

## Jeremiah: The Descent into Darkness

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*Locked Up with Nowhere to Go*

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*Heavenly Father, we thank you, thank you for the beautiful music of Christ above us and in us, and we ask that that might truly be something that we experience today. And now we ask for your blessing on the reading and exposition of the Scriptures and that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Now our text this morning comes from Jeremiah 20. We began a series three weeks ago called "Locked Up with Nowhere to Go," what we can learn about ourselves and what we can learn about God and we've looked at Joseph and Samson and today we want to examine an episode in the life of the prophet Jeremiah. So let's read together Jeremiah 20.

1 Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. 2 Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD. 3 The next day, when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The LORD does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. 4 For thus says the LORD: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. 5 Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon. 6 And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely." 7 O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. 8 For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 9 If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it

in, and I cannot. 10 For I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side!  
"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my close friends, watching  
for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can overcome him and  
take our revenge on him." 11 But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They  
will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor  
will never be forgotten. 12 O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who  
sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to  
you have I committed my cause. 13 Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD!  
For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers. 14  
Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore  
me, let it not be blessed! 15 Cursed be the man who brought the news to  
my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad. 16 Let that man  
be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry  
in the morning and an alarm at noon, 17 because he did not kill me in the  
womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever  
great. 18 Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and  
spend my days in shame?

Well, let me tell you a story about a very great missionary by the name of Adoniram Judson, one of the first missionaries to come from the United States or the Colonies, as it was then, and he and his wife were sent as missionaries to Burma, which is now, of course, Myanmar, and during the Burmese War he was imprisoned, he was tortured, and every single night for a year and a half he was placed in the stocks like Jeremiah was. For a year and a half, he never bathed, there was no means of doing it. At the end of his life, something in the region of 100 churches had been established through his missionary endeavors and somewhere around 8,000 Christians could verify that they became Christians through the ministry of Adoniram Judson. God put him in the stocks for a reason.

Well, Jeremiah experiences a night in the stocks, a night in prison, if you will. Some of you will have seen the paintings, the marvelous paintings by Michelangelo and Rembrandt of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. They are extraordinary depictions of a man who looks very very sad. He'd been a prophet at this point in time for 22 years. He was called to be a prophet when he was 17 years of age and he's now in his, he's probably 39 or 40 years of age, and most of his life he had been a prophet under King Josiah. Josiah was a wonderful king. He was a reforming king, brought the five books of Moses back into center stage and many things in the temple and in the society in Judah were reformed according to the word of God. But now he's dead, he died in battle under Pharaoh Necho in 609, arrows, archers pierced him and he was carried away from the battle scene and died, and now on the throne is the lead-footed, clumsy Jehoiakim, and that Egyptian success lived only for a few years and in 605 at a very famous battle at Carchemish, the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians and sent them back to Egypt, and now Babylon is surrounding Judah and threatening Judah and we are roughly around 600 years BC, perhaps 602-603 BC. And in about 16-17 years from now, Judah will be no more and the temple will be no more and Babylon will have sent, in a series of incursions Babylonian

would send folk like Ezekiel and Daniel and so on into captivity in Babylon and those who remained in Jerusalem, many of them would be killed the final years of the siege of Jerusalem would be very bad indeed, and Jeremiah lived through it all and eventually would not go into Babylon but would go to Egypt in his final days.

Jeremiah never wanted to be a prophet. He was the son of Abiathar the priest and he probably grew up thinking and preparing himself for the priesthood but at the age of 17 God came to him and said to him, "Before you were born, before you were made, I knew you and I called you." In Jeremiah's past lie the ministries of Isaiah the prophet and Amos the prophet, and a contemporary though younger is Ezekiel, Ezekiel is probably still in his teens at this point in the narrative. And just ahead lie a series of deportations to Babylon and Jeremiah's task is to tell Judah and to tell Jerusalem that they are going to be made captives, that they are going to be defeated by Babylon, and you can imagine how difficult a task that was for Jeremiah. He was thought of as a traitor because every time he preached, he preached terror on every side. That's the nickname that they gave him. God gave him a very very difficult ministry. You think your circumstances right now are difficult and they pale into insignificance in comparison to the task that God gave to Jeremiah. They thought of him as a quisling. You remember Vidkun Quisling who was Prime Minister of Norway in 1943-1945 and he supported Hitler, and Quisling was arrested and assassinated. He was executed as a traitor and there were many in Jerusalem who wanted to do the same thing to Jeremiah. They were just waiting for the moment that they could accuse him of treachery and treason and have him put to death. We use the term, perhaps you use the term jeremiad with a "d," jeremiad, and a jeremiad is a speech that is full of woe and full of lament.

Jeremiah has seen visions, he's seen an almond tree that blossoms and the Hebrew sounds like the word "to watch" and God is watching Judah right now, seeing them in all of their sin and rebellion. He saw a pot, a cooking pot and a boiling pot and it's tilting from the north and it's a depiction of the coming wrath of the Babylonians. He saw a basket of rotten figs and it was a depiction of the people of Judah, that they weren't even good enough to be taken into captivity like Daniel and Ezekiel, but they would incur the full enmity of Babylon. And more recently in chapter 18, he had visited a potter, somebody who makes pots, and he had purchased one, God had told him to purchase a pot, an earthenware pot, and he goes out and he smashes it into smithereens on the floor, and it's a depiction of what's coming to Judah. And he walks into the valley of Hinnom where human sacrifice was taking place and he preaches a sermon that suggests that the people of Judah are going to be buried here in the valley of Hinnom.

And you think you've got it hard and tough right now and this is what God asked Jeremiah to do and to say, and here in chapters 19 and 20, he has encountered Pashhur. Now Pashhur is a priest but he's also the temple police. He's like the heresy hunter in the temple and Jeremiah has just preached one of these hell-fire and brimstone sermons that sounds like Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon "Sinners in the hands of an angry God," and Pashhur has arrested him, he's gone too far this time. And Pashhur has arrested him and he puts him in the stocks and no doubt people threw stuff, rotten stuff at Jeremiah. And the next day he's released and he calls Pashhur and Pashhur in Hebrew means

fruitful on every side but now he returns the nickname that everyone has given to him and says, "You're not fruitful on every side, you're terror on every side." In other words, Jeremiah preaches the same sermon to Pashhur the next morning that had gotten him into trouble in the first place. There is an example of the faithfulness of Jeremiah the prophet.

Well, I want to look at verses 7 through 20 and I want to divide it into two parts, 7 to 13 and then 14 through 20. And in the first section, 7 through 13, and I want you to notice in verse 13 he talks about the needy, that God has delivered the life of the needy and the word "needy" in Hebrew is in the singular, so he's talking about himself. God has delivered him from the enmity of Pashhur, at least he's still alive. And he sings a song of praise to God and you need to think of this little section, 7 to 13, as a psalm. What does Jeremiah do when he finds himself in a dark place? What does he do when he finds himself in trouble? And what he does is he returns to the language of worship and what do you do when you worship? Well, you sing a psalm and these verses sound like they're in the form of a psalm. He addresses God, he describes his troubles, he confesses his confidence and says some things, credal statements like the Apostles' Creed, and then he makes a petition and the petition is for vengeance. Now if you have problems with the idea of vengeance, then just think of it in terms of justice. He wants justice. He wants God to do the right thing. He wants wrong to be punished and right to be rewarded. That's what he's saying.

It's a psalm of complaint and it's like many of the psalms. What do miserable Christians sing? And if all we sing are late 19<sup>th</sup> century hymns that are always upbeat and the tunes are always upbeat, then we don't have a way of expressing our faith in the language of bereavement, in the language of sorrow, or in the language of anger, or in the language of grief and the book of Psalms helps us to understand that we bring all of our emotions. We don't live in an ideal world, we live in this messy world of confusion and disarray and injustice and things that seem unfair and things that sometimes make us feel completely hopeless. And Jeremiah is doing what the psalmist does, he brings that into the language of worship. "You have deceived me," or perhaps that's a little strong and some commentators suggest that the Hebrew can also mean persuade, God has persuaded him, in other words, what Jeremiah is saying is, "You got me into this mess. I was doing what you told me to do and look at what it got me. I'm trying to do your will, I'm doing this difficult task that you've asked me to do." And finding friends, it's easier than finding toilet paper right now, and Jeremiah has no friends. He's doing the Lord's work and it was a horrible task and they called him "terror on every side."

Jeremiah is preaching God's word. He mentions it here in this little psalm of his, the word of the Lord. You know, of the 359 times that the expression "thus says the Lord" occurs in the Old Testament, 157 of them are in Jeremiah. It's like a tolling bell. Everything that Jeremiah said was the Lord's word and it got him into trouble and he's complaining about it. He tried to keep the word within himself, he tried not to say it. There were moments when Jeremiah said, "I'm not gonna say this anymore," and he tried to hold it in, but it was like a fire in his bones and he couldn't hold it and he could not hold the word of God in. It's time, you see, for Jeremiah to hold in the medicine.

Now you should understand, I think, that verses 7 through 20 are not said in front of Pashhur. After he preached that sermon again to Pashhur, I think Jeremiah went home. This is something that took place in private.

I thought about writing out a prayer this week and it would include things like, "Lord, I just think this is completely unfair. I don't understand what you're doing. I'm completely confused. We're meant to gather, we're meant to worship, we're meant to see each other, we're meant to hug each other." As President Bush said in his video yesterday, that's the kind of people we are, we hug each other and we can't do that right now. And there are so many difficulties and so many obstacles and it seems so unfair to certain sections of our community and to those over 65, that's me. And there seems no end to it and perhaps and some are saying that this is going to be with us for the next year and maybe 18 months, and it's so unfair and I want to say, "Lord, this is just not right. It's not fair." And turn it into an expression of worship, "But you, Lord, are in control. You are sovereign. You hold the world in the palms of your hands." To say with Jeremiah, "The Lord is with me, like a strong warrior he is with me. My enemies will fall. Praise him!" And perhaps Jeremiah wasn't being altogether sincere when he was saying these words about praising God but this is what... how do you get out of trouble?

I remember saying this is, I was probably 28 or 29, had been in ministry just for a few years, and I remember saying to an older Scottish Presbyterian minister that the joy of preaching had kind of left me, and that I was aware that in the last few months I was doing it sort of mechanically but the joy of it had gone, and I said, "What do you do when you experience those days?" And he said, "You do what you always do, you persevere through it, you use the language of worship, you say to yourself, 'What is it that I believe?' And eventually, God willing, in his mercy and grace he'll bring you out on the other side."

So Jeremiah in this section, verses 7 through 13, is using a psalm, he's using his own psalm, a psalm of lament, a psalm of criticism. It's the language of complaint and it's what believers have done, and so I urge you this morning maybe look at some of those psalms and use them and employ them and however lacking in faith you may be when you say these words, it's the only way forward. But then in verses 14 to 18, you notice in verse 14 there's an abrupt change because in verse 13 he's singing praise to the Lord but in verse 14 he says, "Cursed be the day on which I was born!" And he says though, and I think what you need to understand is that Jeremiah has been saying things, this is what, I say the Apostles' Creed, so let me say the Apostles' Creed, these are the things that I believe and I need to sing to God and I need to trust him and I need to ask him to come down in all of his sovereignty, and then it all snaps in his head, in his mind, in his heart, in his affections, and he pauses and it just all falls apart for him and he uses language here that is almost a quotation of Job 3. These are Job's words that he is citing and they may be difficult for you because if in the first place we have Jeremiah's valiant attempt to worship and mask the trouble, in this second section we have Jeremiah's collapse into lamentation and woe.

You need to consider three things. The personal suffering that he has experienced just the night before. He hasn't slept. He's been beaten. He aches. He's got a fever. There are probably flesh wounds. And he hurts and he's in pain. You need to understand that for Jeremiah God seems to have let him down, that perhaps he hadn't signed up for this amount of suffering and he collapses. He feels deranged because he was doing the work of the Lord.

One of our members and an elder in this congregation was standing outside the abortion clinic just a few weeks ago doing what he does every day, gently trying to persuade women to think of a second option other than abortion, to think perhaps of adoption. And his ministry is gentle, his ministry is meant simply to persuade, to provide an alternative, but the police cited him, threatened him with imprisonment for doing the Lord's work. I suspect he felt, I haven't asked him but I suspect he felt for a moment like Jeremiah, that he was being punished for doing the right thing.

There is a poem that we had to learn because he was a Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, who wrote that extraordinary work "Under Milk Wood," but in the last few months of his life, he died I think the year after he wrote this poem, it's a poem that talks about death and it's about the death of his father, I think, and it has those extraordinary lines, "Do not go gently into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." And I think that's what Jeremiah is doing, he's raging.

Now some of you are asking has Jeremiah sinned? Well, of course he has sinned but if that's the first question that comes into your head, you need to take a seat and be quiet for a minute because you've missed the point. The fact is that God has put this in the Scriptures, that this extraordinary man, this extraordinary prophet could find himself this low in response to the circumstances he found himself in. As Alex Matere says, the word of God makes him perpetually at war with himself. He's not the only one, of course. We think of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 beneath a broom tree and asking the Lord to take away his life. We can think of John the Baptist in prison and saying, having a moment where he loses faith and confidence that Jesus is the Messiah. We can think of Jesus himself in Gethsemane, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me." It's an earth-trembling moment in the ministry of Jesus.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was in his early 20s when he was preaching in Surrey Gardens and there were thousands of people in there and some young lads cried, "Fire! Fire!" And there was pandemonium as people left, seven people died and over 20 were seriously injured and Charles Haddon Spurgeon plunged into despair and a period of depression, and what he learned in that period of depression was this, that "next to the death of Christ, I love his sympathy the best; that we have a sympathizing Savior."

Think of this passage like a life vest. I don't think I've ever uttered these words, I don't think I've even come close to saying the things that Jeremiah is saying though I have come close to being frustrated in these last few weeks, but think of it like a life vest. It's there. If ever you find yourself in this terrible circumstance, you're not alone. There are others who have been there before you.

What I love about this is the sheer honesty of it. It's one of those things that makes me think that the Bible is in fact inerrant because if the Bible was just put together by priests and scholars, they would take this out. There's no profit in this. But the fact that God said, "Jeremiah, I want you to include this in your prophecy because I want them to see you warts and all. I want them to see that I can use someone who finds himself utterly and completely broken by circumstances."

Andrew Brunson, imprisoned in Turkey, he says this, "The combination of despair and anxiety is very dangerous, so when I think I may not ever get out, I just wanted to escape the situation. It's not that I wanted to die, it's that I didn't want to live. I couldn't imagine living in these circumstances for a long period of time." Andrew Brunson understood Jeremiah, do you see? As did William Cowper, the neighbor of John Newton, the man who wrote, "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform," the man who wrote, "Oh, for a closer walk with thee," the man who wrote, "There is a fountain filled with blood," and he writes an epoch poem towards the end of his life, in a moment of despair as he has tried to take his life on five different occasions, but at the end of his life he wrote an epoch poem called "The Castaway."

"No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
No light propitious shone;  
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
We perish'd, each alone:  
But I beneath a rougher sea,  
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he."

That's a dark place. That's a very dark place indeed, but God used that broken man and used him to give us the language of worship that we use today.

So let me ask you a final question this morning: how frustrated are you on a scale of 1-10 and 1 is not frustrated and 10 is you're tearing your hair out that needs cutting? Give me a number between 1 and 10 as to how frustrated you are right now and I don't think it compares to where Jeremiah was. God gave us this Scripture, I think, to teach us that God uses even our broken efforts and frustrated efforts to advance his glory and I don't understand that but I'm thankful to my very toes that that is the kind of God that we have.

*Father, we thank you, thank you for this word, thank you for Jeremiah the prophet and we ask now that you would just simply bless these words, and for those perhaps in our congregation just now who are particularly low, we pray that these words might be a comfort to them. In Jesus' name. Amen.*