Introduction; The Broken Covenant

Our session now is a second look at Jeremiah’s confessions in Jeremiah 11-20. We looked in the previous lesson at how these confessions are an expression of Jeremiah’s personal relationship with God, but what I would like to see in this session is that these confessions are really a message toward Israel and toward the people of Judah about the broken covenant. So, in a sense, the prayers of Jeremiah become just as much a statement of what they are going through and the broken covenant with God as the sermons that he preaches. So, we need to understand these confessions—or these laments—in the context of the broken covenant between God and Israel that’s in the background of Jeremiah 11-20.

Jeremiah’s Confessions

Remember this section begins with a sermon in Jeremiah 11 where the Lord is basically charging Judah with covenant unfaithfulness and reminding them that he has and continues to be in the process of bringing the covenant curses against them. The Lord says in this particular sermon, Jeremiah chapter 11, verse 10: “They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers.” There’s the accusation. They’ve broken the covenant. They’re guilty. “Therefore,” here comes the announcement of judgment: “Thus says the Lord God, behold, I am bringing disaster upon them that they cannot escape. Though they cry to me, I will not listen to them. Then the cities of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will go out and cry to the gods to whom they make offerings, but they cannot save them in the time of their trouble. For your gods have become as many as your cities, O Judah, and as many as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have set up to shame,
altars to make offerings to Baal.” So, there’s a context of covenant brokenness; the covenant curses are coming. I believe that these confessions are a reflection and an expression of the broken covenant between God and Israel.

The Broken Relationship between God and Judah

I want to remind us that, in Jeremiah, there are four specific places: the first time that this occurs is right after the Temple Sermon in chapter 7, verse 16: You are not to pray for these people because I’ve already decided to judge them. Your prayers are not going to make a difference. Your intercession is not going to help them. That is a shocking thing, because intercession was one of the primary jobs of a prophet. Now, in case Jeremiah didn’t hear this, the Lord in chapter 11, verse 14, after the sermon about the broken covenant and the covenant curses: “Therefore, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble.” I’m not going to listen to your prayers for them, I’m not going to listen to their prayers, if they want help, if they want someone to save them, then they need to cry out to the gods that they have trusted and built altars to.

Jeremiah chapter 14, verse 11: “The Lord has said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.” Jeremiah, your prayers and your intercession are not going to deliver them from the covenant curses. It is not going to keep them from being destroyed by the sword, by famine, by pestilence. So, three different times here, the Lord says, you’re not to pray for these people--and so the prayers of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 11-20 are a reflection of that broken covenant. It’s not just a broken relationship between God and Judah there’s something broken about prayer and prophetic intercession itself. Now, this is hugely significant in light of the fact--as we already mentioned--praying for the people and interceding for the people, especially during times of apostasy or sin, was a major role that God had given to the prophets.
Prophetic Intercessions: Moses and Samuel

We go back to the example of Moses after the worship of the golden calf, after the people had listened to the response of the spies: first of all, in Exodus 32, Numbers 14, God says that he’s ready to destroy the people, and Moses comes to him and reminds him of the covenant promises that he’s made. What about the Egyptians? What about your reputation? What are they going to think when they hear that you have destroyed the people that you rescued and delivered out of bondage in Egypt? And it says there that the Lord changed his mind.

In the book of Samuel during the time when Israel asks for a king, the people had rejected God, in a sense, by doing that. The Lord had promised to provide them a king, but it would be on his terms and in his way and they had sinned against the Lord. At the end of Samuel’s life, as he’s calling them back to their responsibilities to keep the covenant he intercedes for them as a prophet and, in a sense, he turns away God’s judgment on the people by the sin that they had committed in asking for a king.

So, here’s what happens near the end of Samuel’s public ministry to the people. They’re together for this assembly and the Lord sends a thunderstorm during a time of harvest, when rain was not normally expected. The people got the message that God was sending them a word that he was displeased with them. So, it says that Samuel called upon the Lord and the Lord sent the thunder and the rain that day, and all of the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. So, he prayed, and God brought the thunder and the rain. But, then, the people are going to say this to Samuel in chapter 12 verse 19: “All the people said to Samuel, 'pray for your servants to the Lord your God that we may not die for we have added to all of our sins this evil to ask for ourselves a king'.” They realize God is angry, they could potentially die as God puts them to death, please turn away God’s anger.

Verse 20: “Samuel said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And do not turn aside from empty things that cannot profit or deliver,
for they are empty. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover,…” and this is the important verse here, “as for me, far be it from me, that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.” So, in this particular situation, it was Samuel’s intercession that had spared the people when they had sinned by asking for a king. Samuel says, in my ongoing role, in the final days of my ministry, as I continue to be a prophet, far be it for me that I would sin by ceasing to pray for you. For a prophet not to pray for the people, that’s the ultimate sin. So, in a sense, it’s a strange thing that God is coming to Jeremiah and saying, look don’t fulfill your prophetic role, don’t intercede for this people.

God Changing His Mind: Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah

The exact opposite of what we see with Moses and with Samuel. In looking at that phrase that the Lord changed his mind, I really believe that if Moses doesn’t pray, then God destroys the people. This is not simply a metaphor; this is not simply, “God knew all along what he was going to do, so he’s just trying to teach Moses a lesson.” Moses’ intercession effectively changes the direction that God is going to take. So, in a sense, is this a metaphor? Yes; in some sense it is. God doesn’t change his mind in the way that we do; on a whim, I’m going to MacDonald’s instead of Burger King. God doesn’t change his mind in the sense that he has limited understanding or knowledge of what’s happening in the future as open theism has taught. But, it is saying beyond just simply being a metaphor that one of the real aspects of God’s nature in the Old Testament is that he was open to the prayers of his prophets and he changed the course of his actions based on either how the prophet would pray or how the people would respond. It’s a real thing. God is entering into real give-and-take relationships with the people.

In a sense, we almost have to understand that yes, there’s a God in the Bible who is eternal and outside of time and he knows all things, but there’s also a God who comes into time, interacts with people, deals with them in real history and in real give-and-take relationships. So the prayers of God’s prophets
ultimately at times change the direction of God’s actions.

Now there are some passages in the Bible like I Samuel 15 or Numbers 23 that say that God does not change his mind. What do we do with these passages that say there are times where God does change his mind? The answer is: It depends on the circumstances. There are times when God has sworn an oath, when God has made a covenant promise that he is not going to turn back from. God may have issued a sentence of judgment that he says is unalterable. At those times, the Lord does not change his mind. One of those times has happened when God rejects Saul as king, and Samuel, though, understanding that the Lord sometimes does change his mind, prays all night. If God is simply immutable and never changes his mind, there’s really no reason for him to do that. But when the Lord comes back to him and says in this particular case, “When the Lord has issued a decree that is unchangeable, when the Lord has sworn an oath, he does not change his mind.”

But in other times, like this situation with Moses, in Exodus 32, or like Moses again with the children of Israel in Numbers chapter 14, God is open to changing his course of direction based upon how people respond to him and prophetic intercession often turned God’s judgment away from the people of Israel and Judah.

We have another one of these examples of powerful and effective prophetic intercession in Amos 7:1-6. Amos sees a vision of a locust swarm that invades the land of Israel. Remember the devastating effects that those kinds of things could have, and this locust swarm almost completely consumes and destroys the land of Israel. As Amos sees that, it says that he cried out to the Lord and he said, “Ah! Lord God! Israel is too small! They could never survive this!” He comes to God, pleads for God’s mercy, gives God motivation for answering his prayer. And the amazing thing again, the same thing that we see with Moses, God relented, God nacham, he changed his mind. He did not bring the judgment. Then Amos sees the vision of the fire that sweeps through the land. Amos, by the same prayer, the
same petition to God, “Ah, Lord God, Israel’s too small.” They cannot withstand a judgment like this fire that’s going to sweep through the land and consume it. God changes his mind and not send the fire.

Past the Point of No Return

So, for God to say to Jeremiah, do not pray for these people, do not intercede for them, what that means is that that is an unalterable decree of judgment. We have seen the closing down at the beginning of Jeremiah 1-25, repeated, recurring calls for the people to return and the opportunity to do that. Then in chapters 17 and 11-20, there are only three calls to return. Then chapters 21-25, those calls basically disappear. There is a closing down of the opportunity to repent and that is reflected again in the fact that God tells Jeremiah, “Don’t waste your time praying for these people. We are past the point where I am willing to respond to that.”

Now looking at that past history that we’ve just talked about, the intercession of Moses and Samuel, they’re the primary examples of prophetic intercessors who delivered the people. The Lord says this to Jeremiah in chapter 15:1-2 and now I think these verses make more sense in light of what we just said. “The Lord said to me, ‘Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight and let them go and when they ask you, “Where shall we go?,” you shall say to them, thus says the Lord, ‘Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, those who are for sword, to the sword, those who are to famine, to famine, and those who are to captivity, to captivity.’” Look, if Moses and Samuel were to show up on the scene, and if they were to intercede, I would not listen.

So, we might look at Jeremiah’s ministry and say Jeremiah’s kind of a sub-prophet because you had these great prophets in Israel’s past who had it in with God, and God responded to them when the people had committed serious sin, the Lord forgave them and the Lord relented from sending judgment. The problem is not with Jeremiah’s gifting as a prophet. The problem is not that Jeremiah is not
as tight with God as Moses and Samuel were. The Lord says, “Look, even if Moses and Samuel were around today, they would not be able to intercede for these people.” There has been a closing down of the opportunities to repent. God now is saying the time for intercession, the time for praying for the people, that’s over because God is ready to destroy them.

So, at one level, we see God telling the prophet not to pray for Israel. And then, at the other level, in this same context and in this same chapter, we have the prophet praying to God. The confessions and the laments of Jeremiah reflect that he’s no longer interceding for the people of Israel. So, instead of praying for God to deliver them, Jeremiah is praying for God to slaughter his enemies like sheep for the slaughter because they are covenant rebels who have not listened to God. They have shaken their fists in God’s face, they have defied God, they have defied God’s messenger. It’s not simply that they’ve mistreated Jeremiah; they have rejected the word of God and on the basis of the covenant, they deserve this judgment.

So, the role of a prophet in the days of Moses, Samuel was to intercede that God would relent from sending judgment. The implications are reflecting that now the role of the prophet is to, in a sense, pray against the people. So, the brokenness of the covenant, the removal of prophetic intercession, is being reflected by these confessions where instead of praying these great prayers like Moses and Samuel prayed for God to spare the people. Jeremiah in the desperate situation that he is living in is actually praying for God to judge the people. Andrew Shead says that Jeremiah, in a sense, is functioning as a mediator between God and Israel. He represents the anger and the wrath of God toward the people of Israel, and he represents the pain and the sinfulness of Israel towards God. Shead says, “Standing between God and man in this situation is a painful place to be.”

So, the confessions, the laments of Jeremiah, reflect the breaking down of prophetic intercession. At another level, the prayers of Jeremiah, the intercession
of Jeremiah, however, is also a way of God reflecting himself through the person of Jeremiah to the point where Jeremiah becomes a living example of God to the people. As Jeremiah is praying and pouring out his heart, his pain, his grief and his sufferings, at one level, he represents a struggling human with all of his foibles and weaknesses, someone that I can definitely relate to as a minister of God, but at another level, he is representing God to Israel.

Jeremiah as a Symbol of God’s Pathos and Grief

The pain in these prayers is, in a sense, the grief of God over the sins of the people of Israel. This is not just in the confessions, this idea of the pain of God are the suffering of the prophet. Jeremiah you know, and Jeremiah is not just a sensitive guy who needs to get over some of this. He's not a guy who needs to go to therapy or something like this. In a sense, Jeremiah is representing, through his tears, the tears of God. That begins actually before we ever get to the laments. I want to go back to chapter 4 verses 19 to 22. Jeremiah's job is to express or to represent God to Israel; that's why Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. Again, it's not just because Jeremiah's really a sensitive guy or Jeremiah's a guy who is able to get in touch with his feminine side, or, Jeremiah is this kind of psychological prophet. This grief of the prophet is an expression of the pain and the grief of God himself. One of the things that commentators of the book of Jeremiah have noted is that in these passages where Jeremiah is talking about his pain, his weeping, he's the weeping prophet, sometimes it's difficult to tell who exactly is talking. Is it God or is it the prophet, is it the people or could, in some sense, it be all three of those things?

So one of these grief or anguish passages, one of the first ones we see in the book is back in Jeremiah chapter 4, verses 19 to 22. Listen to Jeremiah's grief and anguish. Jeremiah says, “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, and the alarm of war. Crash follows hard on crash, the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are laid waste, my curtains in a moment. How
long must I see the standard and hear the sound of the trumpet?” Now these sound like the words of Jeremiah. He's observing the invading army and all of the terrible things are happening and he's grieving and mourning about this. This looks like the anguish of the prophet of this vision but listen to verse 22 and it says this, "For my people are foolish; and they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are ‘wise’--in doing evil! But how to do good they know not." There at that point it's difficult for us to say as it's talking about "my people". Is it the prophet or is it the Lord? I'm not sure that interpretively we need to make a choice: I think it's both. Jeremiah has swallowed the words of God in a sense that he's become the expression of God in his person. So we don’t really need to know is it Jeremiah or is it God, it's both.

Chapter 9, verses 1 to 3, is another expression before we ever get to the confessions of Jeremiah’s pain and grief over the destruction over his people, Jeremiah says, “Oh that my head were waters, and that my eyes were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” Again, it seems like the human reaction of a prophet to the destruction and the death and the doom that’s going to be visited on the people of Judah. Then he goes on to say in verse 2, “Oh that I had in the desert a travelers’ lodging place, that I may leave my people and go away from them!” I wish I could escape from this but instead I weep constantly because of the disaster. So is it the prophet or is it the Lord? Well, it sounds like the prophet. But in verse 3, we read this, “They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil and they do not know, me declares the Lord.” And so, maybe it is Jeremiah who wishes that he could weep day and night because of the destruction that’s coming on Israel. But it’s the grief of God, it’s the voice of God that answers in verse 3. In a sense, here what is happening is the weeping of the prophet becomes the weeping of God. The voice of the prophet coalesces into the voice of God. This back and forth, is expressed as well as when we go further down into chapter 9. What we have there is that the Lord goes back and forth
between his anger and his grief--his anger and his grief.

God’s Pain and Sadness within the Old Testament

You know, we have this understanding of God sometimes in the Old Testament. He’s simply a God of wrath, he’s a God of anger, he loves to destroy, he loves to send pestilences on people. He loves to zap them with lightning bolts. This section is revealing the pain of God himself, as he observes and watches what is happening to his people. Listen to the emotion that comes out. First of all there’s going to be the emotion of extreme anger in verse 9. The Lord says, “Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on them on a nation such as this?” Absolutely. Remember they were an unfaithful prostitute. They had been unfaithful to the covenant for hundreds and hundreds of years. They had betrayed God by worshiping other idols. They had been like a wife unfaithful to her husband. “Shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?” Absolutely. But listen to the grief that comes out in verse 10. Is it God or is it the prophet? “I will take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone.” There’s this sadness. Look at the ruin, look at the devastation. Look at the destruction that has come on the people of God and it’s like this seems to be the prophet again as one of the people experiencing what’s going on. But in verse 11, the Lord is speaking. And the Lord says, “I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals, and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without habitation.” So what we have going on here is God is speaking in verse 9, God is speaking words of anger. God is speaking in verse 11, God is speaking words of anger. There is this section of grief in verse 10 where the speaker is not clearly identified. But we have to hear that in some way as the voice of God because he’s the one who’s speaking both before and after.

God’s Grief and Anger within the Old Testament

There is this idea of God who is angered by the people’s sins, the fierce
anger of the Lord will not turn back until it's accomplished all that he’s designed, but, on the other side, God’s broken heart over the destruction of the daughter of Jerusalem, his daughter, his wife. He’s experiencing all of these things. We talked about the language of the judgment of Judah as a woman and often how many feminists criticize that as an expression of just things about women that are not appropriate for our culture and our time or that God is being portrayed as an abusive husband or a divine rapist. But I want to remind us that the purpose of this was not simply to vent his anger, it is to pour out the pain of a betrayed husband.

I remember when all of my children got their driver's license. They had to go and appear in front of the judge and be reminded of the privileges and responsibilities that go along with driving. The judge turned over the session to a police officer who showed all of our kids a video of a traffic accident that took the life of a young person. The judge did not do that because he hated kids and wanted to see them in car wrecks. The police officer did not do that because he had been jaded by his years in law enforcement. The judge and the officer painted those vivid pictures as a warning to my children. As a parent, I sat there and was I was thankful that they did that. I see God doing the same thing through the prophet Jeremiah.

Theologians sometimes have talked about the “impassability” of God, the idea that God is so separate from his creation and so holy other that God does not experience either pain or joy by any other creature or their response or their reaction to them. I understand the reason why theologian’s wanted to stress God’s un-changeability, his immutability, his holy otherness, but that image of God does not work with the book of Jeremiah. God is definitely a God who grieves over the pain of his people. Terrence Fretheim has talked about the suffering of God and I think that is a very accurate portrayal of the God of the book of Jeremiah. God weeps along with the prophet Jeremiah. He is not a God who is sitting impassively in heaven saying, “I’m going to work this out, I’m going to
accomplish my sovereign purpose, and ultimately, I’m happy with that.” The Lord, as he sees people making choices that bring about destruction on themselves, as the relationship with his people is severed, he grieves over that. The idea of an impassable God, for whatever theological reasons we may want to use to protect the immutability of God, it simply is not an accurate portrayal of the God of the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 12:7-11, again the emotion of God in all of this and the back and forth between God’s pain and God’s anger. Chapter 12:7, the Lord says, “I have forsaken my house: I have abandoned my heritage; I have given” – and listen to how he describes the people – “the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.” God didn’t do that because he wanted to destroy them and the fact that he describes him as the beloved of his soul, and as his heritage, and as his most precious possession, it reflects how deeply this pained the Lord.

The Prophet Hosea, Hosea 11:8-9, the Lord says, “How can I give Ephriam up?” No matter what they’ve done, I cannot give them up, I will not stop loving them. Therefore, I will not vent the full wrath and anger of God upon my people and I will not completely consume them and destroy them. But the Lord says that I’ve forsaken my heritage, I’ve abandoned the beloved of my soul and that causes God deep pain. Amazing image of God, just think about God in that light. But then, God comes back in Jeremiah chapter 12, verse 8 and says, “My heritage has become to me like a lion in the forest; she has lifted up her voice against me; therefore I hate her.” So let's juxtapose that. The beloved of my soul – I hate her. Sometimes we use the expression today that God loves the sinner and hates the sin, and I understand the reasons why we do that, but at times, the Old Testament is almost going to convey the idea that God doesn’t just hate the sin, he hates the sinner as well. That’s a scary thing to deal with, but that’s God’s wrath, that’s God’s anger, it’s a part of the Old Testament that we need to hear it.

Verse 9--“Is my heritage to me like a hyena’s lair? Are the birds of prey against her all around? Go, and assemble all of the wild beasts; and bring them to
devour. Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard; they have trampled down my portion; they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.” So here’s the Lord in his anger saying, “I’m going to bring these wild animals against Judah, and I'm going to have these wild animals destroy them” but then in the next verse, the Lord is grieving over the fact that the leaders of Israel are the ones who have destroyed his beautiful vineyard. The Lord had planted it and blessed it, in a place where it was going to be absolutely fruitful, but it is the leaders and the Lord grieves over that. Verse 11, “They have made it a desolation: desolate, it mourns to me.” So the land is mourning, and God hears that weeping and it touches his heart and it grieves him at the same time that he is giving the vineyard over to the wild animals to eat it and to consume it. Then in the midst of this mourning, the Lord says, “Upon all of the bare heights in the desert destroyers have come, the sword of the Lord devours from one end of the land to the other; no flesh has peace. They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns; they have tired themselves out but profit nothing. They shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the Lord.” So again, we have this passage. Which is it, God? Are you a God of passionate love, and is Israel the beloved of your soul or is it the target of your judgment that you hate and that you want to consume in your fierce anger? The answer is: both of those things.

So, as Jeremiah is praying his confessions and at least in places as Jeremiah is grieving over what is happening, and what he’s experiencing, and what he’s going through he is not just expressing the hardships of his own ministry, he is reflecting the grief and the heart of God over what is happened in the midst of this fractured and broken covenant where the relationship between God has been severed from his people.

God’s Rejection of Judah’s Prayers of Repentance

Yet we are in the mist of this context dealing with broken covenant, we are in the mist of this context where we have confessions and laments of the prophets are all under the prophet Jeremiah. Now God is going to specifically say this to
Jeremiah are to the people [14:17-18], “You shall say to them this word: 'Let my eyes run down with tears night and day and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter of my people is shattered with a great wound, with a grievous blow. If I go out into the field, behold, those pierced by the sword! And if I enter the city, behold, the diseases of famine! For both prophet and priest ply their trade through the land and have no knowledge.” Here is what's important in this passage, the Lord says to Jeremiah “You shall say to them this word: Let my eyes run down with tears.” So what’s significant about this is that the weeping of the prophet is actually the revelation of God. God says I want you to weep and that is my word to them in this particular situation. So again it not just that Jeremiah is a human being saying this an awful situation, it not just Jeremiah's human emotion, it not just Jeremiah as a member of the people of Israel thinking “look at what our country is going to go through,” it’s not just Jeremiah grieving and the Lord saying to him, “suck it up Jeremiah that’s the word of the Lord let's move on.” The Lord says to Jeremiah, as part of your prophetic word, don’t just say “Thus says the Lord,” also stand in front of them and say, “thus weeps the Lord.” Andrew Shead makes this comment he says “If God's intention and God’s design had simply been to tell the people the message that they needed to hear, the Lord could have communicate that message from the distances of the divine council in heaven; but the Lord wanted to communicated that message via a person, via an instrument. And by seeing the weeping of Jeremiah, “Oh that my head were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night,” that’s not just an overly sensitive prophet that is God himself grieving for the destruction of his people.”

So beyond simply the confessions being an expression of Jeremiah's personal difficulty, the confessions are about the brokenness of the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant is broken, the marriage is irreparably damaged, and prayer itself is shutting down.

Command Not to Pray

Instead of praying for the people, Jeremiah is called to pray against them
and to ask God to judge them. Now as a prophet the Lord comes to you, the Lord tells you don’t pray for those people, how would you respond to that? If you are the pastor of a church and you hear a message form God one day, don't pray for your flock, I think as much as you wanted to listen to what God said, you would probably pray even when you couldn't help yourself. Jeremiah in a very real way does that in chapter 14 because we have the brokenness of prayer, not just between God and the prophet but we have the brokenness of prayer between God and the people. In chapter 14 the people come to God with a confession of their sin and here is when they're going to pour their hearts and prayer to God.

Remember that Jeremiah is the one who is expressing these prayers for the people so in a sense God had said Jeremiah don't pray for these people don't intercede for them I'm not going to answer anyway. Jeremiah is praying a confession of sin for the people, he's doing what God told him not to do. Here is what the prayer says: “Though our iniquities testify against us act, Oh Lord for you name's sake, for our backslidings are many, our shuvs, our turning away are many.” That is what the prophet had said about them back in chapters two and three, we have sinned against you. Let me ask you a question, does that sound like a good confession? It looks pretty good, it's got all the right elements in there, a proper measure of humility and all that. This is what a confession is supposed to be. Then they say to God, “Oh you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land and like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night? Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save us. Lord, why would you turn away from your people? Yet you O Lord are in the midst of us and we are called by your name, do not leave us.” Is that a good confession, absolutely, they are confessing their sins. They're confessing their needs and their dependence on God.

In fact, this is the kind of prayer that Jeremiah tells them back in chapter 3 verses 22-25, this is what you need to pray. The Lord says there: “Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.” The people say, “Behold, we come
to you, for you are the Lord our God. Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on
the mountains. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.” That passage
is envisioning the time when they are finally going to renounce their idols. They
are finally going to revoke their past practices and they are going to turn to God in
confession.

We look at this in chapter 14 and well maybe we are here, maybe we are
finally at this place and all of this judgment and all of these other things that are
going to happen in the rest of the book are not necessary. They are saying exactly
all the right words to God, they are not saying the words to God that they said
when he indicted them in the court room in chapter two. We have not sinned, we
have not followed after all the Baals, we are innocent, we don't understand what
you are talking about. “At the same time they were saying, “Lord, we can't help
ourselves, we have to run after these gods. We say to a tree you are our father, we
say to a stone you are our mother.” Now they are not saying those kinds of things -
they are saying the right words. So we think that God obviously is going to
answer their prayers. God obviously is going say, “Great we are going to have a
time of national revival, the judgment is averted”—that’s the end of the book of
Jeremiah. But, no, verse 10 says this thus says the Lord concerning those people,
“They have loved to wander thus, they have not restrained their feet, therefore the
Lord does not accept them.” Now he would remember their iniquity and he will
punish their sins.

God’s Sadness and Determination while Enacting His Judgment

Jeremiah don't pray for these people. Jeremiah: Lord I can't help it I've got to
pray for them. The people are coming to you and confessing their sins. The Lord
says, “Jeremiah I am not going to listen because they are just words. And they
have not restrained their feet they are not really turning around! In a shocking
statement the Lord says here is I am going to remember their iniquity. If you think
about the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31 when the Lord says, “I will no
longer remember their sins,” we are not at that point yet because the people have
not been changed, they have not been transformed. Great prayer and great words, orthodox, it can make it to any conventional book of prayer but words without real substantive repentance don't mean anything. So if that’s not enough. The prophet comes to the Lord again on the behalf of the people with another confession in the same chapter and immediately after this passage where the Lord has said, “let my eyes run down with tears day and night and let them not cease for the virgin daughter of my people is shattered.” The people come to God again and again he tells the prophet, don't pray for these people. Jeremiah responds, “Lord I can't help it, I am going to pray for them anyway.”

Here’s the prayer that’s found there [Jer 14:19]: “Have you utterly rejected Judah? Does your soul loathe Zion? Why have you struck us down so that there is no healing for us? We looked for peace, but no good came, we look for a time of healing, but behold, terror.” Now right here it almost sounds like our suffering is kind of unjust. We don’t understand what you’re doing. Listen to what they say after this in verse 20 of chapter 14: “We acknowledge our wickedness, O Lord, and the iniquity of our fathers.” They’re no longer saying, “the fathers eat the sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” We’re just as sinful as our fathers, they acknowledge that. “We have sinned against you. Do not spurn us, for your name’s sake: do not dishonor your glorious throne, [Jerusalem].” And then they say this: “Remember and do not break your covenant with us.” This is highly ironic, right? Chapter 11 introducing the section says, you have broken the covenant, the covenant curses are coming. Chapter 14, Lord don’t break your covenant with us, this is a good prayer, again it could work in our liturgical prayer books.

But this is the time God responds in chapter 15, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards these people. Send them out of my sight” and they will experience pestilence, plague, and all of things that the Lord had threatened to bring against them. The covenant curses are coming into effect. Great confession, great words of prayer, the Lord is not going
to respond; Jeremiah do not pray for these people. Here the Lord is going to continue what he’s going to do. Here is the response to that great confession: “I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers”, declares the Lord: “the sword to kill, dogs to tear, birds of the air, and the beast of earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all of the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.”

Now the judgment that he had threatened a while ago that he has diverted, that’s back in play. The Lord is not listening to their prayers and God is going to again talk about the grief of all of this in the verses that follow and we’ll close by looking at this passage. Chapter 15, verse 5, “Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem, or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord; you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you--I am weary of relenting. I have winnowed them with a winnowing fork in the gates of the land; I have bereaved them; I have destroyed my people.” You see this angry God, but I also see the irony of that question: “Who will have pity on you oh Jerusalem? Or who will grieve for you?” The answer to that is the Lord himself will.

God says in verse 8, “I have made their widows more in number than the sands of the sea.” The people said don’t break your covenant with us, in the Abrahamic covenant, God promises to make the people of Israel as numerous as the sands on the seashore. Now in the reversal of the Abrahamic covenant, God is making their widows more than the sands on the seashore. The covenant is broken. “She who has bore seven has grown feeble; she has fainted away; her sun went down while it was yet day; she has been shamed and disgraced. And the rest of them I will give to the sword before their enemies, declares the Lord.”

Conclusion

The confessions of Jeremiah are not just the prayers of a struggling prophet. They, in a sense, help us to see a grieving God. In our theology of God, Jeremiah 11-20 reminds us of something very powerful: that God is a God of incredible
passion and emotion. He is a God who experiences and who feels wrath and anger
over sin and we best not neglect or avoid or try to do away with that aspect of
God. But his is also a God of love and mercy and compassion and grace who
grieves even as he brings judgment on his people. Through the confessions of
Jeremiah, we’re not only given insight into the character of the prophet, we’re also
provided revelation into the character and the nature of God himself.

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