

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Against the Flow

(studies in Jeremiah)

The Disquieting Prayers of an Honest Prophet Study #5

(selected passages from Jeremiah)

Introduction: The paparazzi in all of us...

It's not too much of a stretch to suggest that we are fascinated by the lives of the rich and famous. The popularity of celebrity TV shows, celebrity tweets, and blogs devoted to celebrities is evidence of this penchant for news about newsmakers.

The paparazzi do the dirty work, and we take sneak peeks at their ill-gotten pics.

I'll admit to being drawn to news about famous people. While I don't read the National Inquirer or the Star, I do love reading biographies of men and women who have made a difference in the world. I like to read about their exploits. I like to see if I can figure out what makes them "tick." You probably do, too.

In recent weeks, we've been looking at the life of a truly great man, the prophet Jeremiah. We've been exploring his exploits, listening to his prophecies.

What do you think we would find if we could get inside his head? What do you think he was really like?¹

¹ Eugene Peterson asks these questions: "What was Jeremiah really like? What did he do when he was alone? When there was no audience to address, how did he behave? What did Jeremiah do when he was not staging confrontations with the religious leaders of Jerusalem? ... What did he do when he wasn't colliding with

We might find out all kinds of things about Jeremiah if we probed deep enough. But the one defining trait of the man, the one thing that was true about him, the absolutely clear answer to the question, "What made him tick?" is this: He prayed.

Jeremiah was all about God, start to finish. Over and over again throughout this book, Jeremiah prays. And today we are going to look at Jeremiah at prayer.²

My prayer life and yours...

Prayer is, undoubtedly, an important topic for a Christian. We believe in God, therefore we believe in prayer.

I've got lots of books about prayer on my bookshelves. I've read them all. I've gone to prayer conferences, special prayer meetings and prayer retreats.

I have preached on prayer. Prayer is on my mind. Prayer is on your mind, too. But, maybe not prayer as it was lived out by Jeremiah.

Here we are in the month of Thanksgiving. Thoughts of cornucopia filled with vegetables and of meals shared by Pilgrims and Native Americans flood our minds as do thoughts of praise and thanks offered to God.

These are the kinds of prayer we are most familiar with and perhaps most comfortable with. And, while these kinds of prayers are present in Jeremiah, they are not prominent.³

temple officials and upsetting the status quo? What did he do when he wasn't making headlines?" (*Run with the Horses*, p. 97)

² When we, today, think of someone sitting down to write a book, we think in terms of chronology. This was not the way Jeremiah's book was put together. He preached over the course of decades and then the book was put together in a way that was not necessarily chronological. Hence, there is a relatively confusing structure to the book and little chronological development. Martin Luther said of the prophets, "They have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at." This would certainly be true of Jeremiah's prophecy. The prayers we are looking at today are not necessarily studied in chronological order.

At various times in his life, Jeremiah was scared, lonely, hurt, angry, and sad. All of these emotions show up in his prayers. So if you ever have been, are right now, or think you ever may be scared, lonely, hurt angry, or sad, Jeremiah's prayers are just what you need.

The first prayer we will look at today finds Jeremiah praying at a time when his heart was breaking. He was desperately sad.

Praying When You Are Desperately SAD (8:18--9:2)

When Did Jeremiah Pray THIS Prayer?

Through a prophetic vision, the Lord allowed Jeremiah to see the future destruction of his people.⁴ And he entered fully into this anguish of what was going to happen. He was not just a dispassionate observer of his nation's coming trials.⁵

And, as a reflex reaction to the calamity to come, He prayed to God.

There are three different "complaints" in this prayer. First, Jeremiah represents the people of Israel. They are complaining against the Lord.

What Is THIS Prayer All About?

The complaints of the people

[8:19] Behold, listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from a distant land:

***"Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King not within her?"***

³ So, Eugene Peterson.

⁴ He was either seeing through prophetic eyes the awful destruction of Judah and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians or was writing at that time. Perhaps he was writing about the preceding attacks when there was guerrilla warfare (2 Kings 24:2)

⁵ And he was not only lamenting the horrible hardship that the people were going to experience, he was lamenting the hardship HE PERSONALLY was going to experience.

**[20] "Harvest is past, summer is ended,
And we are not saved."**⁶

The people are bitter that the Lord should stand aside and (seemingly) do nothing at their hour of greatest need.

But of course, their complaint was an empty one. The disaster that was coming their way was really their own fault, as the Lord makes clear.

The "complaint" of the Lord

**[8:19]... "Why have they provoked Me with their graven images,
with foreign idols?"**

So the Lord puts the blame where it belongs. He explains why destruction is coming. The people have brought their suffering on themselves by their idolatry.

The people and the Lord make their appearances in this prayer, but it is the sadness of Jeremiah that predominates.

The complaint/lament of Jeremiah

No medicine will fix Judah

A wounded person needs a healer/doctor. And in ancient Israel, a doctor would use an ointment (a "balm") taken from the resin of a special tree (the storax tree) to treat wounds.

For the wounds of people's flesh, there was balm, found in the region of Gilead. But a doctor's care would not work on Judah's wound. It was too deep. It was a spiritual and moral wound.

[8:22] Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?

⁶ Harvest lasted from April to June. If the wheat harvest failed, the people could still look forward to the yield of grapes, figs, olives, etc... If these failed, then famine faced the people.

The wound is beyond dealing; the sickness beyond hope. You can hear Jeremiah's sadness bleeding through as he considers the hopelessness of the situation.

At the same time he feels desperate sadness, he is also disgusted at his people's sin and rebellion against God.

Disgusted at his people's sin

*[9:2] Oh that I had in the desert
A wayfarers' lodging place;
That I might leave my people
And go from them!
For all of them are adulterers,
An assembly of treacherous men.*

He can't believe how low his people have gone! His disgust is palpable. But if he hates what they have done and what they have become, he feels even more an inconsolable grief over the coming tribulations.

Inconsolable grief over his people's suffering

*[8:18] My sorrow is beyond healing,
My heart is faint within me!...
[21] For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken;
I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me.
[9:1] Oh that my head were waters
And my eyes a fountain of tears,
That I might weep day and night
For the slain of the daughter of my people!*

This is not a prayer of thanksgiving or praise. This is a prayer of lament. And there is room in our arsenal of prayer, today, for lament, too. Prayer is the proper response of your soul when you are desperately sad.

Praying SAD Today

The example of Jeremiah is that when we are sad, we can do no better than to pour out our hearts' anguish to God.

The rock band U2 is well-known for its frequent use of the lament in its songs, and they got the lament direct from the Bible.

When you are sad there is nothing better to do than to take your sadness to God. Tell God the specifics of your sadness. Tell Him all about it. Plead with God for relief.

Jeremiah did what people do who are all about God. He prayed. He also prayed when he was confused about what was going on in his world.⁷

Praying When You Are Terribly CONFUSED (11:18--12:6)

When Did Jeremiah Pray THIS Prayer?

While the setting for the prayer of lament we just saw is somewhat uncertain, we know the setting for this second prayer.

At a certain point in his career, likely very early on, the Lord revealed to him that there was a plot against his life. This plot to kill him had been instigated by family and friends who lived in the city of Anathoth, his own hometown!⁸

What Is THIS Prayer All About?

WHY the plot against Jeremiah?

[11:18] Moreover, the Lord made it known to me and I knew it; Then You showed me their deeds....[21] Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, saying, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, so that you will not die at our hand"; [22] therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, "Behold, I am about to punish them! The young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters will die by famine; [23] and a remnant will not be left to them, for I will bring disaster on the men of Anathoth⁹—the year of their punishment."

⁷ This is the first of his expressed confessions in which he makes complaint against God.

⁸ Jeremiah 18, 26, and 36 provide other accounts of the people's desire to get rid of this prophet of doom.

⁹ Ezra 2:23 reports that 128 men returned from exile to rebuild Anathoth, evidently it had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

Various theories...

There are various theories as to why people from Jeremiah's own hometown would want to see him dead!

We know that the religious reforms of Josiah, which Jeremiah supported, centralized worship in Jerusalem and would have mandated shutting down sanctuaries in the outlying areas. Cities like Anathoth - priestly cities - likely would have lost their position as centers of worship, putting the priests in town out of work.¹⁰ That could have moved these folks to want Jeremiah dead.

Or, it might have been the character of Jeremiah's ministry that prompted the assassination plot. Other prophets were proclaiming that God would bring peace while Jeremiah was saying that defeat was inevitable AND that it was the result of the people's sin. Maybe the citizens of Anathoth were embarrassed by Jeremiah.

Whatever the reason, Jeremiah was unpopular, and he became the target of a hit. Those who wanted him dead were his family and the people with whom he had grown up.

How devastating! What a state of confusion this must have caused for Jeremiah!

He likens his shock at this turn of affections to an innocent sheep that is completely unaware of the intentions of its owner as he took it and led it to slaughter.

To discover that we have an enemy is unsettling. That's not the way we like to view our world. Friendly is better than hostile.

But the ones who opposed Jeremiah were from his village. They were his family. Family and friends could have been, SHOULD HAVE BEEN, a source of comfort to this bad news preacher. Instead, those closest to him rejected him and wanted him dead.

Upon finding out about this plot, Jeremiah fled to God in dismay and despair, and prayed that God would vindicate him.

A cry for vindication and vengeance

***[19] But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter;
And I did not know that they had devised plots against me, saying,
"Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
And let us cut him off from the land of the living,
That his name be remembered no more."
[11:20] But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously,
Who tries the feelings and the heart,
Let me see Your vengeance on them,
For to You have I committed my cause...
[12:3] But You know me, O Lord;
You see me;
And You examine my heart's attitude toward You.
Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter
And set them apart for a day of carnage!***

He protests his innocence and begs God to avenge him the wrong that has been committed against him. He begs God to destroy those who would hurt him.

So, he has prayed, but he's not finished. He keeps praying. Jeremiah is confused about the way God is running His world and he says it out loud.

Where is justice, Lord?

***[12:1] Righteous are You, O Lord, that I would plead my case with You;
Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You:
Why has the way of the wicked prospered?
Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?
[2] You have planted them, they have also taken root;
They grow, they have even produced fruit.
You are near to their lips
But far from their mind...
[4] How long is the land to mourn
And the vegetation of the countryside to wither?
For the wickedness of those who dwell in it,
Animals and birds have been snatched away,
Because men have said, "He will not see our latter ending."***

¹⁰ So Kidner and Longman.

Words like these are not rare in the Bible. Job spoke similarly. So did Habakkuk. And throughout history, thoughtful people have noticed that the world does not work the way they suspect it should if it were ruled by an all-good, all-powerful God.

So, while respectful and affirming God's righteousness, Jeremiah wants to discuss matters of justice with God.

- Why have the wicked prospered?
- Why are those who deal in treachery at ease?
- Lord, You are the One who has established these evil people (they talk about God but don't think about Him) - why?
- How long, O Lord, are You going to allow the carnage/injustice to continue?

Jeremiah is puzzled that he, God's righteous servant and spokesman, is suffering, while those who rebel against God are prospering. It is confounding!

Jeremiah pours out his heart to the Lord. He gives vent to his confusion. And it may be that at the end of his prayer, he felt spent, exhausted from his gut-wrenchingly honest confrontation of God.

Maybe he thought that this time of prayer was over. Maybe he didn't expect that God would answer him. I don't know if he expected either an answer or the answer that God would give him - but answer Jeremiah God did.¹¹

God's answer: How will you compete with horses?

[12:5] "If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, Then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a land of peace, How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?"

[6] "For even your brothers and the household of your father, Even they have dealt treacherously with you, Even they have cried aloud after you. Do not believe them, although they may say nice things to you."

In short, the Lord says, "If you're having trouble standing firm against THIS level of opposition, you're in trouble."

Why?

"Because you ain't seen nothing yet!"

The persecution at this point is relatively light. It's going to get much, much worse.

Expanded, the Lord's words might sound like this -

"Now, you are opposed by your family. Later, you will be opposed by the King of Judah. Today you are dealing with people from the little village of Anathoth. Later, you will have to reckon with the horses of the Babylonian army.

"Jeremiah, this is life when you are living for Me. Expect opposition. You can't ever let your guard down. To not watch your back is to be naïve." (Sounds remarkably like Jesus, doesn't it? "Be as wise as serpents; innocent as doves." and "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.")

Life is confusing. Why things turn out the way they do - personally, locally, globally - is beyond us. It doesn't make sense.

It does, though, make sense that we would be confused by it all and it totally makes sense that we should take our confusion to God in prayer.

Praying CONFUSED Today

Pray when something has not gone your way. Pray when you are opposed by those you expected would support you.

¹¹ Like the answers He gave to Job and Habakkuk, His answer to Jeremiah didn't exactly put to rest the concerns he had brought. But God's response was exactly what Jeremiah needed to hear.

Pour out your heart to God. Ask for justice. Plead for protection. Just don't expect that God will pat you on the back and tell you, "*There, there. It'll be OK.*"

When He answered Jeremiah, the message was, "*Man up!*"

Opposition and hardship and injustice are par for the course for this life - especially for those who follow the Lord. It's possible that things will get harder, worse, more desperate before they get better.

But pray. By all means, pray!

Sadness and confusion moved Jeremiah to pray. So did pain.

Praying When You Are Deeply HURT (15:15-21)

When Did Jeremiah Pray THIS Prayer?

No specific incident seems to have prompted this prayer. He has simply come to a point when, though faithful to carry out his mission for the Lord, he is in deep soul-anguish and feels totally isolated.

We're not surprised that he prays. That is, after all, just what Jeremiah does. His prayer begins with an appeal to God to avenge the hurt he has suffered.

What Is THIS Prayer All About?

Vengeance!

***[15:15] You who know, O Lord,
Remember me, take notice of me,
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
Do not, in view of Your patience, take me away;
Know that for Your sake I endure reproach.***

He asks that God will not be so patient with his persecutors that He won't rescue Jeremiah in time to save him!

Then, he recalls how wonderful it was at the beginning when he had first been commissioned by God to be a prophet!

Affirming a delightful commission

***[15:16] Your words were found and I ate them,
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;
For I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts.***

From the outset, Jeremiah internalized the message. He was eager to proclaim the message. It was like candy, like dessert.

But giving out God's message, over time has resulted in bitter suffering and he takes a minute to remind the Lord of the suffering he has endured for serving Him.

Desperately lonely - because of You, Lord!

***[15:17] I did not sit in the circle of merry-makers,
Nor did I exult.***

***Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone,
For You filled me with indignation.***

***[18] Why has my pain been perpetual
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?
Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream
With water that is unreliable?***

The prophet is experiencing a crisis of purpose - he's not getting anything out of serving the Lord but grief.

There are parties going on all around him. People are having fun. He's not invited to any of the parties. He sits alone - what a picture of isolation.

Who wants to invite ol' "*bad news Jeremiah*" to the party?

Some people have thought of Jeremiah as a masochist who lived on suffering. Not true! He wasn't in love with the idea of suffering or dying. And his suffering came as a direct result of God's commission on his life.

Listen to the way characterizes his life. His pain is "*perpetual.*" He has a "*wound incurable.*" His wound "*[refused] to be healed.*"

This is not hyperbole. It is true. And he expected something different when he began to fulfill his prophetic role. He expected joy and life and fullness from God. It hasn't happened - and he tells God about it.

People who approach Leon Creek for water are usually disappointed. Only during or immediately after a rain does the river flow. It's usually a dry creek bed (called a "wadi" in Palestine).

God has become a Leon Creek to Jeremiah. When he is parched and most in need of water, God's stream doesn't flow. There is no refreshment. No nourishment for his soul. He is alone, suffering, in pain. Life hurts. Again, he told God about it.

And again, the Lord answered him. But while He spoke to the complainer, God did not answer Jeremiah's specific complaint.

God's response: Repent, Jeremiah!

[19] Therefore, thus says the Lord, "If you return, then I will restore you—

Before Me you will stand;

And if you extract the precious from the worthless,

You will become My spokesman.

They for their part may turn to you,

But as for you, you must not turn to them.

[20] "Then I will make you to this people

A fortified wall of bronze;

And though they fight against you,

They will not prevail over you;

For I am with you to save you

And deliver you," declares the Lord.

[21] "So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,

And I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent."¹²

What a striking response!

Jeremiah had often called on people to repent. Now, the Lord calls on Jeremiah to repent!

"Turn from such talk, Jeremiah!"

If Jeremiah had been seeking release from his calling because the pain of serving God was too great, he didn't get release. What he got was a stern warning. He also got something else. He got a word for the way forward.

The only way forward was to continue serving the Lord. That is the only place to find life. In this life, pain is a given - serving God or not.

God's words offered nothing easy, certainly not a pain-free life. But they did offer a path that would lead to ultimate victory and a path that would produce real maturity and character.

If pain is your lot today, take a page from Jeremiah's playbook. Pray to God. Take your pain to the Lord

Praying HURT Today

Let Him know how badly you have been hurt by the offenses of others, by the isolation you have felt/experienced, by the obediences you have performed for Him.

Recall to the Lord the excitement you have sensed about Him and His ways and His words in times past.

Tell God of sinful delights you have avoided so as to please Him.

And if you have felt the temptation to cease following Jesus because it is so tough to do so, listen to His response. He's saying the same thing to you He said to Jeremiah.

Repent of that idea! It is in returning/repentance that you will find grace and strength to go on. It is in returning that God will make of you a "fortified wall of bronze" and that you will find Him to be your deliverance.

Everything that happened in life prompted Jeremiah to pray. Sadness, confusion and pain all revealed that what was central to the prophet was GOD. He was God-centered, so he prayed. He even prayed when he was angry.

¹² The last two verses are a near verbatim repetition of his initial call to the prophetic role. (1:18-19)

Praying When You Are Thoroughly ANGRY (20:7-18)

When Did Jeremiah Pray THIS Prayer?

We again have a specific event to which we can tie the angry prayer. Jeremiah prayed this prayer right after his suffering at the hands of a man named Pashhur. We will spend much more time looking at the suffering Jeremiah endured next Sunday.

Briefly, he was kept in stocks overnight - a deeply painful AND humiliating experience. He truly suffered.

When he was released, still nursing wounds and a terribly bruised ego, he prayed. And what a prayer he prayed.

What Is THIS Prayer All About?

Accusing God! (?)

**[20:7] O Lord, You have deceived me and I was deceived;¹³
You have overcome me and prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long;
Everyone mocks me.
[8] For each time I speak, I cry aloud;
I proclaim violence and destruction,
Because for me the word of the Lord has resulted
In reproach and derision all day long.**

Jeremiah envisions a bride who gets married to a man who uses her and then tosses her aside. The prophet feels that this is how the Lord has treated him. The language verges on blasphemy.

He had thought that bringing the word of the Lord would lead to repentance among the people. Revival would break out. Lives would be changed. Marriages restored. Families reconciled. All the good stuff.

Instead, being the spokesman for God has led only to trouble! He's tasted humiliation and physical pain. He has become a laughingstock. He has been rejected by his closest friends.

If ever a servant of God hit rock bottom, this is it. Jeremiah feels that he is wrestling, not against man, but against the Lord.

At the same time, he's trapped by a commission he can't quit!

A commission he can't quit!

**[20:9] But if I say, "I will not remember Him
Or speak anymore in His name,"
Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire
Shut up in my bones;
And I am weary of holding it in,
And I cannot endure it.**

One part of him would like to cease being God's spokesman (It is too painful!), but he cannot! He is lashed to the mast.

It wasn't as if he could just stop prophesying - after all, God's hand was on him. And he was deeply committed to the prophetic commission.

But - and notice the see-saw nature of his prayer - the ridicule and reproach he was receiving was just about to tear him apart!

Persecuted on every side

**[20:10] For I have heard the whispering of many, "Terror on every side!
Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!"
All my trusted friends,
Watching for my fall, say:
"Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail against him
And take our revenge on him."**

Evidently, Jeremiah used the term "magor missabib" (terror on every side) so often that people began to refer to him by the term! "There goes old 'terror on every side' himself."

¹³ There is a similar thought earlier in the book. [4:10] Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Surely You have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, 'You will have peace'; whereas a sword touches the throat."

He knew that people were plotting against him. They were hoping for his fall. What a terrible thing to realize!

BUT (another swing), he puts his confidence in God!

Affirming reliance on God!

**[20:11] But the Lord is with me like a dread champion;
Therefore my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.
They will be utterly ashamed, because they have failed,
With an everlasting disgrace that will not be forgotten...**

**[12] Yet, O Lord of hosts,
You who test the righteous,
Who see the mind and the heart;
Let me see Your vengeance on them;
For to You I have set forth my cause.**

**[13] Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord!
For He has delivered the soul of the needy one
From the hand of evildoers.**

The Lord, he is sure, will take up his cause. His persecutors will be ashamed and disgraced.

And then he closes the prayer with a final swing headlong into hopelessness. After praising God and expressing his great confidence in God, he immediately turns to curse the day of his birth!

Despair

**[14] Cursed be the day when I was born;
Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me!**

**[15] Cursed be the man who brought the news
To my father, saying,
“A baby boy has been born to you!”
And made him very happy.**

**[16] But let that man be like the cities
Which the Lord overthrew without relenting,
And let him hear an outcry in the morning
And a shout of alarm at noon;**

**[17] Because he did not kill me before birth,
So that my mother would have been my grave,
And her womb ever pregnant.**

**[18] Why did I ever come forth from the womb
To look on trouble and sorrow,
So that my days have been spent in shame?¹⁴**

Like Job, Jeremiah plunges to the depths after reaching his high point of faith.

He is angry. Angry at life. Angry at his persecutors. Angry at God. And he didn't wait to cool down to pray. He prayed at the fever pitch of his raw rage.

And if Jeremiah prayed his anger, you and I can do the same.

Praying ANGRY Today

Express your feelings to the Lord. He can handle the worst you can dish out. Pray respectfully. Pray reverently. Never forget that He is God. But pray!

Let Him hear you say just how angry you are - if you are angry - about the hardships you are going through because you are doing His will.

God is honored when you approach Him with genuine emotion, even if it is raw.

Conclusion:

Spectator sports are great. It's a great thing to spectate! But prayer is not a spectator event.

The Lord invites you and me into the adventure of prayer - even when life's storms hit. And He has provided a great model of praying in those storms in the prophet Jeremiah.

¹⁴ These words may actually have been influenced by Job 3:3-12.