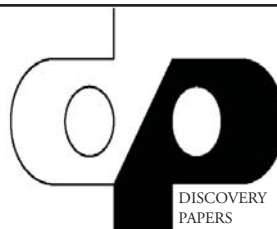


WILL THE BAD GUYS GET WHAT'S COMING TO THEM?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 50-51
16th Message
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I have a habit of showing movie clips to introduce my sermons as a way to get us to think about how our culture engages with Bible themes. We need to think about the culture in which we live, but movies aren't the only way to do that. This morning I want us to look at a different kind of cultural media from a different culture.

This particular media is a bit older than most of the movies I show. It's about 460 years old to be exact. But it served a very similar function that movies in our culture do today and it is just as central to defining a culture. This is a painting, completed by the artist Michelangelo in the year 1541. This painting covered the wall directly behind the altar of the most important church in all of Christianity at the time, the Sistine Chapel. This is what worshippers would see while they sat in worship. As I put up this image, I want you to describe it to me in one word.

[*The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo]

The title of this painting is *The Last Judgment*. And this is the dominant image that people would be looking toward as they entered into worship of God; the same God whom we worship, by the way. But most of us don't find this image very worshipful. To most of us, this image is somewhat frightening, even chaotic. Why is that? What has changed in the last 500 years that has caused us to no longer want an image like this, welcoming us into worship?

Well, to answer my own question, I would suggest that we, as a culture, aren't very comfortable with the idea of judgment. We'll talk more about how this plays itself out in some specific ways, but I think most people can agree that people these days aren't keen on the idea of being judged. Not until our mechanic rips us off by finding a bunch of extra work to do on our car that costs an extra few hundred dollars. Then, all of a sudden, we're interested in judgment and we want it to come as fast as possible. So on the one hand, we don't like to think about judgment, but on the other hand, we can be quick to want it.

This morning we are finishing up our sixteen week series in the book of Jeremiah. Today's sermon is the last of these four weeks and the last of the series as a whole. Remember, Jeremiah has been predicting that Babylon is going to destroy Jerusalem because of the sin of God's people. But if you are living in Jerusalem during this time, you might ask the same question that you'd ask if your mechanic rips you off. What about these bad guys? Are the Babylonians going to destroy the holy city of God and then just go about their merry way? Last week we saw that sometimes we get dumped on for doing the right thing. But is that the end of the story? When Babylon destroys our city or we get thrown into a cistern of mud, we want to know whether the bad guys are going to get punished. Will the bad guys get what's coming to them? Will justice be done?

Well, it just so happens that Jeremiah deals with this issue. In fact, he deals with it at some length. Jeremiah chapters 46-51 deal with the bad guys and what's going to happen to them. That's over 20% of the entire book. In fact, most of the other prophetic books have very similar sections. Scholars call them "Oracles Against the Nations." Jeremiah deals with ten different nations in these six chapters. So any journey with Jeremiah would be incomplete if it didn't include something about the fate of the bad guys.

What we're going to do this morning is look at one of those messages. We'll be looking at the message to the nation of Babylon because it is the

climax of this section and because Babylon has been the primary enemy throughout this book. This message to Babylon starts at the beginning of chapter 50 and runs for the next hundred verses through the end of chapter 51. I hope you're prepared to listen to a judgment oracle for the next ten minutes ... No, I won't read the whole passage, but I'll be pulling out selected sections to help us get a feel for what this judgment oracle is all about.

We're going to be moving pretty quickly through a lot of different passages and I'm hoping we'll see a fuller picture of who God is. I'm convinced that because we are uncomfortable with it, we have forgotten a pretty significant part of who God is. But everything we do in this life is based on who we understand God to be. How you think about your job, your friends, your family, yourself; how you think about everything. So if there is a piece we've lost, we need to recover it. I think we'll find that if we really have lost this part of God, then we've lost a major piece of the gospel. So hang with me and let's find out whether the bad guys are going to get what's coming to them.

God Will Judge the Bad Guys

Let's start with the beginning of this passage to see what God is going to say to Babylon.

Jeremiah 50:1-3

This is the word the LORD spoke through Jeremiah the prophet concerning Babylon and the land of the Babylonians: "Announce and proclaim among the nations, lift up a banner and proclaim it; keep nothing back, but say, 'Babylon will be captured; Bel will be put to shame, Marduk filled with terror. Her images will be put to shame and her idols filled with terror.'

"A nation from the north will attack her and lay waste her land. No one will live in it; both men and animals will flee away."

Starting in chapter 46, Jeremiah works his way through Egypt, Damascus, Edom, Moab, Ammon and other nations explaining how God will judge them for their evil deeds. Finally, in verse 50 we get to Babylon. Remember, if you're living in Jerusalem, these are the guys that are camped outside your gates. So for you, these next two chapters come as really good news. You want the Babylonians to be judged. You might have even started to wonder about God and whether He was really all that fair. So this comes as good news to you. You can breathe a sigh of relief. God will judge the bad guys. The Babylonians will get it.

So if you're living in Jerusalem in the 6th century BC, this is good news. Undoubtedly, this is good news, but what about for us and half millennia later? We have to ask an important question. Is this good news to us? We live in a very different condition than these people living in Jerusalem. We aren't being attacked. We live pretty safe lives. For the most part, we're far more concerned with protection than judgment. The gospel is supposed to be good news. What about this part of who God is? Is this good news for us?

I'm convinced that this doesn't sound like good news to most of us. Maybe when someone hurts us, we want them to get hurt back, but then we feel really bad about it. And if it doesn't sound like good news, then

it can be really hard to love a God who judges bad guys. So we need to find out whether this is good news. So why is it good news if the bad guys get judged?

Well, let's see what God says about why it is good news for these people in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 51:34-35

“Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar. Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies, and then has spewed us out. May the violence done to our flesh be upon Babylon,” say the inhabitants of Zion. “May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia,” says Jerusalem.

OK, so it looks like the issue is vengeance here. Babylon destroyed Israel. So Israel wants Babylon to be destroyed. *“May our blood be on the Babylonians”* say the Israelites (Jeremiah 51:35). This is a classic example of justice in the Old Testament. Scholars call it talionic justice and it forms the basis for most modern justice systems; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. A punishment that fits the crime, you destroy my country; I want your country to be destroyed in return. So this is what God's people want.

Now, as Christians we might look at this and say that they are wrong. Aren't we taught not to want revenge? I read something on the internet where a Christian teacher said that when we want revenge, we have a serious problem in our hearts. . . . need to understand that God Himself does not want to have revenge on the wicked people. Doesn't that sound like what we've been taught?

But here in this passage, God says that He is going to take vengeance on Babylon.

Jeremiah 51:24

“Before your eyes I will repay Babylon and all who live in Babylonia for all the wrong they have done in Zion,” declares the LORD.

So God repays Babylon. He exacts vengeance, but this is confusing. We aren't supposed to want revenge, right? Isn't the desire for vengeance wrong? Didn't someone say that God, Himself does not want to have revenge?

Well, maybe that's not totally accurate. This passage seems to say that God wants vengeance. That God wants to repay Babylon for all the wrong she did to His people.

How do we fit this together? What are we supposed to think about vengeance? I'd say that God actually desires vengeance. But it's his responsibility. Deuteronomy 32:35 says this, *“It is mine to avenge. I will repay.”*

Now the pieces are starting to fall into place. Maybe it's not that vengeance is wrong. Maybe the desire for vengeance is fine. Maybe it's even godly. Maybe since our God is a god of justice, it's right for us to want to see judgment come to the bad guys. But maybe as Christians we acknowledge whose responsibility it is to exact that judgment. So it's not wrong to want revenge, but it is wrong to take revenge because you'd be taking something that isn't yours. Vengeance belongs to God.

And this is the role of a judge. It's never a good idea for someone involved in the conflict to punish an offender. I see this all the time with my children. If Silas hits Ava, then most likely Ava will hit Silas back. She will want revenge and she will take revenge. But then Silas will hit Ava back and then Ava will hit Silas back an on and on and on because

revenge never stops. This is true between two people, two people groups, and two nations. Al Qaeda won't stop because they've been hurt by the US. We won't stop because we've been hurt by them.

So what do I teach my kids? If Silas hits Ava, I teach Ava to come to me. Tell me that her brother hit her because I can be an impartial third party. I can judge. This is what the situation needs and it can only be done by someone who is outside of the conflict. I can end the vengeance cycle once and for all because I can put Silas in time out for hitting Ava and then it's all done. Justice has been served.

And that's what is going on here. It's right for God's people to want vengeance. And it's right for God to take vengeance because He is the third party. He is on the outside of the conflict. He is the judge and that's why judgment is good news. Justice has been done by a good judge. And this means that the cycle of evil can be broken. Justice can be followed by peace.

So as we read this passage in Jeremiah, we can start to see that judgment on the bad guys might be good news. Judgment means that the cycle of evil can stop and this is good news because we see evil in our world. When someone cuts us off on the highway, it's good news to know that God will judge the bad guys. When we see political leaders abusing their power, it's good news to know that God will judge the bad guys. When we were in India and saw how poverty is deeply embedded into their cultural systems, it's good news to know that God will judge the bad guys.

Last fall, at our Missions' Conference, we heard from a mission organization called International Justice Mission. While we were in India, Scott, Pete, and I had the opportunity to visit one of the offices of IJM in India. And while they were reiterating what they understand their calling to be, one aspect of it struck me as very different from what other organizations are doing. They called it “perpetrator accountability.” But that's just legalese for “making sure the bad guys get what's coming to them.” I realized that there are a lot of organizations out there rescuing victims and that's a big part of what IJM does as well. But there aren't as many that are interested in bringing justice to the bad guys, partly because they aren't equipped to contribute in this way. IJM is uniquely equipped to do that because they believe that it's just as important that the bad guys get in trouble as it is for the victims to be rescued. Otherwise, the bad guys just find new victims and the cycle repeats itself.

For us today, it's good news to know that an impartial third party will establish justice. That a good judge will judge. The problem is that a lot of people don't think God is impartial. They don't think He is fair. Think about this situation in Jeremiah. Didn't He say that Babylon was doing His bidding when they destroyed Jerusalem? They had sinned and they deserved to be destroyed, right? So how is it fair that God punishes them for that?

Jeremiah 50:6-7

“My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place. Whoever found them devoured them; their enemies said, ‘We are not guilty, for they sinned against the LORD, their true pasture, the LORD, the hope of their fathers.’”

The Babylonians say “we are not guilty because they deserved it.” There's a movie that came out a few years back called *Suspect Zero*. I haven't seen it, but the plot sounded interesting. It's about an FBI investigation of a serial killer. But it turns out that this murderer is only killing other serial killers. So what do you do with that? Do you just let him be? As much as you'd like to, the answer is no. He's still killing people. He's still guilty.

Even though God used Babylon to punish Jerusalem, they are still guilty. They are still guilty for their violence and their abuse. They still

need to be judged. In fact, God needs to judge them to prove that He is a fair judge; to prove that God is, in fact, impartial.

If you're living in Jerusalem and you hear God say that He's going to use Babylon to destroy this city, then you might think that this God is actually the God of Babylon instead of the God of Israel. This is normally how things worked in the ancient world; gods fought for their people. It wasn't the way it worked for a god to fight for someone else or to help someone else win; gods were loyal to their team. They picked a side. So if the God of Israel was fighting against His people, it would make you think that He traded sides. He's stopped cheering for the Dodgers and started cheering for the Giants.

But the God of Israel doesn't pick sides. He has chosen a people, but He isn't on their side in the way that other gods were on sides. He is a God of righteousness; a God of justice; a God of judgment. So He isn't on anyone's political side—He's always on the side of justice.

This is why it doesn't work to say that God is on America's side or God is on Israel's side or God is on the Palestinian's side or God is on Iran's side or anyone's side. Our God; the true God is on the side of justice. It was just and part of His plan to punish Israel, but He had to demonstrate that He wasn't trading sides. It was just and part of His plan to punish Babylon as well. Our God will judge the bad guys, whoever they are.

So where does this leave us? To be honest, this is a difficult message to preach. I'm uncomfortable by a lot of these ideas. Knowing that our God judges the bad guys makes me scared. I think it makes most of us scared. Why? I'm scared because deep down, I'm afraid that I might be one of the bad guys. In fact, deep down, I'm pretty convinced that I'm one of the bad guys. I know my heart. I know the inclinations of my heart. I know about selfishness, greed, lust, ambition, and addiction. So if this God is a god who judges bad guys, what does that mean about me? How do I approach Him? How do we approach Him?

The past three weeks I've suggested that we can rest in dependence on God. I've suggested that we can turn to Him through His word and that we can expect Him to act in surprising ways to save us from betrayal. But how is any of that possible if God judges bad guys and I'm one of the bad guys that He is judging? You see, I think that we're so afraid of judgment because we know we deserve it. We want to ignore the idea of judgment because we're afraid of being judged ourselves.

We watch *ft* occasionally in my house and I'm always interested in that moment right after someone performs and just before the judges release their verdict. You can see the performer tense up and brace himself for the coming judgment. Why? He tenses up because he doesn't like to be judged and neither do we.

So if you are here this morning to worship the God that reveals Himself in this book, we can't escape judgment. Our God is a judge. That's not all He is, but there is no escaping that He is a judge. So what do we do with our fear of judgment? Where does that leave us?

God will forgive

Well, if the only message that we see this morning is that God judges bad guys, then ultimately it's not good news for us. But that's not the only message. Scattered throughout this judgment oracle are some words of a different sort. This passage mostly has to do with Babylon, but that's not all. There are verses that speak of God's people.

Jeremiah 51:5

For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the LORD Almighty, though their land is full of guilt before the Holy One of Israel.

So here's a clue that judgment isn't the end of the story. Jeremiah says an interesting thing. He says that God has not forgotten His people, even though they are guilty. God is not ignoring their guilt like we'd prefer to do. He's acknowledging their guilt, but he says that He has not forsaken them. Sending them off into exile does not seem to be the end of the story. Even in the midst of this judgment oracle against Babylon, there is a word of hope for God's people. He has not forgotten them.

When I was kid, I had this fear of being left at the grocery store by my mother. I think I saw some afterschool special about a mom abandoning her kids at the grocery store and heading off to start a new life. I thought about this every time I went to the store with my mom. Isn't this what we fear from God? That He has just forgotten us? That we are sent into exile, maybe our enemies are judged, but we are out of His sight. We have been forgotten. Yet God says that isn't the case. God has not forgotten His people. He is a God who judges, but He is not a God who forgets. Even when His Son hangs on a cross and asks why He has been forsaken, we know that God has not forsaken. He has not forgotten them, but there is still that issue of their guilt. We know that God judges. We know their guilt is still there. So what is God going to do? Well, something amazing.

Jeremiah 50:20

“In those days, at that time,” declares the LORD, “search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare.”

God sends His people into exile into Babylon because they are guilty. He punishes Babylon for her own guilt. He says that He has not forsaken them even though they are guilty. But then we get this verse that says people will search for the guilt of Israel and not be able to find it. Her guilt will be gone. Really? Where did it go? Guilt doesn't just go away. That's the whole point of the whole first part of this sermon. God will judge the bad guys. Evil is real. Judgment is necessary. But now we learn something else about God. He judges the bad guys, but He also forgives His people. God says He will forgive the remnant. God forgives His people; He will forgive.

But how can He? This is where we are caught. I've said that God judges the bad guys and I've said that God forgives His people. Even worse, I've said that we are part of the bad guys. The entire book of Jeremiah has testified to that. His people need to be judged. So how do these things go together? And even though we have the answer and most of us know the answer, on some level it doesn't make sense to us. So we, right along with our culture, prefer to think that evil isn't real and forgiveness comes easily. God is a God of love. God forgives His people. When we hear that: God forgives us; most of us hear “you're not so bad.” We think there's not all that much to forgive and God just overlooks whatever slight imperfections we might have.

This type of situation comes up all the time as a parent. You have small kids and you've told them to go to bed, but they come out of their room for the thirty-seventh time and say that they want another glass of water. Now, we can't really deny our children access to water. But we know that this is about more than water. It's stalling. So you're caught. Do you let it go? Do you let them have another sip of water knowing that eventually they'll go to sleep. It's not that big of a deal that it takes longer than you wish it would. Or do you take a stand. Do you say that if you let this go on, it's going to be every night, bedtime will stretch later and later, your kids will be tired, they'll be grumpy in school, get into fights, start dealing drugs, and end up in prison. So now is the time to take a stand and tell them that they'll be in big trouble if they ask for one more sip of water.

What do you do? Do you let it go? Or do you take a stand? Do you forgive? Or do you judge? Well, as parents, the best you can do is to alternate. Take a stand on some things. Let other things go. Try to find some balance. But ultimately that can't be the answer for God. Because

if He is going to destroy the bad guys, then how can He forgive them at the same time? Alternating doesn't work for Him. There needs to be something else.

And it just so happens that there is. In fact, Jeremiah speaks of it several times. A new arrangement; new agreement between God and His people; a new ... covenant. Even here, in the midst of God's judgment on Babylon, we find out something about it.

Jeremiah 50:4-5

“In those days, at that time,” declares the LORD, “the people of Israel and the people of Judah together will go in tears to seek the LORD their God. They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it. They will come and bind themselves to the LORD in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten.”

These verses speak of something new; some eternal covenant that will bind God's people to Himself. God says that His people will be able to turn to Him. They will be able to come to Zion and seek the LORD. He will make a way. Something will change.

One of the remarkable things about these oracles to the nations is that most of them actually contain some passage similar to this and not just about God's people, but about the nations being judged as well. Most of the oracles in Jeremiah talk about the destruction that God is going to bring on various nations. But usually at the end is some statement that in the latter days, God will re-gather those people. Their devastation won't last forever. So it seems like this eternal covenant, this new arrangement will be available to more than just Israel. It seems like the nations, the bad guys that are being judged, will also be able to be a part of it. But how can this be?

How are all these things possible? How can God judge and forgive? What ties all of these things together? And of course the answer is simple. The answer is the answer to most of the complicated questions about who God is. The answer is a person not a concept. It is the person and work of Jesus. This is the mystery of the gospel. This is the key that combines two things that can't be combined into one glorious truth. This is what we believe. Paul summarizes it in Romans 3:25-26.

Romans 3:25-26

God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

And there it is. This is where it comes together. Where everything in what we believe comes together; in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is where all the paradox of what we believe lands. Our God is a God who judges the bad guys. Our God promises to forgive His people. How does He make that work? He makes it work through His Son Jesus. The messy, bloody, and abandoning to destruction judgment that God promises to visit on the bad guys gets directed at Him.

Jeremiah 51:40 says of the Babylonians, *“I will bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, like rams and goats.”* So God does destroy the

Babylonians like lambs to the slaughter. But their destruction foreshadows another lamb led to the slaughter. Another destruction and another judgment, where God judges the bad guys once and for all, but this judgment doesn't land on the bad guys. It lands on the good guy; the only good guy, so that all the bad guys can be forgiven. It is here, when Jesus is led like a lamb to the slaughter that God's judgment meets God's forgiveness and through it we are reconciled to the God who created us. It is the cross that allows a God who judges the bad guys to forgive His people. It is the cross that allows us to approach a God who takes vengeance.

And this is why it is so important for us to know that our God judges bad guys because we know we are guilty. We know we need to be judged. Deep down, we all know that and though we try to ignore that fact, it never really works because it's still there. And it's part of the reason why so many of us find it hard to approach God, to trust Him, and to rest in Him. But once we understand that our God is a judge AND we understand that His judgment rests on Christ then we can be free. People think they are free by ignoring their guilt and their distance from God, but that doesn't bring freedom. Acknowledging that God judges and knowing whom He judges is the only way to real freedom.

And that makes this a message of good news to us and our culture. God's judgment is, in fact, a message of good news because that judgment has been spent on Christ. So we don't need to be uncomfortable with judgment because we don't need to fear that we will be judged. We can recognize God as a God of judgment without fearing Him because He is a God of forgiveness. The just and the justifier. His forgiveness is available even for the bad guys, even for the worst guys, even for the Babylonians. Even for us.

Conclusion

As we come to the end of this section of Jeremiah as a whole, we see that this book prepares us for something. This book prepares us for what is to come. It prepares us for who is to come. What we see in this last look into Jeremiah challenges the way we think about the world. It challenges the way we think about ourselves.

We don't like to think about judgment. We wouldn't be comfortable with a painting like Michelangelo's welcoming us into worship. And yet, because of our message, we are uniquely able to understand the idea of judgment and still approach a God who claims to love us. Because of who Jesus is, we can understand judgment and forgiveness. That's why five hundred years ago people could be welcomed into worship by an image of disturbing judgment. In fact, that's why we can have an icon of judgment at the front of our worship center: a cross. We worship with the idea of judgment always before us because we know that this judgment falls on another and that God forgives us. Therefore, we can approach God and offer forgiveness to a culture who desperately fears judgment.

So Jeremiah invites us to God. He invites us to weep. He invites us to worship. We weep because life is hard. Our city may be destroyed. Evil is all around us. Life will be harder than you think. But we worship because God has an answer. He will judge the guys that destroy our city. He will judge evil. He will come to save us. He has made a way for us to come to Him. He has forgiven us. Rest in Him. Turn to Him. Wait for Him to rescue you from the pit. Our God judges and forgives. We can come to God.