

# Jeremiah: The Weeping Prophet

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

God of Courage, be in our speaking. Be also in our listening. And speak to our souls' deep understanding. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### Introduction

It was an offer Jeremiah couldn't refuse.

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you  
and before you were born I consecrated you:  
I appointed you a prophet for the nations."*

Ah Lord God! I don't know how to speak—I'm just a boy.

Jeremiah my child, don't say I'm *just* a boy. You shall go to all whom I send you. You shall speak all that I command you to say.

Then the Lord reached out with his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms:

*to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant."*

The word "vocation" is taken from the Latin *voco* or *vocare*, which means "to be summoned." And this summons comes from something, or someone beyond yourself.

In the Bible, a calling from God is an appointment. A court summons. You respond to God's call, yet you're not really free *not* to respond. The prophets usually respond to their calling kicking and screaming.

OK, God, if you say so—but this *certainly* isn't my idea.

And so begins Jeremiah's calling to be the Lord's prophet to the Southern Kingdom. Everything that could go wrong for Israel, *went* wrong for Israel while Jeremiah was prophet.

Three Babylonian invasions,  
The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple,  
the end of political independence,  
the forfeiture of land,  
death and deportation.

It was as if Jeremiah was the lone person aboard the Titanic who knew that the ship was on a collision course with an iceberg. It was his task to convince the crew and the passengers that they were doomed if they didn't change course. *There was still time*—if they would just listen.

But the captain and the people plugged their ears and didn't course correct. They just kept dancing and dining to their demise.

Like the Titanic, the leaders and people of Jerusalem thought they were unsinkable. They ignored Jeremiah's pleading. Their God, their temple, their city, their covenant, their status as God's chosen people would keep them afloat.

*But the word of the Lord didn't sink in:  
Their house was full of treachery,  
they had become great and rich.  
Their deeds of wickedness knew no limits.  
They failed to defend the rights of the needy.  
The prophets prophesied falsely ... and  
The people loved it that way.*

In other words, they gave the wrong answer to God's jeopardy question:

*Shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?*

Emotions run high in the book of Jeremiah. *God is emotional*. God's hopes are dashed. He feels pained, forsaken, even shunned by his beloved and unfaithful bride Israel:

*"What I have built, I am breaking down."*

*The prophet is emotional*. Jeremiah weeps, shrieks, laments, and complains. In fact Jeremiah was able to get his own word into the dictionary:

*jeremiad*

Merriam-Webster defines a *jeremiad* as a prolonged [lamentation](#) or complaint; *also*: a cautionary or angry [harangue](#).

But Jeremiah isn't a hothead like John McEnroe. His passion is purposeful—from the bottom of his heart. He's more of a hot *heart*, than a hot head.

*"Within me there is something like a burning fire, shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."*

Jeremiah feels what God feels. Jeremiah felt God's anguish for Israel. The people's anguish is Jeremiah's anguish.

Because Jeremiah loved deeply—his pain went deep. Those he cared for—he was called to condemn. And the people resented his message—and it ripped him up.

Jeremiah was caught in the middle—between a demanding God and an unfaithful people. Torn between fleeing God and finding refuge in God. Rebelling or obeying. God was Jeremiah's Protagonist and his Antagonist.

The life of a prophet is a darned if you, danged if you don't existence.

If I don't speak—I'll be toast.

If I do speak—the people will hate my guts.

And yet ... Jeremiah weathered it all. The misunderstanding, the rejection, the humiliation, the suffering. He preached, prayed, struggled, wrestled, whined, and wept through it all. Even in his anguish, he sent a cry of hope God's way.

"Jeremiah wrote what he lived," says Eugene Peterson, "and lived what he wrote." He embodied the word of God, almost became the word.

Jeremiah has a way with words. He was not only the most personal of all the prophets, he was the most poetic. Like Isaiah, the book of Jeremiah can roughly be divided in half, between judgement in the first half and hope in the second half. It can be described as both disaster literature and a survival guide.

In the verses before our Scripture reading, Jeremiah prophesied and gave the tough message God gave him for the people. It didn't go over well. They responded by having Jeremiah beaten and put in stocks.

Let's hear now a portion of *The Confessions of Jeremiah* from:

### **Scripture: Jeremiah 20:7-13 (NRSV)**

O Lord, you have enticed me,  
and I was enticed;  
you have overpowered me,  
and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughingstock all day long;  
everyone mocks me.  
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the Lord has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, "I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,"  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

For I hear many whispering:  
"Terror is all around!  
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"  
All my close friends  
are watching for me to stumble.

"Perhaps he can be enticed,  
and we can prevail against him,  
and take our revenge on him."

But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;  
therefore my persecutors will stumble,  
and they will not prevail.

They will be greatly shamed,  
for they will not succeed.  
Their eternal dishonor  
will never be forgotten.  
O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution 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  
from the hands of evildoers.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## **SERMON – Jeremiah: The Weeping Prophet**

Our passage is one of the most personal and impassioned writings in all of Scripture. No one speaks of the plight of the prophet better than Jeremiah.

"Lord you've enticed me."

One translation says "duped." Another "deceived." "Seduced."

You've tricked me God. Used me and abused me. The prophet teeters on blasphemy here. You challenged me to an arm-wrestling match—like I could ever win. You've overpowered me—and you have prevailed.

What I like about Jeremiah is that he lays all his dirty laundry before God. His exchanges with God are heated, spirited, adversarial, accusatory, and moving. In one verse he's accusing God, the next verse he's praising God, the next cursing the day he was born.

There's no editing or airbrushing with Jeremiah. And so Jeremiah models the kind of faith God wants from us—not a perfect faith, but an honest faith, a free faith. It's an act of faith to take our anger and our frustrations with God and our enemies *to* God—and turn them into praise.

But Jeremiah was also bound by his divine duty to cry out:

*Violence and destruction!*

Faithfulness to God is sharing not only the good news, but also the bad news appropriately. The People of God tell the truth about the world not because *they like to*, but because *they must*—even if you're mocked or made a laughingstock or called a fool for Christ.

I like how [Dieterich Bonhoeffer](#) put it:

*"Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian in one's community back from the path of sin."*

On a smaller scale—I can relate with Jeremiah's dilemma—the plight of the pastor.

Preaching God's Word is a privilege and joy—but it's also scary getting in the pulpit. Pastors are very attuned to Sundays. Did you know that Sundays come every seven days! Come rain or shine, heaven or high water—Sunday *will* come.

Preaching's a lot like being a tightrope walker. No, tightrope *dancer*. God's Word is good news and inspiring and hope-inducing. No doubt. But it also brings out painful things about the human heart.

God's Word calls out injustice. Sin. It addresses controversial and uncomfortable issues—that would be so nice to avoid.

I believe God sees what's going on in the world. God not only sees, but he cares. And God has something to say about it—to do about it—in the Scriptures. And so I need to speak up—I don't have a choice.

I appreciated the words of a retired pastor I know:

Do I think something is God, when it actually isn't?  
It's not always so easy hearing the voice of God. Am I missing it?  
And then, will the congregation understand what I'm really trying to say?

Each week I struggle, preparing the message:

Am I addressing this in the right way?  
Am I rightly dividing God's Word? I'm I getting the spirit of it?  
Am I abusing or using the pulpit for the wrong or selfish reasons?

Do I have the full story?  
Are people offended at the message? Or am I just being offensive?  
Am I just talking here--chattering my way through Christianity, but not doing anything?

And naturally, self-doubt creeps in:

Am I putting you to sleep?

One of my preaching professors defined preaching as "truth through personality."

Will the congregation think I'm weird? Boring? Irrelevant?  
Out of touch? Out to lunch?

And then I worry about being labeled political—

Will you think I'm using the pulpit to advance a particular party?  
Am I doing it—consciously or maybe unconsciously?  
Will people leave because I speak on a certain issue?  
Or if I'm too weak on something? Or too hard on an issue?  
Am I avoiding an important topic because I don't want conflict?

And then more dark, honest moments:

God—am I called to do this?—or did I miss what I'm really supposed to be doing?  
Did you say psychologist or professor—not pastor—when you called?

And then in times of controversy:

God, do you really want me to speak to the hot button issues like racism or sexuality or how we treat the immigrant?

Yes. I have to.

Preaching God's Word is my job, my joy, my calling. I'm not perfect. I'll not always get it right. But I keep trying. I like how the Apostle Paul put it,

"Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel!"

And then I'm encouraged by Jesus too—who was a prophet, priest, and king:

"Don't hide your light under a bushel basket. ...  
Let it shine for all the world to see."

And then Jesus' words in the Beatitudes:

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

What I love about Jeremiah is that he ends with *hope*. For many years Jeremiah predicted war, famine, death, and exile. But *the very second* those things happened, he preached hope, comfort and consolation. He didn't say "I told you so!" No, he said:

*"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,  
plans for your welfare and not for harm,  
to give you a future with hope ...*

Jeremiah gives us direction on how rise from the ashes and work towards establishing a new normal:

*"Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens, eat what they produce. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, for in its welfare you will find welfare."*

Jeremiah reminds us to ask God what he's doing in our pain:

*God, what are you trying to teach me through this struggle, through this devastating experience?  
How can I make sense of life when I'm feeling rootless and my future's dashed?*

Jeremiah shows us what faith in the raw looks like. There's nothing superficial about Jeremiah—he's the real deal. Jeremiah teaches us to trust God when our BFFs surround us and are cheering for our downfall—our Best Fiends Forever, that is.

There may be enemies without or we might be our own worst enemy, but the Lord God is with me, like a mighty warrior. Those that are against you God will not prevail or succeed. For to you O God I have committed my cause.

Jeremiah gets us out of a snowflake faith and into a resilient faith. He mentors us on how to turn our prison to praise:

*Sing to the Lord, Praise the Lord!  
For he rescues the needy from those  
who would do him wrong.*

Amen.

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