

Woe to Me, Mother, That You Gave Me Birth

Jeremiah's Fourth Complaint

15: 10-21

DIG: Why does Jeremiah think God is being unfair? Would you agree? Why does Jeremiah wish he'd never been born? What other reward for his dedication to God was he expecting? Does God console him or punish him here? Of what does Jeremiah need to repent? How does YHVH use both the "carrot" and the "stick" with His prophet?

REFLECT: If you would go back and change anything in your life, what would you change? What would you wish could have happened instead? Do you think serving the Lord was a pleasant task for Jeremiah? Would you have liked his ministry? Do you ever feel unrewarded for your dedication? Unappreciated by God? By others? How does God equip you for your ministry? Where do you receive encouragement and support? How honest are you with God in prayer? Who is in first place in your life? How can you tell?

608 BC during the eleven-year reign of Jehoiakim

"Talking to God, I felt, is always better than talking about God; those pious conversations - there's always a touch of self-approval about them."

Therese of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*

There are seven passages in the book of **Jeremiah** labeled complaints or confessions: (1) **Ax - Oh, Adonai ELOHIM, Surely You Have Deceived This People;** (2) **Bj - The Plot Against Jeremiah;** (3) **Bk - Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Why Do All the Faithless Live at Ease?;** (4) **Cm - Woe to Me, Mother, That You Gave Me Birth;** (5) **Cs - Heal Me ADONAI, and I Will Be Healed, Save Me and I Will Be Saved;** (6) **Cx - Jeremiah's Response to a Threat Against His Life;** and (7) **Db - You Deceived Me, LORD, and I Have Been Deceived.** In each of these **Yirmeyahu** speaks in the first person. **He** opens his heart. **He** reveals what is going on inside while the fireworks are going off outside. **Jeremiah's** inner life is revealed in these confessions/complaints/prayers. When **Jeremiah** was out of the public's eye **he** was passionate with **God**. **He** confessed/complained/prayed like we all do. This was **his** secret life. This was a man of prayer.¹⁵³

These confessions/complaints/prayers of **Jeremiah** are no satire, but the real thing - exclusive focus on **God**: intense, undivided preoccupation with **ADONAI**. This accounts for much that is powerful and appealing in **Yirmeyahu**. Here is the source of the personal intensity and incorruptible integrity that is so impressive in **his** character.

What goes on in these intimate exchanges between the prophet and YHVH? We know who he's *with* in private. But what does he say in private? Jeremiah's complaint here is a fair sample. He's **frightened** . . . **lonely** . . . **hurt** . . . and **angry**.

Jeremiah's superficial complaint: Woe to me, mother, that you gave me birth, a man who is the object of strife and controversy throughout the Land! I neither lend nor borrow, yet all of them curse me (15:10 CJB). The prophet's **fearless denunciations of the people's sins and his dark warnings about their future had brought about no reform. Their only response was intense bitterness towards him personally. In a mood of depression, he laments his plight and wishes that he had never been born.**

God's answer: First a word of encouragement. Depression doesn't need to overcome him. ADONAI said: **Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose; surely I will make your enemies plead with you in times of disaster and times of distress (15:11). Jeremiah will be able to accomplish the ministry that God has given him. The LORD promises him that there will come a day when the very enemies who speak against him and curse him will come to Yirmeyahu asking for his help (21:1-2, 37:3, 38:14-26, 42:1-3). Can a man break iron - iron from the north (the best and hardest iron came from the Black Sea) - or bronze (15:12)? As hard as it is for a man to break iron, that's how hard it will be for Y'hudah to stand against Jeremiah. Then YHVH gave a message to those who threaten His prophet: Your wealth you're your treasures I will give as plunder, without charge, you will receive nothing from the enemy for what he takes of your possessions because of all your sins throughout your country. I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for My anger will kindle a fire that will burn against you (15:13-14).** Later we will be told that land will be named Babylon.

Jeremiah's real complaint: Jeremiah starts out by describing his own standing before God. LORD, you understand **how I have suffered in carrying out the commission entrusted to me; remember me and care for me.** Jeremiah starts out by acknowledging that ADONAI is always in a position to understand (literally "know") him and what he was going through. Nevertheless, he pleaded: **Avenge me on my persecutors (15:15a).** Yirmeyahu was **frightened**. Cursed and hunted down, there was no safe place for him. The plots against his life, the physical beatings and cruel confinements that he suffered all come out in this prayer. **The prophet was speaking what he was experiencing. It's clear that he neither accepted nor liked it. It was as if he was saying, "God, you got me into this mess, now get me out of it!"** The priest from Anathoth continues by contrasting his own sense of urgency with ADONAI's deliberate patience.

Knowing from experience how patient **ADONAI** often is with evildoers, **he** acknowledges: **You are longsuffering**. The words of Moshe come to mind when he said to **YHVH**, "**You are slow to anger**" (Exodus 34:6). Therefore, **Jeremiah** pleaded with **the LORD**: **Do not take me away (15:15b)**. This is an expression often referring to termination of life on this earth and the translation to the afterlife (**Genesis 5:23; Psalm 49:15 and 73:24**). His **persecutors** were seeking his life, and **he** pleaded that **God** would intervene. **Think of how I suffer reproach for Your sake (15:15c)**. **He** struggled to resolve his awareness of **God's** unhurried, measured pace with the panicky feeling that time was running out on **him**. It was as if **he** was saying, "Don't be so lenient with **my** persecutors that they have time to kill **me**. Remember, it's for your sake that I have suffered all this." There is desperation in that sentence. The mills of **God** turn slowly while the engines of persecution run exceedingly swift. Our compulsive timetables collide with **God's** leisurely providence. We sometimes like to think that we can tell **the LORD** not only *what* to do but *when* to do it.

Jeremiah next prayed about his **loneliness**. **When Your words were found (NKJ), I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear Your name, ADONAI of heaven's angelic armies (Jeremiah 15:16 and compare the imagery here with Ezekiel 2:7-3:3)**. **Yirmeyahu** had received **God's Word** enthusiastically and was called to his prophetic ministry one year after the scroll of **Deuteronomy** had been found during Josiah's reform movement (see **Ai - Josiah Ruled For 31 Years from 640 to 609 BC**). It was holy work, but a lonely business. It meant years of solitude. The laughing, merrymaking majority went its way, and the prophet went **his**. In lonely reflection, listening to **God's still small voice (First Kings 19:11-13)**, **he** preached the truth that **he** lived out. **He** took **God's Word** more seriously than any human word. But **he** found out that no one was with **him** . . . **he** was all by **himself**. What would **he** do? Go back to the party until others decided to come along? **He** couldn't do that. **He** was committed. **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 (15:17)**. Having acquired a taste for **God's** truth, **he** couldn't return to the bland diet of gossip and rumor. Nevertheless, it was a lonely business.¹⁵⁴

Finally, **Jeremiah** got down to what was really bothering **him** (like many of us, this takes time). Then **the prophet** prayed his **hurt**. **Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable (15:18a)? Yirmeyahu** was deeply wounded by the sin of the masses, the cruelty of the wicked, and the frivolous indifference of the everyday crowd. **He** hurt because **he** cared so much. **He** was **ADONAI's** mouthpiece to a fickle people. **The prophet** personally felt the sting of unreturned love; having identified so thoroughly with **YHVH's** message, **he** also felt the rejection in every bone in **his** body. Their irreverence cut **him**; their open rebellion bruised **him**; their thoughtless rituals were like salt in an open wound to **him**. And there was no cure in sight. The only thing the people could do was to repent and have faith in **the LORD**. **The priest from Anathoth** looked in vain for it.

Then the prayer intensifies. Turning from his hurt, now, in a bold burst, he prayed about his **anger**. **You are to me like a deceptive spring, like a [wadi] that fails (15:18b)**. During the rainy season there is so much water running through it that you would think you were looking at a continual running stream. But as suddenly as the waters appear, they fail. So here Yirmeyahu accused **God** of failing to keep His promise of protecting him against his enemies (1:18-19). Once he had preached that **Ha'Shem was the fountain of living water (2:13)**, now he calls Him a **deceptive brook** - one of those steam beds in the desert that looks as if water should be flowing in it but when you arrive the banks are dry. It's as if **Jeremiah** were saying, "**God You** tricked me. **You** promised but **You** didn't deliver." But what he said to **ADONAI** teetered perilously on the edge of blasphemy.

This was Yirmeyahu's prayer: **frightened . . . lonely . . . hurt . . . and angry**. Surprised? **A prophet of God** praying that way? All of us can relate. Can't we? But do we pray them? **Jeremiah** prayed them! Everything he experienced and thought, he set in relationship to the living **God**. And when these things were put in their proper perspective, something remarkable happened. **Jeremiah** stopped speaking but the prayer continued, for prayer does not end when we end. In prayer, **ADONAI** is not merely the audience . . . **He** is a partner. **The prophet** had spoken honestly. Now he was ready to listen.¹⁵⁵

God's answer began by reminding Yirmeyahu that he had gone beyond complaint to sin and a change of heart and attitude was called for. **God** honors doubts and complaints that are honest. **He** wants us to ask the hard questions. But there are lines we should not cross and this is one of them for **Jeremiah**. Consequently, **YHVH** spoke to His prophet in the same language used in **Chapter 1**. Therefore, this is what the **LORD** said: **If you repent (shuwb), I will restore (shuwb) you that you may serve Me (15:19a)**. The message of repentance that **Jeremiah** had been delivering to the nation was delivered to him! Could it be that his pouring out of pain was tinged with self-pity? It was as if **Elohim** was saying, "**Yirmeyahu**, the fright, the loneliness, the hurt and the anger - I understand. But I won't indulge you in it. Don't wallow in it. **Turn away** from it. **Repent**. If you will **turn away (shuwb)** from such talk, then **I will restore (shuwb)** you to the position of prophet."

*Sometimes our perception of a call is mediated by our life experiences after our initial call that need to be refocused on what we were called to do in the first place. Abraham had two calls (**Genesis 12:1-2** and **Genesis 15:1-21**); King Saul had two coronations (**First Samuel 10: 1 and 15**); David had two coronations (**First Samuel 16:13** and **Second Samuel 2:4**); and **Jeremiah** had two calls (see **Aj - The Call of Jeremiah**) and here.*

Jeremiah's part in the prayer was to be honest and personal. The first requirement in a personal relationship is to be ourselves. We need to be real and take off our masks. **Yirmeyahu's** prayer was not pious, not nice, not proper - **he** spoke what **he** felt, and **he** felt scared, lonely, hurt and angry. Well enough. **God's** part in the prayer was to **restore** and save. Prayer changes us. The fear, loneliness and pain are there, but they don't stay there. **Jeremiah** was feeling sorry for **himself** on **his** knees. Like a good parent **the LORD** feels our pain, but doesn't indulge our self-pity. **YHVH** was as blunt with **Yirmeyahu** as **Yirmeyahu** was blunt with the masses. It was as if **God** was saying, "**Repent. Turn away** from this kind of thinking because it's destructive. Then **I** will restore **you**, and **you** will stand upright, ready to serve again in **My** presence."¹⁵⁶

But **Jeremiah** was discouraged because the people were not listening. **His words** had accomplished nothing. **His** preaching was futile. All **he** got for **his** pains was persecution and criticism. Should **he** change **his** tune and acquiesce to the itching ears (**Second Timothy 4:3**) of **the people**? Should **he** just give them what they wanted to hear? **God** stiffened **His** resolve: **If you utter worthy, not worthless words, you will be My spokesman. Let this people turn (shuwb) to you, but you must not turn (shuwb) to them (15:19b)**. It was as if **God** were saying to **him**, "You must not resort to **their** way of thinking." **The priest from Anathoth** needed to be less concerned with what **the people** were saying and more concerned about what **the Almighty** was saying. Shouldn't we all?

Prayer reestablishes our priorities. It makes all the difference in the world whether **God** is in first place or second place in our lives. Do you have your hands on the steering wheel of your life or does **God**? If **Elohim** is in first place **the world** will not be a safe place for you. We all need to ask ourselves, "What do I really want to do with my life, to please **the world** or please **the LORD**?" **Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God (James 4:4)?**

Then there is a reaffirmation of **YHVH's** original promise in **1:18-19**: **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** (for more on Immanuel there see the commentary on **Isaiah Cb - The LORD Himself Will Give You a Sign**) **to rescue you**, declares **ADONAI**. **I will save you from the hands of the wicked and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel (15:20-21)**. **Yirmeyahu** was not promised freedom from suffering; **he** was promised that **he** would not be killed. Later, **Jeremiah** would come close to being executed more than once, but **God** always intervened. **The prophet** had heard these words when **he** was still a young man (**1:17-19**). Everything **Ha'Shem** had said then had not changed. It was as if **God** were saying to **Jeremiah**, "**Let Me** remind you of what I said to you so many years ago. It is still true, but first you need to **repent**." This rebuke did its job because after this **Jeremiah's** opposition grew in intensity, but **the prophet from Anathoth** would never again regress to using words of this nature. **He** would weep . . . but **he** would never doubt again!

It is the same with us today. **The Word of God** does not change and our call (**Jude 1-2**). Our relationship, however, is under constant attack by the Adversary. Even though our salvation is secure in **Christ** (see **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**), our calling needs to be nurtured and reaffirmed through prayer. Resolve is essential but not enough. **God** provides renewal through prayer. We may or may not learn something new in prayer, but **the Eternal One** reaffirms our calling and the faith to which we are committed.¹⁵⁷

As Eugene Peterson relates in his book *Run With The Horses*, the marathon is one of the most grueling athletic events in sport. The Boston Marathon attracts the best runners in the world. The winner is automatically placed among the great athletes of our time. In the spring of 1980, Rosie Ruiz was the first woman to cross the finish line. She had the laurel wreath placed on her head in the flash of lights and cheering.

She was completely unknown in the world of running. An incredible feat! Her first race a victory in the prestigious Boston Marathon! Then someone noticed her legs - loose flesh, cellulite. Questions were asked. No one had seen her along the 26.2 mile course. Then the truth came out that she had jumped into the race during the last mile.

There was immediate and widespread interest in Rosie. Why would she do that when it was certain that she would be found out? Athletic performance cannot be faked. But she never admitted to the fraud. She repeatedly said that she would run another race to validate her ability. But somehow she never did. She lied convincingly and naturally with no sense of conscience, no sense of reality in terms of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behavior. She appeared normal and intelligent. But she had no moral compass.

Rosie is a lot like people who want to get to the finish line but who cleverly never run the race. They appear in shul or church on the Shabbat or Sunday wreathed in smiles, entering into the celebration, but there is no personal life that leads up to it or out from it. Occasionally they engage in spectacular acts of love and compassion in public. We are impressed, but surprised, for they were never known to do that before. Yet, you never know. Better give them the benefit of the doubt. Then it turns out to be a stunt: no personal involvement either before or after the act. They seem plausible and convincing. In the end, however, they do not run the race . . . believing through the tough times, praying through the lonely, angry, hurting hours. They have no sense for what is real in a relationship with Christ.

No one becomes faithful the way **Jeremiah** was faithful by faking it. It was **his** prayers, hidden but persistent, that molded **his** faith and brought him to the spiritual sensitivity that we also want. What we do in private determines who we are in public. Prayer is the secret that develops a life that is completely authentic and human.¹⁵⁸