

Jeremiah's Lament (15:15-21)

¹⁵ LORD, you understand;
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.

¹⁶ When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart's delight,
for I bear your name,
LORD God Almighty.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
You are to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ “I will save you from the hands of the wicked
and deliver you from the grasp of the
cruel.”

Elijah's Lament (19:9b-18)

Then the word of the LORD came to
him, saying, “What are you doing here,
Elijah?” ¹⁰ He answered, “I have been
very zealous for the LORD, the God of
hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken
your covenant, thrown down your
altars, and killed your prophets with the
sword. I alone am left, and they are
seeking my life, to take it away.”

¹¹ He said, “Go out and stand on the
mountain before the LORD, for the LORD
is about to pass by.” Now there was a
great wind, so strong that it was
splitting mountains and breaking rocks
in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD
was not in the wind; and after the wind
an earthquake, but the LORD was not in
the earthquake; ¹² and after the
earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not
in the fire; and after the fire a sound of
sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he
wrapped his face in his mantle and went
out and stood at the entrance of the
cave. Then there came a voice to him
that said, “What are you doing here,
Elijah?” ¹⁴ He answered, “I have been
very zealous for the LORD, the God of
hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken
your covenant, thrown down your
altars, and killed your prophets with the
sword. I alone am left, and they are
seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹⁵ Then
the LORD said to him, “Go, return on
your way to the wilderness of
Damascus; when you arrive, you shall
anoint Hazael as king over Aram. . . .

Don't shoot the messenger

Ever notice that these words are always spoken by the messenger. Who wants to be the bearer of bad news? Who wants to tell everyone that the end is near, the jig is up, the goose is cooked? Sometimes we can't help but turn on the one who is merely telling us what we don't want to hear. The one who is telling us the hard truth. Who wants that guy?

Not me. Not you. And not Jeremiah or Elijah. Such was the lot of prophets. You might recall Elijah's story¹. After defeating all the priests of Baal, Elijah has to run, for Queen Jezebel has made clear that she is more determined than ever to track the prophet down

¹Elijah was the subject of my 2010 summer sermon series. The studies that accompanied all those sermons can be found at www.scottengle.org.

and kill him. So Elijah flees southward toward the wilderness. Depression and dispiritedness hit him hard.

By the time Elijah gets to the wilderness he is used up. But he presses on one more day. The wilderness, you see, is the place people go to die. And at the end of that day, he lays down to die. I'm sure the contrast of triumph and defeat all in one day are too much for him. There's just nothing left in his tank. He's been running on fumes and now even they fail him.

But God does not fail him. An angel brings him nourishment for another long journey, this time to God's mountain. And there, this burned out, depressed, ready-to-die man encounters God as no one before had, at least not as we get the story in Scripture. Elijah doesn't get any of the usual spectacular manifestations of God's presence, like thunder or a pillar of fire; he gets God in the sound of sheer silence.

It is striking that despite the angel's intervention, Elijah is burned out when he gets to God's mountain and is still burned out after God's visit. God's presence is no instant cure. Elijah responds to God with the exact same things-are-bleak words as before he experienced God's presence outside the cave.

Yet, God doesn't let him go, doesn't give him a pass. Perhaps it is this way for us as well. When we are used up and have had enough, God can see what we cannot, a future still filled with surprising possibilities. Elijah got through his crisis, but it was God who not only dragged him through it but refused to let go. God wouldn't let Elijah give up. It is as if God shoved him forward into his future, toward the right choice. God still had work for Elijah. And God always has work for us as well, for, like Paul, we are ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), bearing witness to the Good News in all that we say and do.

"You are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail"

For most of us, the idea of leveling accusations at God is beyond the pale. Unthinkable. Yet, throughout the Bible, God's people do just that. Sometimes it is little more than whining, as in the case of the Israelites. In others, it is the expression of genuine and understandable fear and frustration.

Here, in these laments, we get some insight into Jeremiah's anguish. Yes, he was chosen by God when he was still in the womb. Yet, in a fallen world, the blessings of being "chosen" can be pretty hard to see. This was as true for all of Israel as it was for Jeremiah.

Israel had been chosen by God to be the agents through whom God would restore all humanity to a right and good relationship with God. God would dwell with them in a way that he was not present with any other people. He would be their God and they would be his people. His relentless faithfulness would be theirs. God would tell them about the way of life needed to live with God in their midst . . . and therein lay the problem.

God told them how to live, but they couldn't do it. They knew quite concretely what loving God and loving neighbor meant. Not in generalized platitudes, but in real, all too real, terms. If you find your enemy's ox or donkey wandering loose, take it to him (Exodus 23:4). Don't keep it, as sensible as that may seem to you; take it to him.

Thus, God's people were the ones who really knew what sin is. It is like all the sins of the world were concentrated and magnified in them. The pagans might have had some sense of right and wrong, but the Israelites could never plead ignorance of the law. They knew.

So it is with Jeremiah. He was chosen by God. Yea! But it meant that he would be reviled and despised. He would be alone and forlorn. No wife for Jeremiah. No children or grandkids.

And Jeremiah is saddened by it. He is dispirited. There is a sadness in his vocation that his chosenness can't seem to fill. "Under the weight of your hand, I sat alone." Such haunting and honest words.

And God's response to Jeremiah?

I guess we could call it a caring slap in the face, a loving pail of cold water over the head.

Snap out of it -- remember who you are

Did you ever have a friend snap you back to reality? Help you out of the hole by yanking you up? Look you straight in the eye and tell you to stop feeling sorry for yourself?

A Book Filled with Choices

Sometimes it almost seems that God gave us the wrong sort of book. We want the Bible to be a magic answer book that we can turn to for an answer to any question we face in life. But it is not. Sometimes we want the Bible to tell us, in plain and organized language, everything we'd like to know about God, like some sort of systematic theology textbook. But it is not.

The Bible is a book of stories. Some large, some small. It is through these stories that we learn about God and ourselves. The Bible is God's word for God's people and the spiritual journal of God's people, telling the story of a journey driven forward by the choices that God and humans make.

God chooses a people. God chooses to love them. God chooses to pursue them even when they turn their backs on him. Abraham chooses to obey God, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his own son, though God, in the end, didn't ask that of him. The only mystery in the book of Job is whether Job will choose to continue to trust in God, despite the most horrible and inexplicable tragedies being thrust upon him.

When Joshua sends a couple of scouts into Canaan, a prostitute named Rahab must decide whether to give them aid and information. She chooses well.

On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter must choose whether to proclaim his allegiance to his Lord. He chooses poorly.

Later, Stephen must choose whether to deny Christ or face death. He chooses well.

What choice do we make when the choices are tough?

That's pretty much what I see God doing here with Jeremiah. God isn't really calling Jeremiah to repentance, for what has Jeremiah done that is sinful, needing of repentance? Jeremiah is having a tough time, even giving in a bit to weakness. But weakness is not a sin. Dread is not a sin. Loneliness is not a sin. Adam was lonely and needed a helper in the garden.

No . . . God reminds Jeremiah who he is. Yes, he is on God's mission. Yes, it is hard. But stand true. Speak God's word. Yes, truly, God is with him.

I suppose it is a bit like a fighter in his corner, who needs to hear an encouraging word from his trainer, even if it has to be shouts to get back in the ring and keep fighting. Jeremiah is ready to throw in the towel, but God won't let him. Make the right choice, says the Lord.

Our own lives are often difficult, even if we truly strive to be faithful disciples of Jesus. Faith is not an insurance policy against hardship. And when the hard times come, as they did for Jeremiah, the question is whether we will give in to the hardship or whether we will remember that we are God's and get back in the ring. Will we truly remember who we are and draw strength and encouragement from that sure knowledge? Which will we choose?

And who are we?

When Moses and the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai after their exodus from Egypt, God formed them into a people defined by and bound to a covenant. As the vanguard of God's redemptive work, they were to love God and to love neighbor.

Despite the people's inability to live up to the covenant, they remained God's covenant people. God would remain faithful to them even when God had every reason to abandon them and start over.

God's covenant faithfulness was demonstrated for all the world to see, though most would not, on a cross outside Jerusalem. Though we refer to the parts of our Bibles as the Old and New Testaments (Covenants), the new covenant focused upon faith in Jesus Christ was not a replacement for the "old" Mosaic covenant, but its fulfillment.

God had a people then; God has a people now. One God. One people. God was present with his people then. God is present with us now. Not in the same way, but present.

It is in our covenantal relationship with God that we find our true identity. This identity, that of God's covenant people, his children and heirs, is not something we create nor is it something that the world can take away. Granted, we often (usually? always?) fail to live as God's new creations; our "habits and practices" fall woefully short of God's glorious standard. Yet, we remain God's people. It is here, with God and among God's people that each of us learns who we really are and find the strength to make the right choices.

Jeremiah and Hamlet

In his commentary on Jeremiah. P.G, Ryken sees parallels between Jeremiah and Shakespeare's character Hamlet. Here is some of what he wrote in connection with today's passage:

Sometimes Jeremiah was discouraged. He experienced periods of depression. At times he was filled with feelings of desperation and even doom.

Jeremiah was transparent about all these feelings. In the past several chapters he has exposed the dark depths of his soul, where doubt and dread resided. Scholars sometimes refer to these personal speeches as the "Confessions of Jeremiah." They appear in chapters 11, 12, 17, 18, and 20.

A better word for Jeremiah's speeches might be *soliloquies*. A soliloquy is a dramatic speech uttered when no one else is on stage. All the other characters in a play go off-stage so a leading actor can pour out his soul to the audience. A soliloquy is a private speech expressing the innermost feelings of a tragic figure, which is precisely what Jeremiah's confessions are. All the other characters in Israel go off-stage so he can put his tragic sufferings into words.

If Jeremiah's speeches are soliloquies, then chapter 15 is his "To be or not to be" soliloquy. By the third act of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, Hamlet is starting to think about taking his own life:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die: to sleep. (III.i.56-60)*

Like Hamlet, Jeremiah called the value of his existence into question: "Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!" (15: 10a).

The prophet had not quite hit rock bottom, but he was getting close. He hits absolute bottom in chapter 20, where he goes beyond lamenting his birth to cursing it (vv. 14-18). For the moment, however, he was as discouraged as can be. One of the first things we learned about Jeremiah (1:5) was that God had appointed him to be a prophet from his mother's womb. But there were times he wished he had never been born at all. He wanted to abort his mission.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have you been through a time of burnout, when you felt used up, that you'd just had enough? Can you recall how you felt at the time? What was the state of your faith during that time? Did the difficulties make you feel closer to God or further away?
2. When you have needed to be slapped back to reality, to shake off despondency and remember that you are loved, that you are an heir of Christ? Does it seem to you that God ought to be more comforting with Jeremiah and less, well, confrontational? Have there been times in your own life when you needed confrontation more than comfort? How about times when someone you love needed you to confront them more than comfort them?
3. When have you personally experienced God's presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how an affirmative core conviction of God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

My recommendation on reading through Jeremiah is to read it in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. If you don't have a copy, you can read it for free at www.youversion.com. The outline here is from Fretheim's commentary on Jeremiah.

Monday, Jeremiah 16 & 17 The shape of a life of a prophet; Who do you trust?	Tuesday, Jeremiah 18 The potter and the plots
Wednesday, Jeremiah 19 & 20 A broken jug	Thursday, Jeremiah 21;1-23:40 An indictment of Israel's leadership
Friday, Jeremiah 24 A vision of the good and bad figs	Weekly Joys and Concerns

