

LAMENTS OR CONFESSIONS OF JEREMIAH

The time of the prophet Jeremiah (from ca. 650 to 570 BC) was a time of crisis. The ancient Near East was in a state of flux and change. At the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, Egypt and then Babylon stood waiting to pick up the spoils of war. The small kingdom of Judah was caught in the middle of the drama. At first, Judah was a vassal state of Assyria, then for a brief period independent, then a vassal of Egypt, and finally a vassal of Babylon. It was at the hands of the powerful Babylonian regime that Judah lost her identity as a nation when Nebuchadnezzar took Zedekiah into exile and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

Jeremiah's responsibility as God's prophet was to proclaim a message about nations and kingdoms—"to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1.10).¹ Jeremiah proclaimed his message primarily to his own nation, which was God's nation, the people of Judah. And the people were very wicked. They had broken their covenant with the Lord by serving false gods and by committing gross personal and social sins (e.g., theft, murder, adultery, injustice; see 7.6ff.). The Lord's judgment for their sinfulness had come. So it was inevitable that Jeremiah would be a prophet of calamity. He had no choice but to proclaim to a rebellious and idolatrous nation the nearness of disaster.

The people did not trust in the Lord God, but they did trust in their city (God's holy city), their temple (God's dwelling place), and themselves (God's chosen nation). They had a false security based on a religion of show, a religion that did not effect their behavior, a religion that did not produce a pure heart. Consequently, Jeremiah preached and proclaimed that their city would be ransacked, their temple would be destroyed, and the people themselves would be

¹Scripture quotations unless noted otherwise are taken from the New International Version (1984).

carried away into captivity. All of this would come about by the “foe of the north” (i.e., the Babylonians).

As expected, Jeremiah and his message were unpopular. He was rejected and derided. The people of his own village Anathoth plotted against him (11.18ff.). They wanted to kill Jeremiah and said, “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands” (11.21). The officials, or chief leaders of the people, tried to kill Jeremiah by putting him in a cistern (38.1-6). As symbolic action, Jeremiah was required by the Lord to withdraw from ordinary life in marriage and in the joys (merriment) and sorrows (mourning) of village life (e.g., he couldn’t marry, he couldn’t go to a feast, he couldn’t go to a funeral; see 16.1-9). Jeremiah endured ridicule, insult, and physical assault.

This put Jeremiah in a predicament. He was chosen by God to be the mouthpiece of the Lord to an evil generation (cf. 1.17ff.). His keen awareness of his prophetic mission with the acute persecution that he received caused Jeremiah to cry out against his lot in life. As a result, in his book of prophecies and in his lamentations we have several examples of his deeply felt confessions and complaints to God.

One stark example comes from chapter 20. This lament of the prophet comes after he had been “beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord’s temple” (20.2). Jeremiah complains:

O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived;
 you overpowered me and prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long;
 everyone mocks me.
Wherever I speak, I cry out
 proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the Lord has brought me
 insult and reproach all day long.

But if I say, "I will not mention him
or speak any more in his name,"

his word is in my heart like a fire,
a fire shut up in my bones.

I am weary of holding it in;
indeed, I cannot.

I hear many whispering,
"Terror on every side!
Report him! Let's report him!"

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."

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.

Sing to the Lord!
Give praise to the Lord!
He rescues the life of the needy
from the hands of the wicked.

Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!

Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
who made him very glad, saying,
"A child is born to you—a son!"

May that man be like the towns
the Lord overthrew without pity.

May he hear wailing in the morning,
a battle cry at noon.

For he did not kill me in the womb,
with my mother as my grave,
her womb enlarged forever.

Why did I ever come out of the womb
to see trouble and sorrow
and to end my days in shame? (20.7-18).

In this passage, Jeremiah expresses the depths of his bitterness and despair. He reveals the extent of his misery and agony that surpasses any other cry of anguish that is recorded in his lamentations (cf. Job, chapter 3). There is little ray of hope here (but see verses 11-13).

Jeremiah's personal crisis is at its peak, so he utters two curses on the day of his birth and the man who took word of his birth to his father. To curse either God or one's parents was a capital offense in Israel (Leviticus 20.9; 24.10-16). Jeremiah avoided both by cursing the day of his birth (verse 14). Yet this was to curse his prophetic calling by God, because God called him before he was born (1.5). And Jeremiah did not curse his father. Rather, he cursed the man who announced his birth to his father (verse 15). In ancient Israel, the birth of a son was especially important, since it guaranteed the perpetuation of the family line (e.g., the child as heir and soon to be head of the family). Jeremiah's father would rejoice greatly to learn of the birth of a son. But Jeremiah wishes for that messenger to "be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity" (verse 16). The Lord had rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah and other cities of the plain (see Genesis 19.24ff.). It seems very crude of Jeremiah that he could wish a judgment on the announcer of his birth like that which fell on Sodom and Gomorrah and "without pity."

For this man, Jeremiah wished fearful cries, or a cry of alarm, in the morning and an uproar, a cry of battle, at noon (verse 16). Why does Jeremiah wish this? He says, "For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever" (verse 17). This is not Jeremiah's hatred for an innocent man. This is the intensity of Jeremiah's despair. Jeremiah asks, "Why did I ever come out the womb?" He answers, "To see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame" (verse 18). Here, there is no answer from God. But, in a sense, Jeremiah has found the answer for himself (see verses 11-13).

In chapter 15, we learn about another of Jeremiah's laments or confessions that the Lord does answer. The prophet writes:

You understand, O Lord;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors.
You are long-suffering—do not take me away;
think of how 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.
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.
Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
Will you be to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails?

Therefore this is what the Lord says:

“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” (15.15-21).

In this exchange between the prophet and the Lord, God's answer to Jeremiah (15.20-21) echoes Jeremiah's earlier answer to himself (20.11-12) and God's original promise to Jeremiah in 1.19: “they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you, declares the Lord.”

In his plea to the Almighty, Jeremiah recognizes that God is well aware of what the prophet was experiencing (verse 15, “remember me”). This, however, is not mere mental contemplation. Jeremiah is appealing to God to intervene on his behalf or “care for me.” Jeremiah wished for God to restrain, and even punish, those who persecuted him. “Avenge me,” he says. This is because the enemies in question are also God’s enemies and not just Jeremiah’s personal enemies. Those who wanted to harm the prophet were seeking to harm God’s spokesman, and thereby they were trying to harm God. So this is not merely personal retribution that Jeremiah is asking for. But he does call for a display of God’s power to restrain the evildoers and to enable Jeremiah to continue his prophetic ministry. There is a sense of divine purpose in this call for retribution. Thus, in light of God’s patience and long-suffering, Jeremiah asks that he might not be taken away (i.e., lose his life).

After all, Jeremiah had accepted the divine instructions when they came to him. At first, the words of God seemed very unpalatable and sour to the taste. But soon these words became a joy to the prophet and his heart’s delight.² It was a joy to Jeremiah, because he as well as his words belonged to God. God owned him (“for I bear your name”—the mark of ownership; verse 16). And Jeremiah had been true to God’s instructions. Jeremiah “sat alone” (i.e., apart from merriment and grief; see chapter 16), an isolation due to the hand of the Lord being upon him, that is, he was constrained to fulfill his special prophetic task (verse 17). Furthermore, he was filled with “indignation”; he was repelled by the sins of the people.

In light of the prophet’s faithfulness to God, “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?” he cries out. He feels alone. He feels abandoned by God. He struggles with the fact that he, a servant of the Lord God Almighty, is suffering persecution. As a result,

²Compare the scroll that Ezekiel ate which tasted “as sweet as honey” (Ezekiel 3.3).

God seemed to Jeremiah like “a deceptive brook” (i.e., a stream that goes dry in summer and cannot be depended on for water) or “a spring that fails” (verse 18). In Palestine, many wadis contain water only after a heavy rainfall, and travelers through such an area could be deceived. This is how Jeremiah felt, at this point in time, about his God who called him to prophetic ministry.

On the occasion of this particular lament or confession of Jeremiah, the Lord does reply. The Almighty does not answer the specific complaints of the prophet. But the Lord does renew his original call to the prophet and tells Jeremiah to repent and to trust him. First, there is a rebuke. Jeremiah often had called Judah to repentance. Now God calls the prophet to repent. In essence, the Lord says, “If you will turn away from such talk (‘worthless words’; verse 19), then I will turn back to you” (i.e., ‘restore you to the prophetic office’). “Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them,” God tells Jeremiah. The people are dependent on Jeremiah to hear God’s word, but Jeremiah must not be swayed over to them, that is, their evil ways. In this manner, with words about repentance or turning, God renews Jeremiah’s prophetic call. The Lord tells the prophet, “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” (verse 20; cf. 1.18-19). This is God’s call to Jeremiah for renewed service, renewed zeal, and renewed dedication to his task. After a spiritual low point in his life, God brings about renewal for his prophet. And I can imagine that Jeremiah was much stronger than before.

It is through the ups and downs of life, and the various God-directed occurrences that we experience, that our God comes to us in words of encouragement and says, “Turn back to me, trust me, and follow my guidance. I will take care of you. I will rescue you and save you.” Are we willing to turn to him, to trust him, and to follow him?