

The Weeping Prophet Wrestling with God

Jeremiah

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Bible Text: Jeremiah 14:19-22
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Turn again to Jeremiah 14 and we'll look at the last four verses here in particular, this prayer of Jeremiah.

19 Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? hath thy soul lothed Zion? why hast thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us? we looked for peace, and there is no good; and for the time of healing, and behold trouble! 20 We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee. 21 Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory: remember, break not thy covenant with us. 22 Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not thou he, O LORD our God? therefore we will wait upon thee: for thou hast made all these things.

Dear congregation, this passage is most instructive for us. There are in it what we would call so often natural disasters. Last time, you remember, we saw that the land of Judah was crippled with a very severe drought and now there is more, there are more disasters, more calamities, and as you go through this chapter, you get the idea that there's just one thing after another. That's what's coming here to the land of Judah, one thing after another. The commentator Derek Kidner noted that the word for "drought" in the beginning of the chapter is actually plural, droughts, and he says this indicates a series of disasters, each one leaving the survivors less able to face the next one.

So it's one thing after another and it seems certainly to me that these passages only seem to be increasingly appropriate and relevant to our own time, one thing after another. We've had what the Bible would call a pestilence, a plague, a virus, and now we have, at least in some measure, what the Bible would call the sword. The sword doesn't need to be an enemy from a foreign country, it can be any kind of violence that upsets the order and haven't we seen that in recent days. So pestilence and sword, and what this question or this passage rather should be making us ask: how do we respond? How do we, what do we think of these things? Or better what does the Bible tell us about these things and how ought we to respond, how ought we to pray about this? Again to quote the commentator Kidner here, he says, "If anything could drive a nation to its knees, this was it. The only question being whether it would be a response of panic or a response of penitence." And

isn't that the case that even in our own situation really that are these, basically there are these two responses: there's panic or there's penitence or repentance. And in a way you'd say who wouldn't be shaken by this kind of thing coming especially one after the other?

Again if you look at verse 18, we noted this last time, you can go out to the field, they say behold you go out to the field, you go outside the city and you have the slain of the sword, the people. There's violence outside your home. You go out the doors, you go out the locked gates, the locks of your house, there's sword, there's violence so don't go outside. But you stay in, you remain within the city, well, there's another problem there, there's sickness, people sick with famine. And so there are not only the livelihoods but their lives are being threatened here with sickness, and just as in our own days, sickness now this threat of rioting and violence and stealing and looting and all these things, this horrible things that we have seen, and we say, don't we as we've been saying for a long time as we've been feeling for a long time, "Well, we hope things will get better soon." And maybe in many ways we expect it because we desire that, we want it to be better soon, but I think the question this passage is forcing us to consider, or the point it's forcing us to consider is that that's not guaranteed. The people here in this time, they were all expecting things to get better. That's their complaint as we're going to see in a little bit. They were looking for peace. They wanted things to get better. They were expecting that but it didn't happen.

You remember Jeremiah had said back in chapter 12, verse 5, he had warned them, "Listen," he said, "if you're running with the footmen and they're wearying you now, then what about the horses? If this knocks you over, then what about if things get worse?" And so he asks, these things that we see shake us, alarm us, but the question remains fundamentally do we respond with panic or do we respond with penitence? I supposed we could add, you could respond with indifference and that would maybe be the worst of all. But basically panic or penitence.

And as you would work through this chapter, you see different response by different people. There's the people of Judah generally. Now we've seen this as we've moved through these chapters of Jeremiah, their reaction to the judgment of God coming. Well, we can see in verse 12 that these people, they're still fasting, they're still praying, they're still, as it were, going to church but there's a problem. There's no deep sense of their own sinfulness. There's panic. There's question. There's confusion but there's no real humbling. Yes, they're fasting but their fasting is more for show. That's always a danger. It's a danger still. We can fast and we can do it for show. We can do it in a way where we expect God to notice, we expect other people to notice for we expect and we even think and maybe we even say that God will surely answer us now because of this kind of fast or this kind of prayer that we have performed. That is a danger. God must notice or see. God must answer, and this was very wrong as we see in verse 12. God saw the fasting, he saw the prayer, he did not see humility and repentance.

Then you have the response of Jeremiah like we saw last time in 7 through 9. He is confessing the backsliding. He's saying there are many. He's confessing the sin. He's

looking to the hope of Israel. He's looking to God, the Savior thereof in the time of trouble. He's pleading with the Lord, "O Lord, leave us not!"

And then the Lord's response comes in in 10 through 12. He speaks of the people's sins that for all their fasting, for all their prayer, they love to wander. It's an intentional thing they're doing. They're going their own way and the Lord says, "I will consume them," at the end of verse 12. "I will consume them," and notice these three things: by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence. These are three of the things by which the Lord has said repeatedly and he's said all the way back to Moses in Deuteronomy, "These are the things I will bring upon you. If you go after other gods, if you forsake me, if you don't listen to me, famine, sword, pestilence." And if you ever get a combination of these, it is the Lord knocking all the louder. So if we have pestilence even in the measure, if we have sword even in a measure, we have got to start listening, that God is speaking.

But then you notice in 13 through 16 there's also the reaction of false prophets, people who are speaking in the name of Jehovah, people who are saying, "Thus saith the Lord," but the Lord is saying, "They're telling you lies." In verse 13 you notice they say the exact opposite of what the Lord just said at the end of 12. The Lord says, "Sword, famine, pestilence is coming upon you because of your sin," and they're saying, "You won't see the sword. You won't have famine. I will give you assured peace. Thus saith the Lord." Everything's okay. You're the people of God. God will not let these things happen to you. He's not like that.

If you go down to verse 18, you see at the end of 18 there this description that the prophet and the priest and it says they "go about into a land that they know not." It could be a reference to their exile into Babylon but some suggest it also has just this idea, that they're all over the place. The people you expect to tell you the truth, the people you expect to come to the word of God to put their finger here and say, "Look, here's the situation. This is the description that describes us. This is what the Lord says about it. This is what the prophet says about it. And you come to this word and you bind yourself no matter how hard or difficult it is." That's what the prophet ought to be doing but instead the prophets, the false prophets, they're all over the place. They're speaking religious language but it's not the message of Scripture.

Now then you have Jeremiah modeling for us the right response, that he is modeling for us the right response. He does it in the right spirit, verse 17, "Let mine eyes." Don't you love Jeremiah? For all the sternness of his message, look at his spirit, "Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and cease not: for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach, with a very grievous blow." So he's not bringing this hard message about the judgment of God to the people of God, he's not doing it with dry eyes. He's not doing it with an unfeeling heart. He's grieved over this.

And the Lord has told him in verse 11, "Don't pray for this people." We have one of the most outstanding confessions and prayers as we saw last time in the whole Bible in verses 7 through 9, one of the most affecting, one of the most pleading. "O LORD, the hope of Israel. Abide with us. Don't leave us. Thou art our only hope." And the Lord

comes in verse 11 and says, "Don't pray for the good of this people." And yet here he comes again and you see him wrestling with God.

Men ought always to pray and not to faint and here comes this prophet modeling for us this prayer, and he does it in three ways. Jeremiah, firstly, goes to God looking for answers. That's what we find in verse 19 and this is where Jeremiah starts and it's where we have to start. Jeremiah goes to God looking for answers. "Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? hath thy soul lothed Zion? why hast thou smitten us, and there is no healing for us? we looked for peace, and there is no good." The condition is desperate. It's one thing after another. They're at their wit's end. They expected it to be better by now. They expected that the tide would have turned, that things would have improved but the middle of verse 19, "we looked for peace, we looked for healing, but instead of peace, no good. Instead of healing, behold more trouble!" They expected things to get better but they didn't. They only got worse.

So the condition is desperate and here goes Jeremiah to God for answers. Why is there no healing? Why are things not getting better? Why is God, as it were, shutting his ear to the prayer of his people? You see, Jeremiah is not looking at his own wisdom, he's not consulting with the king, he's not consulting with even the medics of Judah, he's going to God. He wants to know what does God say about this? What's God's mind in this? "I want to know the mind of the Lord. I want the Lord to tell me what's happening here. I want the Lord and the word of God to inform my thinking. Why are things going from bad to worse?" And how true in relation to us. Our national situation, these are the kinds of questions we could ask. The professing church so often and so much seems to be all over the place, every man doing what is right in their own eyes, all kinds of ideas and inventions. But you could also think of it for your own soul, maybe you've felt a time of blessing before, closeness to the Lord, fellowship with him in the word and in prayer and in the means of grace, but now there's dryness and dryness because maybe we can't worship the way we desire, but the dryness also because, maybe we don't know why, where we're going to the word, we're reading it but our minds are not in it, our affections are not in it, and it seems like a closed book. And there's a dryness not in the land outside but in the land inside, and the sword seems to be there too. We're more conscious of the enemies of our soul than the Savior and that all drives us to ask, "Why, Lord? Show me, Lord. Is there a reason? Is there a cause?" Other people can say don't worry but I want to know from God why is this.

So then this sad condition instead of getting better becomes worse and that's what leads Jeremiah to ask the Lord these questions, "Hast thou utterly rejected Judah? Hath thy soul lothed Zion? Why hast thou smitten us? Why is there no healing for us? This is the way it looks, this is what it looks like. It looks like the Lord has rejected us. It looks like the Lord has smitten us." We see things the way they are, the disorder, the violence, the pandemic, a terrible lack of discernment generally, on our own, we feel it ourselves, a lack of wisdom and we need to see that the Lord has a controversy, the Lord is speaking, "Hast thou utterly rejected Judah," and we ought to feel that. How is it that I, how is it that you, how is it that we can read this kind of statement without feeling the pain of it? If God would utterly reject us, what would that be like? Well, it would be God giving us

what we deserve. What would it be for God to loath us? It would be God giving us what we deserve.

The prophet here, then, you see, he recognizes God's displeasure but he does more than simply recognize it. We've got to do more than recognize that God is speaking to us, we need to know why and that's why Jeremiah's coming to the word of God. Why? What are the reasons? You see, don't we live in a time when we feel and we think and we believe that we have all the answers and if we don't have them, we can get them? We've got science. We've got the best minds. We've got the best intelligence. We've got the best technology. We've got the best medicine. We've got the best military. We've got the best of everything we see and so we can come to our own conclusions. We can work it out. We can solve the problem. At a time like this, what we need is humility. We need to realize that we don't have all the answers and we need to go to the word of God and seek the answers there.

So Jeremiah models here this prayer by going to God looking for the answers and that brings him, secondly, here in verse 20, Jeremiah goes to God confessing sin. He goes to God looking for answers and that brings him to go to God confessing sin. Here's the answer to all the whys, verse 20, "We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers: for we have sinned against thee." He's recognizing that it is God who is speaking in these so-called natural disasters, and having gone to God for the answers, having asked him why we're in this condition, why is there no relief, why are things not getting better, Jeremiah comes to the real problem, the core problem, he comes to the place that God is pointing him to and pointing us to. When God brings these disasters, as we call them, one upon another, this is where he's pointing us to. He's looking for repentance. This is the will of God for you, even your sanctification, and he does this to his people, he points them to their sin because he is a gracious and a kind Lord and he won't leave sin in his people and that's the real problem, that's the cancer that's within.

God is displeased with our sin and so Jeremiah says, "We acknowledge. We acknowledge, O LORD, our sinfulness. Against thee, thee only," Psalm 51 says, "have we sinned." And not just to say it but to really feel it. Jeremiah says and I think it's in chapter 2, that there's two, he says it's an evil thing and a bitter thing to sin against God, and I think we often feel the bitterness of sinning against God, we feel the consequence and the bitter consequence of sinning against God, but God says before he says it's that, he says it's an evil thing, and while we feel the bitterness, do we feel the evilness of sin? Sin is an evil thing, God says. "I hate it. It is that evil thing which I hate." We sang it, didn't we, in Psalm 51? "I am evil, born in sin." But how true it is, isn't it, how often we can sing this kind of Psalm and we can do it without thinking, or we can do it without really feeling the evil nature of sin. But God never looks or thinks of sin in an unthinking or, as we would say, an unfeeling way. It is always always the evil thing which I hate.

And Jeremiah, now he comes, he's modeling this prayer for us and he comes and he says, "We acknowledge it. We feel it." And you notice how he says, "We acknowledge our wickedness." Our wickedness. Here he is speaking on behalf of these people, these

people who don't see their own wickedness, and here's Jeremiah saying "our wickedness." He's not standing above them, he's standing on behalf of them. He's standing with them and we have to do the same, the church has to do the same. You look at the sins of the nation, the evilness of it, the abortion, the theft, the lies, the murder, the greed, the lawlessness, the Sabbath breaking, the evil of it all but we say "our wickedness." We're part of this nation and so we confess these sins. The sins of the church, we're not here pointing the finger at other churches but we look at the sins of the church in general, the coldness, carelessness, lightness, casualness, bringing things into the worship of God that God has not allowed, will worship, our own ideas, but it's our wickedness. Not theirs, ours. Our wickedness.

"We acknowledge our wickedness," and then he says, "and the iniquity of our fathers." Iniquity is crooked or twisted, out of shape, bent, perverse. We acknowledge that, the perverseness, the twistedness, the crookedness of our fathers. You could go back to the first father, Adam. You can also go to Manasseh, if you would look in the next chapter, verse 4. You remember we looked at Manasseh some time ago. Manasseh found forgiveness but now look, Manasseh's in heaven when all this is happening on earth and look what it says, God says, "I will cause this people to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth because of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem." He found personal forgiveness but here's the consequence years later. What an evil, what a bitter thing sin is. Isn't it true for God's people that this is what grieves them more and more, it's my heart sin, the sin of my fathers, our sin, our twistedness, our twisted thoughts, our perverse thoughts, the thoughts no one else sees, the thoughts in our hearts, our motives even when we do things that people would say, "Well, that's good. Look at what he's doing. Look at what she's doing." And yet we know in ourselves we have bad motives. We're crooked. We're perverse. It's iniquity and it grieves the people of God. They hate it and they turn, looking to God, they turn from it. One man described repentance as a revolution in the soul. A revolution in the soul. We hear people crying for a revolution now. What we need is a revolution of the soul. We need what John Duncan said of repentance, repentance, he says, is letting God be God and we his creature. That's what we need. We need to take our place before the Creator. Let God be God and we his creature.

So here's Jeremiah modeling this prayer of confession and he's calling on the name of the Lord, not to an unknown God but the name of the Lord. The Lord God, merciful and gracious. And that name is his hope. That name is what now in the third place causes Jeremiah to go to the Lord pleading covenant mercies. He's going to the Lord pleading covenant mercies. And so Jeremiah is looking at the sin, he's confessing the sin, he hates the sin, he's turning from the sin, and when we think of turning from sin, here's the thing, you will never turn from sin by me simply telling you to do so. You'll never hate sin by me telling you how wicked it is. You will never hate sin by seeing the consequence of it. The way that what is required for repentance is a view of God in Christ, what the Shorter Catechism calls an apprehension, a laying hold, an understanding, a laying hold of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ and that's where repentance happens. You go to Christ, the one who is exalted, to give repentance and when you begin to see him, the one in whom this name shines so gloriously, that's where repentance comes. There's no repentance

without the Gospel. There's no repentance without looking to Christ. There's no repentance without the cross of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you're here and you're saying, "How do I know I've ever really repented? How do I know my repentance is real? How do I know I've ever been really converted?" Well, you see, the answer to that question is this: the way you know you were is because you are now. As one man said, you may not have a birth certificate, you may have lost it, you may never have had it, there's no register anywhere, there's no one who can confirm the place, the time of your birth but how do you know you're alive? Well, because you're living now. You're breathing now. You're walking now. You're talking now. That's the evidence that you had a birth. You don't need to know when, you don't need to know the time or the date, what you need to know is that now today you're looking to God with life in your soul which tells you that the Spirit has worked.

So here's Jeremiah, then, and he's pleading these covenant mercies. He's looking to God. There's great hope here. In verse 22, he's saying there's no other hope. He looks everywhere else and he calls it vanity, emptiness, the vanities of the Gentiles, the emptiness. The gods of the Gentiles, they don't give rain. They don't give showers. It's not just heaven and clouds that give rain, it's God, he said. But Jeremiah, then he's going to this God that he knows and he's confessing it's God alone who can help. We've got to follow Jeremiah here. God alone can help.

The heathen gods don't give rain and don't just think of heathen gods as some ugly Baal-like creature. Remember anything which you ultimately put your trust in is your god. It can be something that is good in its place like a healthcare system. It's something we can be incredibly thankful for like military. But if that becomes our god, if we have the sense of invincibility, that we always will have everything under control, then that becomes a god and we need to follow Jeremiah here and say that's not our ultimate hope, thankful as we are for these things. And haven't these mighty things, the best healthcare system in the world, the best and strongest military the world has ever seen, and are we not shaken? Are we not shaken? I mean, when you think of the kind of word that we've all heard in recent times, we're afraid of being overwhelmed whether it's a healthcare system, whether it's those protecting us, we're afraid of being overwhelmed. They're shaking, even these mighty things. We need to go to God. We need to get on our knees. We need to beg him for mercy for our vile independence. I'm speaking here about the heart, the independence of our hearts, the independence that came with us out of Eden. Oh, we need to be dependent on God. We need to be beggars at his footstool.

And here's the Lord, the covenant Lord that Jeremiah is pleading to and Jeremiah and the Lord is giving the words to say. Would you ever dare to take this kind of plea to God? Verse 21, "Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory." But here these prayers are given to us as prayers that are models for us, as prayers that we ought to be begging the Lord for. "Lord, this, this is what thou hast said. Do not abhor us for thy name's sake." We deserve to be abhorred, to be despised, to be thrown away. We abhor ourselves when we begin to see our own sin. We see our own sin and at times it makes God's people feel ill and sick at the crookedness of their sin, the repetitive nature

of their sin. We abhor it ourselves. Why should God not abhor us, the God who is holy? Only one reason, only one argument: for thy name's sake. For that name that thou hast made, that thou hast revealed especially in Jesus Christ, in that one who had no perversity or iniquity and no sin, that one who is the Savior, that one who is the Lord God merciful and gracious.

Then he says, "do not disgrace the throne of thy glory." What a prayer this is. What a prayer this is, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory. God's throne which is pure and holy and spotless, disgraced. It's grieved us no end to see poor people with their businesses disgraced, graffiti. It grieves us to see these things on the walls of people and institutions that are there to protect us and need our prayers and support. That's a disgrace. They're trying to disgrace it. But to disgrace the throne of God's glory? My dear friend, the throne of God would be covered with shame and disgrace if God would fail in any one of his promises. The throne of God would be disgraced if he ever turned any poor sinner that comes to him through Jesus Christ away. God has bound his name, God has bound his throne, God has bound his glory, his reputation to his Gospel, to his covenant.

"Remember, break not thy covenant," he ends saying. God has bound himself by covenant, engaged himself and God is proclaiming this covenant mercy which is sure to you, to me, to sinners, whoever hears it. That's how you get at these mercies, in the Gospel that's proclaimed to you. And Jeremiah is saying, "O Lord, don't break it. Remember it." And aren't we the ones that need to remember that covenant? We're the ones who forget it. We're the ones who break it. From our side there's only emptiness and breaking and forgetting and confusion, and yet here's a prayer to the Lord, "O Lord, wilt thou not forget. Break not thy covenant."

Well, what a model this is. What power is in these prayers, my dear friend, because God's name is in this, God's covenant is in this, God's mercy is in this, God's reputation, God's throne is in this. Are these not prayers for us to pray in these days? "O Lord, we need answers from thee. O Lord, we confess our sin which is very great. O Lord, do not abhor us for thy name's sake. Do not disgrace the throne of thy glory. Remember, break not thy covenant with us." Amen. May the Lord bless this word.

Let us pray.