

Crying out of the Depths

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[0 : 00] Now in our Bible reading, we are returning to the book of Jeremiah, which we're going to be looking at quite a bit over these Sunday summer evenings. And we've come to chapter 19. We are going to read chapters 19 and 20. If you've got the church Bible, it's on page 647.

Jeremiah has been pursuing an increasingly difficult and increasingly criticized ministry. And he takes up here the metaphor of the potter in chapter 19, this time with a very negative twist.

It's particularly the latter part of chapter 20 we're going to look at. And those of you who are here this morning will notice many echoes and many themes occurring there, which occur in Psalm 88 and other lament Psalms.

But we'll begin at chapter 19. Jeremiah writes, Thus says the Lord, go and buy a potter's earthenware flask and take some of the elders of the priests and go out to the valley of the sons of Hinnom at the entrance of the pot-haired gate and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

You shall say, hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

[1 : 25] Behold, I am bringing such a disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known.

And because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.

Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Tophet or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their life.

I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds.

I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

[2 : 51] Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, so will I break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel so that it can never be mended.

Men shall bury in Tophet because there will be no place else to bury. Thus will I do to this place, declared the Lord, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth.

The houses of Jerusalem, the houses of the kings of Judah, all the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the hosts of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods, shall be defiled like the place of Topheth.

Then Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the Lord's house, and he said to all the people, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words.

Now Pasher, the priest, the son of Imur, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. And Pasher beat Jeremiah the prophet, put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate in the house of the Lord.

[4 : 17] The next day, when Pasher released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, The Lord does not call your name Pasher, but terror on every side.

For thus says the Lord, Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on.

And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon and shall strike them down with the sword. Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hands of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon.

And you, Pasher, and all who dwell in your house shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends whom you have prophesied falsely.

Then comes this great and poignant prayer of Jeremiah. O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived.

[5 : 30] You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I become a laughingstock all day. Everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout violence and destruction.

For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and a derision all day long. If I say I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, there is in my heart, as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in.

And I cannot, for I hear many whispering, terror is on every side, denounce him. Let us denounce him. See all my close friends watching for my fall.

Perhaps he will be deceived. Then we can overcome him and take our refuge on him. But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior.

Therefore, my persecutors will stumble. They will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.

[6 : 35] O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

Sing to the Lord. Praise the Lord. For he has delivered the life of the needy in the hand of evildoers. Cursed be the day on which I was born.

The day when my mother bore me. Let it not be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father. A son is born to you, making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew without pity.

Let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb, so my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great. Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend all my days in shame?

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. As you will see, it's very, very like the lament, Psalm 88. Now, if we'd have our Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 20.

- [7 : 59] And as we are turning that up, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, how your word searches out our deepest thoughts, the dividing of joints and marrow, and right into the deepest and most hidden places of our hearts.
- As we approach this passage, Lord, speak to us. Speak to us words that we need to hear. Speak to us words that will open our eyes. Speak to us words that will strengthen our faith.
- We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Some things, some experiences in life are so awful that they leave us dumb and numb with nothing to say.
- But some people have been gifted to put into words such experiences to help us to live through them.
- Obviously, Scripture itself. I want to read to you a little bit from C.S. Lewis' poignant little book, *A Grief Observed*. C.S. Lewis was married very late in life, in his late 50s, married to a woman whom he already knew to be dying of cancer.
- [9 : 26] What made it worse was the cancer went into remission, and hope was raised, and some, it seemed worth going on. But then shortly afterwards, she died, died painfully, and leaving Lewis completely shattered, completely broken.
- A year or two later, just before his own death, he wrote this little book, which was published after his death. I want to read you a little bit about it, because I think it helps us to understand something of giving grief a voice.
- Here's what he said. No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I'm not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.
- The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, I keep on swallowing. He goes on this way for a bit, and then writes this. Meanwhile, where is God?
- This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy that you are tempted to feel that his claims upon you are an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be, or so it feels, welcomed with open arms.
- [10 : 48] But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain. And what do you find?
- A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.
- You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows.
- It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. What can this mean? Why is he so present as a commander in our time of prosperity, and so very absent a help in time of trouble?
- Now, these are powerful and moving words. I think they lead us well into this Jeremiah passage. And one thing to remember, Jeremiah, nor Lewis, is ever tempted to atheism.
- [11 : 54] That is not the problem here. Never tempted to believe there is no God. What they are tempted to is to believe that this God has become hostile. This God has become a tyrant.
- Indeed, later in this book, Lewis is to call him the cosmic sadist. So, just a couple of words to put this passage in context. Jeremiah has been describing the city of Jerusalem as a pot, as a flask made by a skillful potter, made for his glory, but this pot is going to be rejected.
- It's going to be smashed. Chapter 19, verse 1, going by a pot, and then, verse 10, you shall break, you shall smash. Break is due, weaker word.

You shall shatter the flask in the sight of the men who go with you. This is to happen at the Valley of Hinnom, called in the New Testament, Gehenna, and one of the most powerful metaphors of hell itself, a place where the refuse of the city was dumped and burned.

And why? Long-time idolatry of kings and people and wholesale rejection of the covenant. He goes on to describe the horrors of the siege and the Lord punishing those who are to disobey his word and who have disobeyed his word.

[13 : 18] So, that's the situation of the city, if you like. Now, what about Jeremiah's own situation? Now, we're moving into a part of the book where Jeremiah's own life and his prophecy become inextricably intertwined.

In one sense, that's always been the case. What happens to Jeremiah, the prophet, the experiences he goes through are going to mirror and be mirrored in his preaching.

And here, this man, Pashur, 20, verse 1, the temple official, the one whose task it was to keep order in the temple, the chief officer, he places Jeremiah in the stocks, having beaten him.

Now, it's very interesting, actually. This word translated overseer is the very word that God uses of the prophet in chapter 1, verse 10.

In other words, the overseer of the temple is persecuting God's overseer, and he's persecuting him for obeying God's words.

[14 : 25] Jeremiah calls him terror on every side. And after this experience of beating and of the stocks comes this most poignant of his lament psalms, the deepest, the darkest, and the most moving of what are sometimes called his confessions.

He said already, confessions is an unfortunate word. It's more like the lament psalms. Lament psalms, remember, are not murmuring and complaining. Jeremiah isn't complaining about inconveniences.

Jeremiah is questioning the very nature of God and, indeed, the very point of his existence. So let's look, then, at this psalm in 20, verses 7 to 18, as it develops really in three movements.

First of all, in verses 7 to 12, Jeremiah speaks of the inescapable call that he had received. He's struggling with his calling.

Now, notice he's not rejecting his calling. He is struggling with it. We are being given access to a private conversation between Jeremiah and the Lord.

[15 : 39] Jeremiah had been warned in chapter 1 of opposition, but probably had not realized how deadly and difficult it would be. Now, you can say this is an extreme case, but it is the case that everyone who answers the Lord's call sooner or later will find opposition, and sooner or later will find opposition that makes us want to give up.

I'm pretty certain everybody in this room has felt like giving up. There may be people at this very moment who feel just that. That is the nature of life.

That is the nature of call into the service and into the kingdom of God. And this shows, once again, how sensitive an individual Jeremiah was.

Remember I said at the very beginning, to call Jeremiah a Jeremiah in the way it's popularly used is just so unfair and untrue. We talk about a Jeremiah, someone who denounces, who continually complains and criticizes, largely as a reflection of their own critical and unpleasant nature.

This isn't true here. Jeremiah was called to preach judgment. He obeys this faithfully, but it causes him so much grief and pain.

[17 : 00] And he's in a dreadful dilemma. Didn't God promise back in chapter 1 to protect him? Didn't God say that he would surround him and that no harm would come to him?

That's the problem. The problem is he feels deserted. Verse 7, Oh Lord, you have deceived me. It's actually more terrifying than it sounds in the English translation.

Jeremiah says, Yahweh, you seduced me. That's what the word means and that's how it's used in the Bible about a man seducing a virgin.

See what Jeremiah is saying? A young, inexperienced man I was when I was called. He calls himself, I'm just a boy. The Lord says, I'll protect you.

I'll be an iron wall around you. Now, he feels he's been enticed with promises, with promises that are not being delivered.

[18 : 01] You seduced me and I was seduced. You are stronger than I and you have prevailed. And this terrible dilemma, shouldn't I just give it all up?

Give up the ridicule, the scorn, the hatred, the opposition. Is it worth it? Why don't I just get a life and give it all up? That's the situation of the prophet here.

He feels totally deserted. Now, it's difficult to read this without feeling complete pity for the prophet. We may be rather shocked at the language.

Examine our own hearts. Do we never feel like that? Do we never feel sometimes we have been sold something that's not living up to what it was promised?

I most certainly have. I imagine many people here have as well. This is a terrifying dilemma. But, off or against that is a powerful passion in his heart.

[19 : 01] Verse 9, if I say I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, this is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in and I cannot.

Over against the great impulse and the strong compulsion to throw it all up, this fire burning in his heart proves stronger both than inward fears and outside opposition.

What is this fire burning in his heart? To this fire is the fire of the living Lord, the Spirit himself.

The one of whom the Baptist said he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In tough and in perplexing times, only the Holy Spirit within will keep us going.

This is a greatly neglected ministry of the Holy Spirit. Many people are fascinated by the spectacular ministries of the Spirit, the sound gifts, the miracles, and so on.

[20 : 04] But here is surely a ministry of the Spirit that often in the toughness and difficulties of the Christian life is more important than any other.

Remember in Romans 8, the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. We can't even pray. And in a situation like this, this is probably what our prayers sound like or what Lewis's prayers sounded like.

It doesn't sound like the kind of pious, nice prayers. No, this is agony of heart. But the Spirit himself is within us.

Don't confine the Spirit to the spectacular. Don't confine him to his more obvious works. The Spirit within us.

The hope of glory. The one who keeps us going when we cannot keep going. Do you ever feel you're not going to make it? Sure you do.

[21 : 08] Well, the bad news is you're not. But the good news is you are because the Spirit within you. The fire burning within you. It's as if the Father, as if the Spirit says, Father, you've placed me in this child of yours to bring her, to bring him to glory.

There's a long way to go. But we are going to make it. Remember that in times of absolute depression and dismay. The Spirit within you.

Not that you have to have more grit. Not that you have to put a stout heart to a steep bray, as my granny used to say.

There are times when you cannot put a stout heart even to a level playing field, far less steep bray. Remember the Spirit within you. The inescapable call.

And the unconquerable spirit. And that's why I believe we get on to the second movement, verses 11 to 13, of the invincible Lord.

[22 : 17] We've had, first of all, the inescapable call. Now we move on to the invincible Lord. Jeremiah returns to the rock-solid certainties of his faith.

There's no point in Jeremiah singing a chorus, saying a little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right. He's not making it right, all right. He returns to the solid certainties of his faith.

To truths which are deeper than the present crisis. He turns to the God of the Exodus. Verse 11. The Lord is with me as a dread warrior.

God the warrior who defeated the armies of Pharaoh. God the warrior who fights for his people. And indeed, probably recalling the promise of chapter 1, verses 18 and 19, the Lord says, They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you.

For I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Jeremiah doesn't feel that at the moment. Jeremiah feels utterly abandoned and forsaken.

[23 : 23] But he says these words. Says them because they are true. The book of Revelation makes this true of all God's people.

And he's talking about the power of evil personified by the beast and his followers. John writes this. They will make war on the Lamb.

And the Lamb will conquer them. And those who are with him, chosen, called, and faithful. The armies of heaven are on Jeremiah's side.

He feels helpless and alone. He is standing on the rock that will not crumble. His faith is crumbling. But the object of his faith is not crumbling.

And this is the God who, notice verse 12, who sees right into hearts and motives. O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind.

[24 : 23] Remember, God knows better than Jeremiah what's going on in Jeremiah's heart and mind. It reminds me of that wonderful verse in 1 John chapter 3.

Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. And he knows everything. He knows exactly where these feelings are coming from.

He knows exactly where these emotions are coming from. And the fact that Jeremiah knows this gives him strength to go on. God is greater than our hearts.

If God has said you are his child. If God has said you are justified. If God has said he will bring you to glory. Then who dare say no?

Who can condemn if God justifies? And this indeed leads him to praise. Sing to the Lord. Praise Yahweh. He has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of the evildoers.

[25 : 25] Giving praise to Yahweh, the covenant Lord, whose covenant is intact. Wouldn't it be great if we could stop there?

Don't know how familiar you are with this book. But perhaps if you weren't all that familiar with this passage, you might have been extremely surprised. Sing to the Lord.

Praise the Lord. Cursed be the day on which I was born. To be great, everything back on track. Jeremiah singing a happy song.

Or would it? Wouldn't that mean that every time we feel like Jeremiah, every time we're in the depths, then we have to summon up this kind of resolution to sing this song.

Finish it off with a happy chorus. That's why we go on to the third movement, the intense despair in verses 14 to 18.

[26 : 31] Cursed be the day on which I was born. This passage is very close to a similar passage in Job. Job says similar things. Very likely, Job was written before Jeremiah, and therefore it's very likely that Jeremiah is being influenced.

He's giving grief a voice. He's probably using the words of Job to help him. And also he'd said similar things back in chapter 15, verse 10.

Woe is me, my mother that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land. What are we going to make of this?

First of all, you'll notice that the truth of verse 13 is not denied. The two are placed together. Bless us, sing to Yahweh, praise the Lord.

Cursed be the day that I was born. The two are placed together, and we can't simply take one of them and use it to blot out the other. Very like what happens to Job, that famous passage, Job 19, I know that my Redeemer lives, kind of thing.

[27 : 43] It's very difficult to read without hearing Handel's music in the background. That glorious leap of faith. On the last days he will stand on the earth, and in my flesh I will see God.

Now it would be nice if Job went on that way, but we're only at chapter 19, and there's 20 or more chapters to go. What he does see actually is my heart fails within me.

More exactly, my kidneys fail within me. The Good News Bible found this too strong meat, and for some reason unfathomable to me, they rendered my heart fails within me as, oh, what a glorious hope.

You see what's happening? The Bible wasn't saying what they thought it ought to say, so they had to revise it. The Holy Spirit missed it out, so we'll put it in.

We've got to allow the Bible to be the Bible, and once again, this is so much more encouraging, because we mustn't take a passage like verse 13, and sing to Yahweh, and then say, well, Job's problems are all solved.

[28 : 55] He's singing to Yahweh, he's singing to the divine warrior. We know that Job's faith cannot sustain that. That is not the point. The point is that Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, is going to sustain him when his faith is strong, and when his faith is weak.

That's why I never like people saying, I depend on my faith. I don't depend on my faith at all. My faith is fickle. My faith keeps changing according to changing circumstances, or even according to changing moods.

What does not change is the God in whom we have faith. That's what's the important thing. Not that we have faith, but that we have faith in a great God.

The other thing you must remember about this, this is the language of poetry and deep emotion, as Willie was saying this morning about Psalm 88. This is not to be taken literally.

We're not to take it literally that Job wished that the man who brought the news of his birth was destroyed the way that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. This is the language of raw wounds.

[30 : 05] When we're feeling like this, we use the language of hyperbole. We use the language that expresses our deepest emotions, our raw wounds. And as Kydner, Steric Kydner says, this shows the frailty of even the finest overcomers.

Don't be ashamed when you feel like that. In times of despair, in times of doubt, this is more than doubt, this is a time of depression, realize that the Lord has placed this in Scripture.

This has not been edited out of the Bible. If this had not been in the Bible, if Psalm 88 had not been in the Bible, if other deep laments had not been in the Bible, then we might well have felt that it was sinful, that it was sub-Christian almost, to feel this way.

This is deep, deep sorrow. And it points to the deepest sorrow of all, doesn't it? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why? This is the word for lament, Sam. It's not, there is no easy, cheap believism. This is deep and living faith.

[31 : 30] I notice the context as well. Next week, we'll be looking at chapter 21. What does 21, 1 say? You might expect it to see if God were as moralistic and condemnatory as some Christians are.

I made a mistake about Jeremiah. He's not a fit guy to take my message. He's shown, he crumbles under pressure. This is the word that came to Jeremiah from Yahweh.

The private conversation, we don't know what the Lord said and we've not been told, but we are told the work continues. Indeed, towards the end of the book in chapter 44, as the story of Jeremiah comes to an end, he is still preaching the same message to God's people in Egypt.

So, you see, these things must go together. The inescapable call, the invincible Lord, and the intense despair.

They don't cancel each other out. They don't, the one doesn't mean that the other doesn't exist. And therefore, we need to remember that our security depends not on our feelings.

[32 : 48] The old hymn says, I dare not trust my sweetest frame, sweetest frame of mind. There are moments, aren't there, when we feel rejoicing, when everything looks sunny, everything looks beautiful.

These moments don't last and we can't depend on them. This book here, the whole book of Jeremiah, with its depths, with its sorrows, with its anguish, is here for the fight of faith.

This is addressed to people who are up against it. This is addressed to people going through hard times. People crying out of the depths. I think it's very important to remember this as we finish.

You may not be feeling this way at the moment. Indeed, my prayer would be that you're not. But, sooner or later, you're going to feel this way.

Sooner or later, you're going to pass through this dark valley. And you're going to be grateful for these words. Words not of easy believism.

[33 : 53] Words not, it will be alright on the night. But words of assurance about the power and the keeping power of the gracious, Holy Spirit of God, the one sent to bring you and I to glory.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. God, our Father, we call to you from many circumstances.

You alone know the hearts of each of us in this room. You alone know what experiences we have passed through and what experiences are still to come. Help us to rest on the solid rock, not to depend on our feelings, and to thank you with deepest gratitude.

These passages are in the Bible to encourage us ultimately and to strengthen us. And we present this prayer in the name of the Lord, the warrior, the mighty one of hosts.

Amen. Amen.ons' Amen.

[35 : 11] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.? Amen. Amen.