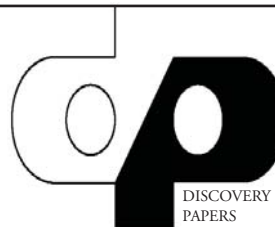


WHAT DO WE DO WHEN OUR COUNTRY FALLS APART?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 1:1-3

1st Message

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Things aren't going all that well in our nation, are they? You don't have to dig deeply into the news or talk to all that many people to realize that this is a really hard time for a lot of people. The unemployment rate is peaking, the housing market is dropping, our government is incurring a huge deficit, and major American companies are on the verge of collapse. We are involved in two simultaneous wars, we have a bad reputation throughout much of the world, and lots of people want to do very bad things against this country and its citizens. Things aren't going all that well in our nation.

And it's not just happening on a national level. People are affected on a very personal level by this stuff as well. A lot of people have lost their jobs and are struggling to find new jobs in a very difficult environment. Many have lost dramatic amounts of money saved up for retirement or education for their children. For those of us who still have a job, we wonder how long that will last and whether we'll be employed next week. Things aren't going that well for us personally in the midst of all this.

This message is the beginning of a twelve week series studying significant passages from the book of Jeremiah. I'm excited about this study because this book is perfectly suited to what is going on in our world today for three reasons. First, Jeremiah is about *global* crisis. The message that God gave him as a prophet to deliver to His people was that they were headed for unthinkable disaster—the kind of disaster that no God-fearing Israelite would ever believe God could allow to happen to His chosen people. This book describes in detail what happens when a nation faces a global crisis.

Jeremiah is also a book about *personal* crisis. His task was to tell his nation about imminent disaster. That made his life kind of difficult. Nobody believed him. Nobody wanted to believe him. Several times people tried to murder him. He spent a long time in prison. He ended his life running away to Egypt, the last place a Jew ever wanted to run to. Jeremiah preached about disaster. But he also lived it. His life was filled with personal crisis.

But finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jeremiah is a book *about God*. It's about what God is doing in the midst of crisis. And it particularly addresses some of the deepest questions about God that we tend to have in crisis. And whenever you talk about God, you're doing theology. You could call this 12-week series a course in systematic theology. All of the individual messages line up with a major theological topic: sin, judgment, sovereignty, religion, hope, faith, and so on. But it's not theology from a textbook. It's theology in the context of life—the life of

a nation, the life of a community, and the life of one man in the midst of really trying times.

So I think Jeremiah will speak to us. We need to hear about what to do in the midst of global crisis. We're in one. We need to hear about what to do in the midst of personal crisis. If you're not in one now, you will be at some point. But mostly, we need to hear about God.

This morning we're going to look at the first 3 verses of Jeremiah as a kind of introduction into the book as a whole. As we do that, we'll ask the question, "What do you do when your country falls apart?" This is the background for the book of Jeremiah. Political, economic, and religious disaster are things we are pretty familiar with in our country too. So what do we do? And, perhaps more importantly, what is God doing?

Jeremiah 1, verses 1-3:

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

Jeremiah is a book about global crisis

Let's start with understanding how Jeremiah is a book about global crisis. If we're going to understand that crisis that Jeremiah is predicting, we need to set the stage a bit with some historical background. I had a friend in college who was a history major, and when I told her that I didn't like history, she asked me if I liked memories. I said, "Well, I guess so." And she said, "Then you like history." So as we examine these verses, remember that this history is the collective memory of the people of God. This is our heritage.

Jeremiah lived during the 7th and 6th centuries BC. Verses 2 and 3 tell us that he began his ministry during the reign of King Josiah, somewhere around 627 BC, and he continued to minister until somewhere around 582 BC, through the reign of Josiah's sons. These were complicated political times.

Almost 100 years before Jeremiah began preaching, the northern realm of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. Their capital, Samaria, was destroyed and most of the Jews living in the north had been carried away into exile. By Jeremiah's time, however, the Assyrian

ians were starting to lose power. They had been the major world power, but that season was coming to a close. And as they lost power, there were two major political forces that wanted to step in and occupy the power vacuum that they would leave. Those two powers were the Babylonians, to the northeast of Israel, and the Egyptians, to the southwest of Jerusalem. So during Jeremiah's ministry, these kings were trying to figure out what it meant to be Israel in the midst of two nations battling to be the next world power.

Josiah was one of Judah's greatest kings. His reign saw a set of reforms that brought the people of God back into a closer relationship with Him. Josiah became the king when he was eight years old. Some of you have eight year old sons—can you imagine them becoming king? Well, for Israel, it was a very good thing, because when Josiah became the king, most of the people in Israel had forgotten all about YHWH and what it meant to worship him. But Josiah changed that.

When Josiah was twenty-six, he decided that the temple needed to be cleaned up and restored. So he instructed some priests to renovate the temple. And when they did that, they discovered the book of the law, God's instructions on how to live as His people. And Josiah was thrilled to find this book. Now he could know how to worship YHWH, Israel's king, in the proper way. But as soon as he started to read it, he was devastated because he very quickly realized that his people were violating an agreement that they had made with God centuries earlier.

Most scholars think this book of the Law that Josiah found was probably a copy of Deuteronomy. And so when Josiah read it, he would have gotten to Deuteronomy 27 and he would have realized that, when God gave the land of Palestine to Joshua and the Jewish people, he established a covenant with them. He would have read Deuteronomy 28:1-2, which says, "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God." And he would have read the glorious list of blessings that follow.

Then he would have read Deuteronomy 28:15, which says, "However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you." The terrible list of curses that follow culminate in Deuteronomy 28:32: "Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation, and you will wear out your eyes watching for them day after day, powerless to lift a hand."

Josiah didn't want these things to happen. So he did something about it that same year. He started a massive reform campaign in Israel. The altars to other gods were torn down. The Temple was restored to service. And Passover was celebrated for the first time in a very long time. And what a celebration it was! He donated 30,000 sheep and 3000 heads of cattle for the party.

So things got better under Josiah, but he was in a tricky political situation trying to maintain Israel's independence between the two powerhouse nations of Babylon and Egypt. At one point, Egypt was marching up to battle Babylon, and Josiah stepped into the fray in an attempt to assert Israel's power, but he was killed by the Egyptians. So Jerusalem became a kind of vassal state under the Egyptian Pharaoh, who set up one of Josiah's sons as a subservient king. But when the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in a subsequent battle, Jerusalem came under Babylonian control. So the next four kings saw Jerusalem pass like a ping-pong ball between Egypt and Babylon, and their desire to regain Israel's independence never panned out.

So at the end of verse 3, you get this ominous reference to how all of this ends up: "when the people of Jerusalem went into exile." And you have to understand that these words fall like a lead weight on the ears of an Israelite in the 7th century. This was the unthinkable conclusion. The Jewish people started with Abraham. That's who all the Jews trace their lineage back to. But the Jewish nation got their start when they left Egypt. In Egypt they were a bunch of Jewish slaves, but when God released them from slavery and gave them a land of their own, they became the nation of Israel. Deuteronomy 27 says that they became the people of God when they entered their land. The Exodus from Egypt defined Israel. And now here they are, about 800 years later, and another major world power is about to destroy them and make them slaves in a foreign land. Israel was born when she left Egypt. For her to go into exile would be her death. It was unthinkable.

Things are pretty bad right now in our country. But imagine if this evening you turned on the TV to see Barack Obama holding a press conference. You watch him slowly walk up to the microphone and say, "Ladies and gentlemen of the United States of America, I come to you tonight to deliver some difficult news. Due to the precarious economic situation and the tense international pressures, my administration, in conjunction with the Senate and House, have decided to discontinue our pursuit to be an independent nation. We gave it our best, but it turns out that we just can't make it on our own. Effective immediately, the United States of America will now be the British Colonies of North America."

This scenario is inconceivable, isn't it? The identity of the United States of America is so wrapped up with freedom and independence and democracy that, if we were to lose those things, we would essentially cease to be the USA. And that doesn't even match how a 7th century Jew would feel about going into exile.

So one of the things that this book will challenge us to consider has to do with what we think is the unthinkable. What is unthinkable in America? Is it unthinkable to God? Some pretty unthinkable things have already happened in our country. A lot of people never thought God would treat America this way. The unthinkable success of ten years ago seems to have all of a sudden given way to unthinkable crisis. What are we to make of it? Is God mad at us? Was He pleased with us ten years ago? It seems

like God is doing the unthinkable.

Some Christians think about America in a way that can be described as “exceptionalism.” This is the notion that America as a nation is spiritually unique and occupies a fundamentally different place in God’s plan than other nations in the world or in history. Some people go so far as to equate America with the Old Testament nation of Israel. And some Christian American rhetoric borders on making this country sound like God’s new chosen people. But even the priests of Jerusalem had to learn that God’s ultimate concern is for His spiritual kingdom, not for earthly nations.

But what if God does have a special place in His heart for America? Does that mean He wants America to experience nothing but success? To be the strongest world power forever? Well, let’s look at what God asked of His Son. We know He has a special place in His heart for His Son. And what did He ask of Him? Suffering, humiliation, and death. And out of that death came life. Not just for Him, but for everyone who believes in Him. What does God want for America?

The question that we need to be asking during these times is not “how could this happen?” It’s not “how much worse will things get?” And it’s not even “how are we going to get out of this?” The question that Jeremiah encourages us to ask is “What is God doing here now?” What is God doing in America? Why is all of this happening on His watch? What is God doing through the global crisis that is happening today? We’re going to come back to this question again a bit later.

Jeremiah is a book about personal crisis

In the midst of the global crisis in Jerusalem, these verses also introduce us to one man, Jeremiah. We learn about his family, his vocational background, and where he was from. The first thing we learn is that he is a priest. What does it mean that Jeremiah was a priest? Well, first off it means that he is part of the establishment. He is not a rogue prophet that God called up out of nowhere. He is from a priestly background—his father was a priest—and he conducted his priestly duties in a village called Anathoth, which was only a few miles from Jerusalem. Jeremiah was an “insider.”

Now here’s the thing. When you’re an insider, there are certain rules that you are supposed to follow, certain policies that are not to be questioned. When I started working at Oracle as a software developer right after college, we were right in the midst of changing the way we delivered software. We were moving toward what is called a thin-client approach. My team wrote software that was meant to be used in a warehouse and wireless scanner devices connected to the internet. But some companies didn’t want their information to be streaming through the air. They wanted what we called a “disconnected application.” But that wasn’t the way we worked. And if you were an insider

you knew that. Disconnected was “yesterday.” Thin-client was “tomorrow.” But every now and then, some from our organization would get it into their heads that we should offer the disconnected application to companies who wanted it, and they would try to convince everyone else that this was a good idea. But that was basically professional suicide. There were some things that you just didn’t question. And if you did, you wouldn’t last long on the inside. Many of you have probably been in meetings where someone was really excited a suggestion that you knew wouldn’t happen. And you may have realized that their excitement over a bad idea was going to cost them personally in the future.

In 7th century Jerusalem, there were certain things that you didn’t question as a priest. And the biggest thing that you didn’t question was that God wanted His people living in their land worshipping at His temple. That was how it had to be. So as the tension around Jerusalem heated up with Babylon and Egypt vying for world dominance, all the priests and prophets of Jeremiah’s day promised that God would deliver them from disaster. But Jeremiah’s message was a little bit different. He questioned the one thing that no one was ever allowed to question. He told the king to surrender to the Babylonians. And that turned out to be professional suicide.

All the other priests wanted to kill him. All the prophets wanted him dead. Nobody in Jerusalem wanted to listen to him. The king listened to him but then had him locked up and made him promise not to tell anyone else what God had told him. Jeremiah had a tough job. And so Jeremiah isn’t just a book about global crisis. It’s also a book about personal crisis.

And one of the things that I love about Jeremiah and this book is that we get to see how he responds to all this. We don’t know much of the personal response of most of the other prophets, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Micah. But with Jeremiah, it’s like we get to read his diary. All the good stuff. Nothing is held back. His response is raw. He gets depressed. He curses the day of his birth. He gets really angry. He gets so lonely that it hurts physically. His faith wavers. At times he wants to throw it all in and just give up. And we get to see it all.

But there’s something more to him. He isn’t just complaining all the time. He’s not always angry and depressed and bitter. Sometimes he’s joyful. And filled with gratitude. Sometimes he gushes with praise. So with Jeremiah we get this really rich picture of a dynamic range of emotional experience. But what’s really remarkable is how he processes these emotions. What he does with them. Or more specifically, to whom he goes.

What we’ll see is that it all comes down to Jeremiah’s relationship with God. The title for this series in Jeremiah is “Weeping in Worship” because, in the person of Jeremiah, we don’t just see him weeping. We see him weeping in worship. We see him angry at God. We see him complain about his depression to God. We see him lament his loneliness to God. And we see him thank God

and praise God as well. He brings his experience to God. And that is worship. That is what a relationship is all about. And our relationship with God is worship. When we bring Him our dynamic range of emotional experience, that is worship. We bring Him our anger, our loneliness, our joy, and our thanks. That is worship.

This is what draws me to Jeremiah and his story. He doesn't express his anger to the people who are closest to him (which is what I usually do). He doesn't demand that the people around him take away his loneliness. He doesn't blame his upbringing for his depression. He expresses his anger toward God. He complains to God about his loneliness. He weeps his depression to God. He weeps in worship. I want my relationship with God to look more like this. I want Him to be the first place I take my emotions, whether it's anger and depression, or joy and gratitude.

And so in the midst of our personal crisis, we don't ask each other, "what is God doing here?" We ask God directly, "What in the world are you doing? What are *you* doing?!" We weep in worship.

Jeremiah is a book about God

We've seen that Jeremiah is a book about global crisis. And we've seen that Jeremiah is a book about personal crisis. And we've realized that in this book both of these crises lead us to ask what God is doing? Jeremiah had the privileged responsibility of answering that question. Because ultimately Jeremiah is a book about God. It's about Jeremiah delivering God's Word in the midst of the chaos of crisis.

When our first two kids were little we had them sleeping in the same room. And our son, Silas, was going through a really tough time as a baby where he had a series of severe ear infections that made him cry through most of the night. He would literally cry for hours on end. But it always amazed me that his sister, Eliana, could lie in the same room with him and not be awakened. She could sleep through all of his crying. But here what really surprised me. I would walk into their room while Silas was crying to try to comfort him. And I would crouch down beside him and whisper, "Silas." And even though Eliana had been asleep up to that point, at the sound of my voice, she would wake up. Silas' crying didn't wake her up, but my voice did. Because she knew the voice of her Daddy. My whisper spoke louder than Silas' crying.

And that is what we see here in Jeremiah. We see a chaotic political situation. We see a corrupt priestly situation where no one seems to be able to trust that anyone can speak for God. Chaos swirls everywhere. But just like in Genesis 1, the voice of God speaks into the chaos. And something is created. The word of God creates a picture of an alternate reality, a reality that doesn't have to do with political alliances and emotional despair. Jeremiah speaks of something that God is doing in history.

In the midst of all of this chaos, Jeremiah says that God is at work. He says what is unthinkable: that God actually

planned for Jerusalem to be destroyed. Even though there is disaster, it is all taking place under the hand of a loving God. And what Jeremiah's message does is to provide an alternate reality to the people of Israel. When they look around and see Jerusalem under siege, the temple about to be destroyed and God's people living in Babylon, they see failure. They see a God who has abandoned them. But Jeremiah gives them another picture. He paints a picture of a compassionate God who brings about judgment for their rebellion, but who promises hope in their future. Because even as Jeremiah is a book about disaster, it is just as much a book about hope. Jeremiah 27:22 says, "They will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day I come for them," declares the LORD. "Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place."

In the same sentence that God tells His people that the unthinkable is about to happen, he promises them that He will restore them afterward. In Jeremiah, the pain of disaster is dealt with honestly and expressively. But there is hope. There is always hope. In fact, Jeremiah has some of the most beautiful passages that promise hope in the entire Bible.

The middle section of this book, chapters 30-33, is often called the Book of Consolation because it contains several of the hopeful promises that God gives His people in the midst of this disaster. God promises them *economic* restoration. As they watch their fortunes being burned, God promises them that He will restore their fortune. He promises them *physical* restoration. As they are being brutalized by the Babylonians, He promises that He will ultimately restore them to health. He promises them *relational* restoration. As they are turning on each other in the terror of war, God promises that He will bring them together again as a nation, even uniting the Northern and Southern tribes in the last days. And He promises them *spiritual* restoration. Even as they are being punished for failing their covenant with God, He tells them of a New Covenant that they cannot fail, that will ultimately seal their relationship with God forever.

So what does this all mean to us? It means that in the midst of whatever crisis we are going through, we allow God's Word to give us a different picture of reality. His Word reinterprets our experience. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann explains it this way:

*"This text does not require 'interpretation' or 'application' so that it can be brought near our experience and circumstance. Rather, the text is so powerful and compelling, so passionate and uncompromising in its anguish and hope, that it requires we submit our experience to it and thereby reenter our experience on new terms, namely the terms of the text. The text does not need to be applied to our situation. Rather, our situation needs to be submitted to the text for a fresh discernment."*¹

God spoke into their disaster and reinterpreted it for them. He said "I'm doing this." It looks like death to you. It looks like Israel is dying. It looks like you are dying. But I'm doing this so that you can really live. I'm bringing you

life, but to get there we have to go through death. Just like a father's voice to a sleeping child, God's voice cuts through chaos and changes us. gives us a new perspective.

So in the midst of our crisis as a nation, and in the midst of whatever personal crisis you might be going through, we must ask God, "what are you doing?" We see jobs being lost, money disappearing, and people hurting. But we have to ask whether this crisis that our country is facing is really a crisis in God's view of reality. We have to allow Him to paint us a picture of an alternate reality. From a spiritual point of view, there may be a lot of good things about an economic downturn. I don't know what God's plans for America are. I don't know whether our economy will turn around or dive deeper. I don't know what the world political stage will look like in 50 years. But it may include the unthinkable. America may not even exist in 50 years. As American Christians, we need to be really careful about assuming what God wants for America. We need to be careful about making the same mistake that the Jerusalem priests made. They thought that God wouldn't be with them if they weren't in the land. Sometimes we can think that God won't be with us if America isn't strong. But God never promised that. We can't assume how God wants to treat America. We can only allow His Word to reinterpret our experience for us.

The truth is that we don't know exactly what God is doing in the midst of this global crisis. But we do know what He is doing in history as a whole. God brought the Israelites in Jerusalem a message of destruction that would give way to restoration. But the restoration that He promised was in the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of man. So as our country falls apart, we can have hope. There is always hope. Our hope is in the new kingdom of God, not that God would restore America's fortunes. But that God is preparing a place for us in a kingdom where thieves do not steal and rust does not destroy. That is our hope. That is how God's Word reinterprets our experience. Not by promising a new America, but a new Jerusalem. That's what God is doing.

The book of Jeremiah is about a prophet declaring disaster yet promising good news. But this good news is for the people. This good news is the gospel. It's the news of a God who brings forth life from death. It's the news that God has founded a new kingdom and that as we watch this kingdom crumble, we look forward to full participation in God's new kingdom. So when we read this book, we get the promise of disaster, but we also get good news. We also get the gospel.

So in the midst of our country being in crisis and in the midst of whatever personal crisis you might be experiencing or will experience, my prayer is that we would encounter God. We started off this morning by asking

the question, "what do you do when your country falls apart?" The answer we've come to is that we ask God what He is doing. And we look for the new work that He is doing. What do we do when our country falls apart? We look for the new country that God is building among the rubble. We look for the new country that God is building among the rubble.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998).