



## PERPETUAL PAIN AND INCURABLE WOUNDS

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 Jeremiah 15:15-21  
 Eleventh Message  
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Earlier this year, Todd Poulter, one of our missionaries with Wycliffe Translators, wrote in his newsletter of the tragic deaths of a couple he had worked with in Africa. A number of Wycliffe staff had met in Mali to plan strategy. Following the meetings, Todd and a couple of others headed back to the United States, while Bob and Ruth Chapman, among others, traveled south to the Ivory Coast. Shortly after takeoff from Abidjan their Kenya Airways plane crashed and the Chapmans were killed. Their remains were brought back to native Canada and laid to rest near the spot where ten years earlier they had buried their two young sons, Ross and Timothy. The boys had come down with malaria on a flight home for furlough and they died within hours of each other. The only member of the Chapman family left is 19-year-old Erin, who stayed behind in Canada for college when her parents returned to Africa last year. One can only imagine the pain this young woman must be feeling. How could this series of tragedies happen to a family that had given everything to serve God?

This morning we are going to lament with the prophet Jeremiah. In this book we find every kind of biblical literature: history, narrative, poetry, prophecy, proverbs, psalms, old covenant and new covenant. Lament, an emotion that is frequently expressed in the Psalter, is found in much of Jeremiah, too. The first 20 chapters of the book has seven confessions in which Jeremiah pours out his heart before God and poses some troublesome issues for his Creator. The reason behind these confessions, as we have already seen, is the very difficult life experiences that Jeremiah endured.

The prophet was chosen by God to speak judgment to a people who had turned their backs on their Creator. For his troubles, Jeremiah was beaten, thrown in pits, placed in stocks and publicly ridiculed. His own townspeople put out a contract on his life. Even his family became his enemies. God had instructed Jeremiah to not take a wife. His ministry would be too difficult to sustain a marriage, and the coming judgment would be so severe as to preclude having a family. Jeremiah lived a life of loneliness and depression. Truly he was the weeping prophet who learned to lament.

The Christian life has many aspects and dimensions. When we experience victory in Christ we rejoice and celebrate, but in times of pain and brokenness we weep and lament. Our life in Christ therefore is made up of both of these realities, not just one or the other. We live between two worlds, the already and the not yet. Today

we are going to talk about perpetual pain and incurable wounds. Jeremiah's words will help us express our thoughts and emotions and allow us to lament. My prayer is that we will be encouraged to experience our brokenness together.

Jeremiah 15:15-18:

**You who know, O LORD,  
 Remember me, take notice of me,  
 And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.  
 Do not, in view of Your patience, take me away;  
 Know that for Your sake I endure reproach.  
 Your words were found and I ate them,  
 And Your words became for me a joy and the de-  
 light of my heart;  
 For I have been called by Your name,  
 O LORD God of hosts.  
 I did not sit in the circle of merry-makers,  
 Nor did I exult.  
 Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone,  
 For You filled me with indignation.  
 Why has my pain been perpetual  
 And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?  
 Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream  
 With water that is unreliable? (Jer 15:15-18, NASB)**

This poem, which follows the standard lament form, consists of four parts: address, petition, statement of innocence, and complaint.

Jeremiah begins with an address to God. He makes an abrupt opening with the words, "Thou knowest." These could be words of trust, but more likely they are a statement of reproach. Jeremiah says that God knows what is going on but he isn't doing anything about it. The prophet can't believe that God is allowing him to suffer even though he is innocent.

This is where our problem begins. We suffer, and God knows we are suffering, but we think he doesn't care. John Stott comments on suffering: "The real sting of suffering is not misfortune itself, nor even the pain of it or the injustice of it, but the apparent God-forsakenness of it. Pain is endurable, but the seeming indifference of God is not."

Jeremiah's petition consists of four imperatives: remember, take notice, take vengeance, do not take away. This is bold and candid speech. The prophet wants God to remember him and pay attention to him. He is not asking for revenge, but for justice and lawfulness. Expressing his anxiety about death, he fears being "taken

away.” He tells God not to be too patient, too slow to anger. He wants God to unleash his judgment against Judah right away.

Notice the four-fold repetition of the word “me” in the text. Jeremiah’s life is in jeopardy. He wants to go to the front of the line. He doesn’t want to be put on hold or leave a voice message. He wants his picture placed on the refrigerator so that God will remember him and attend to his situation. For him, the engine of persecution runs swiftly, while God moves too slowly. In the past God had made certain commitments to him and he expects him to make good on these. He is saying to God, “You got me into this mess, now get me out of it.”

Most people have used similar words with God. When life isn’t working, when we are suffering, anxious, fearful and filled with doubt and confusion, we want the situation to be resolved immediately. We feel we cannot take another day or even another hour. We have been to the doctor and he has prescribed medication, but that is not enough. We want things to change, so we tell God what we want him to do and when to do it.

And we expect instant results. When we hurt we do everything we can to alleviate the pain immediately. When our children hurt we will move heaven and earth to ease their distress instantly. We think that God should handle our pain with the same urgency, but oftentimes he doesn’t respond that way. That is when we begin to think he doesn’t care. Our petition consists of honest words from a fearful heart: remember me, pay attention to me, avenge me, don’t let me suffer anymore, don’t let me die.

But petition alone isn’t enough. We like to give God some good reasons for taking action. Jeremiah mentions three things.

Firstly, he reminds God that it was for his sake that he has become an object of reproach. He has to bear insults, abuse, scorn, contempt, shame, taunts and threats, because he has followed God. He reinforces for God everything that he is doing for him, reminding him that he isn’t benefiting in any way. Nothing of what is happening to him is his fault or his doing.

Secondly, Jeremiah reminds God that he has filled his stomach with God’s word: “Your words were found and I ate them.” He is probably referring to the discovery of the law in the temple during Josiah’s reign. When God’s word was found, Jeremiah devoured it. He put the word in his mouth and chewed it, swallowed it and digested it. This was a cause of great joy for the prophet, because he was called by God’s name. He was satisfied with God’s word in the same way we are satisfied by a delicious meal. But now, being called by God’s name has made him have to swallow a bitter pill.

Thirdly, Jeremiah reminds God that he has not gone the way of the crowd. Literally, he doesn’t sit in the secret counsel of the partygoers. He isn’t part of the “in” group. He resists seeking his identity and his sense of

acceptance from others. He sits alone because God’s hand is upon him. He is filled with anger at the sin of Judah, and perhaps his own afflictions.

Furthermore, says Jeremiah, in verse 10:

**I have neither lent, nor have men lent money to me,  
Yet everyone curses me. (Jer 15:10)**

No one loves a money-lender or a debtor. Jeremiah is neither, and yet he is still cursed. He is all alone, with no social relationships.

The prophet is saying, in effect, that he hasn’t done anything wrong. Rather, he has done everything right, everything that God expected of him. He is completely innocent. He is faithful and devoted to God. He suffers because he has followed the straight and narrow path. He can’t understand what is happening to him. He has every reason to believe that God should be moved to action, so he seeks to motivate him to act.

So in these opening verses the prophet issues his complaint and voices the deepest emotions of his soul. He asks, “Why has my pain been perpetual, and my wound incurable?” These words resonate within us.

All of the key words in this verse are repeated in Jeremiah and in the lament psalms. The word “pain” (referring to physical or inner pain) is used nine times in the Psalms, Jeremiah and Lamentations. And the prophet’s pain has been “perpetual,” i.e., without end. “Wound” means sickness or disease. “Incurable,” chronic illness, is used five times in Jeremiah. “Refusing” is used eleven times; “healed” (meaning, restore, mend, recover) thirteen times.

This combination of words is often used in conjunction with sin and ensuing judgment. Sickness follows sin. That makes sense. We can understand that. But in this case the poet is in turmoil because he has not sinned. His grief and pain are like a chronic illness that never gets better. There is no medicine, no treatment, no cure and no cause. So he asks, “Why? I have done all these things in obedience to you. Why then am I made to suffer?” Job expresses the same despair:

**“Why is light given to him who suffers,  
And life to the bitter of soul,  
Who long for death, but there is none,  
And dig for it more than for hidden treasures,  
Who rejoice greatly,  
And exult when they find the grave?  
Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,  
And whom God has hedged in?  
For my groaning comes at the sight of my food,  
And my cries pour out like water.  
For what I fear comes upon me,  
And what I dread befalls me.  
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet,  
And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes.” (Job 3:20-26)**

We can identify with these words that describe perpetual pain and incurable wounds. All of us have been

wounded and broken, perhaps as a result of our sin or, as was the case with Jeremiah, our obedience. Rejection, unkindness, criticism, loneliness, disease, death — we will have some wound or pain that will always be with us. We cannot or should not try to deny it. We don't come into church feeling utterly happy and joyful always. When we hurt, lament gives us permission to pour out our hearts before God.

Jeremiah's pain prompts him to ask another penetrating question:

**Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream  
With water that is unreliable? (Jer 15:18b)**

The words "You indeed" are very strong. This is a double "you," as if Jeremiah is pointing a finger at God. "Deceptive" means to lie; "unreliable" means to be untrustworthy. The picture here is of a dried-up wadi that fills with water only when it rains. In chapter 2, Jeremiah said that God was a fountain of living water, but now that living water has failed. God doesn't seem reliable. Jeremiah wonders if God has lied to him. He had made a promise to be with him when he called him into ministry, but he doesn't seem to be upholding his promise. The prophet wonders if he can really trust God. The priests, kings and men of Anathoth are not the cause of Jeremiah's troubles. He is claiming that God is the cause. In the end we always blame God for our troubles.

Jeremiah expresses the deepest emotions of our souls and gives voice to our confusion. There seems to be no logic or reason behind our pain and suffering, no connection between our following God and our circumstances. So we ask, "Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong?" Like Jeremiah, we look at the evidence and we are baffled. We find every reason why God should bless us and take care of us and remove our hurt and struggle. So we cry out to him. We remind him that we are innocent, and we ask, Why. We wonder if we can really trust him.

What we need to understand is this: when sin is not involved there is no connection or correlation between the pain we experience in this life and our faithful service of God. There is a reason for our pain and suffering, but we cannot pinpoint the cause so that we can understand it. The purposes of God do not fit into our grids of logic and efficiency. They are inexplicable. We can't explain why a couple dies in a plane crash. We can't explain losing a child or a spouse, being thrown into prison and tortured, or suffering family rejection for our faith. We feel we didn't do anything wrong that would cause the suffering. We suffer and hurt, period. We can't deny it. We can't alleviate it. We can't explain it with our limited human reason.

What does God have to say to Jeremiah? Lament characteristically evokes an assuring response from God. We should expect him to defend himself at least. But, as we saw last time, God's answer is hardly what we might expect. He doesn't answer the complaint; he

answers the complainer.

God's response has two parts. Before he gives an encouraging word, he gives a bracing word.

**Therefore, thus says the LORD,**

**"If you return, then I will restore you—**

**Before Me you will stand;**

**And if you extract the precious from the worthless,**

**You will become My spokesman.**

**They for their part may turn to you,**

**But as for you, you must not turn to them. (Jer 15:19)**

The first part of God's reply is a condition. Here is a play on the word "return" or "turn," which is used four times in the text. This is the Old Testament term for repentance. In this instance it is used in Jeremiah's interaction with God and with his opponents.

God tells Jeremiah that he must repent of his attitude and remain faithful to his calling. The prophet's relationship with God is of first importance. It must remain righteous and pure. In effect, God is asking Jeremiah to repent, to do the same thing that Jeremiah is urging upon the people of Judah. The prophet is pouring out his heart to God, but his words are tinged with self-pity and blame. He is feeling sorry for himself, and God tells him to turn away from that. Repent of it. Don't wallow in it: "If you return, I will return you." (Note: the word "restore" should be translated "return." God is not saying that he will heal Jeremiah of his problems if he repents.)

And God wants Jeremiah to be faithful to his calling. The reference here to "extract the precious from the worthless" takes us back to chapter 6, where God told the prophet to be an assayer and remove the dross of idolatry from the precious metals. He is God's spokesman, or literally, God's mouth. God is asking him to remain faithful to his assignment and uncompromising to the truth even though he might have to stand alone. Jeremiah is lonely, but he must not seek the favor of people. They must turn to him, not the other way around.

When we find ourselves mired in grief and despair, our circumstances don't matter so much to God as our hearts. Our pain can never justify wrong attitudes or wrong actions, things like anger, bitterness, resentment, blaming God or self-pity. We may feel like quitting the life of faith and joining forces with the partygoers, but God calls us to resist this temptation. We may hurt, we may be all alone, our situation may not change, but still God calls us to be faithful to him and to our calling. We should continue to eat his word, not compromise with people, and bear reproach for his name. Even in our pain, God calls us to repent and have pure hearts.

The second part of God's response is more reassuring.

**"Then I will make you to this people**

**A fortified wall of bronze;**

**And though they fight against you,**

**They will not prevail over you;**

**For I am with you to save you  
And deliver you,” declares the LORD.  
“So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,  
And I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent.” (Jer 15:20-21)**

This is exactly what God told Jeremiah in chapter 1, when Jeremiah was a young boy. God reaffirms that he is with him. Three powerful verbs, save, deliver, and redeem, describe God’s presence. God is reliable and will stand by his messenger.

God doesn’t answer the “why” question, but he does answer the reliability question. He promises to be with us and see us through. This is the word that we need to hear over and over. It isn’t enough for God to tell us just once, because we fear that we may not be able to make it through. We need this word when we are seventeen and when we are seventy-seven. Our faithfulness to his call may leave us lonely, scared, angry and hurt, but God promises to be with us. Nothing will happen to us outside his will. God will see us through – all the way to heaven.

Jeremiah experienced this very thing. That is why he could write, in Lamentations:

**This I recall to my mind,  
Therefore I have hope.  
The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,  
For His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness...  
For the Lord will not reject forever,  
For if He causes grief,  
Then He will have compassion  
According to His abundant lovingkindness. (Lam  
3:21-23, 32)**

Henri Nouwen writes: “Our life is full of brokenness – broken relationships, broken promises, broken expectations. How can we live that brokenness without becoming bitter and resentful except by returning again and again to God’s faithful presence in our lives?”

All of us suffer from perpetual pains and incurable wounds. What we need is a theology of pain. We seek an explanation for the pain and healing for our wounds, but God wants to use them to a greater end. We are looking for a way out; God is looking for a way in. He uses pain to make us real: real people living in real community. He uses pain to make us trust in him and not in ourselves. Pain strips us of our strength and adequacy. God uses pain so that we might have a pure and proven character. The impurities are driven out, leaving only what is precious. He uses pain so that we might discover our longings and desires for love and acceptance and find these things in him. He uses pain so that we might discover true intimacy with him, so that we might love him solely for who he is and not for what he has to give us.

God is doing so much more than our limited minds can understand. His purposes go way beyond our reason and logic.

Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

—Tennyson, *In Memoriam*

Our little systems are inadequate to contain God’s purposes. Paul put it this way: “for momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17)

In the Christian life we will hurt and lament — and it is good for us to weep. But all of this is the means to a greater end. In the words of an old Audrey Meier song, “God washes our eyes with tears that we may see.” God wants us to find him in the pain.

Yet e’en the greatest griefs  
May be reliefs,  
Could he but take them right, and in their ways.  
Happy is he, whose heart  
Hath found the art  
To turn his double pains to double praise.

—George Herbert, *Man’s Medley*

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