

In 1974, Dr. Cynthia Illingworth, an English physician specializing in emergency medicine, discovered that when children accidentally sever the finger tip (down to the first joint), the best treatment is no treatment. Cleaned and covered with a bandage, the finger tip, including the nail, grows back. In 11 or 12 weeks the new finger tip usually looks as if nothing had happened to it.

After study, there seem to be three requirements for regrowth: the patient must be under 12 years old, the cut must be above the crease of the first joint, and surgeons must keep hands off the injury. Any operation performed on the finger destroys its ability to grow back. The last condition is the hardest to accept.

For some things, only God can help us in starting over.

In a spiritual breakthrough, Jeremiah learned the value of starting over.

1. While God had not turned from His covenant, He would not turn from punishing this generation with exile. (v.1-9)

Who are two of the most noted and successful praying prophets of the Old Testament? Moses. Samuel.

Remember the prayer of Moses after the incident of the Golden Calf? God was ready to destroy the people in Exodus chapter 32, when Moses implored God to turn from His wrath, and what happened? God relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on His people! Moses' prayer was effective!

Remember the prayer of Samuel after the incident of the Philistines captured the ark of God, but then God used sickness to the Philistines and a cart pulled by two cows to bring back the ark of God? After that, Samuel said that he would pray to the LORD for the people, and he did. What happened? The Lord used the sound of thunder to defeat the enemy army of the Philistines. Samuel's prayer as effective!

So Moses and Samuel are two of the most noted and successful praying prophets of the Old Testament.

And Jeremiah just got done praying a beautiful prayer in the previous chapter, chapter 14. Verse 20, "*We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD...we have sinned against You...(v.21)...remember and do not break Your covenant with us...(v.22), ...O LORD our God, we set our hope on You...*" And what happened after the prayer of Jeremiah?

Verse 1 of chapter 15 tells us what God replied to Jeremiah, "*...the LORD said..., "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of My sight, and let them go!"*"

Wow. God was determined to send the people away! Away to where?

To exile.

Verse 2, "...when they ask you, "Where shall we go? You shall say to them, 'Thus says The LORD: 'Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword; those who are for famine, to famine, and those who are for captivity, to captivity.'"

Their judgment was sealed.

Verse 3, God set four kinds of destroyers, the sword, the dogs, the birds of the air, and the beasts of the earth to kill, tear, devour and destroy.

Verse 4, the reference to Manasseh pointed to the accumulated evil of generations, which explained why this was the time that God's patience had finally come to an end.

Verse 5 – with intensity, God spoke to the people, asking them who would have pity on them, who would grieve for them, and who would ask about their welfare?

Does it sound like God is rejecting Jeremiah's prayer, and that God is rejecting the people? Yes, that is an understatement.

Let's be very clear here, about who rejected whom.

Verse 6 – The LORD declares, "*You have rejected Me... you keep going backward.*" The people rejected God. The people kept backsliding.

In spite of warnings for years by prophet after prophet, the people would not turn back to God, and God's patience finally ended. The people never change, and yet they always expect God to hold back His proper and warranted response of anger and judgment. Verse 6, God said, "*I am weary of relenting.*" When did "one last chance" and then another "one last chance" and yet again "one last chance" – become one too many?

Even in human life, there comes a time when punishment that has been threatened-but-then-delayed again and again and again, can no longer be postponed.

We are shown in this passage that there comes such a time for God.

The Bible tells us that God's character is slow to anger. But God is holy. The Bible does not lead us to believe that God will eternally postpone His anger. At some point, God would no longer be true to His own moral character, if God continued to perpetually overlook wrongs and always withhold any action.

Out of His mercy, God delays judgment, and does so again. But the day of the Lord must come eventually.

It is not about fatigue or getting fed up. God does not get tired the way that humans do.

God finds His own people exhausting, and ultimately, the people's sins require the life of God. God forebears and forebears the sins of the people over a long period of time, and so God suffers bearing the sins of the people. Does that sound familiar? God suffering, bearing the sins of the people? Yes, this holy God

showing mercy to sinners, all finds its final expression at the cross of Christ, where Jesus bore the sins of the people once for all. Hebrews 10:10, “*we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all...*” Christ suffered the judgment of God that we deserved. The self-giving God, finally gave Himself fully for us. Philippians 2:7, Jesus “*...emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant... (Phil. 2:8) humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”

Why was this the cost?

Because in our passage here in Jeremiah 15, we see in verse 7 – the people “*did not turn from their ways.*” And so in verse 8, God must eventually make anguish and terror fall upon the people. Instead of a blessing, God must give a curse. The only way for us to survive, and the only way for God to enact His covenant blessings toward us, is that this covenant curse fell on Jesus for us.

Verse 9 – expresses this reversal of the beautiful covenant blessing of Psalm 127:5, “*Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with [children]! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with the enemies in the gate.*” Now listen to the opposite in our text of Jeremiah 15:9, “*She who has borne seven [children] has grown feeble; she has fainted away; her sun went down while it was yet day; she has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies. ’ declares The LORD.*”

Here is the question – is it ever too late for repentance? That is an important question. On the one hand, don’t play with fire, if you don’t want to get burned. On the other hand, don’t enter despair, because God’s forgiveness is truly offered to every sinner who truly turns to Christ. In that sense, it is never too late for repentance, as long as the sinner is alive. However, that glorious truth about God’s patience, mercy and tireless love, is not a reason for us to flagrantly continue in our sins, as if we can always count on some later deathbed moment of repentance. Our God is not a God to be mocked. We cannot play God for a fool, and assume that we can trick God and win.

Today is the day of grace. When the day of grace ends in the day of judgment, we who trust in Christ will not be condemned, but rather will stand in His righteousness. If you have been playing with God, Jeremiah warns you that you should be starting over. That brings us to our second point.

2. Jeremiah struggled with his calling to continue speaking judgment. (v.10 - 18)

Jeremiah had a tough job. He spent long years in speaking warnings to the people with no apparent success. Instead of the people listening to Jeremiah’s messages, the people rejected, ridiculed, and isolated Jeremiah. Jeremiah suffered with intense depression and despair, which he expresses in astonishing honesty.

There are personal dimensions, but even in his suffering, Jeremiah remains the official spokesperson for God. In other words, Jeremiah's message is God's message, and Jeremiah's pain reflects God's pain.

From verse 10 to verse 18, we see Jeremiah express his struggle. Jeremiah is disappointed and frustrated, feeling that his ministry as a preacher of repentance was an utter failure.

Do you know how far Jeremiah went? Jeremiah went so far as to wish that he had never been born! All that Jeremiah received was strife, contention, hatred, and cursing from the people. So, if that is what he had been born to do, then he wishes he could just not be born in the first place.

Verse 10, "*Woe is me, (which is like saying, 'I'm a failure'), woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land!*"

Jeremiah is saying that he regretted even being called as a prophet.

Verses 11-14, God showed that when judgment finally came, there would be no resisting it. In verse 15, Jeremiah cried out to God. In verse 16 – Jeremiah remembered and reflected on how good it was at the start to preach, he wrote that God's words "*Became a joy to me and the delight of my heart....*" Maybe that makes it harder. Because Jeremiah loved his job, he loved God's Word and found delight in calling the people to turn from sin and make things right. Jeremiah thought he was doing something valuable and pleasant. Jeremiah used to see it as a privilege to bring God's Word to God's people. As a young man, he had high hopes and high expectations to make a difference in the spiritual lives of his generation. Verse 16, Jeremiah said, "*I am called by Your name, O LORD, God of hosts.*" This means Jeremiah was truly an authentic prophet of God who spoke with authority from God. How could Jeremiah lose? How could Jeremiah fail? He was called by God to speak, and he was referred to as a prophet of God. It was a priceless joy. Somehow, the best job on earth became the worst job on earth.

Verse 17 – the people would not even let Jeremiah sit with them. Jeremiah sat alone. Jeremiah was filled with the message of God's wrath, and so Jeremiah felt angry all the time. Verse 17, "*for You had filled me with indignation.*"

Verse 18 – Jeremiah sounds like he is being tortured in his professional life. "*Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?*" This was supposed to be a great job, and it has turned out to be unbearable.

Jeremiah was disillusioned. He felt like God ripped him off. Verse 18, Jeremiah said to God, "*Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?*" I am a brook with no water, a preacher of God with no power to have the people repent.

Jeremiah was stuck. There was nowhere else to go. There were no other options. No choices. Jeremiah hated it. All of Jeremiah's dreams were shattered. Jeremiah's hopes did not materialize. Jeremiah has become a tragic figure.

Do you know someone like this? The person who sees no good anywhere. Always critical. Always pessimistic...about everything. Such people even become sarcastic and cynical. Whenever a new person arrives with enthusiasm or good ideas, the disillusioned person will pour cold water, and even become maliciously negative. The disillusioned person tends to spread their poison to the minds of others, and snuff out hope. The chronically negative person is rabidly infectious. All of this is a description of what we call self-pity. The person whose view of themselves is that life is horrible, and it is always going to be like this, so all that is left to do is complain, complain, complain.

What a sermon. How do you like it so far? I really think we all need to hear this. I think we need more articles and books about the danger and destructive power of the sin of self-pity. It is a pit. We all are tempted to fall in the pit and live there. Jeremiah is in a pit of self-pity.

I have one question - what would God say to Jeremiah? That brings us to our third point.

3. God spoke to Jeremiah about starting over - turning to God, but not turning to the people. God promised to be with, save, deliver, and redeem Jeremiah. (v.19-21)

God said to Jeremiah that Jeremiah is the one who needed to repent!

Yes, that's right. A gentle rebuke is what God gives for self-pity.

Verse 19, "*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...'*"

This gentle rebuke is aimed specifically at what Jeremiah had been saying. All of Jeremiah's self-pity talking had become negative, destructive, and therefore 'worthless.' God stopped Jeremiah.

Repentance is always a replacement of one thing for a different thing.

Jeremiah was to replace bad talking for good talking.

In place of negative words, God gave Jeremiah positive words, worthy words, precious words. Let me quote it straight out of verse 19 again, "*If you utter what is precious...you shall be as My mouth.*" Declares The LORD!

Make sure you understand this – God was telling Jeremiah to quit all of his talk about wishing that he had never been born, and stop wasting everyone's time with that, and get back to what is healthy, true, constructive and upbuilding. This is how God speaks. This is how God's spokesman must speak. This is how God's people must speak!

Self-pity turns in to a sin of speech.

God allows His people to question, to protest, even to complain – for the Psalms are full of such struggles in prayer.

But does not allow His people to stay stuck down in that mood with nothing good to say. All of those Psalms have movement through the struggle and past worthless words, and all of those Psalms chronicle an arrival at a new place of a new mood, a new vision, and new words to say that are true and right. Words of victory are always fitting for us, because our God is on the throne.

Verse 20, God would fortify Jeremiah to be as uncompromising a messenger as the truth of the message itself. God said, *“I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you....”*

Why not? Why will the people not win over Jeremiah?

Because God is with Jeremiah. (v.20)

Because God will save Jeremiah. (v.20)

Because God will deliver Jeremiah. (v. 20)

Because God will deliver Jeremiah out of the hand of the wicked. (v.21)

Because God will redeem Jeremiah from the hand of the ruthless. (v.21)

God found Jeremiah in the pit of self-pity, and taught him about starting over.

CONCLUSION

Remember how this chapter started? Jeremiah had prayed for the people to turn from their sins, and God responded by saying that even if the mighty Moses AND the mighty Samuel prayed for these people, even then God would not turn his heart toward the people.

What this tells us is that there is a limit on the ministry of Old Testament prophets like Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah.

They could not save their people from their sins.

They could pray for the sins of the people, but they could not atone for the sins of the people.

They could beg for God’s mercy, but they could not leverage it.

What sinners need is someone to pray for them who can stand in the gap to save a sinner from the wrath of God.

What sinners need is someone to pray for them who could offer a perfect sacrifice for their sins.

Sinners need both prayers and payment.

Only Jesus offers both.

Jesus paid the full price for our sins.

This is what we celebrate when we sing our last hymn this morning, the last two stanzas, “Kind and merciful God, in Christ’s death on the cross, you provided a cleansing from sin; speak the words that forgive, that henceforth we may live by the might of your Spirit within. Stanza 5. Kind and merciful God, bid us lift up our

heads and command us to rise from our knees; may our hearts now be changed and no longer estranged, thro' the pow'r of your pardon and peace."

On the basis of Christ's perfect sacrifice for sin, when He died on the cross, Christ now made the full payment required for God the Father to pour out His mercy on sinners.

This is the true spiritual breakthrough. From the prayers of Jesus for us and the cross of Jesus for us, we learn the value of starting over every day. We are starting over in this new year, because of Jesus' prayers and Jesus' payment.

1 Thessalonians 1:10, it is not Moses, or Samuel, or Jeremiah, or your pastor and elders, but it is only "...*Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*"

Hebrews 7:25-27, Jesus "...*is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself.*"

Jesus is our basis for starting over.

Jesus paid for our sins, and Jesus continues to pray for us.