

## LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

### THE CONFESSIONS OF JEREMIAH (11, 12, 15, 17, 18, 20)

Within the Book of Jeremiah, there are a series of passages alternately called the Confessions, the Complaints, or the Lamentations of the prophet (not to be confused with the Book of Lamentations). Not unlike the famous confessions of St. Augustine to be penned many centuries later, they are candid, direct, and intimate prayers composed after the pattern of the laments found in the Psalms.<sup>1</sup>



In these poetic prayers, Jeremiah speaks his heart with a boldness that almost takes one's breath away. He gives full vent to his anguish, complaining of the abuse heaped upon him in his prophetic

office and cursing his enemies. These prayers are a behind-the-scenes look at the prophet's inner life as he struggled against overwhelming opposition. His questions and complaints to God are blunt and visceral, and if they did not proceed from a prophet of such profound faith, they might be suspected of verging on blasphemy. In public, Jeremiah was "like a fortified city and a bronze wall" (Jer. 1:18), but in private, when he was alone with God, he raged in frustration and desperation. Following each confession is a divine response, but these responses are not always as comforting as one might wish, for God refused to indulge Jeremiah's self-pity, and he challenged him to prepare for the worst.

#### HEBREW LAMENTS

*Lament is a specific genre, one of the oldest and best-attested in the ancient Near East. The form was widely employed as a funeral dirge, part of the ceremony for the deceased, but in other contexts, it could be used to mourn the loss of a city or an institution (e.g., a temple) or by individuals who were crying for help, confessing sin, or asserting innocence. 2 Sa. 3:33-34, for instance, is one example of a funeral dirge. When King Josiah was killed, Jeremiah composed laments for him (2 Chr. 35:25).*

*The reader can often identify laments by an opening exclamation, such as, "Oh" or "O" in English Bibles. For Hebrew readers, there is a pronounced rhythm for laments that scholars call a "qinah" meter, where the poetic lines are divided into bi-colons with three stresses in the first and two in the second. It is, more or less, the same 3:2 rhythm one finds in English poetry called iambic pentameter. Qinah rhythms can be found in various psalms (e.g., Ps. 3, 6, 13, 22, etc.) as well as scattered throughout passages in the prophets.*

<sup>1</sup>There is an opinion that the Confessions of Jeremiah represent liturgical expressions, that is, prayers made on behalf of the people, and as such, they are not personally related to the experiences within the life of Jeremiah. Against this, however, see J. Bright, "Jeremiah's Complaints: Liturgy, or Expressions of Personal Distress?" *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. J. Durham and J. Porter (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 189-214.

### A Gentle Lamb Led to Slaughter (11:20-23)

In the midst of Jeremiah's oracles of judgment against Judah because of her covenant-breaking stubbornness (11:1-17), Jeremiah was severely opposed by members of his home town, Anathoth. In their plotting, they threatened to kill him and silence his prophetic voice. Before such powerful antagonists, Jeremiah felt as unprotected as a gentle lamb ready to be butchered (cf. Ps. 44:11, 22; Is. 53:7). As such, he prayed for divine vengeance against his foes. Yahweh answered Jeremiah's prayer for vengeance by assuring him that the men of Anathoth would be exterminated.

### The Prosperity of the Wicked (12:1-6)

The second confession is a classic statement of the problem of why wicked people prosper, a problem also addressed in Psalm 73 and elsewhere. It begins in near insolence with Jeremiah addressing Yahweh as though the Lord were a defendant in court with whom the prophet has a quarrel (though Jeremiah complains, as did Job, that the Lord will probably turn out to be innocent anyway, cf. Jb. 9:1-20). Still, the prophet intends to pursue his case: why do wicked people have it so good? They ought to be dragged off and butchered for giving their hypocritical lip service to God while raping the land as they have. Yahweh seemed oblivious, and the violators themselves chirp that God would not see what they were doing anyway. Implicitly, of course, Jeremiah is also complaining that while the wicked prosper, the righteous do not.

Yahweh's answer to Jeremiah comes as a shock. If the prophet thought it was bad now, it would quickly become much worse. If he thought he was presently suffering, it would be nothing compared with the suffering that was on the horizon, for he would even be betrayed by his own family members (12:5-6). Furthermore, the present suffering of the prophet would be minor compared with the coming death of the entire nation. Yet, Yahweh was not aloof to the miseries his judgment would bring, as the subsequent poem indicates (12:7-17). He fully intended to uproot the nation of Judah, but he did so out of a deep pathos.

### TALKING POINTS

- *How much identity do you personally find with Jeremiah's frustrations in ministry?*
- *What similarities or contrasts do you see between Jeremiah and Jesus?*

### The Suffering Prophet (15:10-21)

Jeremiah certainly did not relish his message that the nation was doomed to death (15:1-9). In a tremendous burst of emotion, he declared his wish that he had never been born (15:10a). He was continually being cursed for his preaching by his detractors, and it seemed to him that he stood alone against the entire nation (15:10b). Still, Yahweh had preserved him for his mission, however distasteful (15:11). The purpose of Yahweh was set, the iron and bronze enemy from the north was intractable, and the nation was doomed (15:12-15).

Yet again Jeremiah complained (15:15). Even though he had eagerly and faithfully responded to his prophetic mission (15:16), he had been ostracized (15:15b), terribly lonely (15:17), and his anguish seemed interminable (15:18a). In his distress, he even bluntly questioned the reliability of Yahweh

himself (15:18b). God rebuked his impertinent prophet for such accusations. Jeremiah had told the nation to repent, and now God tells Jeremiah to repent (15:19a)! The nation has also indulged itself in accusing God (14:8-9), and will Jeremiah now join in their diatribe? He must remain resolute and not be shaped by his audience (15:19b)! He must remain as unmovable as a bronze wall (15:20-21)!

### Vindication (17:14-18)

Relentlessly, Jeremiah preached against a hardened Judah (17:1). Disaster would come to Mt. Zion and the other cultic high places alike (17:2-4). Dependence upon human ingenuity was folly, while dependence upon Yahweh was the only hope (17:5-8).<sup>2</sup> Yet Judah was not depending upon Yahweh. Her citizens were fickle and incurable (17:9), and their greed and faithlessness would catch up with them in the end (17:10-13). The nation's Sabbath violations would bring upon their beloved capital a terrible disaster (17:19-27). So, Jeremiah preached on.

However, the predicted disaster was not immediate, and this produced for Jeremiah a dilemma. His detractors, of course, were not slow about challenging him with this lack of fulfillment (17:15). It is of this that Jeremiah prays when he asks for healing. He wishes to be healed of the bleak situation in which his oracles have gone unfulfilled. His "healing" would only occur if Yahweh vindicated his predictions about the breaking of the nation. It would have been more convenient, of course, for Jeremiah simply to have remained silent, but even though he had no liking for what he was compelled to say (17:16b), he remained committed to his message (17:16a). So, the prophet was left to pray that his enemies would be shamed (17:17-18). His prophetic vindication, that is, his "healing," could only come by the shattering of his own people.

### Vengeance and Retribution (18:18-23)

Jeremiah could never be faulted for a lack of candor! When his enemies designed a campaign of slander to discredit him (18:18; cf. 11:18), he bitterly responded in the spirit of the Sons of Thunder (cf. Lk. 9:54). His prayer was certainly not offered in the spirit of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount! It was a vehement prayer for retribution and vengeance on his enemies and everything they owned, and it was offered in the tradition of the imprecatory psalms (cf. 35; 69; 137:7-9 etc.).

### The No-Win Prophet (20:7-12)

Jeremiah's preaching cost him more than merely verbal abuse. Pashhur, a temple officer, arrested him, had him flogged (possibly with 40 stripes, cf. Dt. 25:3), and punished him with a day in the stocks (20:1-2).<sup>3</sup> When he was released, Jeremiah retorted that Yahweh had renamed

#### IMPRECATORY PRAYERS

*Imprecatory prayers, which is to say, prayers that invoke judgment, calamity or curses on one's enemies, characterize a number of the Psalms (e.g., 69, 109, etc.) in addition to the imprecatory prayers of Jeremiah. C. S. Lewis suggests that these prayers are primitive calls for justice. For the ancient person of faith who lived before Christ, imprecatory prayers were cries of outrage, because the one praying took seriously right and wrong in the midst of a society filled with horrendous injustice.*

<sup>2</sup>The simile in this passage is remarkably similar to Ps. 1.

<sup>3</sup>The term *mahpeket* (= stocks), from a root meaning "to distort," were a form of scaffold in which the prisoners were held in a stooped position which produced severe cramping (29:26), cf. R. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An*

Pashhur as Magor-Missabib, that is, "Terror on Every Side" (20:3-6). Jeremiah predicted that Pashhur would see with his own eyes the terrible exile of the nation.

However, Jeremiah's words of retort were turned against him. When his prophecy did not immediately come to pass, he was taunted with his own words as the local scoffers whispered and jeered, "The Terror! Let's turn him in!" (20:10). In prayer, then, Jeremiah bitterly complained that Yahweh had tricked him (20:7a).<sup>4</sup> Why did God keep forcing him to prophesy things that did not happen? This only left him in the lurch to become a laughingstock to his enemies (20:7b-8). Yet Jeremiah was under pressure no matter what he did. If he spoke, he was ridiculed; if he remained silent, God pressured him from within (20:9). Yet in the end, he knew that he must continue to rely upon Yahweh, for like a mighty warrior, the Lord would at last vindicate his loyal spokesman through the coming catastrophe (20:11-13).

### **I Wish I Had Never Been Born (20:14-18)**

The final confession of Jeremiah is perhaps the most bitter of all, for unlike the others, this one does not close with any resolution. Jeremiah's cursing is far more severe than Job's, though it bears clear affinities (Jb. 3). In terrible dismay, Jeremiah curses his birthday (20:14). He curses the man who brought the news of his birth from the midwives to his father (20:15), and he curses the fact that he was not aborted before birth (20:17).

### **Jeremiah and Jesus**

What is there to say about Jeremiah's depression and inner bitterness toward his circumstances? Commentators seem at a loss to do more than simply describe his words. To curse the day of his birth is one thing, but to curse the innocent man who brought his father the news, in fact, to curse him with the same curses as Sodom and Gomorrah, is nearly inexplicable (20:16). Final resolution does not come until some seven centuries later, when another man was led like a lamb to butchery, a man who suffered ridicule and abuse. This man, also, was tempted to express vengeance and retribution. He, too, faced a bleak and bitter hopelessness which starkly contrasted with the prosperity of his accusers. Unlike Jeremiah, who prayed, "Do not forgive their crimes" (18:23), this man prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34). It may well be that in the economy of God, the sufferings of Jeremiah and his scorching anger are intended to punctuate more vividly the sacrificial love of this other man -- the man who was God's only Son!

### **TALKING POINTS**

- *Is there a place for moral outrage in our contemporary world?*
- *How are Christians to pray in the face of overwhelming injustice, and how might their prayers be like (or, unlike) the prayers of Jeremiah?*
- *In the NT, Paul speaks of "wrestling in prayer" (Col. 4:12). How might the prayers of Jeremiah contribute to our understanding of this metaphor?*

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*Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), pp. 28., 112.

<sup>4</sup>The *piel* perfect form of the verbal root *p-t-h* means to fool or to deceive.