



PAIN BREAKS IN SONG

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 Jeremiah 20:7-18
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Anne Lamont shared this story about her son Sam and his response to disappointment he faced with a friend:

I was driving Sam and his friend Josh over to Josh's house, where the boys were going to spend the night. But out of the blue, Josh changed his mind about wanting Sam to stay over. "I'm tired," he said, suddenly, "and I want to have a quiet night with my mom." Sam's face went white and blank; he has so little armor. He started crying. I tried to manipulate Josh into changing his mind, and I even sort of vaguely threatened him, hinting that Sam or I might cancel a date with him sometime, but he stayed firm. After a while Sam said he wished we'd all get hit by a car, and Josh stared out the window nonchalantly. I thought he might be about to start humming. It was one of those times when you wish you were armed so you could attack the kid who has hurt your own child's feelings. "Sam?" I asked. "Can I help in any way? Shall we pray?" "I just wish I'd never been born."¹

Have you ever wished you had never been born? Many people have. When we struggle with disappointment, heartache and pain, we wonder if it's all really worth it.

The prophet Jeremiah certainly felt this way. In fact, he says so in chapter 20 of his book: "Cursed be the day when I was born" (20:14). Jeremiah was honest and realistic. In his prophecy he has much to say about God and Judah, about idolatry and judgment, but he reveals a lot about himself, too. His confessions, handed down in beautiful poetic verses, provide a glimpse into his prophet's heart. In our last study we lamented with Jeremiah's perpetual pain and incurable wounds. Today we will focus on the last of his seven confessions, from chapter 20, where, to borrow a phrase from a poem by Wendell Berry, "pain breaks in song."

**O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived;
 You have overcome me and prevailed.
 I have become a laughingstock all day long;
 Everyone mocks me.
 For each time I speak, I cry aloud;
 I proclaim violence and destruction,
 Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted
 In reproach and derision all day long.
 But if I say, "I will not remember Him
 Or speak anymore in His name,"
 Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire**

**Shut up in my bones;
 And I am weary of holding it in,
 And I cannot endure it.
 For I have heard the whispering of many,
 "Terror on every side!
 Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!"
 All my trusted friends,
 Watching for my fall, say:
 "Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail
 against him
 And take our revenge on him." (Jer 20:7-10, NASB)**

Jeremiah had pronounced terrible words of judgment to the leaders of Jerusalem. In the valley of Ben-hinnon he had broken a clay pot in their midst and proclaimed that God would similarly break them. When Pashhur, the chief priest, heard what Jeremiah was up to, he had him beaten and put in stocks at the upper Benjamin Gate, near the temple in Jerusalem. Upon his release, Jeremiah rendered a harsh judgment against Pashhur and the leaders in Jerusalem. He told the chief priest that henceforth his name would be Magor-missabib, meaning, "terror on every side." Pashur would be given over to the king of Babylon and carried off to exile, where he and his family would die.

But the cost to Jeremiah for his boldness would be great. In these verses we have access to a conversation he had with God in which his confidence gives way to despair. Oftentimes our deepest despair comes right on the heels of a great victory when we have been used of God.

Verses 7-10 set out Jeremiah's complaint. On one level he complains about his unjust treatment. He was the object of public ridicule, a laughingstock. He was mocked, and his obedience resulted in reproach and derision all day long. Everyone was talking about him. Even his closest friends made him the object of a whisper campaign. In 20:3, he labels his nemesis Pashhur as "terror on every side," but now his own words are turned against him as he is accused of causing trouble and terror. Everyone was watching and waiting for him to make a fatal mistake, so that they might be rid of his irritating, unpleasant message.

Jeremiah was all alone. His friends and family had turned against him. He could not trust a soul. He was sensitive, thin-skinned and emotional. The words and actions of others, even his friends, hurt him deeply. He wilted in the face of the never-ending public criticism.

One of the most difficult things about our own struggles is the feeling that we are all alone. We think there is no one we can talk to, no one we can trust, no one, not even father, mother, sister or brother. It seems the whole world is against us. Rejection and mistreatment bring on acute feelings of loneliness and lament. I would venture to guess that half of the people in this auditorium would say that they feel lonely; they don't have a close, trusted friend.

But, on a completely different level, Jeremiah's complaint is against God. The prophet may be the subject of human hostility but his dilemma runs much deeper. Hear what he says to God, "O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived." To be deceived is to have a mind that is open to external influences, to be enticed or lured. Why would the prophet think that?

Jeremiah was called into God's service when he was about 17 years old. At first, he balked at this assignment, saying he was too young. But God promised that he would be with him, and he stretched out his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, putting his words in his mouth. God assured him that it wouldn't be easy, but he would be there to deliver him.

Jeremiah trusted God, but things didn't turn out the way he envisioned. He didn't know that he would not have any friends. He didn't know that he would not be able to marry and have a family. He didn't know he was going to be the object of a smear campaign. Jeremiah trusted God, but here in these verses he feels that God has taken advantage of him.

The prophet feels he is in a no-win situation. If he speaks God's word of judgment, he is the object of mocking, ridicule and hostility all day long. If he doesn't speak, then God's word is like a burning fire in his body and he cannot hold it in. He is between a rock and a hard place. He is powerless to do anything about it because God is too strong. "The prophet has only two alternatives, and neither one works. When he speaks, Yahweh does not support him. When he is silent, Yahweh does not console him. He has this awesome burden from Yahweh, but without the accompanying power or presence of Yahweh."²

This is how all Christians feel at times. We say we are following God and trusting him, but what good does that do us? We are in dire straits. We can't change our circumstances. We can't run away, and we can't hide from God. Republicans may be able to change sides, but we can't. God has hemmed us in and there's no escape. We feel absolutely miserable. And yet the word of God burns within us. So we lament. We complain that this is not what we signed up for when we came to Christ. We say, with Jeremiah, "God, you deceived me. I thought life as a Christian would be clear sailing."

In verses 14-18, Jeremiah deepens and intensifies his lament. It is difficult to determine whether these verses go with verses 7-13 or whether they are included here

because of the thematic connection. However, I want to look at these lines before returning to verses 11-13.

**Cursed be the day when I was born;
Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore
me!**

**Cursed be the man who brought the news
To my father, saying,
"A baby boy has been born to you!"
And made him very happy.**

**But let that man be like the cities
Which the LORD overthrew without relenting,
And let him hear an outcry in the morning
And a shout of alarm at noon;
Because he did not kill me before birth,
So that my mother would have been my grave,
And her womb ever pregnant.**

**Why did I ever come forth from the womb
To look on trouble and sorrow,
So that my days have been spent in shame? (Jer
20:14-18)**

Jeremiah has complained about his unjust treatment from people and his unfair treatment from God. But here, in a cry of hopelessness and futility, he complains about his very existence. He wishes he had never been born.

He begins verse 14 with a curse, which is not addressed to God or to anyone in particular. The first word in the Hebrew text is "curse," the last is "bless," two opposing ideas which often appear together in the Scriptures. Jeremiah curses the day he was born and the man who brought the news of his birth. He wishes that there had been no announcement, no celebration, no cigars. As he himself was rejected as a messenger of God's word, so he would reject this messenger. He wishes that this messenger would suffer the agony of God's wrath, like the inhabitants Sodom and Gomorrah, because he did not kill Jeremiah in the womb. He wishes that the womb had been his grave. Perhaps he was wishing that the messenger had committed a double murder.

The reason Jeremiah laments so deeply lies in the question we read in verse 18, the great "Why?" question of human existence: Why was I ever born if all I experience is trouble and sorrow? What a contrast to God's statement to Jeremiah when he was youth: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Once Jeremiah had hope, purpose and direction, but his life had become a series of afflictions. Sorrow was the only thing he had ever known. For him there were no birthday parties, no trips, no little children running through his house, no friends. What an honest confession this is.

We all face times of heartache, sorrow and pain: one crisis after another, one disappointment after another. We barely recover from one thing when something else knocks us off our feet. Our path seems always to be uphill and against the wind. We even begin to wonder why we were born. It was the same for just about every

important figure in the Bible. It was the same for the church fathers and the great Christian writers. "The dark night of the soul" is what they called it. The Bible does not deny this. What it does is give us permission to lament, to cry out, "Why am I here?"

In the middle of our text, between the two lament sections, we find an assertion of trust, a petition, and a remarkable doxology.

**But the LORD is with me like a dread champion;
Therefore my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.
They will be utterly ashamed, because they have failed,
With an everlasting disgrace that will not be forgotten.
Yet, O LORD of hosts, You who test the righteous,
Who see the mind and the heart;
Let me see Your vengeance on them;
For to You I have set forth my cause. (Jer 20:11-12)**

Jeremiah steps out on the limb of faith and makes an assertion of trust. He asserts that God will be with him like a dread champion, a mighty warrior that evokes terror and prevails against his enemies. Jeremiah trusts in the fact that God will defeat and overwhelm his enemies. They will be ashamed and disgraced forever.

Here is how Eugene Peterson renders this verse in *The Message*:

**But God, a most fierce warrior, is at my side.
Those who are after me will be sent sprawling —
Slapstick buffoons falling all over themselves,
A spectacle of humiliation no one will ever forget.
(Jer 20:11)**

This is a genuine assertion of trust, but it is also an attempt to motivate God. In asking God to take care of his enemies, Jeremiah is seeking from God the very vengeance for which his enemies seek. He feels that he has proven his case and God should act accordingly.

The key word in verses 7-12 (it is used four times) is "prevail," meaning, to overcome. In verse 7, God "prevails" over Jeremiah. In verse 9, Jeremiah cannot "prevail" in holding in God's word. In verse 10, Jeremiah's enemies are looking to "prevail." But in verse 11 we see that Jeremiah's enemies will not be able to "prevail."

Jeremiah is weak and helpless. He cannot prevail against God and he cannot prevail against his enemy. His only hope is that God will be his ally. Without God, he is unequally weak. With God, he is unequally triumphant. His only hope is that God will side with him and not his enemies.

This is the promise of God. By faith we believe that despite darkness, sorrow and affliction, we will prevail and God will bring us through. We will prevail because a dread champion, one who is more powerful than any enemy we face, is with us to fight for us. We find this same truth spoken by Hannah in the Old Testament:

**"He keeps the feet of His godly ones,
But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness;
For not by might shall a man prevail" (1 Sam 2:9).**

It is also recorded by the apostle John in his first epistle:

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

In the midst of our afflictions we must depend on God. Our dread champion is more powerful than any foe, even death. Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world.

Now, out of nowhere, right in the middle of the text, comes a doxology.

**Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD!
For He has delivered the soul of the needy one
From the hand of evildoers. (Jer 20:13)**

This verse may not be part of the original poem, yet we find it here, right in the midst of Jeremiah's lament. The prophet gives way to praise, and pain breaks in song.

How can Jeremiah sing in the midst of his afflictions? Has he been freed from the stocks? Has God has so filled him with assurance that he sings and praises him in anticipation of his deliverance? Perhaps the reason is even more profound. Jeremiah states that he sings because God delivers the soul of the "needy" one. The word is used of the destitute, the day laborers of the ancient world who were completely dependent on others for their survival. What is delivered is the needy soul, not the needy body.

In the midst of his troubles and sorrows, Jeremiah realizes that his soul is needy. In all his pain, God satisfies his soul and sets him free. He sees God and he knows him. He is not alone. He is not deceived. His birth is not cursed. The pain of his affliction makes the taste of God's loyal love that much sweeter. Jeremiah knows God's deliverance, but he sings because he now knows God. He agrees with David,

**I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness,
Because You have seen my affliction;
You have known the troubles of my soul,
And You have not given me over into the hand of the enemy;
You have set my feet in a large place. (Ps 31:7-8)**

In our pain God reveals to us our deepest longings for love, grace and mercy, and we find these things in the only place that will fully satisfy – in the arms of our heavenly Father. There are no accidents and no second causes. God is in everything. He uses these times of anguish to accomplish something that nothing else will. "God wounds deeply when he wills to heal" (Hermann Kohlbrugge). When we experience pain like Jeremiah felt, our pain breaks in song.

Listen to these words of Malcolm Muggeridge:

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo ...the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable.³

The odd juxtaposition of texts is intriguing. We would think that the lament would end here, but instead we find it in the middle. Why is that? I conclude that this represents the tension of the life of faith. We hold lament and praise together. Life consists of both. The themes of lament and praise do not cancel each other out. Both are honest emotions. We don't just have one or the other. This is how life is. One day we taste God's loyal love and we sing; the next day we wonder why we were born. Joy and sorrow mingle down together. We would like it one way or the other, but life is too complex. Praise cannot be sustained all the time because life is too raw. Even following triumphant praise there is more to be said. We must accept this tension of rejection and resolution and believe that God is at work, accomplishing something magnificent in our lives.

Karl Kassulke was a great football player for the Minnesota Vikings in the sixties and early seventies. In 1973, a terrible motorcycle accident left him paralyzed from the waist down, ending his career. Ten years later, he was quoted as saying: "Honest to God, I'm in this wheelchair, but I finally found what life is about, and I'm content ... I said content, and I'm serious! Playing football and raising the roof kept me going, but every night now, before I go to sleep, I remember how glad I am to be where I am today. You see, being in a wheelchair is just an inconvenience, but not knowing God is a handicap."

Maybe the question we should ask is, Why was I born? not, Why was I born to look on trouble and sorrow? We were born to know God, not just to know about him but to know him. That comes through suffering. There is no easy road to maturity. But, when our needy souls are delivered at last, our pain breaks in song.

1. Anne Lamont, *Travelling Mercies* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 103.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 182.
3. Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Twentieth Century Testimony* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 72.

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