*WHEN GOD LETS YOU DOWN*

Jeremiah 15:1-21

February 28, 2021

The book of Jeremiah is distinguished from the other prophets by Jeremiah’s laments. There are six of them, in chapters 11, here in 15, at 17, 18, and two in ch. 20. They are prayers of complaint to God, similar to laments in the Psalms. In them, Jeremiah’s relationship with God balances on the breaking point. But ultimately, his prayers—in all their bitterness and anguish—keep that relationship alive and teach readers how to move through the frightening spiritual wreckage left by disaster. By clinging to God in their own thick jungles of pain, God and they—God and we?—might together survive the cataclysm. And these confessions of Jeremiah, these laments, expand his prophetic role from that of adversary to his people. They serve as instruments of communal survival.

So what’s happening in this lament? Well, sometimes Jeremiah was discouraged. He experienced periods of depression. At times he was filled with feelings of desperation and even doom.

And Jeremiah was transparent about all these feelings. A better word for these laments might be soliloquies. A soliloquy is a private speech (that character alone on the stage) expressing the innermost feelings of a tragic figure. So if Jeremiah’s speeches are soliloquies, then chapter 15 is his “to be or not to be” soliloquy. By the third act of Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet,* Hamlet is starting to think about taking his own life: “To be or not to be, that is the question . . . .”

Like Hamlet, Jeremiah called the value of his existence into question: “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land!”

The prophet had not quite hit rock bottom, but he was getting close. He hits absolute bottom in chapter 20, where he goes beyond lamenting his birth to cursing it. For the moment, however, he was as discouraged as can be. One of the first things we learned about Jeremiah (1:5) was that God had appointed him to be a prophet from his mother’s womb. But there were times he wished he had never been born at all. He wanted to abort his mission.

God seemed to have let Jeremiah down in three ways: He didn’t answer Jeremiah’s prayers (15:1-14), he sent him sufferings he did not deserve (look at v. 10b and 15), and he failed to reward him for his obedience (vv 16-18).

Chapter 14 ended with a powerful prayer on behalf of God’s people. The prayer was flawless. Jeremiah made full confession for all the sins of the nation. He pleaded for God’s mercy for the sake of God’s glory. He affirmed that only God can answer prayer. It was the best of prayers, offered from the purest of motives.

So God answered Jeremiah’s prayer, right? Wrong. “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!’” That’s how chapter 15 starts! God refused to answer Jeremiah’s prayer (or anyone else’s for that matter).

Jeremiah’s intercession proved to be a spectacular failure. In response, God promised to send judgment instead of blessing. And the judgment God threatens sounds like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev. 6:1-8) “I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord: the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy” (15:3). The hyenas and vultures will drag away and devour anyone the soldiers fail to kill.

Moreover, the people of God would become total outcasts. V. 4 says, “And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.” They will be destroyed and trampled and nobody will care. The international community will totally ignore what happens to them. Literally the Scripture says that no one will ask if there is peace (shalom) in the city. All along the other priests and prophets have promised “peace, peace” (6:14 & 8:11). But when judgment comes no one will even ask about peace.

God was planning to toss Israel into the air like a pile of grain from a threshing floor.

I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork

In the gates of the land;

I have bereaved them; I have destroyed

My people;

They did not turn from their ways (15:7).

The wheat would stay at the city gates, but the chaff would be scattered and blown into exile, the nation, yes, even families would be destroyed.

When judgment came, there would be no resisting it:

Can one break iron, iron from the north (in other words, Babylon), and bronze? Your wealth and your treasures I will give as spoil, for all your sins, throughout all your territory. I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever (vv. 12-14).

Jeremiah taught the same lesson over and over and over again: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). That is the literal truth. Those who do not love God die, because their spirit is not connected to their source of life.

Thus the people of Judah were under a death sentence. They did not have a prayer. Jeremiah tried to pray for them, but his prayers were rejected. It was a spectacular intercessory failure! God promised to do exactly the opposite of what Jeremiah prayed for. No wonder Jeremiah is called the “weeping prophet.”

Do you ever complain to God about your sufferings? Do you ever tell God that you deserve better than this, that what’s happening is *not your fault?*

Before God could answer his questions, Jeremiah lodged another complaint: God was letting him down by not rewarding his obedience (vv. 16-18).

And Jeremiah had indeed been very obedient. He was a keen student of God’s Word.

Your words were found, and I ate them,

And your words became to me a joy

And the delight of my heart,

For I am called by your name

O Lord, God of hosts (v. 16).

Francis Bacon, one of the leading figures of the English Renaissance, observed that some books are to be tasted, some are to be chewed, and some are to be thoroughly digested. Jeremiah understood that the Bible is the one book to be devoured. Like the prophet Ezekiel, he gobbled up God’s Word. (“Your words were found, and I ate them” (v. 16). He understood that the Word of God is more than just hors d’oeuvres. When God spoke, Jeremiah bellied up to the banqueting table and started packing it in.

This is a reminder of the tastiness of Scripture. Jeremiah thought of God’s Word as his “joy” and his heart’s “delight.” And it might really become that for you and me if we’d let it.

Jeremiah also obeyed God during his down time. He was not a partier. He said, “I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice (15:17). This line echoes the first Psalm.

Blessed is the one

Who walks not in the counsel of

The wicked,

Nor stands in the way of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of scoffers,

But their delight I in the law of the Lord.

Jeremiah did not waste his time sitting on a bar stool and laughing at the world. Instead, he spent his Friday nights at home. And it wasn’t because he was a frowner on fun, but because he had a passion for purity. “I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation” (15:17).

Believers do have to give up some things to follow God. You pick up (God’s righteousness) and you leave this (empty shallowness ) behind. Serving God meant giving up the apparent pleasures of drunkenness, gluttony, greed, mockery, and sexual immorality. Jeremiah gave up all those things, but he wanted something back. If he was so righteous, then why wasn’t God blessing him?

Jeremiah met all the criteria for the blessed man, yet he did not prosper. So perhaps the problem wasn’t Jeremiah at all, but God. Back in chapter 2, which we looked at last week, God was described as “the fountain of living waters.” But now he seemed more like a wadi that runs full after a rainstorm, but is a dry riverbed the rest of the year. Was God a deceptive brook? In other words, had God let Jeremiah down?

God never lets His people down. He never has, and He never will. Jeremiah had it all wrong. Sometimes we come to God with unanswered prayers, undeserved sufferings, and unrewarded obedience, and we want God to get His act together. We want God to change what He is doing. But the truth is that God never lets God’s people down.

There is a story about a battleship lost in a fog at sea. The ship’s captain could see the lights of another ship in the distance. So he radioed ahead, “Heading for collision. Turn 15 degrees north.”

The reply came back almost immediately: “Heading for collision. Turn 15 degrees south.”

The captain was not one to have his orders countermanded, whether they were on his ship or not, so he sent a stronger message: “No, you turn 15 degrees north!”

Again came the reply, “No, you turn 15 degrees south!”

The captain was so angry that he decided to throw his weight around. “This is a battleship. Turn 15 degrees north.”

The last message was a short one: “This is a lighthouse.”

God is like the lighthouse. God is right where God is supposed to be, doing what God is supposed to be doing. He cannot and will not move. Jeremiah was like the battleship. His faith was heading for a shipwreck unless he changed direction.

The first thing God told Jeremiah to do was to turn around, to repent. If anyone was letting anyone down, Jeremiah was letting God down.

Therefore thus says the Lord:

“If you return, I will restore you,

and you shall stand before me

If you utter what is precious, and not

what is worthless,

you shall be as my mouth.

Jeremiah came to God saying, “I did this, that, and the other thing for you.” But God said, “Wait a minute. Hold it right there. Back up. Try again. Start over. And this time start by confessing your sins.”

It is ironic that God had to tell Jeremiah to repent. For years Jeremiah had been telling the people of Judah to turn back in repentance. But he had some repenting of his own to do. He needed to turn back from his self-righteousness, and return to his calling.

Christians sometimes rehearse soliloquies in their minds. They prepare dramatic speeches about how God is letting them down, speeches about unanswered prayer and undeserved suffering. However, a Christian never can perform a true soliloquy. A soliloquy is a private speech. But Christians do not give any private thoughts because God is their playwright, and the words come from the mind of the playwright, and the playwright always gets the last word. So here is the last word on every Christian soliloquy:

If you return, I will restore you,

And you shall stand before me . . .

For I am with you

To save you and deliver you (vv 19-20).

Amen.