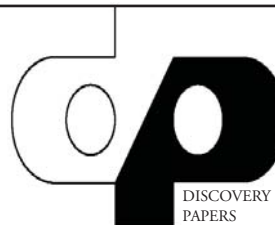


WHY IS LIFE SO HARD?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 20:7-18

7th Message

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In the movie *Stranger than Fiction*¹, IRS auditor Harold Crick begins to hear the voice of an unseen woman narrating the events of his life. He soon discovers that the voice belongs to the author of a novel-in-progress and that he is the main character. Unfortunately, Harold also discovers that his own death is an essential part of the story. But Harold confronts the author, desperate to change his seemingly unavoidable fate. “Can’t you change the story?” Harold asks. “Why do I have to die?”

In the passage we are studying today, Jeremiah decides to confront the author of his story and challenge him as to why his experience in the story has to be so painful. “Why do you have to make me die?” Jeremiah asks God. At the beginning of this series we looked at Jeremiah’s call narrative and saw how God formed Jeremiah and how He was defining the life of this prophet. This passage has several references back to the call narrative. You see, Jeremiah realizes that God is writing his story—he’s always known that. He’s just not happy with the way it’s being written.

We feel that way at times, too. We can look at our lives and wonder why things turned out the way they did. Sometimes it seems like no one is writing our story. Sometimes it seems like whoever is writing our story has it in for us. Sometimes we look at other people’s stories and just think that things would be so much easier for us if our stories were like theirs. We all come to a place at one time or another where we ask the question, “Why is my life so hard? Why do I have to endure this particular problem or experience this pain or go through this situation?” We all get there at times.

The way Jeremiah’s response to God plays out is really interesting. This whole section is poetry, and there are three very different stanzas in this poem. The first starts out painful. The second gets hopeful. But the third crashes into complete darkness. It’s probably the most shocking passage in Jeremiah. So we go from bad to better to worse. There’s no clean resolution at the end. We’re left with an open question from Jeremiah in the midst of his pain. So let’s read through these and see how Jeremiah asked God, “Why is my life so hard?”

We follow God into dark places

In the first part of this chapter, we learn about one of the most difficult times of Jeremiah’s life. We’ve talked before about how the priests hated him because he was prophesying that the temple would be destroyed. Well, there was one priest in particular that Jeremiah crossed paths with at several points during this book. That priest’s name is Pashhur. In the first part of chapter 20, Pashhur gets mad

at Jeremiah for preaching a message of destruction. So he has him thrown into the stocks to publicly humiliate and punish him for preaching what Pashhur thinks is lies. Our passage picks up with Jeremiah’s response to that situation. Jeremiah 20:7-10:

O LORD, you deceived; me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever 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.”

These verses start out dramatically. Jeremiah accuses God of all sorts of things. He says that God deceived him. He says that God overpowered him. He says that God prevailed. And because of all that, he is ridiculed and mocked. He is essentially saying that God tricked him into being who God wanted him to be. But he is using surprisingly strong language here. The language of being deceived, overpowered, and prevailed upon all has sexual overtones. These would be appropriate words to use of a sexual assault. It’s almost as if Jeremiah is accusing God of raping him. That’s how violated he feels. This is no polite complaint to God; this is raw and bitter. So Jeremiah is referring back to his calling from God. He is saying that God tricked him into being a prophet; God forced him to do it, and it’s caused him to have a terrible life.

Verse 8 makes it clear that Jeremiah’s suffering is caused by his calling. The verse has a parallel structure. Jeremiah says that when he speaks and cries out, he speaks of violence and destruction, and that causes him insult and reproach. It’s God’s fault that he is experiencing so much pain. For Jeremiah, his calling has resulted in great personal suffering.

This verse gives us a hint of why things are so hard for Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s life bridges two realities. One is the world of Jerusalem, of Pashhur, and the corrupt king of Judah. He has to live in that world. The other is the reality that God defines for him, the reality of the word of God that Jeremiah preaches, that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. And living between these two realities causes tension. In verse 9, Jeremiah says that he can’t neglect the

word of God. If he ignores that reality, God's word burns like a fire within him. He must acknowledge God's reality and be faithful to the call that God has given him. But when he is faithful to that call, he says in verse 10 that everyone is out to get him. He can't ignore the reality of life in Jerusalem because it's all around him. And it's causing him pain. He can't ignore God's reality. He can't ignore the reality of the world. And what God has called him to do is to take the word of God into the world. That's his calling. That's what causes him pain.

It's the same for us. You come here this morning to participate in the reality of God's kingdom. That's what you're doing here, testifying that there is something more than 401k plans and economic uncertainty and education. We are here to participate in the reality of God's kingdom. That's worship. And part of our role is to proclaim that reality to the other reality in which we live: life in Silicon Valley, in America, in 2009. Just like Jeremiah, we straddle two realities. And that creates tension for us, not necessarily because the world persecutes us like it did to Jeremiah, but because living amidst two realities is difficult. But that's what God invites us to do. And it causes us pain, just as it did to Jeremiah. There are times when God invites us into very dark places. The first thing we realize from Jeremiah's anguish is that following God often means He leads us into dark places.

Jeremiah's dark place was a place of loneliness and ridicule, a place where everyone else was happy but he was not. In Jeremiah 15:7, he says "I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me."

Our dark places can be different, depending on what God has called us to. Some people in the world are ridiculed and beaten and fear for their lives because they follow Christ. That's not true for most of us here. But God calls us into other dark places at times. Maybe it's the dark place of not being able to get pregnant. Maybe it's the dark place of being ridiculed for your faith. Maybe it's staying in a really difficult marriage. Or facing a difficult disease. Or losing your job. Or going somewhere that terrifies you. Or being lonely and not feeling connected to anyone around you. I don't know what your dark place is now or will be in the future. But Jeremiah's example teaches us that sometimes following God leads us into dark places.

And those places can feel hopeless. In verse 7, Jeremiah says that God deceived him and prevailed against him. In verse 10, Jeremiah says that his enemies are hoping to deceive him and prevail against him. God has deceived him, God has prevailed. His enemies are deceiving him and hoping to prevail. Jeremiah is trapped. No matter where he looks, it doesn't look good. Everyone is against him. Jeremiah is complaining that his life is hard. God is making it harder. The people around him are making it harder. He's come to the conclusion that this life of faith isn't such a great deal. Following God makes things harder. This life that he is called to is really hard.

Rachel and I were talking the other day about our sched-

ule, and we commented how nice it would be if we weren't Christians because we'd have one more day in our week where we didn't have any commitments. That's a trivial example, but the truth is that following God sometimes makes life harder. Jeremiah gives us the freedom to admit that and even to complain about it to God.

We rest in God's justice

Immediately after this intense complaint before God of how difficult He has made life for Jeremiah, the tone completely changes. This next section, verses 11-13, tell a completely different story. Instead of complaining against God, Jeremiah changes his focus and praises Him. Verses 11-13:

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.

Don't you love Jeremiah? In the same breath, you get Jeremiah complaining to God about his treachery and then praising Him for his provision. This stanza is what commentators call an "expression of trust." It's a common form of Hebrew poetry, and it is often found in the Psalms and in the writings of the prophets. The essence of this type of poetry is "But God." Here's all this stuff happening around me, "but God is with me like a mighty warrior." The key word in verse 11 is once again "prevail." In the previous section, Jeremiah was upset that God prevailed against him, and he was angry that his enemies were plotting so that they could prevail against him, but here he is confident that his persecutors will not prevail against him. On the contrary, they will fail. In fact, they'll experience eternal shame. Jeremiah's shame is temporary; theirs is eternal.

But how is it that Jeremiah is able to change his tone so quickly? Is this just a plastic smile that he's putting on to cover up his pain? I don't think so. Look at verse 12. This verse is the secret to how Jeremiah can express bitter complaint and joyous praise in the same breath. It's this little phrase "for to you I have committed my cause." The source of Jeremiah's peace was that he had brought his complaint before God. He told God how upset he was. He complained at the ridicule that he was experiencing. He let God have it. He says that what he was doing was committing his cause to God. Now that he has expressed himself fully to God, he's free to rest in the knowledge that it is in God's hands. Now that he has told God how hard things are, he knows that God will do what's best. Once he's complained to God, he can rest in God's justice. So this becomes a model for us as well. We can complain to God, but then we rest in God's justice.

My kids love to play together. It is one of their favorite

things to do. But inevitably when they play together, someone takes a toy or does something the other one doesn't like. And then they have the choice to do one of two things. They can exact their own vengeance. They can hit or grab the toy back or do something to get what they want. Or they can come to talk to Rachel or me, because we have the perspective to decide what vengeance should be taken.

You see, one of the roles that parents play with their kids is to establish justice. Incidentally, it's one of the most exhausting roles, but it's one of the roles required of us nonetheless. It's the responsibility of the children to bring their concerns to us, to let us know what happened. And it's even OK for them to say what they think should be the punishment. But it's our decision to who gets punished and how. And it's their role, once they've brought their complaint to us, to rest in our good judgment. Now, our kids have the bringing their complaint to us part pretty well mastered. Resting in our justice is another issue.

But what we see Jeremiah doing is a perfect balance of the two. He brings his complaint before God. And then he rests in God's sovereign justice. So this isn't "fake" praise. This isn't Jeremiah putting all his feelings of abandonment and frustration with God to the side and just choosing to put a smile on it. This is praise that Jeremiah is able to engage in because he's already brought his pain before God. And now he trusts Him with it.

So we see this two-part dynamic of expressing our pain to God and then trusting Him with the outcome. Complain... and rest. Complain... and rest. What's often true for us is that we get these two things out of balance. Sometimes we are just all full of complaints. We can't believe what is going on. And we complain to everyone. We complain to our spouses, to our friends, to anyone who will listen. And sometimes we complain to God too. But we forget to rest in Him once we've committed our cause to Him.

Other times, and this happens a lot in Christian communities, we expect people to rest in God even before they've had the chance to commit their cause to Him. Sometimes committing your cause to God is a process. It can happen quickly, but often it takes time. And what's true about most Christian communities is that we are extremely uncomfortable with unresolved pain, so we want to resolve it as soon as we can and we exert subtle pressure for people to sound like these verses even if it isn't really true of them. We want people to rest in God, but we're not willing to give them the time and freedom to bring their complaints before Him.

Isn't this what we want? We have a list of phone numbers on our refrigerator for who to call in different situations. Doctor, dentist, gas company, poison control, etc. When something happens, we want to be able to call someone who knows what they are doing and then rest in the fact that they'll make the right decision. That's what we do with God.

This complain and rest cycle is a critical aspect of our relationship with God. Moses does it, David does it, Jesus does it, Paul does it. This is how we relate to God in the midst of our pain. I have this picture of a little child who comes up to her father in pain and frustration and just beats on his chest. But then she crumples into his arms in his embrace. That's complaint and rest. That's what Jeremiah models for us.

But sometimes we fall apart

So we started with Jeremiah's complaint about God leading him into dark places. Then we saw his expression of trust, resting in God's justice. Now we get surprised again. In the last section, the tone changes again. Jeremiah goes back to complaint. Only it's gotten darker and more painful and more hopeless. It sounds to me like something has snapped within Jeremiah. This is him at his most raw. He isn't holding anything back here.

The first complaint we heard is what you might get if you ask someone at church how they are doing. And they say, "Well, things are really hard right now. I'm having a tough time with this or that." This next complaint of Jeremiah's is what they might say at 1 AM when they can't sleep and they are completely overwhelmed with emotion. This is a raw picture of Jeremiah falling apart. Verses 14-18.:

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?

He starts by cursing the day of his birth. This is a common exclamation for people in the midst of difficult situations. We find it in the book of Job and an old Babylonian poem. It shows up in Homer's *Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and popular music. I even found a website where people who wish they had never been born can talk about it together. The idea is that no existence at all would have been better than whatever you're experiencing is a common one.

But he goes further. Now he curses the man who brought his father the news of his birth. One of the reasons Jeremiah curses the messenger is because Jeremiah himself is a messenger. And that's part of what is causing his pain. He is burdened by the responsibility God has given him. He wants to be free from responsibility. He wants to be someone else. Have you ever been there? Perhaps you've felt overwhelmed by school or parenting or your job or your relationships. Have you ever just wanted to be someone else? I sometimes have a fantasy that I have a job with no responsibility, just someone telling me what to do. No

big decisions to make, nobody else depending on me. I usually have this fantasy just before a major responsibility. Jeremiah has it out for the messenger because he's tired of being God's messenger.

And it gets worse. As we keep reading, it's clear that Jeremiah is sinking deeper and deeper. His complaint gets darker and he seems to be in a spiral. His depression seems to be getting the best of him and it is dragging him down like water down a drain. His emotion is getting darker and darker. We're not used to this kind of angst in the Bible. Jeremiah explains that he wants this messenger to be treated like Sodom and Gomorrah—to be completely destroyed and full of pain. He says that he wishes the messenger had killed Jeremiah in the womb, making that womb his permanent grave. This is dark stuff. I have this graphic image in my head of the messenger running a sword through the pregnant abdomen of Jeremiah's mother. It's an awful image. But that's what Jeremiah says he would have preferred.

We've seen Jeremiah complain to God. We've seen Him trust God in the midst of it. Now we see him fall apart. I don't know about you, but I've had times like this where I have just felt terrible about life. So it's encouraging to me to see that Jeremiah has these times. And I love that it is part of the Word of God. God's revelation of Himself includes a picture of a man who has lost it. Apparently, this is a normal part of our experience as we follow God. Even when we trust God, sometimes we fall apart. God invites us into dark places. We can rest in God's justice. But sometimes we just fall apart.

I've had several Christian friends who have struggled with depression, and it's been really shocking what some Christian attitudes toward depression is. People will say things like, "You must have some unconfessed sin in your life" or "You just need to trust God more." There can be an attitude in Christian circles that it's not OK for people to struggle with life. And I mean really struggle like we see Jeremiah struggling. But that doesn't make sense. The Bible shows us Jeremiah cursing the day of his birth, the Bible shows us David looking back over his life with deep regret and depression, the Bible shows the apostle Paul despairing of life.

I worry that in our Christian community it's not usually OK for people to get really depressed or discouraged. We want to fix them right away. It's like we have this narrow band of emotional expression that is acceptable. And if you're sadder than you're supposed to be, we have to fix you really quickly. It goes the other way too—if you're more excited than you're supposed to, we just wait until you grow out of it. Back in our sound rack, we have something called a compressor. It basically takes a bunch of sound with really different volumes and compresses it so that the dynamic range isn't so large.

That's what we sometimes do as Christians. But the Bible shows this immensely wide range of emotion. Spiritual maturity isn't about getting to a place where you don't get too sad or too excited. It's about growing in

your ability to turn to God in the midst of your emotion. That's why Jeremiah is a model for us. He falls apart. But He falls apart to God.

This is why this series is called "Weeping in Worship." Jeremiah deals with some really difficult themes. I'm really looking forward to preaching on hope next week because I've felt like the themes we've been dealing with lately have been so hard. And Jeremiah experiences really terrible situations. Yet, he does it in the context of God. Here he is cursing the day of birth. But who is he talking to? God. He's weeping, but he's doing so in worship.

This passage is dark, no doubt about it. But one of the striking things about it is what Jeremiah doesn't say. He curses the day of his birth. He curses the messenger. Jeremiah falls apart, but there is a line that he doesn't cross. He doesn't curse God. Remember what Job's wife told him to do when his life fell apart? In Job 2:9, she told him to "curse God and die." But Job refused. He said plenty of other things. But he never cursed God. And Jeremiah comes short of that as well. If he cursed God, if he turned away, if he just gave up on Him, then it would be a tragedy. Then this would just be weeping. But Jeremiah doesn't go there. He's angry depressed, bitter, and spiteful. But he is all of those things in conversation with God. He never turns away.

The passage concludes as Jeremiah asks the question that is really on his mind. Why? Why was I born so that I could experience such pain? Why would God ask this of anyone? A stunned Harold Crick asks, "You're asking me to knowingly face my own death?" Jeremiah asks, "How can I possibly face this mess that you've laid before me? Why was I even born if this is what my life was going to look like?" Harold protests and says, "But I could be someone else." You can hear echoes of that same idea in Jeremiah's words. "I could have been someone else." But he isn't someone else. He's Jeremiah. This whole section has been set against the story of how God called Jeremiah. So even as Jeremiah asks this question, we know the answer. It sounds like the passage ends with an unanswered question. But it doesn't. Even as he asks the question, we are reminded of the answer. Yes, God has asked Jeremiah to endure terrible difficulty, but it is for a purpose. It is for the sake of something. That doesn't always make it easier, but it can give us the courage to endure.

Conclusion

It's hard to end a sermon on that note and leave Jeremiah in his raw pain. But his experience helps us to understand and face our own experience. And it brings us back to the question we started with: Why is life so hard? It is hard because sometimes God asks us to endure really difficult things. Just as Harold Crick was asked to knowingly face his own death, sometimes the author of our story asks us to go into dark places, to face things that seem like death or even to face death itself. As we live out our calling from God to live in the kingdom of God, we will experience pain in the kingdom of this world. It is unavoidable.

We talked about how Jeremiah lived amidst two worlds. When we step back and look at his experience, we realize that part of his pain was caused because one of his worlds was dying. He was preaching the destruction of Jerusalem, but he was also living in Jerusalem. We proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, but we are, at least for now, also living in the kingdom of this world. As Jeremiah proclaimed Jerusalem's destruction, he suffered alongside his countrymen. Listen to how Walter Brueggemann puts it:

[Jeremiah's] speech is costly, however, not only because of the external hostility and resistance that his word evoked, but because of the intense, personal toll of speaking against the very reality that must have been his own spiritual home. In announcing this harsh judgment of Yahweh, Jeremiah is not speaking only against the world of "others" who are his adversaries, but against the very symbolic world he himself inhabits.²

This is true for us as well. Life is hard because we live both in the kingdom of God and in the kingdom of this world. Some Christians try to escape that pain by thinking that they can escape the kingdom of this world. But we can't. Jeremiah was like a captain who goes down with his ship when it sinks. When Jerusalem was under siege, he starved. When it was destroyed, he was homeless. His message didn't just mean the people around him would suffer; it meant he would suffer as well. The same is true for us. We are part of our world. We live in our culture. As Jesus said, we are "in the world," even as we are of a different world. Living in this world can sometimes be incredibly painful. Realizing this can give us the freedom to experience pain. Jeremiah's experience encourages me not to try to escape that pain and not to try to hide it.

Life is hard, but God is there. He's there right beside us. And there's always hope. Sometimes God calls us into dark places. May we have the courage to follow Him there. And may we have the kind of relationship with God where we can complain to Him and then rest in His justice. But sometimes we will still fall apart. That's OK. Because even when we fall apart and ask God what He is doing, we know the answer. God has called us. He is with us.

NOTES

1 *Stranger Than Fiction*, Columbia Pictures, 2006.

2 (Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, p. 181)