholeness of life, with clear implications for our work.

In his work-related oracles, Jeremiah did not introduce many new principles or commands. Instead, he accepted those revealed in earlier books of the Bible, especially in the Law of Moses. He then admonished God's people that they were not following God's law and warned that this will bring disaster upon them. When disaster came, he taught them how to live out God's law in their new — and bleak — situation. He encouraged them with God's promise that he would eventually restore their joy and prosperity if they would return to faithfulness.

Although Jeremiah lived about 600 years before the apostle Paul, what he said about work could easily be summed up in the words of Colossians 3:23, "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters."

Jeremiah and His Times (Jeremiah and Lamentations)

Most of us find our workplaces to be difficult, at least at times. One of the appeals of the book of Jeremiah is that the prophet's situation was extremely difficult. His workplace (among the governing elites of Judah) was corrupt and hostile to God's work. Jeremiah was constantly in danger. Yet he could see God's presence in the most difficult situations. His perseverance reminds us that perhaps we can learn how to experience God's presence in the most difficult workplaces.

Jeremiah grew up in the small town of Anathoth three miles northeast of Judah's capital, Jerusalem. While close geographically, the two communities were far apart culturally and politically. Jeremiah was born into the priestly line of Abiathar, but had little standing with the priests in Jerusalem. Solomon had removed Abiathar from authority centuries earlier (1 Kings 1:28 - 2:26) and replaced him with the priestly line of Zadok in Jerusalem.

When God called Jeremiah to be his prophet in Jerusalem, the prophet found himself in the midst of priests who did not accept his inherited priesthood. Jeremiah remained a suspicious and disliked outsider throughout his long career in Jerusalem. Those who face cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious or other prejudices in today's workplaces can identify with what Jeremiah faced every day of his life.

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET'S CALL AND JOB DESCRIPTION (JEREMIAH AND LAMENTATIONS)

In his early twenties, Jeremiah received God's call to be a prophet. The year was 626 B.C., the 13th year of King Josiah's reign (Jer. 1:2). His job description was to carry God's messages "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). God's messages given through Jeremiah were not gentle and affirming, for the Jews were coming disastrously close to abandoning their faithfulness to God. God was making an attempt, through Jeremiah, to call them back before disaster struck. Like an outside consultant hired to shake up the status quo in a business, he was called to disrupt business as usual in the kingdom of Judah. Part of his assignment was to oppose the idolatry and evil practices that had become part of worship in Judah.

His prophetic work began under the good king Josiah. It continued through Josiah's evil successors Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, and through the total destruction of Jerusalem under the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.). During his four decades as God's prophet in Jerusalem, Jeremiah was constantly derided, a laughing stock to the citizens of the city. In fact, he narrowly escaped several plots against his life (Jer. 11:21, 18:18, 20:1, 26:8, and chapters 38-39).

Jeremiah did not apply for the position of prophet and we do not read anywhere that he "accepted"

God's call to be his mouthpiece. This is in contrast to Isaiah who, after his vision of God's holiness and majesty, heard God ask, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah replied, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). When God informed Jeremiah that he was to be his mouthpiece in Jerusalem, the prophet protested his youth and inexperience (Jer. 1:6-7). But God appears to have overridden that protest by immediately giving him prophetic messages for the people (Jer. 1:11-16). God then followed those messages with instructions, a warning and a promise to the newly minted prophet:

But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I, for my part, have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land — against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. (Jer. 1:17-19)

Jeremiah knew from the beginning that his vocation as prophet was a tough one. His assignment would pit him against the whole nation of Judah from the king, princes and priests down to the people in the streets of the city. Nonetheless, he felt a clear calling from God to do this difficult work, and he trusted God to lead him through it.

An Overview of the Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah reflects the ever-worsening situation Jeremiah encountered. At various times, he had the unenviable tasks of challenging the religious hypocrisy, economic dishonesty and oppressive practices of Judah's leaders and those who followed them. Jeremiah was the voice of warning, the watchman who brings attention to hard truths that others would rather ignore.

Thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah...I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city. I will prepare destroyers against you....And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, "Why has the Lord dealt in this way with that great city?" And they will answer, "Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord their God." (Jer. 22:6-8)

He was the pessimist, who was in reality the realist. He was dismissed and ridiculed by false prophets who insisted that God would never let the city of Jerusalem fall to an invader.

Jeremiah's persistence in delivering his unwelcome message over four decades is remarkable. He

simply would not quit what seemed like an impossible assignment. How many of us would have walked away from such a situation? But one of the striking things about Jeremiah was his tenacious faithfulness in carrying out God's instructions in the face of unrelenting opposition and harsh criticism. While he has often been called the "weeping prophet" because he mourned the sins of his people and grieved his own lack of success in turning them back to Yahweh, Jeremiah never flinched in his confidence that God, who placed him where he was, would vindicate the truth of his message. The prophet could be faithful to his unwanted call because God had promised to be faithful to him. He served with God's promise in his pocket: "They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you" (Jer. 1:17-19).

In 605, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked Jerusalem and carried off 10,000 of the most able Jews (including Ezekiel and Daniel). At that point, Jeremiah's role was expanded to bring God's word to the Jews in exile (chapter 29). Among the captured Jews were false prophets who assured the exiles that Babylon's days were numbered and God would never allow Jerusalem to be captured. Jeremiah warned the exiles that they would be in Babylon for seventy years. Instead of acting on false hopes, the Jews there were to settle down in the land, build houses, plant gardens, marry off their children — and stop listening to the false prophets.

Meanwhile, the remaining inhabitants of Judah continued to refuse God's message. In 586 the Babylonians returned, sacked Jerusalem, pulled down its walls, destroyed its temple stone by stone, and carried off the remaining able-bodied people as captives. Once more, Jeremiah's role changed (chapters 40-45). God kept him in the destroyed city, now governed briefly by Gedaliah, to encourage the new ruler and help the people understand what had happened and how they were to go forward amid the destruction. Yet once more, despite his plea that they would hear God's message, they put their faith in an unfortunate military alliance with Egypt that Babylon quickly defeated. Jeremiah was taken to Egypt where he died. To the end, the prophet had to endure the rulers' stubborn refusal to heed God's messages and the ruinous outcomes that resulted. Prophets and workplace Christians alike may discover they do not have the ability to overcome every evil. Sometimes success means doing what you know is right even when everything turns out against you.

The final chapters (46-52) deal principally with the judgment God will bring upon all nations, not merely Judah. While God used Babylon against Judah, Babylon would not escape punishment either.

We cannot read Jeremiah without a vivid awareness of the disastrous results of the persistent faithlessness of Judah's leaders — the kings, the priests and the prophets. Their shortsightedness and willingness to believe the lies they told one another led to the complete destruction of the nation and its capital, Jerusalem. The work God gives us to do is serious business. Failing to follow God's word in our work can inflict serious damage on ourselves and those around us. Leading the people of Israel was the job of the king, priests and prophets. The national catastrophe that soon engulfed Israel was the direct

result of their poor decisions and failure to perform their duties under the Covenant.

Work-related Themes in the Book of Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is not organized as a treatise on work. Because of this, work-related topics appear at scattered places in the book, sometimes separated by many chapters, other times overlapping within a single chapter or passage. We will take these topics and passages, as much as possible, in the order they appear in Jeremiah.

We have seen that Jeremiah's overwhelming concern is whether people are acting in faithfulness to God. As we read, we can ask ourselves whether we see our work as being a significant area where God wants us to be faithful to him. If it is, then we can expect to experience God's presence in our work. Therefore, our faithfulness to God and God's presence in our work are linked themes to which we will frequently return.

Calling to Work (Jeremiah 1)

As we have seen, God prepared Jeremiah from before his birth for the work of a prophet (Jer. 1:5) and, at the right time, appointed him to that work (Jer. 1:10). Jeremiah responded faithfully to God's call to work, and God gave him the knowledge he needed to accomplish it (Jer. 1:17).

Although Jeremiah's profession was prophet, there is no reason to believe that the pattern of God's call, followed by faithful human response, followed by God's equipping is limited to prophets. God called and equipped Joseph (Genesis 39:1-6; 41:38-57), Bezalel and Oholiab (Exodus 36-39) and David (1 Samuel 16:1-13) for jobs as finance minister, construction chief, and king, respectively. In the New Testament, Paul says that God equips every faithful person for work that contributes to the good of the community (1 Corinthians 12-14). We can see in Jeremiah a pattern for all those who follow God faithfully in their work. As William Tyndale stated long ago:

There is no work better than another to please God: to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a [cobbler], or an apostle, all are one; to wash dishes and to preach are all one, as touching the deed, to please God.[\[1\]](#)

God knows how we — like Jeremiah — are knit together according to God's design. God leads us to employ our abilities and talents in godly ways in the world. We likely will not have the same calling as Jeremiah. Nor will our call necessarily be as direct, specific and unmistakable as Jeremiah's was. It would be a mistake to think that our calling to our work must resemble Jeremiah's. Perhaps God was

extraordinarily direct with Jeremiah because Jeremiah was so deeply reluctant to accept God's call. In any case, we can be confident that God will equip us for our work, whatever it is, if we will be faithful to him in it.^[2]

Goodness and Defilement of Work (Jeremiah 2)

Long before Jeremiah lived, God declared that work is good for people (Genesis 1-2). As we have noted [elsewhere](#), Jeremiah's method was to accept what God had revealed earlier, and call attention to how it is being lived out — or not lived out — in his day. In (chapter 2), Jeremiah called out how the people were perverting the goodness of work. God says to his people, "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination" (Jer. 2:7). He adds that the people "went after things that do not profit" (Jer. 2:8).

The Lord brought the people to a fertile land where their work would yield plentifully, but they rejected his presence by defiling his land. This is a standard expression of theological privilege in the Ancient Near East: God created the land and owns it, but has given the land to people who serve as his stewards of it.^[3] God gave his people the high privilege of working God's very own land, the central real estate of the cosmos. Although in Jeremiah's time the people worked God's land with contempt, the work itself was created by God to be good. "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you (Psalm 128:2). Working the land is necessary and, when done in accordance with God's ways, brings enjoyment and a deep sense of God's presence and love. "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24). But work became defiled when people ceased to work in faithfulness. The people defiled the land because they stopped following God and "went after worthless idols and became worthless themselves" (Jer. 2:5). When our work goes bad, it can be a diagnosis that our fellowship with God has dimmed. We may have ceased to spend time with God, perhaps because we busy working so hard. Yet we are often tempted to try to fix the problem by spending more time at tasks "that do not profit" (Jer. 2:8), neglecting fellowship with God even further. Our tasks profit little not because we aren't working long enough hours, but because without God in our work, it has become fruitless and inefficient. What would happen if we went to the heart of the matter and spent more time in fellowship with God? Imagine saying to the boss, "My performance hasn't been up to my highest standards the last 6 months, so I've decided to come in 30 minutes early every morning and spend half the extra time praying and the other half getting a head start on my work." Would that be more or less effective than simply working longer hours? Would the boss be pleased or aggravated that an employee would bring their deepest source of meaning and support into their daily work?

Acknowledgement of God's Provision (Jeremiah 5)

Jeremiah complained that “this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away” (Jer. 5:23). It is God’s land in which they are stewards, called to work it in the “fear” of the Lord. “Fear” (Hebrew *yare*) of God is often used in the Old Testament as a synonym for “living in response to God.” [4] But Jeremiah pointed out that they had no awareness of God as the source of the rains and the assurance of the harvests. “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’” (Jer. 5:24). Thus they are unfaithful, imagining themselves to be the source of their own harvests (cf. Jer. 17:5-6 above). As a result, they no longer experienced good harvests. “Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have deprived you of good” (Jer. 5:25).

This section is one of the many places in chapters 1-25 that speak of the “pollution” of the land: “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:30-31). In ancient times — when agriculture was the vast majority of the economy — the pollution of the land was not only an aesthetic loss, but the loss of productivity and plenty. It was also a rejection of the God who had given the land. Chris Wright has noted that the land — like a sacrament or a visible sign — is a thermometer of our relationship with God. [5] The rape of the land (whether by corporations, armies or individuals) denies God’s ownership and purpose in making us stewards of the Earth.

Material Success and Failure (Jeremiah 5)

Does God withhold material success from those who do evil in his sight? Jeremiah says what few modern Christians would dare to say: the *lack* of God’s provision might be a sign that your work is not approved by God. God withheld the rains from Judah because of the sin of its inhabitants. “Your iniquities have turned these [the rains] away, and your sins have deprived you of good” (Jer. 5:25). The prophet did *not* say that *all* cases of lack of provision or success are signs of God’s judgment. This is one of the open issues Jesus addressed almost 600 years later when he said that the man born blind was not blind as a sign of God’s judgment (John 9:2-3). Moreover, God even provides material good for those who are evil. God “causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous,” according to Jesus (Matthew 5:45). From the book of Jeremiah we can say only that material success depends on God’s provision, and that God may — at least at times — withhold material success from those who practice injustice and oppression. [6] The real question is, “Would it be a good thing for me or not, if God were to take away the incomes of the unjust and oppressors?”

Injustice, Greed, the Common Good and Integrity (Jeremiah 5-8)

INJUSTICE

Failing to acknowledge God as the source of good harvests, the people of Judah soon lost any sense of accountability to the Lord for how they worked. This led them to oppress and deceive the weak and defenseless:

They know no limits in deeds of evil; 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 (Jer. 5:28).

They have held fast to deceit, they have refused to return. I have given heed and listened, but they do not speak honestly; no one repents of wickedness, saying 'What have I done!' (Jer. 8:6)

What ought to have been done for the good of all in God's land was done solely for individuals' own profit and without fear of their God for whom they were called to work. So God withheld rain, and they soon learned that they were not the source of their own success. There are parallels here in the economic crisis of 2008 - 2010 and its relationship to compensation, honesty in lending and borrowing, and the rush to make a quick profit at the cost of putting others at risk. It is important not to be simplistic — today's major economic issues are too complex for generalized maxims drawn from Jeremiah. Yet there is a connection — complex though it is — between the economic well being of people and nations and their spiritual lives and values. **Economic well being is a moral issue.**

GREED

God calls people to a higher purpose than economic self-interest. Our highest end is our relationship with God, within which provision and material well-being are important, but limited, matters.

I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest (Jer. 2:2-3)

Jeremiah looked around and found that greed — unbridled pursuit of economic gain — had displaced the love of God, as the people's chief concern. "From the least to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely" (Jer. 8:10). No one escaped Jeremiah's

condemnation for their greed.^[7] The prophet was not partial to the rich or the poor, the small or the great. We see him running “to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem” to find even “one person who acts justly and seeks the truth” (Jer. 5:1). First he asked the poor, but they are found to be hardened (Jer. 5:4). Then Jeremiah turned to the rich, “but they all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds” (Jer. 5:5).

As Walter Brueggemann states, “All persons, but especially the religious leaders, are indicted for their unprincipled economics.... This community has lost every norm by which to evaluate and assess its rapacious and exploitative greed.”^[8] The people’s hearts were inclined toward getting rich rather than fearing God and loving others. Whether done by the rich (the king, Jer. 22:17) or the poor, such greed aroused divine wrath.

THE COMMON GOOD

God’s intention is that we live and work for the common good.^[9] Jeremiah criticized the people of Judah for failing to care for others who could not offer some economic benefit in return, including orphans and the needy (Jer. 5:28), aliens, widows, and innocents (Jer. 7:6). This is above and beyond the accusations he made against breaking specific elements of the Law, such as stealing, murder, adultery, swearing falsely, and worshiping false gods (Jer. 7:9). Jeremiah made this charge against particular individuals (“scoundrels are found among my people,” Jer. 5:26), against all individuals (“all you people of Judah,” Jer. 7:2), against the leaders of business (the rich, Jer. 5:27) and government (judges, Jer. 5:28), against cities (Jer. 4:16-18, 11:12, 26:2, et al.) and against the nation as a whole (“This evil people,” Jer. 13:10). Every element of society, individually and institutionally, had broken God’s covenant.

Jeremiah’s insistence that work and its products serve the common good is an important foundation for business ethics and personal motivation. Whether an action contributes to the common good is just as important as the whether the action is legal. It may be legal to conduct business in ways that detract from the common good, but that does not make it legitimate in God’s reckoning. For example, most companies are part of a supply chain leading from raw materials to parts to assemblies to finished goods to the distribution system to consumers. It may be possible for one player in the chain to gain power over the others, squeeze their margins, and capture all the profits. But even if this is done by legal means, is it good for the industry and the community? Is it even sustainable over the long term? Or it may be legal for a union to preserve benefits for current workers by negotiating away benefits for new workers. But if the benefits are needed by *all* workers, does this really serve the common good? These are complex issues, and there is no rigid answer to be found in Jeremiah. The relevance of Jeremiah is that the people of Judah, for the most part, thought they were living according to the Law, including presumably its many economic/workplace regulations.^[10] But God still found them unfaithful in their workplace and economic activity. They followed the regulations of Law, but not its

spirit. Jeremiah says that doing so ultimately prevented the whole people from enjoying the fruit of their labor in God's land.

Like the people of Judah, we all have chances either to hoard or to share the benefits we receive from our jobs. Some companies concentrate bonuses and stock options in the hands of senior executives. Others distribute them broadly among all workers. Some people try to take full credit for every accomplishment they had a hand in. Others give credit to co-workers as liberally as possible. Again, there are complex considerations involved, and we should avoid making snap judgments of others. But we could ask ourselves a simple question. Does the way I handle money, power, recognition and the other rewards of my job benefit primarily me, or does it contribute to the good of my colleagues, my organization and my society?

Likewise, organizations may lean either towards greed or towards the common good. If a business exploits monopoly power to extract high prices or uses deception to sell its products, then it is acting on greed for money. If a government exercises power to promote the interests of itself over its neighbors or of its leaders over its citizens, then it is acting on greed for power.

Jeremiah takes a broad understanding of the common good and its opposite, greed. Greed is not restricted to gains that violate some particular law. Instead, it includes any kind of gain that ignores the needs and circumstances of others. According to Jeremiah, no one in his day was free of such greed. Is it any different today?

INTEGRITY

The word "integrity" means living life according to a single, consistent set of ethics. When we follow the same ethical precepts at home, at work, at church and in the community, we have integrity. When we follow different ethical precepts in different spheres of life, we lack integrity.

Jeremiah complains about the lack of integrity he sees in the people of Judah. They seem to believe that they can violate God's ethical norms in work and daily life, then come to the temple, act holy and be saved from the consequences of their actions.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord. (Jer. 7:9-11)

Jeremiah is calling them to lives of integrity. Otherwise their piety means nothing to God. “I will cast you out of my sight,” God says (Jer. 7:15). Our hearts are not right with God just because we go to the temple. Our relationship with him is reflected in our actions, in what we do every day, including what we do at work.

Faith in God’s Provision (Jeremiah 8-16)

We see in Jeremiah 5 that the people did not acknowledge God’s provision. If the people did not acknowledge God as the ultimate source of the good things they already had, how much less would they have faith to depend on God to provide for them in the future? John Cotton, the Puritan theologian, says that faith needs to underlie everything we do in life, including our work or vocation:

A true believing Christian...lives in his vocation by his faith. Not only my spiritual life but even my civil life in this world, and all the life I live, is by the faith of the Son of God: He exempts no life from the agency of his faith. [\[11\]](#)

Here again lay the fundamental failure of the people of Judah in Jeremiah’s day, their lack of faith. Sometimes Jeremiah expressed it as not “knowing” the Lord, a term of fidelity. [\[12\]](#) At other times he put it in the terms of failing to “hear” — to listen, obey, even care about what God has said. [\[13\]](#) At still other times, he termed it a lack of “fear.” But all of these are simply a lack of faith — a living, working faith in who God is and what he does or says. This lack bled into the people’s view of work, leading to them blatantly violating the law of God and exploiting others for their own gain.

The great irony is that by depending on their own actions in place of faithfulness to the Lord in their work, the people ultimately failed to find enjoyment, fulfillment and the good of life. Jeremiah writes that God will eventually deal with their faithlessness, and “then death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family” (Jer. 8:3). The laws of God are aimed at our own good and are given to keep us focused on our proper purpose. [\[14\]](#) When we set God’s laws aside because they hinder us from taking care of ourselves in our own way, we depart from God’s design for us becoming our true selves. When we work in such a way that we are dependent only on ourselves — and especially when we break God’s laws in order to do so — work fails to achieve its proper end. We deny God’s presence in the world. We think we know better than God how to get the things we want. So we work according to our ways, not his. But our ways do not yield us the good things God intends to give us. As we experience this lack, we engage in increasingly desperate acts of self-interest. We cut corners, we oppress others and we hoard what little we have. Now we are not only failing to receive what God wants to give us, we are also failing to produce anything of value for ourselves or others. If others in the community or the nation act the same, we are soon fighting one another in pursuit of less-and-less

satisfying products of our labor. We have become the opposite of who we are designed to be as the people of God. Now we “know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts” (Jer. 2:19).

The theme of the people abandoning God, losing faith in his provision, and oppressing each other in consequence is repeated at intervals through chapters 8 to 16. “They refuse to know me, says the Lord” (Jer. 9:6). Therefore their prosperity fades away, “the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone” (Jer. 9:10). As a consequence, they try to make up the loss by cheating one another. “They all deceive their neighbors and no one speaks the truth....Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit!” (Jer. 9:5-6).

Work Within a Balanced Life (Jeremiah 17)

Jeremiah also turned his attention to the rhythm of work and rest. As always, the prophet began with God’s earlier self-revelation; in this case, the Sabbath rest:

On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. (Genesis 2:2)

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. (Exodus 20:8-10)

Jeremiah, however, encountered a people who refused to honor the Sabbath:

Thus says the Lord, “Take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath, or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors.” Yet they did not listen or incline their ear; they stiffened their necks and would not hear nor receive instruction (Jer.17:21-23).

Earlier in chapter 17, God, speaking through Jeremiah, said: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places in the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not

cease to bear fruit” (Jer. 17:5-8).

In essence, Jeremiah was repeating his point about faith in God’s provision, which we discuss above in chapters 8-16, with the Sabbath as a case in point. By depending on ourselves instead of being faithful to God, we come to believe that we cannot afford to take time to rest. There is too much work to do if we are to succeed in our careers, in our households and in our pastimes, so we break the Sabbath to get it done. But according to Jeremiah, if we trust in ourselves and make “mere flesh” our strength, it will lead to “desert” as we push ourselves 24/7 relentlessly to achieve. We “shall not see when relief comes.” In contrast, if we trust in the Lord, we will “not cease to bear fruit.” Ignoring our need for balance between work and rest is ultimately counter-productive.

Blessing the Wider Society Through Work (Jeremiah 29)

In Jeremiah chapter 29, the prophet draws attention to God’s intention that his people's work should bless and serve the communities around them, and not only the people of Israel.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters...multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:4-7)

This theme was already present in earlier chapters, as in God’s command not to oppress the aliens living within Judah’s borders (Jer. 7:6, 22:3). And it is a part of the Covenant to which Jeremiah keeps calling Judah. “Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (Genesis 18:18). Nonetheless, false prophets in exile assured the exiled Jews that God’s favor would always rest on Israel, to the exclusion of its neighbors. Babylon would fall, Jerusalem would be saved, and the people would soon return home. Jeremiah attempted to counteract that false proclamation with God’s true word to them: you will be in exile in Babylon for seventy years (Jer. 29:10).[\[15\]](#)

Babylon would be this generation’s only home. God called the people to work the land there diligently: “build houses...plant gardens and eat what they produce.” The Jews were meant to flourish there as the people of God, even though it was a place of punishment and repentance for them. Moreover, the Jews’ success in Babylon was tied to Babylon’s success. “Pray to the Lord on [the city’s] behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). This call to civic responsibility twenty-six hundred years

ago is valid today. We are called to work toward the prosperity of the entire community, not merely for our own limited interests. Like the Jews of Jeremiah's day, we are far from perfect. We may even be suffering for our faithlessness and corruption. Nonetheless we are called and equipped to be a blessing to the communities in which we live and work.

God called his people to use their various job skills to serve the surrounding community. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (Jer. 29:7). It could be argued this passage doesn't prove that God has any real care for the Babylonians. He simply knows that as captives, the Israelites cannot prosper unless their captors do too. But as we have seen, caring for those beyond the people of God is an inherent element of the Covenant, and it appears in the earlier teaching of Jeremiah. House builders, gardeners, farmers and workers of all kinds were explicitly called to work for the good of the whole society in Jeremiah 29. God's provision is so great that even when his people's homes are destroyed, families deported, lands confiscated, rights violated and peace shattered, they will have enough to prosper themselves and bless others. But only if they depend on God; hence the admonition to prayer in Jer. 29:7. In light of Jeremiah 29, it is difficult to read 1 Corinthians 12-14 and the other gifts passages in the New Testament as applying only to the church or to Christians. God calls and equips his people to serve the whole world.

God's Presence Everywhere (Jeremiah 29)

This should be no surprise, of course, because "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). God's presence is no longer to be found only in Jerusalem or Judah, but even in the enemy's capital city. We can be a blessing wherever we are because God is with us wherever we are. There in the heart of Babylon, God's people were called to work as in the presence of God. It is hard for us today to understand how shocking this would be to the exiles, who had thought up until then that God was fully present only in the temple in Jerusalem. Now they were told to live in God's presence without the temple and far from Jerusalem.

The feeling of exile is familiar to many working Christians. We are used to finding God's presence in church, among his followers. But in the workplace, working alongside both believers and nonbelievers, we may not expect to find God's presence. This doesn't mean that these institutions are necessarily unethical or hostile to Christians, but simply that they have agendas different from working in God's presence. But God is present nonetheless, always looking to reveal himself to those who will recognize him there. Settle into the land: plant gardens and eat what they produce, work and take home your pay. God is there with you.[\[16\]](#)

Blessing for All Peoples (Jeremiah 29)

This brings us to an expanded notion of the common good. Pray for Babylon because Israel is intended to be a blessing for all humanity, not just for herself: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Now in the moment of utter defeat comes the time they are called upon to bless even their enemies. This blessing includes material prosperity, as Jer. 29:7 makes clear. How ironic that in chapters 1-25, God withheld his peace and prosperity from Judah because of their faithlessness; yet by chapter 29, God wanted to bless Babylon with peace and prosperity even though the Babylonians had no faith in the God of Judah. Why? Because Israel’s proper end is to be a blessing for all nations.

This immediately calls into doubt any scheme designed for the special benefit of Christians. As part of our witness, Christians are called to compete effectively in the marketplace. We cannot run subpar businesses, expecting God to bless us while we underperform. Christians need to compete with excellence on a level playing field if we are to bless the world. Any trade organization, preferred supplier relationship, hiring preference, tax or regulatory advantage, or other system designed to benefit only Christians is not blessing the city. During the Irish famines in the mid-1800s, many Anglican churches provided food only to those who would convert from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. The ill will this created still reverberates 150 years later, and this was merely the self-dealing of one Christian sect against another. Imagine the much greater damage caused by Christians discriminating against non-Christians, which fills the pages of history from antiquity to this day.

The work of Christians in their faithfulness to God is intended for the good of everyone, beginning with those who are not God’s people, and extending through them to God’s people themselves. This is perhaps the most profound economic principle in Jeremiah, that working for the good of others is the only reliable way to work for your own good. Successful business leaders understand that product development, marketing, sales and customer support are effective when they put the customer first. Here, surely, is a best practice that can be recognized by all working people, whether Christ-followers or not.

The Goodness of Work Restored (Jeremiah 30-33)

For twenty-three years, Jeremiah prophesied the coming destruction of Jerusalem (from God’s case against Judah in chapter 2 through chapter 28).^[17] Then in chapters 30-33, the prophet looked forward to the restoration of God’s kingdom. He described it in terms of the joy of work without the defilement of sin:

Again I will build you and you shall be built, O virgin Israel.^[18] Again you shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you

will plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.' [19] (Jer. 31:4-6)

The overall frame of Jeremiah's prophecies is sin, then exile, then restoration, as we see here. While restoration in Judah was still far off, [20] the prophet gave a reason for the hope promised to the exiles in 29:11. In the restored world, the people would still work, but while in the past their work led to futility, now they would enjoy the fruit. The restored people would have lives of work, enjoyment, feasting and worship all tied into one. The picture of planting, harvesting, playing music, dancing and enjoying the harvest depicts the pleasure of work in faithfulness to God.

Faithfulness to God is not a side issue, but the heart of enjoying work and the things produced by work. The "new covenant" described in Jer. 31:31-34 and 32:37-41 repeated the importance of faithfulness.

The days are surely coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. (Jer. 31:31-34)

In one stroke we see a restored world: work enjoyed by the people of God as it always ought to have been, with hearts that are faithful to the law of the Lord. The people will be restored to what they always ought to have been, working for the common good because of their experience of God's presence in every aspect of life. Robert Carroll remarks, "The rebuilt community is one in which work and worship are integrated." [21] We may not expect that this will be fully true for us now because we are still in a world of sin. But we can gain glimpses of this reality now.

Slaves Set Free (Jeremiah 34)

One of the final new commands from God in Jeremiah is the renunciation of slavery (Jer. 34:9). The Law of Moses required Hebrew slaves to be set free after six years of service (Exodus 21:2-4, Deuteronomy 15:12). Adults could sell themselves, and parents could sell their children, into servitude for six years. After that they must be released (Leviticus 25:39-46). In theory, it was a more humane system than the

serfdom or chattel slavery known in the modern era. But it was abused by masters who simply ignored the requirement to set slaves free at the end of the term, or who continually re-enrolled slaves into a lifetime of consecutive six-year terms (Jer. 34:16-17).

Jeremiah 34:9 is remarkable because it called for an immediate release of all Hebrew slaves, without regard to how long they had been enrolled. And more dramatically, it provided that “No one should hold another Judean in slavery.... so that they would not be enslaved again” (Jer. 34:9-10). In other words, it was the abolition of slavery, at least with respect to Jews having Jewish slaves. It is not clear whether this was meant to be a permanent abolition, or whether it was a response to the extreme circumstances of impending military defeat and exile. In any case, it was not enforced for long, and the masters soon re-enslaved their former slaves. But it is a breathtaking economic advance — or it would have been if it had stuck.

From the beginning, God had prohibited life-long, involuntary slavery among Jews because “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you” (Deuteronomy 15:15). If God stretched out his mighty arm to set a people free, how could he abide them being enslaved again, even by others of the same people? But in Jeremiah 34, God added a new factor: “granting a release to your neighbors and friends” (Jer. 34:17). That is, the humanity of the slaves — referred to by terming them “neighbors and friends” — demanded that they be released. They deserved freedom because they were — or should have been — beloved members of the community. This went beyond religious or racial classification, for people of different religions and races could be friends and neighbors to one another. It had nothing to do with being descendants of the particular nation — Israel — that God set free out of Egypt. Slaves should be set free simply because they were humans, just like their masters and the communities around them.

This underlying principle still applies. The millions of people still enslaved in the world urgently need to be released simply because of their humanity. Moreover *all* workers — not just those bound to their work in slavery — should be treated as “neighbors and friends.” This principle applies as strongly against inhumane working conditions, violation of workers’ civil rights, unjust discrimination, sexual harassment, and the host of lesser ills as much as it does against slavery, *per se*. Anything we wouldn’t subject our neighbors to, anything we wouldn’t tolerate happening to our closest friends, we shouldn’t tolerate in our companies, organizations, communities and societies, either. To the degree Christians shape the environment in our workplaces, we are under the same mandate as the people of Judah in Jeremiah’s time.

Taking a Stand at Work (Jeremiah 38)

The bulk of the rest of Jeremiah describes Jeremiah’s trials as a prophet (chapters 35-45), his oracles

against the nations (chapters 46-51) and the narrated fall of Jerusalem (chapter 52). One passage stands out with relation to work, the story of Ebed-melech. The narrative is simple: Jeremiah preached to the people as Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonian army. His message was that the city would fall and anyone who would go out and surrender to the Babylonians would live. The officials of Judah did not take this to be a properly motivational sermon. With the king's permission, they threw Jeremiah into a cistern where, presumably, he would either die of hunger during the siege or drown during the next rain (Jer. 38:1-6).

Then a surprising thing happened. An immigrant named Ebed-melech, a servant in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, Ebed-melech went out of the palace and said to him, "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into a cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." Then the king commanded Ebed-melech, "Take three men with you from here and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies" (Jer. 38:7-10).

The turn of the king's decision most likely showed a simple apathy in the matter. (Though God can use a king's apathy as much as a king's activity.) It is the nameless Gentile slave (Ebed-melech simply means "slave of the king") who stands out as faithful.^[22] Although his immigration status and racial difference made him a vulnerable worker, his faithfulness to God led him to blow the whistle on injustice in his workplace. As a result, a life was saved. An anonymous cog in the wheel made a life-and-death difference.

Ebed-melech's action on the prophet's behalf illustrated Jeremiah's message that faithfulness to God outweighs all other workplace considerations. Ebed-Melech could not know in advance whether the king would act justly, or whether going outside the chain of command would be a career-limiting move (or a life-ending move, given what happened to Jeremiah). It appears that he trusted God to provide for him, however the king might respond. So Ebed-melech is praised by God. "I will surely save you...because you have trusted in me, says the Lord" (Jer. 39:18).

Jeremiah the Poet at Work: Lamentations

While we do not have internal proof that the Lamentations were written by Jeremiah, rabbinic tradition, the parallel themes in Jeremiah and Lamentations, and the eye-witness character of the laments point to Jeremiah as the likely author of these five poems of lament.^[23] Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, have been totally destroyed. After a two-year siege, the Babylonians have captured the city, torn down its walls, looted and destroyed God's temple, and taken the able-bodied citizens into exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah is among the few survivors left in the land, living among those who had clung to life through the famine and watched starving children die, as false prophets continued to mislead the people about God's purposes. The book of Lamentations captures the desolation of the city and the despair of the people at the same time that it underscores the reason for this desolation.

Here we see the poet at work. In five tightly structured poems, he uses powerful images of the carnage in the city as God allows the punishment of his people for their vicious sins. But in spite of the emotional depth of his grief, the artist captures the devastation in a controlled poetic form. This is art in the service of emotional release. While a discussion of "work" doesn't often include the work of artists, these poems force us to acknowledge the power of art to encapsulate the highs and lows of human experience.

The artist embeds a note of hope in this despair, anchoring the future in the goodness of God:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. (Lamentations 3:21-25)

For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone (Lam. 3:31-33).

Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins? Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven (Lam. 3:39-41).

In the destruction of Jerusalem, the innocent suffered alongside the guilty. Children starved and faithful prophets like Jeremiah bore the same misery meted out to those whose sins brought an end to the city. This is the reality of life in a fallen world. When corporations collapse under the weight of bad decisions, gross negligence or outright illegal practices, innocent people lose their jobs and pensions along with those who caused the debacle. At the same time, for the Christian in the workplace, the inequities in this life are not eternal. God reigns and his compassion never fails (Psalm 136). It's not easy to hang onto that divine reality in the midst of sinful systems and unprincipled leaders. But Lamentations tells us, "The Lord will not reject forever." We walk by faith in the living God whose faithfulness to us will not fail.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Quoted in Parker Society Vol. 42, (Cambridge University Press, 1841), 102.
- [2] See Theology of Work Key Topic #2, “Calling,” at www.theologyofwork.org.
- [3] Some theologians refer to God’s people as “tenants” in the land. See for example, Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 109-110. However, tenancy is not the same as stewardship, which is the clearer implication of Genesis 1:28.
- [4] Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), entry 907.
- [5] Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* NIBC (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996).
- [6] We must be very careful not to take the short step of inferring an absolute cause-and-effect relationship between our sin and God’s punishment in all situations of deprivation. Are the poor deprived because they are evil? Jeremiah would say that the poor are deprived because evil people oppress them.
- [7] See, e.g., Jer 2:30-32, 3:25; 7:21-24; 11:7-8; 22:21.
- [8] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 72-73.
- [9] The Steering Committee of the Theology of Work Project was not of one mind about using the term “common good” to describe Jeremiah’s insistence that work and products of work should benefit people in society generally (or at least *certain* people in society) rather than only the workers or those holding power.
- The majority favored using the term “common good” to describe Jeremiah’s point because its plain-English meaning seems to describe the situation accurately and succinctly. Moreover, the term is used in major English translations of the Bible, such as the NIV, NASB, RSV and NRSV; for example, in Nehemiah 2:18 and 1 Corinthians 12:7.
- The minority did not favor using the term because it does not appear in any English translation of Jeremiah, nor is there any Hebrew term in Jeremiah that roughly corresponds to it. If the majority is correct that it describes Jeremiah’s point, it must be said the Jeremiah himself doesn’t describe it that way himself. Moreover, the term has acquired a specialized meaning in certain schools of

philosophy, theology and politics that goes far beyond any plain-English meaning that might pertain in Jeremiah. Using the term can give the erroneous impression that such philosophical-theological-political schools of thought are taught, per se, by Jeremiah.

In accordance with the majority opinion, we have used the term in this article. However, we do not mean to take a particular political position or to read post-Jeremiah philosophy or theology into the text of Jeremiah. Rather, we use it simply to refer to Jeremiah's proclamation that God intends each person's work to contribute not only toward meeting their own needs, but toward meeting the needs of others as well.

- [10] In contrast to some of the other prophets (e.g., Ezekiel 45:9-12), Jeremiah does not suggest that merchants he came in contact with were using unjust weights and measures, which would have broken the Law as found in Leviticus 19:36.
- [11] Quoted in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 26.
- [12] E.g., Jer. 2:8; 4:22; 5:4-5; 8:7, 9; 3:6; 22:16. "When Jeremiah talks...about the knowledge of Yahweh, he is talking about compliance with covenantal stipulations," in Jack R. Lundbom, "Jeremiah, Book of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 718b. See Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of *Yada'*," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 181 (1966), 31-37.
- [13] E.g., Jer. 7:23-28; 11:7-8; 32:23; 40:3; 43:3, 7; 44:23.
- [14] Thomas Aquinas noted: "Now the extrinsic principle inclining to evil is the devil....But the extrinsic principle moving to good is God, who both instructs us by means of His law, and assists us by His grace....Now the first principle in practical matters...is the last end: and the last end of human life is bliss or happiness....Consequently the law must regard principally the relationship to happiness" (*Summa Theologica* Ia IIae, q.90, pro. and a.2.co).
- [15] Note that this often-quoted verse is about a people in exile because of their sin; the future and hope promised will not come until the seventy years of exile have purged the survivors of the sin that took them there. It is only at the end of the seventy years that the people will be ready to seek God: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord...and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile" (29:13-14).
- [16] Even today many Christians cannot imagine that God is both near and far. As finite human beings limited to time and space, we think of God in terms of distance from us. It is difficult for many to believe that God is really near.

- [17] The prophet attacked “the false pen of the scribes” (Jer. 8:8), the greed and deceit, saying “‘peace, peace’, when there is no peace” (Jer. 8:10-11). He noted that Judah’s gods were as many as Judah’s towns (Jer. 11:13). In 20:3-6, he prophesied the Babylonian exile after being beaten and put in stocks in Jerusalem; chapter 21 is a clear prophecy of coming destruction with one last chance to do justice and deliver the oppressed (Jer. 21:12). In chapter 25, the refrain is that “the work of their hands” is evil, and God will use evil people [Babylon] as a sword against evil people throughout the earth (showing the destruction of all evil nations). All the while Jeremiah begged people not to listen to lying prophecies (Jer. 27), Hananiah predicted that Babylon would return the exiles and all the loot within two years.
- [18] The naming here (“virgin Israel”) is a statement of renewal. Contrast it with Jer. 2:23-25, 33; 3:1-5, etc.
- [19] Or Jer. 32:15: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (cp. Jer. 32:43-44, 33:12).
- [20] This oracle is tied to the cultic celebration and worship of God (Jer. 31:6), which at this point in the book is a vital issue because the people had been thrust out of the house of God and failed in their worship (cf. Jer. 11:15). For the false approach to worship, see esp. Jer. 7:1-15. Jeremiah 31:4-6 is not intended as a catalog of good kinds of work, but it is worth noting that music-making and dancing are affirmed and honored.
- [21] Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1986), 590.
- [22] “Ebed-melech is a rare man of character in a book filled with evil people and evil behavior. It is ironic that the one man whom we are told trusted God is not an Israelite, but an Ethiopian.” Tom Parker, “Ebed-Melech as Exemplar,” in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen*, ed. John Goldingay (NY/London: T&T Clark, 2007), 258.
- [23] The construction of these five poems of lament is intricate. Hebrew poetry structurally depends on meter and parallelism rather than on rhyme. Note that chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 each have 22 verses and, except for chapter 5, they are acrostic: verses begin in order with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 is a kind of triple-acrostic with 66 verses instead of 22 (so that vv 1-3 begins with *aleph*, vv 4-6 begin with *beth*, etc.).