

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: January 2nd: Jeremiah 24: Some Notes

This fairly well-known passage is a powerful example of why it pays to study the Bible, and not just read it. It is a passage that reinforces the prejudices of both Bible literalists and Bible deniers. On a simple un-reflective reading, Jeremiah is saying that there are good folk and bad folk, and God looks after the good folk and destroys the bad folk. In this case, the good folk are those who have been exiled, and the bad folk are those who have been left behind. You could be forgiven for picking up the message that God determines who is going to be good and who is going to be bad: who will listen to his message, and who won't. The Bible puncher says "Yippee!! I'm destined for salvation!! I'm one of the chosen (few)!" The Bible denier says "I'm really not interested in your invention of a god who creates babies with Hell or Heaven birthmarks!"

But study the text, and study it in context. First, Jeremiah himself is one of those who stayed behind.... one of the "bad" people? Second, Jeremiah says repeatedly that exile was punishment: "bad" people get punished. Third, Jeremiah implies that false prophets were among the exiles – carrying on their non-God propaganda. Fourth, those exiled were, in the main, the upper and middle class: the opinion leaders who had led others astray and set a bad example. It passes belief that the roads sweepers etc were all bad folk and the Court and Temple hierarchy all goodies; and Jeremiah never suggests this.

You can make up your own mind whether Jeremiah is right in saying that God sent the Babylonian invaders to add Judah to their collection, and in saying that God dictated the Babylonian choice of who to carry off into exile and who to leave behind. However, the informed way to read Chapter 24 is that Jeremiah was optimistic that ***a good number of the exiles would use exile as a learning experience.*** Taking that as a starting point, you might want to read the whole history as God enabling and encouraging folk then (and now) to use both good and bad experiences as learning experiences. To jump to modern times, whatever Mr Putin may or may not believe if he stops to think, I don't believe God sent the Russian army into Ukraine. I'm absolutely convinced God helps Ukrainians, Russians, and us, to make God choices in the context of the Russian invasion.

At a more individual level, I don't personally believe (1) that folk can be separated out into simply good and simply bad [why are "the good" almost neurotic about regularly seeking forgiveness?!]; (2) only the bad suffer bad things; (3) God sends disease etc as a punishment. Yes, of course, we can do bad things to ourselves and suffer the consequences.

In traditional English terminology, I haven't heard about people deciding to be good or bad figs. But I have heard of people deciding to be good or bad "eggs"! P.S. Jeremiah would have said that not bothering to make decisions is as bad as making bad decisions?

Quotation: *They'll be my people and I'll be their God, for they'll have returned to me with all their hearts.*

Question: Which is harder/easier, turning to God when everything is going swimmingly, turning to God when everything is going badly, or turning to God at the transition from bad times to good times?