

Jeremiah 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 20 He says, You 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, to whom you have prophesied falsely.

O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived. You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the 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 of reproach and 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.

Say all my close friends, watching for my fall. Perhaps he will be deceived. Then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him. But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior. Therefore my persecutors will stumble. They will not overcome me.

[2 : 06] They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts who test the righteous, who seize the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them.

For to you have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord. Praise the Lord. For he has delivered the life of the needy from 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 my days in shame? In chapter 19, Jeremiah had performed the symbolic action of smashing the earthenware decanter at the potsherd gate, before the elders of the people and the elders of the priests.

Then he returned into the city, and delivered a message of judgment in the courtyard of the temple. Jeremiah had made himself an enemy of the establishment, and the chief officer of the temple, Pasha, who seems to have been a leading administrator or superintendent, a sort of officer policing the temple precincts, punishes him by placing him in the stocks.

[3 : 35] Jack Lumbum notes the similar conflict between Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel in Amos chapter 7 verses 10-17. There Amaziah tried to shut up the prophet, and judgment was declared upon him and his household as a result.

There are references to Pasha's family of Imah in the book of 1 Chronicles. Pasha has Jeremiah beaten and places him in the stocks at the gate. This is likely an attempt to silence Jeremiah by intimidating him.

We don't know exactly what these stocks would have involved. They may only have constrained the legs, but perhaps also the arms and the neck. The person in the stocks would have been placed in a contorted and painful position for a long period of time, and held up for public shaming.

The next day Jeremiah, however, is uncowed. He declares that the Lord now calls Pasha terror on every side. This isn't a play upon Pasha's name, it merely changes his name.

He himself had prophesied falsely and had tried to terrorize Jeremiah, and now he will become synonymous with the exile and the captivity that Jeremiah is declaring. He is punishing Jeremiah, but he faces a much harsher punishment himself in the future, the torture of seeing his family and

his friends die around him, and knowing that he had a hand in their fate.

[4 : 52] He himself will be torn away from the land and will die in Babylon, him, his household, and his friends of the ruling class. Here, for the first time in the book, we are told that Judah will be given into the hand of Babylon.

The threat from the north is finally given a name. And Jeremiah concludes by calling Pasha a lying prophet. In verses 7-12, we are made privy to the internal struggle of the prophet.

He makes a bitter complaint to the Lord, laden with pathos. While he is faithful in his declaration of the word of the Lord, he faces alienation, opposition, and the distress of the message that he is bearing, and all of these things are traumatizing him.

He faces opponents like Pasha, and the ridicule and the reproach of the people. Worse than all of these things, he feels harassed by the Lord, forced into an intolerable situation, helpless to withstand the Lord's power or command.

If he speaks, he is resisted by the people, sometimes even violently. If he tries to keep silent, the word of the Lord is within him like a burning fire that is trapped, insisting on getting out.

[6 : 01] He cannot hold it in. He has declared that Pasha will be called terror on every side, yet he is so afflicted himself in verse 10. Jeremiah faces conspiracies, slander, denunciation, false accusation, even from his closest friends.

All are besieging him round about, waiting for their moment to pounce. His will and his resolve faltering, Jeremiah is revived as he confidently declares that the Lord is with him.

Once again, these words look back to the beginning of the book. In chapter 1, verses 7-8, But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. And then in verses 17-19 of that chapter, But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

[7 : 13] They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Jeremiah compares the Lord here to a warrior by his side.

He petitions the Lord to show his vengeance upon his enemies. And a key word in this part of the passage, as Walter Brueggemann notes, is overcome. Jeremiah recognizes that one or the other must prevail.

Only if the Lord is with him will he succeed against his many adversaries. Verse 13 takes the movement from complaint, to trust in the Lord, to petition for his help, to the fitting conclusion of praise for his response.

There is a jarring change of tone in verses 14-18 that end the chapter though. Some commentators suggest that what would have been the first edition of the book of Jeremiah might end in this chapter.

This section of the book of Jeremiah began with a reference to Jeremiah prior to his birth, in chapter 1 verse 5. As Lumbum notes, this conclusion of this chapter returns us to this theme, albeit with a bitter twist.

[8 : 23] It's similar to the complaint of Job in Job chapter 3, verses 1-12 of that chapter read, After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, A man is conceived.

Let that day be darkness. May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it. Let the blackness of the day terrify it.

That night, let thick darkness seize it. Let it not rejoice among the days of the year. Let it not come into the number of the months. Behold, let that night be barren.

Let no joyful cry enter it. Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark. Let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning.

Because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me?

[9 : 28] Or why the breaths that I should nurse? Parallels between Jeremiah and Job should not be hard to see. In both cases, the Lord acts almost as their adversary. They are associated with weeping, suffering, calls for justice from the Lord, and deep distress.

Both of them are ostracized, accused as troublemakers of their people, and their closest friends turn upon them. Both of them have the difficult task of remaining faithful, even in the face of the devastating silence of the heavens.

Jeremiah, in chapter 15, verse 10, had already expressed woe in the context of his birth. Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land.

I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me. Here he goes far further. He doesn't curse the Lord or curse his father and mother, but he curses the day of his birth and the man who declared it.

The curse upon the man who declared his birth is an elaborate one. His fate should be like that of the cities of the plain, because the infant Jeremiah was not killed while he was yet in the womb.

[10 : 32] Jeremiah believes that his days are doomed to misery, sorrow, and shame. A question to consider. Why do you believe that the Lord burdens his prophet Jeremiah with so much distress, sorrow, and suffering?