

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

JEREMIAH 13-15

Jeremiah had a tough job!

He was called by God to deliver an *unpopular* message to an *ungrateful* and *unrepentant* people.

And when his pleadings to turn to God went unheeded, God had him pronounce judgment on His people. It made him an object of intense persecution.

Jeremiah made huge personal sacrifices with very few tangible results. His stand for God often required him to stand alone! On earth, Jeremiah's ministry received no praise, and he warranted no recognition.

It's hard to imagine God giving a man a more difficult assignment than He gave to the Prophet Jeremiah.

If God reserves His most demanding tasks for His strongest and most spiritual servants, then Jeremiah ranks above all the others! This evening, we'll continue studying the diary of this important prophet. You could entitle tonight's message, **“Jeremiah's Journal.”**

Chapter 13, “Thus the Lord said to me: “Go and get yourself a linen sash, and put it around your waist, but do not put it in water.” So I got a sash according to the word of the Lord, and put it around my waist.”

It’s often said, “A picture is better than a thousand words.” And often in the Old Testament God spoke to people through pictures - through object lessons.

Call them *divine dramas*, or *spiritual skits*.

Especially when people turned a deaf ear to conventional methods, God would command His prophet to act out a living parable. It was a visual aide to awaken God’s people. Sometimes God used the strangest of behaviors to teach a spiritual lesson...

Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign of judgment against Egypt and Ethiopia. He spoke to the nation of *the bare facts - the naked truth*.

Ezekiel was called by God to lie on his side.

Hosea was told by God to marry a prostitute.

And here, Jeremiah was told to procure a linen sash.

It was a sacred sash - a priestly undergarment. This wasn't a pair of Wrangler Jeans or Dickies overalls. It wasn't something rough and rugged. This sash was a linen, delicate garment. Call it, “intimate apparel.”

The sash represented the intimacy and the fellowship that the nation of Judah enjoyed with God.

Verse 3, “And the word of the Lord came to me the second time, saying, “take the sash that you acquired, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a hole in the rock.”

So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me.” Caravans from Jerusalem westward to Babylon were common. Jeremiah joined one of the convoys, and made the 300 mile trip to the banks of the Euphrates River, where he hid the sash in a rock.

The Euphrates was the river of Babylon. Babel was the seat and center of all idolatry. It had been the headquarters of Satan since Nimrod - Genesis 11.

In Revelation 9, an event in the future, the sixth trumpet will blast, and a voice will sound in heaven, “Release the four angels (actually fallen angels or demons) who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’

So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind.” In the last days, diabolical devils will become a violent, lethal threat to mankind. And they're currently being kept at the River of Babylon.

Verse 6 fast-forwards “*many days.*”

Jeremiah writes, “Now it came to pass after many days that the Lord said to me, “Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the sash which I commanded you to hide there.” Then I went to the Euphrates and dug, and I took the sash from the place where I had hidden it; and there was the sash, ruined. It was profitable for nothing.” A fragile linen cloth had been buried in mud for weeks. Stains were ingrained.

It was worse than red clay on the trousers of a toddler. The sash was molded, mildewed. A garment that adorned the priest was now ‘*profitable for nothing.*’

Verse 8, “Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Thus says the Lord: ‘In this manner I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.

This evil people, who refuse to hear My words, who follow the dictates of their hearts, and walk after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be just like this sash which is profitable for nothing.” The exercise with the sash had been a metaphor for God’s people.

“For as the sash clings to the waist of a man, so I have caused the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to Me,’ says the Lord, ‘that they may become My people, for renown, for praise, and for glory; but they would not hear.” The priest wore the sash around his waist. It covered the seat of his emotions - *his gut reactions* - his bowels of mercy.

And likewise God had feelings for the nation Judah.

God's desires toward His people were for *“renown, for praise, and for glory.”* His goal was to lavish on the Jews such great blessing that the world would look on, and know that their God was the one true God!

But because of their pride, they refused to submit to God, and thus followed other gods - idols that catered to their carnality, and justified their sinful desires.

As a result their *hearts got cold* and their *minds grew mold*. To God they were like this worthless sash.

Do you have an intimacy with God? *A heart to heart relationship?* Or has pride crowded God out? Have idols, *other concerns more pressing than God*, taken precedent in your heart and mind? If so, to God you've become like a rotten sash. You're no longer profitable.

Verse 12, *“Therefore you shall speak to them this word: ‘Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘Every bottle shall be filled with wine.’ And they will say to you, ‘Do we not certainly know that every bottle will be filled with wine?’ The expression meant, ‘It’ll all turn out well in the end.’”* This is what the false prophets were saying.

The truth is, God will fill them *not with joy*, but with drunkenness. He'll bring on them a spiritual stupor.

“Then you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Behold, I will fill all the inhabitants of this land - even the kings who sit on David’s throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem - with drunkenness! And I will dash them one against another, even the fathers and the sons together,” says the Lord. “I will not pity nor spare nor have mercy, but will destroy them.” God will judge kings, and princes, and priests, and prophets, even the people of Judah.

These are ominous words, **God will have no mercy!**

“Hear and give ear: do not be proud, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before He causes darkness, and before your feet stumble on the dark mountains, and while you are looking for light, He turns it into the shadow of death and makes it dense darkness.” God promises darkness to cover the Jews. They rejected His light, so they’ll taste of *dense dark*.

Three types of darkness are spoken of in Scripture.

First, is **a natural darkness**. Ephesians 4:18 describes an inherent darkness that comes with not knowing Christ. “**Having their understanding darkened being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them.**” All men are born in sin, and are apart from God. They’re in the dark from the start.

Second, is **a deliberate darkness**. In John 3:19 Jesus said, “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” This is a darkness men have chosen.

The light of God exposes our sin and makes us uncomfortable. Thus, sinful men prefer the darkness.

Then third, there is **a judicial darkness**. This is the darkness referred to in Jeremiah. God sentences a rebellious people to stumble into spiritual darkness.

They’ve rejected the light, thus God enacts a spiritual darkness. This is what happens in the end times, during the Great Tribulation. 2 Thessalonians 2 tells us, “For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” They chose darkness rather than light, so God imposes a darkness.

Verse 17, “But if you will not hear it, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock has been taken captive.” Here the weeping prophet is at it again. He weeps over the harm their pride has caused.

Pride is at the heart of all our problems. It's the root of all our sin. **It's even evident in its spelling. At the center of sin is "I."** *Jeremiah weeps over their pride!*

"Say to the king and to the queen mother, "Humble yourselves; sit down, for your rule shall collapse, the crown of your glory." Most commentators believe the king here to be Jehoiachin, and his mother Nehushta.

Read about them in 2 Kings 24:8-16. Jehoiachin reigned just three months before he and the royal family were taken prisoner and carted off to Babylon.

Verse 19, **"The cities of the South shall be shut up, and no one shall open them; Judah shall be carried away captive, all of it; it shall be wholly carried away captive."** The king's deportation was just the beginning. Eventually all the Jews will be taken to Babylon.

"Lift up your eyes and see those who come from the north. Where is the flock that was given to you, your beautiful sheep? What will you say when He punishes you? For you have taught them to be chieftains, to be head over you. Will not pangs seize you, like a woman in labor? And if you say in your heart, "Why have these things come upon me?" For the greatness of your iniquity your skirts have been uncovered, your heels made bare." In other words, you brought your problems on yourself. Your suffering is the result of your own sin.

Which is often our case as well.

Verse 23 is a famous passage, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil.”

Here’s a good question, *can an Ethiopian change his skin color?* And the answer is “No!” And another question, *can a leopard change his spots?* Again it’s “No!” *Both the skin and the spots are permanent.*

Thus, the question follows, *can a man do good who is accustomed to doing evil?* And again, the answer is “No!” An Ethiopian can’t change his skin. A leopard can’t change his spot. And you and I can’t change our nature. We’re born into sin. We’re sinners at heart.

In 17:9 Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” A better translation is “incurably wicked.” There’s nothing I can do to change myself. I can reform my actions for a time, *but how can I change my nature?* **I need a new nature!**

And this is the miracle of the new birth. *We can change*, but it takes God’s Spirit to change us. He cuts out our rebellious heart, and gives us a compliant one.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, in John 3:7, “You must be born again.” We’re reborn spiritually by God’s Spirit.

“Therefore I will scatter them like stubble that passes away by the wind of the wilderness. This is your lot, the portion of your measures from Me,” says the Lord, “because you have forgotten Me and trusted in falsehood. Therefore I will uncover your skirts over your face, that your shame may appear.” This was how they shamed a prostitute: pulled her skirt over her face.

And Jeremiah is exposing the harlotry of God’s people. Judah betrayed the Lord and slept with idols.

Verse 27, “I have seen your adulteries and your lustful neighings, the lewdness of your harlotry, your abominations on the hills in the fields.” Like an animal in heat. The people pursued lewd and lustful desires.

They worshipped the fertility gods and goddesses of the pagans who sanctioned prostitution and immorality.

And as a result God warns His people, “Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you still not be made clean?”

Chapter 14 begins a new section, “The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the droughts.”

In both Mesopotamia and in Egypt, Abraham and his descendants, lived in a land that was fed by great rivers - the Nile in Egypt and the Euphrates in the East.

But when God brought the Hebrews into the land He'd promised them He knew they would have to rely on Him for water. Canaan relied on rains - both the former and latter rain - or the spring and fall rains.

When the people obeyed God, He sent rain. When they disobeyed, God closed up the heavens. The Lord used drought conditions to get His people's attention, and humble them, and bring them back to Himself.

I read somewhere that the Bible speaks of thirteen famines and all were the result of God's judgment.

The drought spoken of here is no exception.

“Judah mourns, and her gates languish; they mourn for the land, and the cry of Jerusalem has gone up.

Their nobles have sent their lads for water; they went to the cisterns and found no water. They returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded and covered their heads. Because the ground is parched, for there was no rain in the land, the plowmen were ashamed; they covered their heads.

Yes, the deer also gave birth in the field, but left because there was no grass. And the wild donkeys stood in the desolate heights; they sniffed at the wind like jackals; their eyes failed because there was no grass.” O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do it for Your name's sake; for our backslidings are

many, we have sinned against You.” They weren’t just guilty of a *one-time backsliding* - their *“backslidings are many.”* They were living in a backslidden state.

Here Jeremiah intercedes for his people, and notice the pronoun he uses. He doesn’t say, *“their backslidings,”* but *“our backslidings.”* It’s *we*, not *they*.

Jeremiah loves the Jews. He’s one of them.

The prophet stays loyal to his people and identifies with them through thick and thin, good or bad.

As Jesus did in an ultimate sense, Jeremiah does in a lessor sense - he bears the burden of their sin.

Verse 8, *“O the Hope of Israel, his Savior in time of trouble, why should You be like a stranger in the land, and like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night?”*

Here in a very bleak, dark time Jeremiah gives us a wonderful name for God. He’s *“the Hope of Israel.”*

And He’s *our hope* as well. God is our *“Savior in time of trouble.”* Don’t treat Him like a stranger, but a friend.

“Why should You be like a man astonished, like a mighty one who cannot save? Yet You, O Lord, are in our midst, and we are called by Your name; do not leave

us! Thus says the Lord to this people: “Thus they have loved to wander; they have not restrained their feet. Therefore the Lord does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, and punish their sins.”

Then the Lord said to me, “Do not pray for this people, for their good.” Again, God tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people - at least for a pleasant outcome. Their judgment is now fixed. The dye has been cast.

“When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence.” As we’ve noted, God’s patience has its limits. God will not wait on us forever. The door of opportunity eventually slams shut.

Verse 13, “Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, the prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.’” Realize, Jeremiah was not the only man claiming to speak for God during this time.

There were false prophets preaching the exact opposite message. Jeremiah said judgment is coming. The false prophets cried out, “Peace and safety.”

And I’m sure there were moments of self-doubt when Jeremiah wondered, *“Have we crossed wires here? Have I heard God correctly? Who’s right in all this?”*

Well, the Lord comes to assure him, “And the Lord said to me, “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart.

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who prophesy in My name, whom I did not send, and who say, ‘Sword and famine shall not be in this land’ - ‘By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed! And the people to whom they prophesy shall be cast out in the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and the sword; they will have no one to bury them - them nor their wives, their sons nor their daughters - for I will pour their wickedness on them.’

How’s that for a validation of Jeremiah’s message!

I wish that lying prophets with a smooth and easy message were a problem of the past, but not so. They still plague us today. Listen to this little excerpt...

"Noah's message from the steps going up to the Ark was not, *'Your Best Life Now!'* - Amos was not confronted by the high priest of Israel for writing a book entitled, *"Something good is going to happen to you!"*

Jeremiah was not put into the pit for preaching, *'I'm OK, you're OK!'* - Daniel was not put into the lion's den for telling people, *'Possibility thinking will move mountains!'* - John the Baptist was not beheaded because he preached, *'Smile, God loves you!'* - The two prophets of the tribulation will not be killed for

preaching, *'Become A Better You' or "Get Your Hopes Up!"* Instead, the message of all these men of God was one word, *'Repent!'*" We need men who'll speak truth!

Verse 17, *"Therefore you shall say this word to them: 'Let my eyes flow with tears night and day, and let them not cease; for the virgin daughter of my people has been broken with a mighty stroke, with a very severe blow.'"* I had a man once tell me when he converted to Christ, God gave him **the gift of tears.**

He'd lived a rough life. His conscience was seared.

Along the way the fellow became so calloused he had lost the ability to cry. But when the Lord touched his life, and softened his heart, and desensitized his conscience - **He gave him back his tears.**

Billy Graham once said, *"Tears shed for self are tears of weakness, but tears shed for others are a sign of strength."* This was true of Jeremiah. He's called the weeping prophet for the tear he shed over the nation.

Someone observed, *"More tears are shed in our movie theaters over make-believe tragedies than in our churches over real ones."* I'm afraid that's sad, but true!

When was last time you and I actually shed a tear for the pain and lostness of the people around us?

Verse 18, “If I go out to the field, then behold, those slain with the sword! And if I enter the city, then behold, those sick from famine! Yes, both prophet and priest go about in a land they do not know.” The land that is, bears no resemblance to the ravaged land that will be.

And Jeremiah asks the Lord, “Have You utterly rejected Judah? Has Your soul loathed Zion? Why have You stricken us so that there is no healing for us?”

We looked for peace, but there was no good; and for the time of healing, and there was trouble.

We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You. Do not abhor us, for Your name’s sake; do not disgrace the throne of Your glory. Remember, do not break Your covenant with us.” Jeremiah has forgotten that the curses were as much a part of God’s covenant with Israel as were His blessings. In judging them God will be fulfilling promises just as much as if He blessed.

“Are there any among the idols of the nations that can cause rain? Or can the heavens give showers?”

Are You not He, O Lord our God? Therefore we will wait for You, since You have made all these.” The chapter ends as it began, with a focus on the drought.

Only God can bring the rain! And Jeremiah has asked. Now, he'll wait for God to prove Himself again.

But God answers Jeremiah in a surprising way...

Chapter 15, “Then the Lord said to me, “Even if Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My mind would not be favorable toward this people. Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth.” Moses and Samuel were known in Jewish history as powerful intercessors.

On numerous occasions both men went to bat for their people in prayer. God heard them and delivered.

Read Exodus 32, Numbers 14, 1 Samuel 7 and 12.

Psalm 99:6 declares, “Moses and Aaron were among the priests, and Samuel was among those who called upon His name; they called upon the LORD, and He answered them.” If there was one, Moses and Samuel would've had a spot in *The Intercessors Hall Of Fame*.

Yet here, even if effective, proven intercessors like Moses and Samuel were around to pray for the Jews of Jeremiah's day nothing could be done. Their prayers would be ineffectual. The nation was too far gone.

Judah had pushed God too far. Their judgment was already determined. Prayer would not alter God's will.

This passage proves two truths. **First**, no one can repent on behalf of another. It's up to each individual to come to God. And **second**, as the Lord said just before the flood, in Genesis 6:3, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." There are limits to God's patience.

Verse 2, "And it shall be, if they say to you, 'Where should we go?' then you shall tell them, 'Thus says the Lord: "Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for the famine, to the famine; and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity.'" That's not a very comforting answer!

In other words, their fate has already been decided. They have nowhere to go but to receive their reward.

"And I will appoint over them four forms of destruction," says the Lord: "the sword to slay, the dogs to drag, the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. I will hand them over to trouble, to all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, for what he did in Jerusalem." Everyone was destined to die in one of four ways - neither of them very appealing.

It's interesting the Lord points back to the reign of King Manasseh as a reason for the nation's judgment.

2 Kings 21:9 tells us, “Manasseh seduced them to more evil than the nations whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel.” This is ironic, Manasseh brought more and worse idolatry into Israel than had been there under the Canaanites who God drove out of the land at the hands of the Hebrews.

Manasseh was involved in idolatry, the occult, witchcraft, astrology, he burned babies to Molech, he even set up an idol to a fertility goddess in the Temple.

If God didn't judge Judah on account of Manasseh's sin, He would need to apologize to the Canaanites.

At the time of Manasseh, God prophesied that He would wipe Judah clean, like a man wipes a dirty plate.

Manasseh reigned 52 years, and though he would repent later in life, he couldn't undo the damage he did.

But this brings up interesting point. Manasseh's father Hezekiah was told by God he was about to die. *To prepare...* update your will, say your good-byes.

But Hezekiah prayed, and asked God for an extension. God granted Hezekiah fifteen additional years. Yet it was in that stoppage time that Manasseh was born, and the nation sunk so deeply into idolatry.

You hate to play *the what-if game* - but if Hezekiah had been content with God's will, and accepted his plight, Manasseh would've never been born. Perhaps Judah would've lasted a few centuries longer.

The moral of the story is... **Father knows best!**

“For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing? You have forsaken Me,” says the Lord, “You have gone backward.” Again, their backslidings.

God says, “Therefore I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you; I am weary of relenting!” God was getting tired of staying His judgment for nothing but their hollow and meaningless promises.

Verse 7, And I will winnow them with a winnowing fan in the gates of the land; I will bereave them of children; I will destroy My people, since they do not return from their ways.” Realize how hard that was for God to say, “*I will destroy My people.*” Yet their sin drove Him to it.

“Their widows will be increased to Me more than the sand of the seas; I will bring against them, against the mother of the young men, a plunderer at noonday; I will cause anguish and terror to fall on them suddenly.”

In the Jewish mentality to kill a man was to kill a nation, since in ending the man's life you were eliminating his potential progeny. This is how he accounts for *“widows more than the sand of the seas.”*

“She languishes who has borne seven; she has breathed her last; her sun has gone down while it was yet day; she has been ashamed and confounded.

And the remnant of them I will deliver to the sword before their enemies,” says the Lord.” Seven was the number of perfection, thus seven children was the perfect family. This woman should've been content, but she languishes because of the judgment that's come.

“Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me, a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth!” Needless to say, Jeremiah has gotten very discouraged. He's regretting the fact he was ever born.

All Jeremiah had ever wanted to do was serve Lord; yet princes, and prophets, and even priests had fought him and persecuted him. Even people from his own hometown of Anathoth had plotted his assassination.

He says, *“I have neither lent for interest, nor have men lent to me for interest. Every one of them curses me.”* *This is actually humorous.* When it comes to loaning money to a friend, it's problematic for both the borrower and lender. If the

borrower misses a payment he upsets his lender-friend. And if the lender has to call in the loan he will anger his borrower-friend.

I've heard it said, "Before borrowing money from a friend decide which one you need more, the money or the friend." Personal loans create all kinds of tension.

Yet Jeremiah is saying, I haven't loaned money or borrowed more - yet still everyone despises me. I have no friends. Everyone around me is now my enemy.

Verse 11, "The Lord said: "Surely it will be well with your remnant; surely I will cause the enemy to intercede with you in the time of adversity and in the time of affliction." Here the Lord comforts Jeremiah...

First, God will watch over the survivors of the invasion. A remnant of Jews will be taken into captivity.

And **second**, God see to it that the Babylonians are kind and caring in their personal treatment of Jeremiah.

"Can anyone break iron, the northern iron and the bronze?" The northern iron - iron that came from around the Black Sea - was particularly hard, durable.

And just as iron can't be broken, neither can the Babylonian army. Their troops are "*the northern iron.*"

“Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder without price, because of all your sins, throughout your territories. And I will make you cross over with your enemies into a land which you do not know; for a fire is kindled in My anger, which shall burn upon you.” When Abraham’s family crossed over the Euphrates River into the land God had promised them, they were given the name “Hebrew” which means “crossing over.”

But sadly, tragically, they’re crossing back! They’ve come full circle. Because of their sin, God sends them back to the idolatrous land from which they’d escaped.

“O Lord, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke.” Not all Jeremiah’s concern was for the people. He also cared about his own plight. He didn’t want to be taken into captivity.

Here he’s hoping God will spare him on account of his faithfulness. Jeremiah asks, “Lord, take vengeance on my enemies, but show mercy toward me.”

In verse 16 Jeremiah recalls the moment that changed his life, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts.” It was during the reign of the evil Manasseh that the Word of God - the Law of Moses - was lost.

It wasn't until 20 years after Manasseh's death that a copy of the Scriptures was rediscovered in the Temple.

It was found by the High Priest, Hilkiah - who may've been Jeremiah's dad. Thus, Jeremiah got to read it!

From the moment that scroll was found Jeremiah read it, studied it, devoured it. He digested every word. He chewed on it, and mulled it over, and devoured it.

The Bible became his bread. God's truth fed his soul.

The Scriptures created in Jeremiah *"a joy and rejoicing."* It's been said, *"When a hungry spirit feeds on holy Scripture a sweetness fills the soul."*

When you read your Bible you see across time into eternity. You eavesdrop in on the thoughts of God. Your attention is snatched from things on earth and focused on things in heaven. When a hungry heart reads the Bible, God's presence rises from the sacred page.

Yet Jeremiah not only read God's Word, he put it into practice. He followed it's precepts, even though it alienated him from others, and made his way more difficult. Verse 17, *"I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone because of Your hand, for You have filled me with indignation."*

Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream, as waters that fail?"

In seeking to serve the Lord, Jeremiah's ministry hadn't turned out the way he'd hoped. Pain, hurt, and wounds wasn't what the recruitment poster advertised. It's not what the Prophet Jeremiah expected.

And I can relate to Jeremiah's angst. Holiness is not hassle-free. There's no such thing as *no-mess ministry*.

Jeremiah made the mistake of adopting expectations for his ministry, that God never signed off on. He made assumptions that were not of God. His disappointment wasn't due to God's failure, but his faulty expectations.

This is what happened to me. I assumed God would grow our church quickly and exponentially. I told Kath *"by six months we'd have 1500 people."* I was wrong.

I had some self-inflated visions of grandeur, and had to learn to calibrate my expectations to God's plan.

In fact, I recall a dark time, when I was so bummed, I took it out on God. Like Jeremiah, I was close to calling the God of all faithfulness, *"an unreliable stream."*

What Jeremiah is thinking of is a drainage ditch - a water run-off. It fills with water in the springtime, but it's bone dry in the hot summertime when you really need some water. You can't count on it... It can't be trusted.

Imagine, rather than blame me - or my methods - or my flawed expectations - I came close to blaming our God - *accusing Him of being an unreliable stream...*
He can always be trusted to do His will in His time!

Over the years I've had to learn what the Psalmist ordered himself to do in Psalm 62:5. *"My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him."*

My will is not always His will. My plans and my time don't always sync with His plans and time. Always remember true faith is not in an outcome, but a person!

Verse 19, *"Therefore thus says the Lord: "If you return, then I will bring you back; you shall stand before Me; if you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth."* God's response was such a shock to Jeremiah. What God tells him was so unexpected.

Jeremiah accused God of moving - of abandoning him - of being unreliable. Whereas, God tells Jeremiah he's the one who's moved and needs to return. It's like praying, *"God where are you?"* And God replying, *"I'm right where I've always been. Where are you?"*

It's like the old saying, *"If you're feeling distant to God, He's not the one who has moved, you have!"*

Remember, Jeremiah was a priest, a pastor - yet God tells him he needs to return to Him. This means **you can drift from the Lord, even while you're serving the Lord.** You can backslide in the midst of ministry.

This is an occupational hazard of the ministry they don't tell you about in Bible College. Your heart can drift from the Lord, even when you're up to your eyeballs trying to serve the Lord. You take short cuts.

The ends becomes more important than the means.

The deed becomes more important than the motive.

Some of us in ministry need to humble our heart and return to God. ***"If you return, then I will bring you back."***

Another occupational hazard in the ministry is the ease at which *a motive can become muddied*, polluted.

In the heat of battle motives get contaminated.

All it takes is a few disappointments and our attitude can sour. We begin to develop *an entitlement mentality*.

We think people - even God - owes us. The more I'm hurt trying to help, the more my heart can grow hard.

The polluting of a motive is a subtle occurrence...

When does *righteous anger* become *vindictiveness*? When does *strong leadership* turn into *domination*?

When does *admiration of another man's ministry* erode into *jealousy*?... When does *encouragement* morph into *manipulation*?... When does *a vision for the future* turn into *ingratitude for the past*? These are fine lines, *but God let's us know when we've crossed them.*

There was much in Jeremiah that was still precious. *His desire to serve. His compassion. His courage.*

But he was a mixed bag. There was also some vile in Jeremiah. Some anger, and bitterness, and doubt..

Jeremiah is like us. There's much in you that's precious to God, but there's also some vile, and if we want to continue as God's mouthpiece, we'll ***"take out the precious from the vile."*** A constant sifting needs to be going on in us at all times. This is true repentance.

And then God tells him, verse 19, ***"Let them return to you, but you must not return to them."*** God doesn't want Jeremiah to become too attached to people. His tenderness could hinder his ability to speak the truth.

How often has a bleeding heart tried to lower the bar so that half-heartedness can crawl over. This is not the kind of compassion God wants. Yes, Jeremiah should love people, but not at the expense of truth.

Hebrews 2:17 describes Jesus as “a merciful and faithful High Priest.” He was both merciful *AND* faithful.

Churches today that set aside God’s righteousness to relate to modern sensibilities take the side of mercy, *but what about faithfulness?* Other churches side with truth, *but show no mercy.* God is pleased with neither one. He wants us to be both merciful and faithful.

This is why God says, “*Let them return to you, but you must not return to them.*” Jeremiah needs to hold the high ground, even if he isn’t seeing the results he’d like! The church shouldn’t compromise to get a crowd.

The world has never been attracted to a Christianity that’s hazy about what it believes. Men are drawn to the Savior when our faith is serious and heart-felt.

And if Jeremiah is going to hold the high ground he needs to bulk up - *add some toughness to his tears.*

This is why God tells him in verse 20, “*I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall; and they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you...*” God will build up Jeremiah - fortify his faith.

A city surrounded by “fortified bronze walls” would be invincible. Walls made of brass would be *too strong to ram - too heat-resistant to burn - too slick to climb.*

Now that God has corrected and strengthened Jeremiah He recommissions him, verse 20, “For I am with you to save you and deliver you,” says the LORD.

I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible.” What a promise! Deliverance “*from the grip of the terrible.*”

I don’t know what terrible, icy fingers hold you in its grip tonight, but the Lord promises to deliver you from them... *if you come back and let Him make you strong.*