

## **Lament: A Prayer for the Disappointed**

*Jeremiah 15:10-21*

Have you ever been disappointed with God? I'm sure all of us would say that at times we've been disappointed by a person, but how about God? Have you ever been disappointed by God? Let me focus the question a little bit more. Have you ever experienced disappointment with God when, as far as you know, you have been right in the middle of what you believe He wants you to be doing? You're following Him, you're trusting Him, you're living out what you believe He has called you to and yet God doesn't seem to be providing what you need; He doesn't seem to be upholding what you thought He has said He would do. Have you ever experienced that kind of disappointment?

Maybe you've stepped into some kind of ministry opportunity at church or elsewhere as an act of obedience to God. You thought it would be a fruitful endeavor and yet no fruit has come. God doesn't seem to be coming through on His end of the deal. Or maybe it's your career – you do what you do because you believe it's what God wants you to do and yet it hasn't been fulfilling. Rather, it has been full of struggle and challenge. Or maybe your disappointment is found in just seeking to live out the calling to live faithfully as a follower of Christ. You've been doing that, but all it has gotten you is hardship and opposition. Your family or friends think you are a fool for following Christ. Have you ever experienced this kind of disappointment with God? Some of you haven't, but many of you have. Some of you show up here this morning and you are deeply disappointed with God.

When you face disappointed with God, what do you do? You can put on a happy face and pretend you're not disappointed. You can live in denial. Or you can lower your expectations of God. In other words, you can just sort of stop trusting Him. Or, you can move through your disappointments. There is a kind of prayer called lament that is a prayer for the disappointed. It is a kind of prayer that can help us move through our disappointment with God.

Today, we are going to look at passage in Jeremiah that gives us some insight into what to do when we are disappointed in God. Jeremiah is one of those books where we can learn from the words of Jeremiah – his message to Judah and the surrounding nations. But it is also a book where we can learn a lot through his life and his interactions with God. Today, we are going to look at a passage that provides a window into Jeremiah's relationship with God and how he deals with his disappointment with God as he wrestles with the assignment God had given him and whether God was keeping His end of the bargain.

As we have already seen, Jeremiah was set apart by God at birth to be a prophet. This was his calling. And it was a hard calling. God sent Him with the message that due to the fact that the nation has forsaken God, He is bringing severe judgment upon them. That's the message that Jeremiah proclaims. But it's a message that the people don't

want to hear. In fact, they want to silence the message. In chapter 11 (11:19ff), we read of how plots were made against his life to keep him from speaking. In chapter 14 (14:13ff), we read about how false prophets were proclaiming a contrary message. Because it was favorable in to the ears of the people, they wanted to listen to the false prophets and not Jeremiah. And so he was a lonely voice preaching the truth. He was faithful to proclaim God's message, but he didn't see any results; all he saw was opposition and persecution. He was disappointed with God.

Jeremiah didn't put on the happy face and he didn't lower his expectations of God. Instead, he prayed through his disappointment with God. Let's take a look at Jeremiah's lament.

### **I. Jeremiah's Prayer of Lament (15:10, 15-18)**

**10**     *Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me  
As a man of strife and a man of contention to all the land!  
I have not lent, nor have men lent money to me,  
Yet everyone curses me.*

You get a pretty good clue that this is going to be a prayer of lament when it starts out, "*Woe to me.*" As I've already mentioned, back in 1:5, God had said to Jeremiah that before he was born God had set him apart with this calling to be a prophet. But here, Jeremiah prays, "Woe that I was even born." In a sense he is cursing the day that his mother gave birth to him. In cursing the day of his birth he is essentially saying, "I hate my calling. I don't want this."

Because of his calling he was a *man of strife and a man of contention to all the land*. The NIV translates this phrase with the meaning the Jeremiah is the object of strife and contention, but it is better to understand that Jeremiah is the one who instigates the "*strife*" and "*contention.*" Both of these words can have the meaning of bringing a lawsuit, or a case, against another in a legal sense. That was what Jeremiah was called to do as a prophet. He kept bringing a legal case against the nation for their disobedience to the laws of God. And because of this he says, *everyone curses me*.

Some time ago there was a situation in which a person got mad at me. I believed that I had acted and spoken appropriately in this situation, but still this person was mad at me and unfairly accused me of some things. That conflict produced turmoil in me for days. I found myself playing it over and over again in my mind. It occupied my mental energies. It was draining. It made my stomach hurt. And it was just conflict with ONE person.

Jeremiah says *everyone curses me*. Can you feel the weight of that? Everyone was against him all because he was obeying God and following his calling. He was in the middle of God's will. And he was suffering for it.

Sometimes we can think the prophets are superhuman; that they are Spock-like with no feelings. Not true. Jeremiah feels this rejection deeply – to the point that he feels that it would be better to never have been born and given this calling.

Before Jeremiah continues his lament, God responds with these words of assurance:

11      *The LORD said, “Surely I will set you free for purposes of good;  
Surely I will cause the enemy to make supplication to you  
In a time of disaster and a time of distress.*

God assures Jeremiah that he will use him for *purposes of good*. He gives Jeremiah the assurance that there will be a time of severe disaster and distress when even his enemies will come and appeal to Jeremiah to pray for them. God goes on to talk about how bad it will get for the nation. The next three verses predict the Exile. God says:

12      *“Can anyone smash iron,  
Iron from the north, or bronze?  
13      “Your wealth and your treasures  
I will give for booty without cost,  
Even for all your sins  
And within all your borders.  
14      “Then I will cause your enemies to bring it  
Into a land you do not know;  
For a fire has been kindled in My anger,  
It will burn upon you.”*

The Babylonians will come from the north. They will be powerful and strong, like iron. No one will be able to *smash* them. They will come against the land and conquer it and carry off the wealth and the treasures of the land as booty to their own land (cr. 20:5). All of this, as God says in verse 13, is *for all your sins* – the sins of the nation that is. God’s anger burns against His people because of their sin.

This is the message that Jeremiah was called to proclaim. To the ears of a rebellious and hard-hearted nation to whom false prophets were speaking lying words of hope, Jeremiah just simply appeared to be an unpatriotic, even a traitorous, voice. And he was persecuted because of that.

As we come to the next verse, Jeremiah continues to pour out his complaint to God.

15      *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.*

Jeremiah prays, “God, you know. You know my situation. Remember me; take notice of me and take action on my behalf!” Specifically, he asks that God would *take vengeance* on those who persecute him. And he wants God to do it now! When he says *do not, in view of Your patience, take me away*, he is expressing that he wants vindication in this life. In the last line in verse 15 he reminds God that he is suffering reproach because of living out his calling.

In verse 16 he recalls his first reception of God’s word. He prays:

16      *Your words were found and I ate them,  
And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;  
For I have been called by Your name,  
O LORD God of hosts.*

In poetic language he speaks of how God’s words became his own. He found them. He ate them. And they became something that brought great joy and delight to his heart. But it was these very words that had Jeremiah in the difficult circumstance in which he found himself. And so he asks for God to act!

In verse 17, he continues to pour out his complaint to God. He says:

17      *I did not sit in the circle of merrymakers,  
Nor did I exult.  
Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone,  
For You filled me with indignation.*

Jeremiah expresses how alone he feels. He says that because of his calling, how God’s hand was upon him, *I sat alone*. He doesn’t join in with those who make merry. In fact, he can’t because God filled him with indignation at the nation for their sin. He saw things the way God saw them. He felt what God felt. And in this he feels alone - one man against the whole nation.

Then, in verse 18, Jeremiah expresses the depths of what he is feeling.

18      *Why has my pain been perpetual  
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?*

Do you feel the agony that he feels? “I’m suffering here God! I’m in pain!” It is clear from the book of Jeremiah that Jeremiah suffers physically, but he also suffers spiritual and emotional anguish because of his calling. He’s not Superman. He’s not Spock. No, he is a man suffering because of his calling. And out of his suffering he gets as honest as he can about how he feels about God. And ultimately, he expresses his disappointment with God this way:

*Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream  
With water that is unreliable?*

I remember during the summers growing up that there would be times on the 6 mile drive from our home into town that you could look into the distance and there appeared to be water on the blacktop road. As a little kid there were times I was convinced it was real. But when you got to where the water had been it was gone. It was only a mirage. It wasn't real.

That is essentially what Jeremiah is saying about God. "God, you are a deceptive stream." He says that God is like the streams in the dessert that run with water for a little bit after a rain, but then dry up. They are unreliable. God was supposed to be the fountain of living waters (2:13), but Jeremiah experiences him like a mirage. In essence, he is saying, "God, you have failed to fulfill your promises to me. Where is the promise of strength to carry out my ministry? Where is the promise of endurance to resist my enemies?" And maybe he is even wondering where the fruitfulness is of his ministry.

This is Jeremiah's prayer of the disappointed. It is honest. It is real. It is what he feels and so he prays it. At this point, it is God's turn to speak. He responds to Jeremiah's prayer. But before we look at that, let me make three point of application from Jeremiah's prayer.

First, **those take God seriously need to learn the language of lament.** And here's why - those who take God seriously eventually will be disappointed by God. God will seem to be silent. He will seem to not follow through on what He has promised. It is a fairly universal experience of those who take God seriously.

We must not think that disappointment with God is a reflection of an unspiritual or weak or immature believer. Jeremiah felt this. He felt utterly abandoned by God. He felt that God wasn't upholding His end of the deal. But Jeremiah was not an unspiritual or weak or immature believer. No, he was someone who took God very seriously. And when God didn't do what he thought he should do, the disappointment was huge.

And so if you take God seriously, there is a good chance that there will be a day when you experience disappointment with God. And so you need to learn the language of lament, which leads to my second comment.

**Lament is a biblical way to deal with our disappointment with God.** What are your options if you are disappointed with God? You can stuff it and put on a happy face. Or you can stop taking him seriously. Or you can actually deal with your disappointment through the prayer of lament. You don't have to stuff your feelings; you don't have to deny your disappointment with God. And you don't have to give up on God and stop taking Him seriously. You can actually go to God with your disappointments. Lament gives you a biblical way to deal with your disappointment with God.

I want to say something that is probably obvious, but if we are truly going to lament, we need to take our disappointment to God. So often when we experience disappointment

with God, we will complain to our friends and will talk to everyone but God. Now, obviously, there is a place to talk to others about such things, but we need to make sure we are actually pouring out our complaints to Him.

Third, this example of Jeremiah's life suggests that **we can be honest in our laments**. If there is one thing that is clear from this passage (and from the psalms of lament) is that we can be honest in expressing our disappointment with God. You might feel like, "How can I express my words of disappointment to God?" But here's the deal, you are already thinking it and God knows that, so why not bring it out into the light and express it and then trust God to meet you right where you are? Be honest with God about your disappointments.

Well, let's look now at God's response to Jeremiah's lament.

## II. God's Response to Jeremiah's Prayer of Lament (19-21)

19     *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.*

Out of his agony, Jeremiah had rejected his calling. And, he had uttered statements about God that were not true. In a sense he had wandered from the truth. God doesn't start by speaking words of comfort to Jeremiah. No, God says to him, "Return and I will restore you." God rebukes him and makes it clear that Jeremiah needs to repent and turn from these words and thoughts of God. He needed to return to his trust in God.

If he will, God says, *I will restore you and Before me you will stand*. To *stand* before God has the idea of standing before Him as His servant. If he will repent, God says to him that he *will become* [God's] *spokesman*. There is sense of a fresh commissioning as a prophet in these words. God will restore him to his role as a prophet and he will continue to serve God, if he will return.

And if Jeremiah will return, God promises strength and endurance.

20     *"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.*  
21     *"So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,  
          And I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent."*

Jeremiah had felt overwhelmed by the persecution that he faced, but God promises that if he will return to Him, Jeremiah's enemies will not prevail over him. He will be like a *fortified wall of bronze*. God gives him reassurance; He says, "*I am with you to save you and deliver you.*" He adds in verses 21, that he will *redeem* him from the grasp of the wicked. These are words of God's presence (*I am with you*); and these are words of deliverance – save, deliver, redeem.

And in these words, Jeremiah is strengthened. He will continue to serve God faithfully for many years. He will continue to face persecution and suffering for living out his call. And though there will be other times where he pours out his complaints to God (18:19ff; 20:7ff), never again does he complain to the Lord as he does here. Jeremiah gets to a better place not by denying his feelings, but by expressing them to God. He finds new strength through the prayer of the disappointed.

God's response to Jeremiah suggests one last point of application. When we lament and when we get honest about how we feel, we need to **be ready to receive God's reply**. God's response might not just be comfort; it might be rebuke. That might be His first reply to our complaint. That's what comes to Jeremiah first right? God tells him he needs to return. There is a need for restoration. Sometimes when we are disappointed with God, we, like Jeremiah, might accuse God of things that aren't true or we might move into some kind of sinful attitude. When we bring our prayer of lament to God, He is going to address such things. But isn't that what we need? And so lament gives us a way for God to confront us if we need that, but it also gives us a way to find renewed encouragement and strength as well just like Jeremiah did. When we lament, we need to be willing to receive God's answer regardless of what it is – a rebuke, a promise, or whatever – and we need to respond appropriately.

Some of you here today are deeply disappointed with God. My encouragement to you is to not put on the happy face; don't deny your disappointment. Others of you, because of your disappointment with God, are ready to lower your expectations about God – you're ready to believe He's not as good, faithful or powerful as you have believed him to be. There is another option – like Jeremiah you can move through your disappointment. You can bring your disappointment to God through the prayer of lament.

Amen.