

Painful Questions and Puzzling Answers

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could turn to our Bibles, please, and page 642. We are looking this evening at Jeremiah 14 and 15. I'm going to read extracts from both these chapters.

So page 642, Jeremiah 14, beginning at verse 1. The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought.

Judah mourns, and her gates languish. Our people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Our nobles send their servants for water. They come to the cisterns.

They find no water, and return with their vessels empty. They are ashamed and confounded, and cover their heads because of the ground that is dismayed, since there is no rain in the land.

The farmers are ashamed. They cover their heads. Even the doe in the fields forsakes her newborn fawn, because there is no grass.

[1 : 03] The wild donkeys stand on the bare heights. They pant for air like jackals. Their eyes fail, because there is no vegetation. For our iniquities testify against us.

Act, O Lord. For your namesake, for our backslidings are many. We have sinned against you. O you hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble.

Why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who turns aside to tarry for a night?

Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save?

Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us. We are called by your name. Do not leave us. Thus says the Lord concerning this people. They have love to wander thus.

They have not restrained their feet. Therefore the Lord does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. The Lord said to me, Do not pray for the welfare of this people.

[2 : 03] Though they fast, I will not hear their cry. And though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

And then down into chapter 15. Verse 1. Then the Lord said to me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards this people.

Send them out of my sight and let them go. And when they ask you, Where shall we go? You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Those who are for pestilence to pestilence.

Those who are for sword to the sword. Those who are for famine to famine. And those who are for captivity to captivity. I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord.

The sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air, and the beasts of the earth to devour and to destroy. And it will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

[3 : 08] Because of what Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem. And then down to verse 15 of that chapter.

O Lord, you know, remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away.

Know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them. And your words became to me a joy, and the delight of my heart.

For I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice. I sat alone, because your hand was upon me.

For you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

[4 : 10] Therefore thus says the Lord, if you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth.

They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you.

For I am with you to save and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Amen. And may God bless to us this reading from his word. Now, if you could turn your Bibles back, please, to Jeremiah 14 and 15.

And as we're doing so, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, we know that your word is like a sharp two-edged sword, piercing right through into the deepest places of our hearts and of our lives.

[5 : 24] And we pray as we look at this passage together, this passage that the Holy Spirit has preserved for us as a warning, as a challenge, as an encouragement, that you will indeed speak to us.

And through these gracious words of Scripture, lead us to the living Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Teresa of Avila, who was a Spanish nun in the late 16th century, and wrote a number of spiritual works which are still read, tells in the story of her life, which is one of the things she wrote, of how late on in life she went through a period of tremendous depression and darkness, which seemed to go on forever.

And towards the end of that time, she had a vision of God. And the Lord said to her, this is how I always treat my friends. And she replied, then, Lord, it's not surprising that you have so few.

And that engagement, that honest, bitter engagement with the Lord, which was exemplified in these words, seems to me to be at the very heart of the book of Jeremiah, a spiritual agony.

You'll find it in Job as well. You'll find it in some of the Lament Psalms, one of which I used in the prayer, Out of the Depths, I Call to You, O Lord. This is a deeply emotional, deeply personal, powerful passage.

[7 : 05] It's not dated. Plainly, Jeremiah had been preaching for some time, and the situation is not good. And as we've gone through Jeremiah, we've always been trying to find some unifying principle in this very diverse material.

And the unifying principle here seems to me to be questioning. This is what unifies this material. Jeremiah is seriously questioning his ministry.

Did I get it wrong? Why is it proving so bitter and so painful? That's why the tone here is of lament and protest. Now, this is not whinging.

This is not moaning and complaining. This is Jeremiah questioning the very nature of his call, the very heart of what he believes about God.

And the questions arise from what he knows of God and what God has revealed to him and called him to. This is an experience which is a great deal to teach all of us.

[8 : 06] Murmuring and complaining is condemned, but honest questioning is not. Honest questioning, as I say, is a feature of this book and of the book of Job and many of the Psalms.

That's why I'm calling this sermon Painful Questions and Puzzling Answers. Questions are painful, but the answers at first sight are less than reassuring.

It would have to be said, as we'll see. Now, as I studied this passage, it seemed to me that the whole passage was so tightly woven together, it wasn't as if one question follows the other.

There are a number of questions which all arise out of the basic question, which is, what is God up to? Why is God behaving in this way?

Why, if you like, is God treating his friend, Jeremiah, in such an apparently hostile way? The mystery of God's ways. So, this is the one question, really, which unifies the two chapters, but it divides itself, it seems to me, into three particular questions, which develop that basic question.

[9 : 18] And the first question is, why has God rejected his people? Especially, for example, in chapter 14, verse 10, Thus says the Lord concerning his people, They have loved to wander, Thus they have not restrained their feet, therefore the Lord does not accept them.

Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. But God has pledged himself to his people. And again in 15.9, The Lord in the midst, where is he now?

And also 15.20, and also 15 at the end of the chapter, 15.19, If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me.

Basic truth about Israel's faith is that God has saved them. God has called them. God dwells in the midst of them. Well, why are things the way they are? And why particularly for this prophet?

And as Jeremiah wrestles with this question, I think one of the things that's coming out is God has not turned his back on his covenant.

[10:29] If you read back about the covenant in Deuteronomy 28, you'll find there are covenant curses as well as blessings. If you obey, then the blessings.

If you do not obey, then the curses. So it's not, God's not acting out of character. He's not rejected his covenant. Indeed, he's being faithful to his covenant.

If he had, if he had simply allowed people to float that covenant and nothing about it, then he would not have been faithful to his covenant. And there are a number of curses, one of which is drought, as in this very vivid and moving passage in chapter 14, verses 1 to 6.

Or drought there is plural, concerning the drought, concerning the droughts. Now that may well mean a particularly severe one, or it could equally mean a series of droughts, like the kind of thing that happened back in Elijah's time when there was a drought on the land for three years.

But it's more than about a drought. This is about the land under the curse. And we go back well beyond Elijah. We go back to Genesis 3, and to the curse on creation.

[11:45] The curse which comes about as a result of human sin. And the hopelessness of humans and animals is brought out here. This is related to sin and to judgment.

So creation is fallen. And since creation is fallen, God's covenant with creation and with his people means there will be punishments, there will be judgments, as well as blessing.

And this is what makes us long for the new creation. There are beautiful things in this creation. Not every land is blighted with drought. Not every place is ugly.

Not every place looks cursed. And yet there's this discord. But it's not because God has broken his covenant. It's because God is being faithful to his covenant.

And that's important to realize. And the other thing is, God has not broken his word. Look at 15 verse 4. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.

[12:54] You can read his story in 2 Kings 21. The worst of all the kings of Judah. No greater condemnation for a king of Judah could be given than was given to Manasseh.

He was like Ahab, king of Israel, the historian tells us. Even Josiah's great reformation could not turn back the judgment.

The book of Chronicles tells us that Manasseh personally repented and was forgiven personally, but his terrible legacy remains.

And his terrible legacy could not be undone. Actions have consequences. This is spelt out here in particular in the following verses.

Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem? Who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? There is forgiveness, but how can there be forgiveness for those who do not accept the need for it?

[13:58] These terrible verses. Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Verse 11. We'll come back to that in a moment or two.

The point is that God does not tolerate empty religion. Look at verse 12. Though they fast, though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept. They keep on doing all the right things. In our terms, it would be like God saying, you can have all the prayer meetings you want. You can have all the expository preaching you want. You can have all the missions you want.

But unless your heart is open and ready for forgiveness, I will not hear. We really need to get the impact of this. It's rather like in the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us.

Does that mean God is saying, if you don't forgive others, I'm jolly well not going to forgive you? Kind of tit for tat. I don't think so. He's saying something very different. If you don't forgive others, you will become so hard, so interned, that you will not be capable of receiving forgiveness.

[15:10] Like the man who said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well, I hope you never sin. Because if we don't forgive, if we are unforgiving, if we are hard, and don't listen to the word, then we will reach a stage where we can no longer hear it.

And this is emphasized, especially in 15.1. Though Moses and Samuel stood before me. These great intercessors, those men whose prayers and whose witness have been so powerful in the history of the nation, even they could not save the people by their prayers because God cannot be untrue to himself.

That's the first perplexing question, isn't it? And it's not, it's not immediately a reassuring answer, is it? God has not rejected his people because he is being faithful to his covenant and faithful to his

word.

It's his people who have rejected him. Secondly, why is Jeremiah's ministry so hard? Now we've seen often that Jeremiah is not harsh and unfeeling.

He is sensitive and vulnerable. And it's his plea for the people that here is being refused. In 15:5-9, this is the plea of Jeremiah.

[16:40] Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? I'm sure that points forward with another prayer about Jerusalem, which you get in Matthew 23, when Jesus wept over the city and said, I would have forgiven you.

I would have received you, but you would not. So why is Jeremiah's ministry is pursued in these circumstances? And part of the reason for the hardness he is surrounded by false prophets.

Back at chapter 14, verse 13, You see what these prophets are doing.

These prophets are essentially saying, God got it wrong. God will not judge. God will never punish you. Verse 14, The Lord said to me, The prophets are prophesying lies in my name.

I did not send them, nor did I command them, or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of your own minds.

[17:54] What the Lord is saying is, these men are saying exactly what people want to hear. Now, you're never going to bring people to repentance if you simply tell them what they want to hear.

The one thing a false prophet will never say is that we need to change. Because the false prophet will never teach repentance. The false prophet will never point out the sinfulness of sin.

A false prophet will never speak about the holiness of God, but rather draw people, lull people, into a false security.

You'll notice they are prophesying to you a lying vision. This is not a vision that's come from the Lord. This is a fantasy of their own minds.

Worthless divination, dabbling in the occult, and so on. Isaiah has a great deal to say about it. And the deceit of their own minds. Everything will be just fine, say these false prophets.

[18:57] And of course, if people hear these guys saying this, there's going to be no famine, no sword, Yahweh loves you, everything is well. That's going to be far more popular than Jeremiah saying, sword and judgment and drought is going to come as a result of the Lord being faithful to his own word.

Verse 15, I did not send them. That's the condemnation of these false prophets. Interesting, actually, the word prophet occurs over 200 times in this book.

And more often than not, it refers to false prophets, self-appointed, self-deceived prophets. People who have taken it upon themselves to speak for the Lord and people believe them rather than Jeremiah, which increases the hardness of his ministry.

But what's worse than that is chapter 15, verse 15. Why is the Lord not helping him? A heartfelt cry, O Lord, you know, remember me and visit me and take vengeance for me.

Look, Lord, I didn't volunteer for this. You put me here. Unlike these prophets who volunteered, you sent me. And why is it so tough?

[20:19] Why is it so hard? You ought to be helping me. Rather, it's the boldness here of the prophet as he wrestles with God, which shows his intensity of relationship with the Lord.

Lord, as Jacob said, as he wrestled with the stranger in the ford of Jabbok back in Genesis, I will not let you go. That's what Jeremiah is saying to the Lord.

And in verse, notice verse 16, your words were found and I ate them. Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart. Echoes surely of Psalm 19 that we sang a version of at the beginning.

I love your word, Lord. It's a joy and a delight. Why is it resulting in drought? Not just physical drought, but spiritual drought.

Like Ezekiel, like John in Revelation 10, he found the words that he loved became bitter as they were rejected. The words which moved him so deeply left his hearers hostile or apathetic.

[21:23] And he's isolated by his grim task. Verse 17, I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice. You just imagine it.

Don't talk to him. He's an old misery. You don't want to. You don't want to be in his company. He'll simply depress you. I sat alone because your hand was upon me.

Verse 18, Why is my pain unceasing? My wound incurable, refusing to be healed. And then, this dreadful, these dreadful words, Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

Back in chapter 2, 13, the Lord is a fountain of living waters. Now it seems like a dried up waddy. The stream has gone. His light, the source of his life, is cut off.

See why we sang that hymn, Preacher of the God of Grace, Herald of the Dawning Day, that hymn described so deeply the experience that Jeremiah went through. So, has God rejected his people? [22 : 33] The answer is, no, God is faithful and God remains faithful. Why is Jeremiah's ministry so hard? Because he's surrounded by those who undermine all he does. He's confronted by those who despise and reject all he says.

And the third question, has God rejected Jeremiah? That's the question that's filling his heart and mind at the moment. And if you look now at chapter 15, verse 19, he, therefore, thus says the Lord, these are the words of the Lord to Jeremiah himself, obviously, they apply by extension to the people, if you return, I will restore you and you shall stand before me.

Now, that seems cold comfort, doesn't it? Jeremiah goes to the Lord and says, I've been faithful to your calling. I've preached your word. I love your word.

What does the Lord say? If you return to me, I will restore you and you shall stand before me.

Jeremiah had regularly called on the people to return and repent.

The Lord is saying, Jeremiah, you need to experience the bitterness of that. You need to enter into this experience. But, if we look at these words more closely, we'll see that although they sound harsh, although they sound pretty terrifying on the surface, there is actually very deep and profound truth in them.

[24 : 08] First thing the Lord says, don't alter the message. Later on in verse 19, if you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, what is worthless is what the false prophets were uttering, if you utter what is precious, you shall be as my mouth.

They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. Jeremiah says the Lord, what you are saying is true. It's what I've given you to say.

So, whether they accept it or whether they don't, don't alter it. You can't alter it because by altering it, you will be untrue to me and untrue to my word.

They need to hear you, you don't need to hear them. And earlier in the verse, you shall stand before me. Now this phrase, stand before me, is almost a technical term in the Old Testament for a prophet.

Elijah says to Ahab on his first confrontation, Yahweh, God of Israel before whom I stand, has sent me with this message. The prophet stands in the court of heaven, he hears the word of God and he brings it.

[25 : 19] So what the Lord is saying is, your words, Jeremiah, are my words. Painful, difficult, crucifying, indeed, as they are, they are my words.

It's a very deep level the Lord is saying, keep on going, keep on preaching the word, whether they accept or whether they don't.

This is reinforced by the original commission being repeated. Remember, Jeremiah is doubting his call. Remember, Jeremiah is wrestling with what the Lord has called him to.

Look at verse 20, I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you.

These echo the words of chapter 1, verse 8, and 18 to 19, which describe Jeremiah's original call. So you see what the Lord is doing.

[26 : 17] The Lord is saying, Jeremiah, I'm still calling you. The words I said to you, as I say, I don't know how long Jeremiah would have been preaching, these are the original words.

Jeremiah, you are my prophet. Jeremiah, you are my messenger. What I called you to still stands. God's purposes have not been thwarted. And that's reinforced by the great affirmation, I am with you.

Jeremiah, I know they're all against you. They mock you, they criticize you, they ridicule you, they hate you, but I am with you to save, deliver, and redeem.

These great salvation words, coming from the Exodus story. You see what the Lord is saying, not only have I called you Jeremiah, but I have chosen you before the foundation of the world.

I have rescued you, you're my child, nothing, no one can pluck you out of my hand, because of these great saving purposes. It's interesting, when you read through the Lament Psalms, the Psalms I mentioned already, when the Psalmist is in deep agony like Jeremiah, more often than not, they turn to the God of the Exodus.

[27 : 30] You are the God who redeemed your people, you are the God who destroyed the forces of Pharaoh, you are the God who led Moses and Aaron through the Red Sea.

Now, as you know, we are not Jeremiah, we are not Moses and Aaron, but our God is the God who saves, delivers, and redeems. That's where it applies so deeply to us.

The cost is great though, isn't it? Jeremiah is battle-scarred, deeply, deeply wounded, deeply hurt, and it's not surprising that as the book goes on, his moods change inevitably, but he never leaves hold of God.

And all those who follow the Lamb are going to bear the scars of battle. There's no doubt about it. Now, as reminded, and we'll finish with this, of the poem by Amy Carmichael, who did so much for orphan girls in India, and girls who rescued girls from temple prostitution, and she writes this poem, and I'll read it to you.

Have you no scar, no hidden scar on foot or side or hand? I hear you sung as mighty in the land.

[29 : 01] I hear them hail your bright ascendant star. Have you no scar? No wound, no scar. Yet as the master shall the servant be, and pierced are the feet that follow me.

Can he have traveled far who has no wound, no scar? Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Let's pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Take up your cross and follow me, said the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the world you will have tribulation, but do not be afraid, for I have overcome the world. Father, in the deep agonies and lonely suffering often of the Christian life, help us to lean on the great truths that you are the Savior, the Redeemer, and the deliverer, and to experience in these truths that will transform us, truths that will help us to persevere.

We ask this in the strong name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 23] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.