

The Confessions of Jeremiah

“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.” Jeremiah 20:7-8

Jeremiah was unrelenting in proclaiming the message of judgment before the people of Jerusalem. He remained undaunted and steadfast, refusing to be cowed by psychological intimidation, betrayals, conspiracies, physical persecution, imprisonment, and constant death threats. He delivered the message of judgment in a variety of imaginative and compelling ways. Through reasoned discourse from the book of Deuteronomy he confronted the people with their violation of the terms of the covenant (11:1-8). He attacked the pride of Judah with simple, dramatic object lessons so that no one could miss the message. His parables of judgment included burying a linen belt (13:1-11), picturing smashed wineskins (13:12-14), observing a potter rework his clay (18:1-12), smashing a clay pot (19:1-13), using two baskets of figs—one good the other rotten (24:2), and even wearing a yoke around his neck (27:2).

To shape the context of Jeremiah’s preaching the Lord God provided his own object lessons of judgment. He sent a drought which caused the people to mourn, but they mourned because of the drought, not their disobedience. “The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns but find no water. They return with their jars unfilled; dismayed and despairing, they cover their heads” (14:3). To intensify the impact of the message, the Lord directed Jeremiah to specific locations. Besides standing at the temple gate to deliver his message, Jeremiah was also sent to the potter’s house and to the notorious Valley of Ben Hinnom where “the blood of the innocent” continued to be sacrificed (19:4-5).

Jeremiah’s more dramatic messages were balanced with his straightforward, practical messages of reform, such as his call to keep the Sabbath holy (17:19-27). No one could accuse Jeremiah of being too abstract or theoretical. He brought the message home in powerful ways that the people could reject, but not ignore. Moreover, Jeremiah pictured the message of God so well that he himself became like a parable constantly pointing to the will of God. He not only *stood* for the message that he proclaimed, he also embodied it. The message shaped his personality, dictated his actions, governed his investments and endangered his life. The word of the Lord shaped the medium (Jeremiah’s life) and the medium became one with the message. This was especially evident in Jeremiah’s personal life. “The word of the Lord came to me,” reported Jeremiah, and said, “You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place” (16:2). By denying Jeremiah the joys of marriage and family life, the Lord pictured in the life of his prophet the future sorrow of Judah. By prohibiting Jeremiah from attending funerals and weddings, the Lord illustrated the coming desolation of his people. Jeremiah pictured what the Lord meant when he

said, “I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and pity from this people....I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of the bride and bridegroom in this place” (16:5, 9).

In public Jeremiah’s message was “like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” (23:29), “like a burning fire, shut up in [his] bones,” which he was unable to hold in (20:9). There was no hint of weakness in Jeremiah’s public ministry, but in private, when he was alone with the Lord, he cried out to God in frustration and desperation. He complained bitterly about his enemies and lamented passionately about his life. His prayers run the gamut of emotions from blistering anger and raw hate to utter helplessness and overwhelming feelings of rejection. Throughout this section of the book, and only in this section, there is a threefold pattern of intensity. The initial factor involved Jeremiah’s delivery of an intense message of judgment, often followed by life-threatening persecution. Then against this opposition Jeremiah responded with anguished prayers of lament that ranged from desperate cries for help to scandalous imprecations against his enemies. The third factor in this confessional paradigm was God’s response to Jeremiah, which consistently refused to indulge his self-pity and challenged him to remain strong.

Prayer of Frustration (12:1-4)

Jeremiah’s prayers are a rare, behind-the-scenes, look at the inner life of a person working on the front-lines of a spiritual war zone. This section begins with his acute awareness of his personal vulnerability (11:18-23). The men from his hometown of Anathoth issued an ultimatum, saying, “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands” (11:21). Up until now, we have no record of Jeremiah coming under fire personally. The people had condemned the Lord and rejected his word but there was no significant backlash against Jeremiah. But that all changed when men of Anathoth secretly plotted against him, saying, “Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more” (11:19).

Jeremiah was not looking for a fight and he certainly did not relish making people angry with him—angry enough to want to kill him. He admitted that he was naive about their animosity and unsuspecting of their threats. He liked himself to “a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19). Then as now, those who stand by the word of the Lord will suffer persecution. Jesus prepared his followers for what to expect when they acknowledged him publicly. He said,

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—your enemies will be members of your own household’” (Mt 10:35).

What was happening to Jeremiah was what the Lord said in the Sermon on the Mount would happen to us,

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were

before you” (Mt 5:11-12).

Jeremiah’s reaction to these harsh circumstances was to pray. Instead of whining or debating or gossiping, he prayed real prayers to the living God, not nicely worded ritualistic prayers, but bold, straight-from-the-heart prayers. Prayer makes perfect sense, especially when you know that the living God created, called, consecrated and commissioned you (1:4). Jeremiah’s first line of defense against the terror that confronted him was not to talk about God but to talk to God. This simple spiritual discipline spared Jeremiah the common mistake that many sincere believers make when their naivete is shattered and their vulnerability is exposed. Instead of going to God they either talk to themselves and carry on an inner monologue which feeds off their anxiety and insecurity or they wear others out with their complaint. Jeremiah was desperately frustrated, but instead of turning inward or trying to escape the pain, he turned to God.

Like the faithful before him, Jeremiah prayed out his frustration (see Ps 73; Job 21). He began, “You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit. You are always on their lips but far from their hearts.” (12:1-3).

His confession reflects an acute sense of moral pain, intensified by the failure of his ministry to change hearts and lives. Jeremiah felt what Soren Kierkegaard expressed, “Everything goes on as usual, and yet there is no longer any one who believes in it.” A thin veneer of religion-as-usual covered up strategies of deception and oppression that promoted the prosperity of the wicked. Yet the Lord seemed to condone the behavior of the faithless by permitting their comfort and success. “Meanwhile,” Jeremiah complained, “you know *me* inside and out. You don’t let me get by with a thing!” (12:3, *The Message*). The frustration of it all infuriated Jeremiah and ignited his hate. “Drag them off like sheep to be butchered!” he cried. “Set them apart for the day of slaughter!” Undoubtedly this metaphor occurred to him, because he felt “like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19). Instead of the Lord being in control of the situation, Jeremiah felt like the people who were plotting his demise were in control, and they were saying in effect, “Jeremiah won’t be around for long. He will not see what happens to us.”

Jeremiah’s personal vulnerability triggered this disturbing confession of hate. Like a wounded animal he had been backed into a corner and he came out praying. “Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God—and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with “the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12, Peterson, *Answering God*, 95). It is better to pray out our hate to God than act out our hate against others. “...Our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed...Embarrassed by the ugliness and fearful of the murderous, we commonly neither admit or pray our hate; we deny it and suppress it. But if it is not admitted it can quickly and easily metamorphose into the evil that provokes it...” (Peterson, 98). In his frustration, Jeremiah did three things right. Instead of turning away from God or talking about God, he talked to God. Then, instead of acting out his hate, he prayed out his hate to God. And thirdly, he listened to what God had to say. The Lord wants us to pray

boldly and speak our mind, but then we need to be open to hear what he has to say in his Word.

The Lord's answer to Jeremiah's feeling of vulnerability reminds us of his response to Job when the Lord said, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 38:2-3). The Lord did not give Jeremiah soothing answers or a pat on the back, he challenged him, saying, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" The Lord said to Jeremiah in effect, "Face the facts. This is only the beginning. Your family has betrayed you. You can't trust them even if they compliment you" (12:5-6).

In the second part of God's answer, Jeremiah is privileged by God to see that what has happened to him is a tragedy in miniature of what has happened to God (Kidner, 61). Yahweh has been abandoned by his people. "My inheritance," says the Lord, "has become to me like a lion in the forest. She roars at me; therefore I hate her" (12:8). In prayer the prophet and his God discover a common bond. As he prayed out his feelings of frustration and listened to God faithfully, he identified with the will of God.

This was not the only time Jeremiah prayed out his hate. A conspiracy sponsored by the religious leaders to discredit and ignore Jeremiah triggered a passionate, vehement prayer for vindication and vengeance (18:18-23). The spirit of the conspirators comes through in their rationale, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says" (18:18). Those in leadership decided that they had nothing to lose and everything to gain by silencing Jeremiah. Their thinking was especially perverse, because they claimed that the word of the Lord would not suffer with Jeremiah out of the way. They conspired to "black ball" the Lord's prophet so they wouldn't have to put up with his teaching. Jeremiah blasted Judah's depraved leadership with a caustic invective to God that spared no one:

But enough! Let their children starve!
Let them be massacred in battle!
Let their wives be childless and widowed,
their friends die and their proud young men killed.
Let cries of panic sound from their homes
as you surprise them with war parties!
They're all set to lynch me.
The noose is practically around my neck!
But you know all this, God.
You know they're determined to kill me.
Don't whitewash their crimes,
don't overlook a single sin!
Round the bunch of them up before you.
Strike while the iron of your anger is hot!" (18:21-22, The Message)

It may be shocking for today's followers of Jesus Christ to realize that Jeremiah's prayer is far more biblical than our pious sounding cut-flower prayers. Jeremiah had more in common with Jesus, who declared, "I have come to cast fire on the earth" (Lk 12:49), than with popular, feel-good preachers who say, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (6:14; 8:11). At least Jeremiah is praying out his hate and expressing his moral outrage against those who hate God and deny his word. At least he knew that he had enemies, whereas so many professing Christians, who identify more with the world than Christ, naively think that everybody loves them because they are such nice people. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you" (Mt 5:44). "But loving enemies presupposes that we know that they are there, whether many or few, and have begun to identify them....Our hate is used by God to bring the enemies of life and salvation to notice, and then involve us in active compassion for the victims" (Peterson, *Answering God*, 102).

Jeremiah's spiritual pain and moral outrage causes us to evaluate our identification with the Lord's will and purpose. Is our suffering due to our disobedience and faithlessness or is it due to our obedience and faithfulness? Do we experience in Christ the tragedy in miniature that God has endured because of sin? Jeremiah felt like "a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" so he prayed out his hate, but it was Jesus who fulfilled Isaiah's prophesy and showed us how to love.

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Isaiah 53:7

Prayer of Loneliness (15:15-18)

The trigger for Jeremiah's first lament was an outright threat to his life, but there were other circumstances that caused him to lament his pain and feel his loss. The responsibility of delivering God's devastating message of judgment must have taken its toll on Jeremiah's life. Like a doctor bearing a grim diagnosis to an unsuspecting patient, Jeremiah was tasked with confronting his people with a message they didn't want to hear. No wonder he felt alienated and alone. He was sent on a mission impossible. He was told by the Lord not to pray for "this people," and that even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before the Lord, his "heart would not go out to this people" (7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1).

Through prayer Jeremiah worked through his sorrow of alienation and tried to come to terms with his loneliness. Like Job, the reason for his suffering did not lie in any particular offense that he had done, but in faithfully doing what the Lord had called him to do. As if to suggest that money is the root of all evil, Jeremiah gave a one line defense of his innocence, "I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me" (15:10). He turned to the Lord as his only solace, praying, "You understand, O Lord; remember me and care for me." This was a remarkable starting point and one that Jeremiah *knew* to be true in his mind, but as the conclusion of his

prayer shows he didn't *feel* it in his heart. As he prayed, he contemplated the reasons for his loneliness: "...I suffer reproach for your sake. When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty" (15:15-16). He *knew* he was alone for all the right reasons: "I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation" (15:17). But in his isolation he *felt* awful: "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" In a clash between head and heart, between what he knew to be right and what he felt to be wrong, Jeremiah ended his prayer angrily, "Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (15:18).

We don't have to wait long to learn whether Jeremiah's disappointment with God was justified. It was one thing to lament his loneliness, but it was quite another to accuse God of letting him down. The Lord's response to Jeremiah was at first bracing, then affirming, "'If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you,' declares the Lord. 'I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel'" (15:19-21). No matter how isolated and alienated Jeremiah felt, he had no excuse for sinking into self-pity and blaming God. The Lord said in effect, "Stop your whining. Don't dwell on your feelings, focus on my message. You don't want the company of these people anyway, in fact you need my protection from them. I will rescue, save, and redeem you from the wicked and ruthless." If the Lord is saying to Jeremiah in so many words, "Get over it," what is he saying to us? Are we ready to take in this word that squelches our tendency to blame God and strengthens our trust in his deliverance?

Prayer of Despair (20:7-18)

Jeremiah's longest complaint was triggered by Pashhur, the senior priest in the Jerusalem temple and the official responsible for maintaining the temple's decorum and order. He heard Jeremiah's message when the prophet "stood in the court of the Lord's temple and said to all the people, 'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they are stiff-necked and would not listen to my words'" (19:14-15). Jeremiah courageously preached the destruction of everything that the prominent and ever popular senior priest vowed to maintain. So it is no wonder that he reacted against Jeremiah and treated him like a common criminal, who needed to be taught a lesson that he wouldn't soon forget. Pashhur had Jeremiah beaten and put in the stocks for twenty-four hours at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord's temple, in order to humiliate the prophet and discredit his message. A badly beaten Jeremiah was put on display in a device designed to twist and contort the body. Added to his physical pain was the psychological pain of public ridicule, social embarrassment and personal mockery. Some of the bystanders may have mocked him with his own words by using a phrase that Jeremiah repeated in his message of judgment from time to time (6:25; 46:5; 49:29). "I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!'" (20:10). It appears that the people pulled a line from Jeremiah's

message (“Terror on every side!”) and used it as a catch phrase to taunt him.

However, if Pashhur thought that subjecting Jeremiah to public humiliation would silence the prophet or suppress his stern message he was wrong. On the very next day, when Jeremiah was released from the stocks, he fought back with a stinging indictment against Pashhur that must have had everyone talking before the day was out. “The Lord’s name for you is not Pashhur,” said Jeremiah, “but Magor-Missabib,” which means “terror on every side.” And he didn’t stop with Pashhur’s new name, he went on to announce to the senior priest that he would see many of his friends executed in the invasion and that he himself would go into exile to Babylon (20:4-6). By all accounts, Jeremiah had the last word, but the incident took a heavy psychological toll and triggered in him a deep-seated emotional reaction that drove him not only to prayer, but to despair. What follows is not for the spiritually faint-hearted nor for those who like their religion safely limited to pious platitudes.

Jeremiah’s lament was intense, even vehement, right from the start. He began, “O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed” (20:7). The word for “deceived” is translated in Exodus 22:16 as “seduced” and in Judges 16:5 as “lured” (Thompson, 459). Using language which was both crude and offensive, Jeremiah complained bitterly that God had seduced him and forced himself upon him. Clearly, Jeremiah was at the breaking point. He had hit bottom. He was angry with God, angry with himself, and intent on cursing the day of his birth. It seems strikingly incongruous that Jeremiah should face Pashhur with such undaunted courage only to lash out against Yahweh in terms that border on contempt, if not blasphemy. It seems that way until we realize that hitting bottom emotionally does not rule out rising to the heights spiritually.

Jeremiah’s encounter with Pashhur was extremely demanding physically and emotionally. It cost him dearly and it tested his character to the limit. To his credit, Jeremiah did not break before the enemy. If he had done so, he would have failed in his mission. Instead he broke down before his “Commanding Officer,” which by the grace of God he had the freedom to do so. Authentic spirituality knows the difference between betrayal and lament, deception and depression, treachery and trust. Before God, no one can fake it to make it and Jeremiah didn’t even try. He was bold before the enemy, but before Yahweh he was in despair. We can learn a lot from Jeremiah’s example. If we were as bold before the world as Jeremiah was before Pashhur, our prayers might be as passionate as his.

The paradoxical nature of Jeremiah’s prayer of despair continues with his understanding of his call. He attributed the reason for his persecution to “proclaiming violence and destruction.” The fact of the matter, Jeremiah concluded, was obvious, “the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long” (20:8). Yet he refused to give up the one thing that caused his suffering. “But if I say,” Jeremiah anguished, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.’” (20:9). Instead of weakening his resolve to deliver the word of the Lord, his prayer of despair literally forced him to understand its compelling inner drive, the fire in his

bones, that could not be extinguished. Ironically, the expression of his despair demonstrated the intensity of his devotion to the word of the Lord.

We are inclined to think that the most important part of any communication comes at the end, but to the Hebrew mind, the heart of the matter lies at the center. Jeremiah's prayer was no exception. In the middle of his lament, Jeremiah prayed out his relational anguish. "All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, 'Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him.'" This is the painful problem that has wounded Jeremiah from the beginning. He felt alienated, alone, and estranged from everyone around him. Of course, it wasn't just that he was friendless. To be left alone, ignored and ostracized would have been hard enough, but Jeremiah was hated, betrayed, and plotted against, and all for the sake of Yahweh. Once again, the paradoxical nature of his prayer of despair comes through, because Jeremiah answered his relational anguish with a bold declaration of confidence in the Lord God.

But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior;
so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.
They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced;
their dishonor will never be forgotten.
O Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous
and probe the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

In the midst of his desperate relational pain he renewed his commitment to the Lord and then broke into song!

Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord!
He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked. (20:11-13)

Singing praise to God doesn't seem to fit with a prayer of despair, nevertheless there it is at the center of Jeremiah's prayer. Perhaps it is easily overlooked by his shocking conclusion, but if we want to know Jeremiah's heart and the bedrock realities that he depended on we have to understand Jeremiah's enduring commitment to the Lord who was with him "like a mighty warrior."

The final paradoxical aspect of Jeremiah's prayer is that his curse-filled conclusion does not indicate a weakened faith and trust in the Lord but a powerful empathy with the Lord's curse against life itself because of human sin and evil. Jeremiah concluded not by calling down curses on the wicked, but by calling down curses on himself. The flood gates of grief and despair poured out and he cursed the day of his birth, "Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?" (20:18). Like Job, Jeremiah questioned "Why?" He lashed out at the human condition. This was no sniveling, self-pitying whine, but a full throttle outburst. No bleeding heart "why me?" There is strength in every syllable, power in

every line. The force of his lament is overwhelming. Jeremiah's lament is from the depths of his soul. It is like a hammer shattering excuses, explanations, and overtures of pity. We are reminded of God's words following the Fall. God cursed. God cursed his very own creation.

"Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel....Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen.3:14-15,17).

"The curse is the affirmation of the fallen world by the Creator" (Bonhoeffer, p.83). Sin gives rise to enmity and evil, physical pain and spiritual suffering. We live between the curse and the promise. The curse is the reminder that God defines the good. The curse in the Garden shouts "No" to evil. God puts his foot down and shouts across the creation, across the cosmos, across all time. Sin is sin. Evil is evil. Cancer is not health, it's hell. God's curse defines and separates out the good from the evil, life from death. With his curse, God took sides against evil and so did Jeremiah. He cursed the life that God gave him to live, but he did not curse God. He cursed the miserable human condition and shared God's moral outrage against a fallen, broken, sin-twisted, evil world. In prayer Jeremiah echoed God's curse in the Garden of Eden.

If we were ever tempted to determine the Lord's calling for our lives according to our personality or temperament, Jeremiah's example would show us the error of our ways. If he had based God's call on his temperament or emotional equilibrium he never would have been obedient. Jeremiah did not *feel* like the ministry he was given, and at times he tried hard to resist it, but in the end, obedience won out in spite of inner doubts and external threats.

"No one becomes human the way Jeremiah was human by posing in a posture of victory. It was his prayers, hidden but persistent, that brought him to the human wholeness and spiritual sensitivity that we want. What we do in secret determines the soundness of who we are in public. Prayer is the secret work that develops a life that is thoroughly authentic and deeply human." Eugene Peterson, (Run with the Horses, 108)

