

Call and Disappointment
Jeremiah 15-20

Turn to Jeremiah 1. Jeremiah was called of God, and obeyed the call. At first he was pleased, but serving God turned out to be much longer and more difficult than he thought. Jeremiah had some dark days. We'll begin with how God called Jeremiah, in Jer 1, and then we'll look at four prayers of Jeremiah, in chapters 15-20. We don't find prayers like this in other prophets.

This sermon is "call and disappointment." God called Jeremiah, and Jeremiah obeyed. He was at least disappointed, often closer to despair. But he was faithful to God. Based on the dates he gives in the first paragraph of Jeremiah, he spoke for God a bit over 40 years.

We have at least two good reasons for reading his dark prayers. One, we need to know that faithful servants of God can experience life like this. Lots of us feel like this sometimes, and some of us feel like this a lot. Those who often find themselves in these places need to know we are not the first. Some whom God calls find themselves regularly in despair. Jeremiah did.

Two, the rest of us need to know this so we will be patient, so we will not dismiss these people, or wonder why they don't "get it," or wonder when they will get their lives together. We all struggle in many ways, and this is one of the ways God's people battle the darkness. God did not tell Jeremiah to get his life together. He served God, he did what God wanted, and he suffered.

Appointed before Birth – Jer 1:4-8

The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24 is clear that every believer is called by God to serve *where we are*, and every believer's assignment is *where we find ourselves*. We *never* need to change our situation to be called by God, or find our assignment. Our assignment, our calling, is to serve God in our current situation. That means that in some ways, we all are called, as Jeremiah was called.

If you can change your circumstances for the better, fine, certainly do that. Paul often did, as did Jesus. But don't ever think we need to change our situation in order to be called and to serve. We are called to serve God by trusting him and living in his ways wherever we find ourselves. We never need to find our calling from God. Trust him and obey him where we are. He might lead us to a different situation, but it will still mean trust him and obey him one day at a time.

God told Jeremiah that the people would not like what he was saying, but God would protect him. God made this real clear in Jeremiah 1, at the start.

Jeremiah must say what God told him to say, he must not waver on that, and God would be with Jeremiah to help him, and make sure that his enemies would not be able to destroy him.

And in Jer 16:1-10, we read some more instructions of God to Jeremiah. One, you must not marry and have children. Two, you must never go to a funeral, or a place where they are mourning. And three, you must never go to a wedding or other celebration. God made a loner out of Jeremiah, which he did not want or like, but that's how it was.

So, for forty years Jeremiah preached his temple sermon, that if the people did not change their ways and their actions, God would destroy Jerusalem and destroy the temple itself. If they did not change, God would bring the Babylonians.

If they did not believe God would do this, said God through Jeremiah, they should look at what was left of Shiloh, where the Israelites had kept the tabernacle, back in Samuel's day. God destroyed the tabernacle in Shiloh, because the Israelites were doing the same things. If Jeremiah's listeners did not turn to God, God would do the same to the temple.

Jeremiah preached some variation of that same sermon for 40 years, and the Babylonians destroyed the temple at the end of those 40. In the meantime, the people had gotten tired of that sermon, angry at Jeremiah, and they tried hard to get rid of Jeremiah. And God kept rescuing Jeremiah, and God would not let him stop preaching. It was not an easy life.

We will look at four prayers of Jeremiah in chapters 15-20, prayers of disappointment.

1. God you deceived me, you failed me. Jer 15:15–21

Lord, you understand; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake. When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty. I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails.

When God first called Jeremiah, and gave him a message, he was delighted. God wanted him to serve, it was exhilarating. But speaking that message brought him reproach and persecution. It put him against his own people, it isolated him, made him unpleasant company. It was wonderful to be called of God, but it brought him pain and wounds.

Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails. Jeremiah told God he was like the brook that gave Elijah water, and then dried up (1Kgs17). Jeremiah told God, "You told me you'd take care of me, but you're not, you deceived me, your care for me has dried up."

God's Response (15:19a, 21):

19 This is what the Lord says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me.... 21 "I will save you from the hands of the wicked and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel."

Let's read the first line again, v19: *Therefore this is what the Lord says: "If you repent, I will restore you [to me] that you may serve me.* Jeremiah had just said, "God, you are to me a *deceptive brook, a spring that fails.*

God said, "You need to repent, Jeremiah. You are telling me that I'm not faithful, that you can't trust me. There's no future in that, Jeremiah. Turn from that, turn back to me." *If you repent, I will restore you, that you may stand before me, and serve me.*

Here's the question, people: Do you want to serve God? May God use your life in his service? Don't tell me, but tell God. Yes, or no. Do you want to serve God? Do you want to be a servant of God? This is for real. We, like Jeremiah, go to God with our troubles. That's good, we should.

God responds, "Will you be my servant?" "May I use your life in my service?" If we will trust him, and live obedient lives right where God has put us, we are his servants. God wants a "yes" to that question. "May I use you in my service?" He will restore us, and make sure we can serve him. Apparently Jeremiah turned back to God.

2. You are my refuge, destroy my enemies - Jer 17:14–18

Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise. They keep saying to me, "Where is the word of the Lord? Let it now be fulfilled!" I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair. What passes my lips is open before you. Do not be a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let my persecutors be put to shame, but keep me from shame; let them be terrified, but keep me from terror. Bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction.

"*They keep saying to me, 'Where is the word of the Lord? Let it now be fulfilled!'"* It took 40 years for Jeremiah's words about Jerusalem and the temple to come true. So after 10 years, 20, they mocked him, and after 30 years, 35, they still mocked. He was hurt and angry. He prayed that his persecutors would be shamed and terrified. "Bring on them disaster, destroy them."

3. Do not forgive my accusers – Jer 18:21-23.

In the three verses before this, Jeremiah tells God how the Jews accuse him. He has prayed for them, that God would turn his wrath away, and they respond to his concern by attacking him. Jeremiah was hurt and sick and furious with them. So he asked God to judge them:

So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle. Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them, for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet. But you, Lord, know all

their plots to kill me. Do not forgive their crimes or blot out their sins from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.

Now keep in mind, this is what Jeremiah said to God. He did not talk to his friends like this, and he did not talk to his enemies like this. But he did talk to God like this. This is also in Psalms; see Ps 69, 109. Jeremiah did *not* attack his enemies, and did *not* raise his hand or mouth against them directly. But he prayed to God for their punishment.

If you are raging, that's the way to handle it. God does not say he will do it, but we can ask. If we are raging, express it like this. Jesus urges us to pray for our enemies. True. But three places in the NT tell us that God listens to prayers for justice, he's paying attention, and will act. (Lk 18:7; Jm 5:4; Rv 6:10-11)

4. You deceived me – Sing to the Lord – Cursed is my birth – Jer. 20:7-18

20:7-10 You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention his word, or speak anymore in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let's denounce him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him."

God told Jeremiah to announce to the people that because of Israel's sins, God would bring the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and the temple. God was bringing violence and destruction, so change your ways and your actions, people!

This message brought Jeremiah insult and trouble, so he decided not to preach God's message. Jeremiah said, "I quit, not doing it anymore. God wants me to say, 'Turn to God or he will bring destruction.' But I quit, no more, I'm done." But Jeremiah could not keep it in.

God's Spirit was too strong. "*You overpower me and prevailed.*" He kept preaching, couldn't stop. So who gets the credit here for Jeremiah's service: Jeremiah? Or God?

Then, praise! *20:11-13 But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten. Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.*

Wow!! In v7, "*you deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived,*" and then in v11, out of the blue, "*But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior.*" And we get a few lines of confidence in God.

And in v14, next breath, he switches directions again: “*Cursed be the day I was born. May the day my mother bore me not be blessed ... Why did I ever come out of the womb, to see trouble, and die in shame?*”

Jeremiah’s mind and emotions jump violently from one to the other. He’s a mess, he’s traumatized. Needs therapy, some would say. But get this, people, he nevertheless spoke God’s words faithfully for more than 40 years.

Jeremiah Cursed his Birth (20:14-18)

“*Cursed be the day I was born. May the day my mother bore me not be blessed ... Why did I ever come out of the womb, to see trouble, and die in shame?*” What does God think about this? Answer: God has already told us what he thinks about this in Jeremiah 1.

Jer 1:4-5 tell us what God thinks about Jeremiah’s birth. *The word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”*

Jeremiah cursed the day of his birth, but he was wrong, plain and simple wrong. God had already spoken clearly to Jeremiah about his birth. Jeremiah’s birth was ordained by God, entirely in line with God’s purposes, as was his life. His call in Jer 1 tells us this is wrong.

Job’s Repentance

Detour into Job. In the last chapter of Job, Job repents in dust and ashes. Job says: *I despise myself, I repent in dust and ashes.* A few verses later, God tells Job’s three friends, *I am angry with you [friends of Job] because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.* And then God repeats the same line, for emphasis: *I am angry with you [friends] because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.*

So, if Job was speaking the truth about God all along, of what does he repent? What did he do wrong? Answer: He did the same thing Jeremiah did. In Job 3, Job cursed the day of his birth, and wished he had never lived. On the same theme, in ch 7 Job said, *I despise my life.* Again in ch 9, *I despise my life.* In 10:1 *I loathe my very life.* (7:16; 9:21).

Of that, Job repented. He had cursed his birth, and had thought his life was a waste. Of that he repented. He had despised his life. Of that he repented, that’s why he uses the same word, *I despise myself, I repent in dust and ashes. Surely I spoke about things I did not understand.*

Job spoke the truth about God, but not about his own life. He thought his life was a mistake, and of that he repented. *I spoke of things I did not understand, no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

Jeremiah needed to repent in the same way. I don’t know if he did or not. Even though Job needed to repent of this, he was still God’s servant all along, and spoke the truth about God all along. God used Job’s life in his service, as Jeremiah. Job detour is over.

Application - Let's pull this together.

Some of God's faithful servants experience life like this. Many don't. Some did back then, and some still do. We are still faithful servants. It can feel like our whole lives have fallen off the rails, but they have not. God used Jeremiah in his service his whole life.

The basic question from God for everyone is, "Will you be my servant? Can I use your life in my service? Can I use your life for my purposes?" Yes or no.

And those who don't experience life like this must not be like Job's friends, or Jeremiah's friends who turned into his accusers. We have to give God permission to treat people we love like this. We don't blame them, or despise them. We don't avoid them, or turn away.

And notice that in the Bible, there is no attempt to hide these things. Jeremiah wrote them out. He had a loyal associate and scribe, Baruch, who wrote these things down. Jeremiah didn't blame himself for his trouble, and it never occurred to him that he should pretend it was better than it was.

Nothing that Jeremiah prayed in these prayers is not also in the Psalms in one way or another. Experiences like this were a part of being God's people. Israel's group worship often included prayers like this. There was no shame in experiencing life like this. No sense of failure. Jeremiah feels awful, but never beats himself up. He didn't do anything wrong, and knows it.

And in spite of all that suffering, there is was the underlying certainty that being God's people was the best thing that could happen to any human. Blessed is the one who delights in God's ways, is how Ps 1 begins, and the Psalms end with praise to God. But we may not silence Jeremiah. Amen.

PRAYER:

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—

with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. (Ps 103)

Father, have compassion on your children, remember how you formed us, remember that we are dust. May your everlasting love be with us, your righteousness with us and our children.

Amen.