

LENTEN STUDY BOOK 2002

PRIVATE STUDY ONLY

CRY OF HOPE

Jeremiah and Lamentations

by

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In gratitude to

Gayelene, Scott and David and our Argentine Family

Together we learnt of being God's children

in the midst of

dictatorship, war, chaos and love

and to affirm

'Dios es fiel'.

God is faithful.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

It was a great joy to lead the Bible Studies at the 1988 Argentine Universities Bible Association National Conference: 'Please share something from your time among us.' The years of national crisis: the 'Dirty War' with over 30,000 'disappeared', The Falkland Islands War, economic turmoil - inflation running at 5,000% per annum, massive poverty, and distress. It all reminded me of a much earlier one who had held onto God in the midst of national crisis. One who had been brutally frank in his relationship with God and His people. We would continue to learn of walking in God's way from this one. Who was this person? Jeremiah.

My addresses were edited into a devotional book '30 Days with Jeremiah: A love waiting with hope' published by Certeza Argentina in 1989. It has been republished in two further editions and found helpful to Spanish language readers for over a decade now.

This Lenten Study Book 2002 develops that reflection and has led to significant rewriting for an Australian context. I have used the 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' to deepen the Lenten dimension of lament over the broken covenant relationship and God's judgement on His people. This later aspect, in particular, was deepened by late night conversation with my friend Rev Laurie McIntyre, to whom I am most grateful. I also wish to thank Mamie Long for her encouragement and patience in the forming of this book.

My prayer is that these studies may be used to deepen our faith as we acknowledge sin for what sin really is, and as we experience the treasure of God's forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ.

Shalom,

John Harrower

25 July 2001

First anniversary as Bishop of Tasmania

INTRODUCTION

Throughout these studies we will discover that Jeremiah was very human. Only a person of flesh and bone could say, ‘Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord!’ in one moment and one sentence later, ‘Cursed be the day I was born!’.

Little did Jeremiah realise what was going to happen to his life on that day when he received God's calling. As we are going to be discovering throughout these studies, Jeremiah's prophetic activity was very wide. He served God for something more than 40 years in a very special moment of history for the nation of Israel – during the sixth century before Christ.

Jeremiah is the prophet many people most likened to Jesus (Matthew 16:14). He lived a truly gigantic life; totally given over to God. Within this magnificent life we find his weaknesses; the ones that make him so human, and so accessible to ordinary people. Jeremiah spoke of himself, argued and listened to God. Through Jeremiah's words we are permitted to see the intimacy of his relationship with God. That is why it is possible to sense God's presence with us today and be strengthened to serve the Lord Jesus with our lives.

GUIDE FOR DAILY MEDITATION

Before reading the bible passage ask the Holy Spirit to help you to understand and to receive God's Word. Through Christ, you are in the presence of God the Father. Draw close to him with confidence, humility and expectancy.

Read the biblical text for the day with care. Note the previous and preceding readings to put the passage in its context.

Think about what you are reading; waiting with an open mind, ready to obey the Lord's instructions. Complete your meditation reading the comments provided.

Take time to reflect upon the things that God is saying to you through your study and note them down.

Now make your discoveries the theme of your prayer. Ask for strength to live what you have learned. Praise the Lord and serve him with joy.

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WEEK ONE

ASH WED

Who am I?

Jeremiah 1:1–5

Jeremiah was a polemical man; of strong words, courage, anguish, badly treated but persevering. Today, 2500 years later, we say of people like Martin Luther King that he was 'a Jeremiah'.

Jeremiah's name means something like 'the Lord finds', or 'the Lord exalts'. As a member of a priestly family, Jeremiah had received instruction in the faith of Israel.

His home town, Anathoth, was situated 5 km from the capital, Jerusalem and this allowed him to know what was happening in the national life of his country.

The Lord was the source of his messages (prophesies) and the words of the prophet were the words of the Lord himself and because of this Jeremiah knew that they would be accomplished.

A man who knew he belonged to God (1:4-5)

The words of the Lord reminded Jeremiah, and they remind us, that every person enters the world created and loved by God. Cartoonist Michael Leunig depicts our human yearning to belong, to be loved, to find ourselves at 'home': A man lying in bed exclaims, 'I'm homesick . . . I yearn . . . I pine . . . I want to go home.' His partner responds, 'What are you saying . . . ? This is your home. There's your underpants on the floor. . . Your car in the drive. Your dishes in the sink . . . Your cockatoo in its cage.' Looking out the window his partner continues, 'Here is your city. . . There are your people. This is your life . . .'. The man turns his face away, curls up under the bed clothes and silently repeats, 'I want to go home.' In the 4th century Augustine grasped this yearning expressing it in his prayer to God, 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.'

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.' Jeremiah is reminded at the very outset of his ministry that he belongs, is loved, has a 'home' with the One who knows him and formed him. This unbreakable relationship will sustain him, is 'home', even in the depths of a wider rejection and marginalisation.

Reflection: If in 20 years' time you were to write your biography: 'The words of ... (put your own name here) ...', what place would your family, your people and your Lord have in the formation of your life? Like the aged apostle John, will you be able to affirm 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.' (1 John 3:1)?

Thought: Who am I? my answer, 'I am made by God, and I am child of God.'

Prayer: Lord: Before I was born you knew me, so I am not here by chance. You chose me, I belong to you and you appointed me to serve. Thank you that I am your child. Alleluia! Amen.

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you’. To ‘consecrate’ is to ‘set apart’ from all other uses for a specific sacred purpose. Thus Jeremiah was being set apart from all other uses for God’s use. This is both a great privilege and a great responsibility.

God is totally committed to the relationship so formed. Through Jeremiah God reminds Israel of their relationship, calls them back to it, judges them for their continued disloyalty and yet is ever seeking to restore their relationship.

Jeremiah’s first preaching in Jerusalem is recorded in the very next chapter (2:2) and recalls the unfailing devotion and loyalty of God’s people in the first delights of their honeymoon following the sealing of their covenant relationship in the desert. Israel is depicted as God’s bride - a new life has been entered into. Marriage is the image God has of his relationship with his people.

Jeremiah was still a youth: would he commit himself to and continue in God’s way? He was to be sorely tried by the mockery of his people, including their leaders. This sense of abandonment by both people and God would drive Jeremiah to curse the day of his birth (20:14,15) and question why he had ever been born and set apart with God’s promise of relationship with him. And yet, he continued faithfully serving God, ‘for to you I have committed my cause’ (20:12b)

God’s sovereign right to rule over those set apart by and for him, meant that no-one and nothing was to exercise any ‘right’ or authority over them. Moreover, their own ‘rights’ were now to be exercised within the freedom, joy and devotion of right relationship with God.

Reflection:

Who am I? I am God’s child.

Where am I? I am in God’s world.

What am I here to do? I am made by God to love him and to love my neighbour.

Thought: I am a child of God on pilgrimage with his people, in the midst of a chaotic world.

Prayer: Creator God, I thank you that from the beginning you created me and set me apart for you. May your Holy Spirit make and keep me loyal, devoted: deeply in love with you. Amen.

This refers to the particular task that God assigned to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was set apart by God for God's purposes. There is no clearer statement of the purposeful nature of life than to be 'appointed' by the very One who created you for his purpose/goals/utility. Meaning is being conferred now also in terms of utility as previously it has been defined in being formed by and known by God.

One of my favourite cartoons has Snoopy lying on the roof of his kennel thinking, 'Sometimes I lie awake at night wondering why I was born . . . Why was I put on this earth? What am I doing here? . . . and then suddenly hits me . . . I haven't got the slightest idea.' I identify with Snoopy's musing because at times I feel so uncertain why I am here. Yet, I thank God that he has a clear idea of why each of us has been put on this earth.

God has a really clear idea of why we are put on this earth: 'In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.' (Ps 139:16) We are given a task. In the words of the Apostle Peter, 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.' (1 Peter 2:9) We are called to consecrate ourselves to Christ and to his work in the world.

Reflection: During the Service of Confirmation: 'We pray that those who are baptized and confirmed will be empowered by the Holy Spirit for the ministry and service to which God has called them.' Our understanding of Christian vocation comes from the Holy Spirit's empowering and gifting of all believers in God's service. The unhelpful, but not uncommon, narrow definition of vocation as only 'deacon, priest and bishop' has both disempowered the laity in their God given vocation in life and service at work, home, recreational pursuits and in some perceptions often removed the 'ordained' from earthly relevance!

Thought: 'There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.' (1 Corinthians 12:4,11, 27)

Prayer: Creator God, I thank you that from the beginning you created me to serve your purposes in this world. Amen.

In the first study we saw how the Lord had affirmed Jeremiah's identity. But to be called by God does not mean that everything always goes smoothly; so what does Jeremiah's cry, 'Ah, Sovereign Lord', mean? This same anguish and insecurity had already been experienced by Moses (Exodus 3: 11-12) and Jonah (Jonah.4:3) when God called them. While hesitation can show humility and sensitivity, it should not be an excuse for indifference or saying 'I'm keeping out of it'.

It is important for us to realise that the ministry is the Lord's and not ours. If we fail in attempting his work, that is God's business. What should matter to us is that we are doing God's will. The Lord knows everything and he calls us to fulfil his purposes. 'I am with you', he says. We are able to overcome hesitation through knowing that we are ambassadors of the King, with his authority and supported by his power.

We can lack confidence in ourselves while we look into the mirror but upon looking at God we see the source of power and victory. Perhaps it is better that our reticence brings us to trust in God. With the apostle Paul we are able to affirm: 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.' (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The Lord is not only with us to protect and support us, but he also lives in us to give to us love and power. Jeremiah fears that he is not able to speak properly and receive the words of God. The Lord is the true speaker. We should not fear failure. God will accomplish his mission.

Reflection: Many times in our life we may well participate in a dialogue like the following:

YOU and GOD

'I cannot' 'I can'
 'I am not able to' 'I am'
 'Others will do it better' 'I chose you'
 'Who, me?' 'I appointed you'
 'Don't be crazy. Not me!' 'Yes. You.'
 'Alright Lord, have it your way; let's get on with it.'

Thought: 'I am with you.'

Prayer: Thank you Lord because you are with me today and everyday. May the Holy Spirit live in me now and always.

Before God sends us out in mission, he expresses his affection for us. He cares for us because he is love and all that the Father of the family does with his children is grounded in this love. The task that God gives us is always preceded by affection. We do not live to gain his love but what we do is motivated and accompanied by his love.

Jeremiah's ministry was initiated by God: 'I have put ...'. God touched the lips of Jeremiah and thus he identified and involved himself personally in the ministry of his precious servant.

Jeremiah's ministry was sustained by divine power: 'I appoint you over nations ...'

The prophet will be an instrument of divine strength that will overcome Satan's strongholds in every nation. (2 Corinthians 10:4). The word of the prophet will come to be like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces. (Jeremiah 23:29).

It will be an extensive ministry: '... over nations and kingdoms.'

From this small town, Jeremiah was able to reach the world with the message of the Lord. In the same way that the sun and the rains cannot be limited, neither is it possible to limit the truth of God.

The word of the prophet is powerful. It uproots the plants that God did not sow and tears down the buildings that were not constructed on divine foundations. To denounce the idolatry of the people of God is a thankless task: evil is more than a negation of truth, it is more than darkness. We must struggle against evil and overcome it.

The aim of the word of God is to plant, in accordance with his will and to construct in accordance with his regulations. Jeremiah shares the hope of Jesus – the coming Kingdom of God.

Reflection: In your life, have you felt the warm embrace of God? Do you both plant and uproot?

Thought: For Christ's love compels us. (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Prayer: Thank you Lord because you chose Jeremiah as your servant and we can learn from his ministry today. Touch my life and help me to fulfil my ministry. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the qualities that stand out in Jeremiah?
- 2 Set apart for?
- 3 What was it that the people of God had to learn?

WEEK TWO

MON

The Lord keeps watch

Jeremiah 1:11–12

The almond tree has a particular characteristic. Do you know what it is? While the earth is still cold from winter, the almond is the first tree to flower. The warm blossom, delicate and free, surprises us with its promise of spring. The flowering of the almond tree is beauty and delight and even more it is an anticipation and promise of a better future.

And so it is with the word of God: 'I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.' The words of God give us hope because they announce that the purposes of God will be fulfilled, just as the promise of the almond tree is that winter will not last forever.

God uses, in effect, an audiovisual to communicate with Jeremiah. The word 'almond' is *shaqued* in Hebrew and 'I am watching' is *shoqued*. *Shaqued* and *shoqued*, are similar sounds; therefore for the rest of his life, each time that Jeremiah would see the flowering of the almond tree (*shaqued*) he would be reminded of the promise of God (*shoqued*). God watches over the fulfilling of his word.

Reflection: At times we receive a word from the Lord that is slow to be fulfilled and the waiting is difficult. In a similar situation the Lord says to Habakkuk: '(my word) awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.' (Habakkuk 2:3) In this sense, the fulfilment is never delayed, because the precise moment does not depend on what I think, but on what God desires.

Thought: The Lord is the Lord of his word.

Prayer: Lord God, in the creation we read 'God said ..., and it was so.' Thank you because you watch over and fulfil your word. Help me to trust more. Amen.

TUES

Take courage

Jeremiah 1:13–19

Jeremiah was to be a messenger of the terrible judgment of God on the people of Israel for having denied their inheritance. His enemy, represented by the boiling pot, was the instrument of punishment. But Israel would also reject Jeremiah, the messenger of God.

To be a messenger of good news is joyous, but to be a messenger of punishment is agonising. Because of this God encourages Jeremiah, commanding him to take courage and not to be afraid. Joshua, another great servant of God, received similar: ‘Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go’ (Joshua 1:9). The challenge of the Lord is always accompanied by the promise of his presence and actions.

The challenge is huge and God will have to make of his timid servant, Jeremiah, ‘a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall.’ God advises Jeremiah: ‘They will fight against you’ (verse 19). It is as if God says to Jeremiah: ‘Jeremiah, there is a great deal of evil in this world, a great deal indeed, and it is terrible. You are going to suffer, cry, and scream out in agony. *But never think that I have abandoned you. I love you and I am with you*’.

Reflection: ‘They will not overcome you’ (verse 19), said God. This reminds us of the great truth of the sovereignty of God above all things. At the same time we all have personal responsibility. God loves you and will rescue you, but do not forget that your role (verse 17) is to ‘take courage’ and get on with the fight!

Thought: Prepare yourself for the battle. (Ephesians 6:10-20)

Prayer: Help me to participate with courage, accepting the challenges, overcoming the enemy, feeling your presence, thanking you for what I am and trusting in your love. I want to be ‘a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall’. In Christ’s name. Amen.

In the marriage ceremony, the moment when the vows are taken is especially solemn. Do you remember them? ‘I, John, in the presence of God, take you, Gayelene, to be my wife.’ ‘I, Gayelene, in the presence of God, take you, John, to be my husband.’ What a joyful moment! With good reason, the couple will frequently recall their marriage service. God also remembers how his bride, Israel, gave herself to him and celebrated the feast of Passover and Harvest to maintain a vital memory of their pact of love.

God emphasises the reply of his bride, Israel, to him. ‘The devotion of your youth’, ‘you loved me’, ‘you followed me’, ‘Israel was holy to the Lord’. The Lord delighted in the love of his bride. The love of Israel was a promise for the future; not only what this love is today, but also what it will be tomorrow. After entering into marriage in Egypt, a cultivated and fruitful land, the bride had her honeymoon in the desert, an unknown and unsown land.

The characteristic of the marriage relationship is its total commitment, absolute confidence, faithfulness, spontaneity and spirit of sacrifice. Jeremiah began his ministry by reminding Israel of its best moments and thus encouraging her to live this relationship of love with the Lord.

Reflection: Think of your ‘honeymoon’ with God. What were the most wonderful moments that you remember? Can you feel this love? Thank God and learn from this in order to live the challenges and opportunities of today.

Thought: Let’s not forget our relationship of love with God.

Prayer: Lord, I reaffirm my commitment to you saying ‘I,, take you, God, to be my Lord and I ask you to keep me at your side, just as you have done up until now.’ Amen.

There is an old saying, ‘If you feel a long way away from God, guess who moved?’ The answer is, ‘I did’, because God does not move away from his people. God asks, ‘What fault did you find in me?’ (verse 5). ‘[You] did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness?’ (verse 6). The Lord is horrified, ‘Be appalled at this, Oh heavens, and shudder with great horror (verse12).’

This anguish helps us to understand the pain God experiences should we break the relationship of love with him. Upon seeing Jesus crucified on the cross, we begin to understand the depths of God’s love and we appreciate the price that he paid in seeking to bring us back.

Betrayal begins when people say, ‘I couldn’t be bothered’, ‘I’m not interested’; when they forget. The two sins of Israel commenced in this way; God said: ‘They have forsaken me, the spring of living water’ (verse13). Perhaps we could ask, is it normal not to drink water when it is available? We need water to live. But Israel ignored the source of ‘living water’ that had served it so faithfully, which led to the second sin: ‘(They) dug their own cisterns.’

We cannot live without water, and we ignore the ‘living water’ when we seek water from another source. And so it is that the ‘ignoring’ becomes separation. People have a thirst for God which, if ignored, turns into a thirst for alternative gods. As the apostle Paul said, ‘They exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator’ (Romans 1: 25). In this way we become what we worship.

Reflection: Jesus said: ‘He who is not with me is against me’. It is not possible to be neutral. Life is a staircase leading towards God or away from God. Which way am I going?

Thought: Jesus said, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.’ (John 7: 37).

Prayer: ‘As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.’ Amen. (Psalm 42:1, 2a).

What a disaster! Assyria has already taken as slaves the ten northern tribes of Israel and pillaged the country. The inhabitants who have stayed behind are destitute and have suffered humiliation for what has happened to them. What happened to the dreams of the bridal couple? The bride has abandoned the marital home and as a consequence has lost her love, respect and fear of God. Now she respects and fears earthly powers instead of God Almighty.

Israel wanted to drink of the waters of the Nile and the Euphrates because the nations of Egypt and Assyria abounded in riches and power. But to trust in these things and not in the help of God was a terrible mistake. These alliances with other countries were the means of Israel's own degradation and destruction. In seeking them Israel separated herself from God her protector.

We must learn not to drink from the watering holes that attract us by their glamour and appearance of security. Our thirst must be quenched by the spring of the water of life (Revelation 21: 6). The stupidity of sin is that it ends up punishing us and so reveals its true character. That which appears so attractive does not satisfy us in practice.

The remedy for sin is gained with a clear perception of reality: 'Consider then and realise' said God (v.19). We see this in the story of the prodigal son in the New Testament. After the parties and the debauched living in the far country, there is the reality of hunger, the desertion of friends, looking after pigs, the desire to eat their food, and the degradation and filth. The reality of the misery of sin brings the son to his senses: 'I will set out and go back to my father' (Luke 15: 11-32).

Reflection: Israel suffered as a consequence of having abandoned God. Do we suffer as a consequence of our own sin, infidelity to God? Do we want to repent and return to the house of our Father?

Thought: Be faithful to God: this is a daily mission.

Prayer: Father, I ask the Holy Spirit to convict me of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8), so that I might repent and follow you more faithfully. In Jesus' name. Amen.

God says, 'I treat you like sons.' Imagine a free, secure and spontaneous relationship between children and their father. What a marvellous life!

God wants to give to his family the best, 'A desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' He says in Exodus 19:5, 'Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.' Israel had to be faithful and committed but she forgot God.

The sanctuaries of the pagan cult were in the hills and from there 'a cry is heard' from the Israelites. It's incredible! They ask for help but continue to follow their idolatrous cult, which is the cause of the problem.

God wants to hear a confession from his people. A recognition of their sins 'surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception'; accompanied by a decision to change their way of life 'let us lie down in our shame' and seek salvation 'in the Lord our God'.

'Return, faithless people', God says – not to a series of rules, nor to a moral reform, but to the restoration of a personal relationship. Above all else, the Father is the one who leaves everything to go in search of the lost child. He accepts all risks, all the costs, any personal loss to rescue his disobedient children.

Reflection: In the cross, we come to understand the price that the Father paid to rescue us: Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). To the God who looks for us, we can totally entrust our spirit.

Thought: 'Return, faithless people' (verse 22).

Prayer: Father, I give you thanks for looking for me. I ask you for each of your faithless children, that we may find salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In a temple we expect to meet godly people who enter to worship the Lord and who leave to live and work with justice and love. But, who do we find entering and leaving the temple? Robbers, assassins, adulterers, liars and idolators!

The sanctuary had come to be considered as a good luck charm. There was a false sense of security in thinking that God would continue to protect the temple and would not be concerned about the behaviour of his people. Without the presence of God, the temple is nothing. Neither place, nor repetition of Bible phrases, nor act of praise unaccompanied by justice, love and mercy can guarantee of the protection and presence of God.

Reflection: About 500 years later Jesus quoted this same verse to the people of God concerning their temple worship, ‘But you have made it a den of robbers’ (Mark 11:17). Another forty years and the temple was destroyed.

The important thing is not to look for security in the temple, or any place or particular style of worship, but to be transformed into living temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Thought: Improve your life and your works.

Prayer: O God, have compassion on me, a sinner. Help me to become more like Jesus in word and deed in every area of my life. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What evidence do we find of God's faithfulness?
- 2 What aspects of Jeremiah and his people do we identify with?
- 3 Share with the group how the Lord has shown us his will: in your own personal life and to our community of faith.

WEEK THREE

MON **Jeremiah's agony for his people**

Jeremiah 8:18–9:5

The tears of a strong man are not common and here Jeremiah abandons himself to weeping. The prophet hears the sighs of the people throughout the country and his tears discharge an overburdened heart. His tears remind us of those of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

We love because God first loved us. Indifference and disinterest are not options for those who have experienced the love of God. We must respond to what is going on around us just as Jeremiah was compelled to pronounce the love of God to Israel. We see that the one who warned the people of the tragic results of sin was also the one who wept and suffered for them. Even though he had not participated in their sin, Jeremiah suffered with his people.

The people of Gilead were famous in antiquity for their healing balms; but not even in Gilead was there a remedy or salve that could cure the deep wounds of Israel. The only remedy was repentance. In vain Jeremiah looked for any sign of repentance – and this deepened his pain. Israel had rejected the only remedy that could cure her.

For as much as Jeremiah understood the suffering of his people, he never tried to minimise their corruption and evil. This degradation was so great that he wanted to escape to the desert where he would suffer no more deception, slander and ridicule. God affirms that 'They go from one sin to another: they do not acknowledge me'.

When we know the love and power of God for ourselves, it is agonizing to see someone suffering and yet rejecting the One who longs to help them.

Reflection: Do I see the suffering of my people?
 Do I suffer with them?
 What am I doing to help my people return to God?

Thought: I suffer with the suffering of my people.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to respond to my people with perseverance and passion. In the name of Jesus Christ your Son, the One who suffered for us. Amen.

Even Jeremiah's neighbours wanted to silence and kill him. Upon hearing of the plot, Jeremiah spoke courageously to them in God's name. Then he questioned, 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' What a way to begin a discussion – and the questions and complaints continued in the same way.

God's reply wasn't exactly what Jeremiah wanted to hear, 'If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?' (verse 5). The recognition that Jeremiah had raced 'with men on foot', demonstrates appreciation for Jeremiah's ministry, as well as an understanding of his tiredness. There is not the slightest suggestion that Jeremiah had failed, the young man who 'did not know how to speak' is faithfully fulfilling his calling.

In addition, God reveals to him a future where even more difficult tasks await him, 'compete with horses' and 'in the thickets by the Jordan' with the danger of ambushes and wild animals. God does not ask us to compete with horses until we have raced with men on foot. God forms and prepares us to participate in the process of uprooting and planting his Kingdom. The strength gained through conflict is to be used in other conflicts. A soldier of the Lord is not weakened by service but is strengthened for greater service.

Reflection: The victories won in difficult situations are a demonstration that in impossible situations we can also triumph. Life and ministry will certainly tire us but we must participate. How will we do it? If God is prepared to risk everything to put victory in our hands, shouldn't we trust in him, given his trust in us? Whether we win or lose, we are his. The final victory is God's; the race today is ours. Are you tired? Are you anxious? Listen to God, 'The past has prepared you, the future needs you, and today, Go for it!'

Thought: Run the race. (2 Timothy 4:7)

Prayer: Creating and sustaining God, with the strength gained in and with you – the One who formed me and trusts me, I will 'compete with horses' and serve you in the 'thickets by the Jordan'. In Christ's name. Amen.

Imagine Jeremiah walking through the streets of Jerusalem and having these conversations with his neighbours.

- ‘Jeremiah, you are so young. Why don’t you marry and have children?’
- ‘God told me that I can’t.’
- ‘But if the Bible says “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife” and “be fruitful and increase in number”. What do you mean, God told you that you could not?’
- ‘Do you want to know something awful? Just as I am not going to have wife or children neither is Israel going to have children because the Lord has told me what is going to happen.’ (16:3,4)

- ‘Jeremiah, do you know that John Brown died? Are you coming to the funeral?’
- ‘God told me that I can’t.’
- ‘But if the Bible says “weep with those who weep”, what do you mean that God said you can’t come?’
- ‘Do you want to know something awful? Just as I am not able to go to the funeral, or to weep, so also the Lord says “I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and my pity from this people”.’ (16:5-7)

- ‘Jeremiah, it’s my birthday tomorrow. Do you want to come? We’re going to party!’
- ‘God told me that I can’t.’
- ‘Are you crazy? Doesn’t the Bible say “laugh with those who laugh”? What do you mean that God said you can’t come?’
- ‘Do you want to know something awful? Just as the parties have finished for me, the Lord says, “I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness in this place”.’ (16:9)

Like other prophets, Jeremiah had to live among his people and be a symbol of God’s message. Each time there was a party or a funeral, Jeremiah’s absence would communicate to the people the terrible judgment of God.

Even when God reprimanded them, this rebellious people did not examine its life. They are like Cain saying to God, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ They answer God with insolence and, when they are punished, they complain and make excuses. Israel ignores the warning of God and so is lost.

Reflection:

A symbol must be clear and correct. (Matthew 5:13-16).

As a symbol, what do I communicate of God to others?

What does God ask of me today?

Thought: ‘Do not . . . for this is what the Lord Almighty says . . .’

Prayer: Lord, I am your ambassador. Help me to represent you faithfully that I might symbolise with my life your message to my people. Amen.

The potter and the clay; an olive branch; a boiling pot: these are daily images that stimulate Jeremiah's imagination and contribute to the knowledge of God.

Jeremiah remembered that it was the same artisan God who had chosen him and was now showing him how he formed the peoples of the world. The Lord had said that the work with the nations was to tear down and to build; the potter graphically demonstrates the sovereignty of God who moulds us with his hand from clay for his purposes (Romans 9:20, Genesis 2:7).

Hope and threat join together in God's affirmation, 'like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand'(verse 6). Hope: 'if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned'. Threat: 'if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it'(v.10). The clay is able to frustrate the designs of the potter and cause him to change them. When the object that he was making was marred, the potter made another with the same clay in the same way. Just as the quality of the clay affects what the potter can make with it, the response of the people affects what the Lord can do with them.

Reflection: Can you imagine the potter looking at his work, the light of love in his eyes, the power of his fingers moulding something beautiful and useful? Who is the Potter of the universe? In Christ and for Christ all things were created, and by him are they all sustained.(Colossians1:15-17) The foot that makes the wheel turn and the hand that moulds the clay are scarred.

Thought: God made me.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that your scarred hands moulded me. I want to be useful and beautiful in your eyes. Amen.

Jeremiah thought, ‘That’s enough! I’ve had it! I can’t keep going any longer! What happened God? You promised to be with me and to make me into a ‘bronze wall’; O LORD, you deceived me. Even my friends are against me.’

What an awful position to be in – among rebellious people, putting up with accusations, insults and ridicule. Jeremiah had no alternative but to proclaim the nearness of the coming catastrophe. The prophet expressed his agony in explosive terms complaining against his destiny even to the extreme of saying that he would not mention God or speak in his name again. But it was impossible. Jeremiah was unable to stop his ministry, ‘His word is in my heart like a fire’ (verse 9). Jeremiah’s internal conflicts further sharpen. He had just affirmed, ‘I will not mention him’ when suddenly he erupts in praise, ‘Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord!’ (verse 13). This sudden change seems very strange indeed.

Following his praise comes the complaint, ‘Cursed be the day I was born!’ Can this be possible? Can Jeremiah be so changeable? This isn’t logical and moreover, how inappropriate for a man of God! But the fact that this change occurs directly after having apparently overcome the problem shows us the depth of his emotional conflict.

Is life worth living? Like Job (Job 3:3) and Moses (Numbers 11:15), Jeremiah laments his birth with bitterness. With language that is savage, suffering and strong, he pours out the misery of his life, ‘Why did I ever come out from the womb?’ He wished the womb of life to be his tomb.

Reflection: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ Doesn’t this sound like Jeremiah? Many people, including Jesus, have suffered strong emotional conflicts. It has been said, ‘Believers argue with God, sceptics argue with each other’. Jeremiah was truly authentic and sincere in his relationship with God.

Thought: An authentic relationship includes disagreements. When things don’t go well, are we prepared to struggle with the difficulties?

Prayer: Help me Lord to love, to argue, to cry, to rejoice and to wrestle with you. I love you and I want our love to grow. Strengthen me by your Holy Spirit. In Christ’s name. Amen.

King Jehoiakim's ambition was to appear as the most powerful of all kings and so he decided to build a grand palace. This was his big mistake: to confuse appearance with reality. God said to him, 'Your father did what was right and just, so all went well with him'(verse 15). He was a good king not for the magnificence of his palace, but because he reigned well.

To reign with justice and integrity is more than refraining from evil: it is to defend the rights of the poor and oppressed. More than abstaining from corruption and violence, we are to extend our hand to marginalised people. A government has authority and liberty. To abuse this liberty in order to dominate and exploit others is a terrible perversion of the privilege of government.

What a contrast between Jehoiakim and his father Josiah! The Bible says, 'all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him. Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah' (2 Chronicles 35:24). But for the son, 'they will not mourn for him'. The prosperity of the father was based upon his walk with God, 'Is that not what it means to know me?', declares the Lord (verse 16). A true reign is gained with the help of God, with moral authority and by serving the people.

Reflection: How unusual to reflect on the fathers and sons. Although Josiah's father was unfaithful to God, Josiah was faithful. The faithful Josiah, however, had an unfaithful son (Jehoiakim). 'Your father ... did what was right and just ... but your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain.' (cf James 1:27 and 2:14)

Knowing God does not depend upon our parents, although they are very influential, but on our own response to God.

Thought: Josiah did what was right and just, so all went well with him.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to pray for those in government, and to act with greater commitment and compassion towards my neighbour. In Christ's name. Amen.

The last four kings of Israel had been bad and here we find a judgment similar to that which a farmer would make about one of his shepherds. The shepherd has the responsibility of penning those sheep under his care, defending them from wild animals, keeping them together, and of searching for them if they get lost. These responsibilities demand courage, patience, vigilance, alertness and above all faithfulness. Even so, it is still possible for a shepherd to lose some of the animals.

God knows that for the kings and others in authority, to care and guide the people was a much bigger task than caring for sheep. What troubled God was not that they had done all that they could and still lost some sheep, but rather their inattention to and abuse of the sheep. The people responsible for the wellbeing of the sheep were the very ones exploiting them. The Lord would punish their evil actions and replace them with true shepherds to care for his people.

The Lord says that a king will come who will be just, upright and wise. A king who will bring blessings for all the people (verses 5 & 6). The return of the Israelites from exile would be like a new Exodus, reuniting the people of God to live in their own land again (v.7 & 8).

Reflection: Jesus said, 'I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.' In a world governed by pragmatism, the 'me' generation, and 'my rights', where will we find martyrs and 'shepherds'? 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' What leadership style can people expect from us?

Thought: The Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you are my Shepherd. Help me to be a 'shepherd-leader' of your people. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the qualities that stand out in Jeremiah?
- 2 What did the people of God have to learn from their experiences in these chapters? Make a list of them, and prayerfully reflect on them.

WEEK FOUR

MON

A letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29:1–14

Exile is traumatic. Everything that had given identity and meaning to Israel had disappeared and she asks herself, ‘Who am I now? How will I live?’

God exhorts his people to pray for the city of their exile. We may well imagine the reaction of the exiles, ‘What? Pray for these hated pagans! This Babylonian rabble; cruel, imperialistic, destroyers of my homeland, my family, the temple; they took us 1,000 kilometers through the desert. Pray for them? you can’t be serious!’

Confronted by this anxiety and against the false prophets who said that they would soon return to Jerusalem (verses 8,9,21, 31,32), Jeremiah exhorted the exiles, ‘Build houses and settle down: plant gardens and eat what they produce: marry and seek the peace and prosperity of the city.’ This attitude is without precedent in that age and it becomes perfected in Jesus, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matthew 5:44).

‘Peace and prosperity’ translate the Hebrew concept *Shalom* – signifying the total quality and completeness of life, the dynamic health and creativity which fills society with divine meaning and transforming love. It means committing ourselves to our community, no matter how pagan it may be. Not joining in pagan practices but applying godly practices: to build, to plant, to marry, to work and to pray.

Often we are over-concerned for the future, but we can learn from history. The Babylonian empire lasted approximately 70 years, between 613 and 539 BC. It did not last forever, although it seemed a possibility at the time. The exiles would return, ‘In order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah’ (Ezra 1:1). Just as God is the Lord of the past, so the future is in his hands, ‘For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your *Shalom*’ (Jer 29.11).

Reflection: We all live experiences of ‘exile’: unemployment, sickness, separation, relocation, accident, divorce, hostility. How do I cope? Do I focus on all that is bad in the world and sit down to cry and complain? Or, do I focus my energies on living and working for the *Shalom* of my community? Exile, or the loss of everything that we thought was vital, can instigate a search which, done with all our hearts, will take us to find that which is more important: God and the *Shalom* of the people.

Thought: Work for the good of the community where I live.

Prayer: Thank you Lord that when we look for you we find you; that you have plans for life, for *Shalom*, to give me a future full of hope. I ask you to prosper my community. Amen.

The background to this message is the old covenant between the Lord and Israel in Sinai (Exodus 19 to 24), with the corresponding obligations and promises. From its beginnings with Moses, Israel had not recognised God and fulfilled his laws. Jeremiah sees this crisis and asks, ‘Can a leopard change its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil’ (Jeremiah 13:23). And so it was that Israel broke the first covenant despite all that God had desired. Could anything be done about it?

The Lord proposes to bring about a change in the people so that they might obey him. The divine law will not be written upon tablets of stone, as was the agreement in Sinai, but written upon their hearts and minds. The biblical text tells us the result, ‘I will be your God and they will be my people’, the past will be forgiven and forgotten, and ‘the biggest to the smallest will know me’ declares God.

This is the only reference to the new covenant in the Old Testament. The simple message of this text is important and profound: there will be a new era in our understanding and relationship with God.

Reflection: This message raises an expectation in those who anxiously desire to know God more. What will be the divine action that satisfies these expectations? Jesus announces to us the cost of this prophesy, ‘This cup is the new covenant confirmed with my blood’ (Luke 22:20). The letter to the Hebrews, written specifically for the Jews tells us, ‘For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant’ (Hebrews 9:15).

Thought: Live out the new covenant.

Prayer: Father, I give you thanks for the blessings of the new covenant that you ratified with the blood of your son, Jesus Christ, for my salvation. Speak to me through your Holy Spirit that I might learn to live your way. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

WED

Jeremiah buys a block of land Jeremiah 32:1–15

When Jeremiah's friends find out what he is doing they go and speak with him; they are very concerned. Imagine the exchange: 'Are you mad, Jeremiah? Can't you see that the Babylonians have already occupied Anathoth? They have surrounded Jerusalem for months now. You yourself said that they will destroy everything. And now you are going to buy a block of land? Can't you see that Hanamel, wants to get rid of a block of land precisely because it is not worth anything? And you are going to pay him, find witnesses, pay the stamp duty, make two copies and keep them in a clay jar? This time you have gone completely mad! Don't do it!'

Hope runs against public opinion, reason and tradition. Because of this, Jeremiah was moved to buy a block of land not by common sense but by the Word of God.

How did Jeremiah realise that God wanted him to buy the block of land? In the first place, God had advised him of the motive for his cousin's visit. When Jeremiah heard what his cousin had to say, it was just as the Lord had said. Secondly, it was consistent with God's promise of national restoration, 'Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land' (Jeremiah 32:15; 31:16,17)

Why did Jeremiah take two copies of the contract, one sealed and the other unsealed? The unsealed copy represents a public statement of hope to encourage the people during their coming years in exile. The sealed copy will help them 'to remember' the faithfulness of God in future generations.

All of this transaction demonstrates the tremendous faith that Jeremiah had in the promises of God. Buying this block of land at this particular time, sent a strong signal of hope showing that there would be a future, after the exile. In the light of this action, it was not necessary to ask Jeremiah, the messenger of God, if he believed in the Lord's promises; the life of the messenger was the message.

Reflection: The active life of faith is a faith that is cemented in actions. 'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (Hebrews 4). True hope is to invest in what we believe. In what do I invest my time, my money, my abilities, my dreams and my leisure?

Thought: Live the hope of the Gospel.

Prayer: God, Lord Almighty who guards treasure in clay pots and offers me an eternal hope, help me to live out this hope in the practicalities of every day. In Christ's name. Amen.

THU

To doubt is human: Jeremiah 32:16–20, 24–27, 43–44

Here we see how human Jeremiah is. Having just bought a block of land, he starts worrying! In his insecurity he prayed to God and he recalled the majesty of God and that there was nothing impossible for the Creator who sees everything. But he worried, “Everything happened as you said...and though the city will be handed over to the Babylonians, you say to me ‘buy the field’.” It is as if Jeremiah had said, ‘OK, Lord, I bought it. But now I stop to think about it, don’t you reckon that this situation is impossible; even for you?’

God uses the same words (v.27) as the prophet (v.17) to reassure him, ‘Is anything too hard for me’. And in direct reference to the doubt, affirms that ‘once more fields will be bought in this land’. In exactly the same way that Jeremiah affirmed, ‘Nothing is too hard for you’, God confirms that indeed nothing is too hard for him.

‘Lord God, what are you doing?’ is a question asked by a person of faith. A person without faith is not going to ask what God is doing! Faith gives light to our searching, questioning and even doubting. Jeremiah’s prayer (v.16-25) is a prayer of faith.

Reflection: What are your doubts and questions? Do you believe in God and desire to follow him even when you feel uncertain? Tell God about your anxieties with all honesty. The prophet Habakkuk is a great example of sincerity, ‘How long, O Lord, must I call for help, do you not listen?’ God replies, ‘I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians’. Habakkuk is shocked, ‘Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent? I will stand at my watch and station myself at the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.’ (Habakkuk1:2,5ff). In the midst of sincere doubt here is powerful faith.

Thought: Be sincere with God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I accept the yoke that you place on me. I want to learn from you, who is patient and has a humble heart. Thus, will I find rest. Amen.

God speaks to us wherever we are. Jeremiah did not need to make offerings, nor go to the temple, even to look for a priest. God spoke to him where he was (in prison) and said, ‘Call to me and I will answer you’. We are invited at every hour and in every place to dialogue with the Lord of Creation.

God promises the people that they will return to hear songs of celebration and joy and the voices of bride and bridegroom. There will be a king from David’s line (v.15,16; cf 23:5,6) in whose reign the hopes for justice and *shalom* will be fulfilled.

With the division of the people of God in 721 BC and the tragedy of 597 BC, many believed that the Lord had rejected his people. But in effect God responds, ‘If my constancy and faithfulness as seen in nature does not change; why do you think it would change regarding the agreement with my people?’ Moreover, a son of David will occupy the throne; the descendants of the patriarchs will minister to him, and they will greatly multiply. The promise to the patriarchs (Genesis 13:16) is now repeated to the descendants of David. The exiles must remain faithful and put their trust in the mercy and promises of God.

Reflection: Jeremiah’s prophesies of hope are fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. For this reason, the disciples of Jesus are called to live as he requires. In him is hope, and this hope calls us to commitment.

Thought: Christ is the ‘Yes; of God because in him all the promises of God are fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 1:19,20)

Prayer: Lord, I praise you with all my heart because in the day and the night I see your constancy and goodness. Amen.

SAT King Jehoiakim Burns the Scroll Jeremiah 36:1–8,10, 20–26

This dramatic scene witnesses Jeremiah's scroll being read. Remembering that the scroll tells of the calamity which God proposes to bring upon Judah so that they will turn from their evil (Jeremiah 36:3), we wonder at the reaction of King Jehoiakim.

The story told in these verses parallels the finding of the scroll in the temple during the reign of King Josiah, some seventeen years previously (2 Kings 22:8-20). The story is similar: a scroll is found, brought by state officials to the king, read in the king's presence, the king reacts and a prophetic word is given. Moreover, the participants in the first story are the fathers of the participants in the second story.

In the first story the scroll was read and King Josiah repented. The prophetess Huldah said, 'Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD.' As a result, the nation experienced renewal.

On this second occasion King Jehoiakim, the son of the previous king, Josiah, receives the scroll from the hands of Gemariah, the son of the previous court official, Shaphan (Jeremiah 36:10,25). How will the king react? He mocks the word of God. He will not hear it. He cuts off strip after strip of the scroll and throws it into the fire. But, is he more powerful than God's word? No. The result is national ruin.

And the prophetic response to the king's mockery? '[H]is dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night' (Jeremiah 36:30).

Reflection: Josiah tore his clothes. Jehoiakim tore the scroll. What's my response upon hearing the word of God?

Thought: Remember that the Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:15).

Prayer: Dear God, give me a heart that is sensitive to your Word and that responds to its exhortation and reassurance of your love. Amen.

After so much suffering Jeremiah finishes up all alone, at the bottom of an empty water storage hole, slowly starving and without hope of escape. How can he be saved if the king ordered this punishment? Most people would have thought, ‘There’s nothing we can do. It’s all over for Jeremiah.’

But Ebed-Melech went to the king and confronted him with the injustice that had been committed and was able to put into operation a rescue mission. He even took rags to avoid injuring Jeremiah when they pulled him out of the hole.

Jeremiah had good friends. Ebed-Melech, was not a famous hero, but this Ethiopian rescued Jeremiah from death. Another friend was Ahikam who, 20 years previously under King Jehoiakim when they were seeking to kill Jeremiah, intervened in order to save him (Jeremiah 26:24). Baruch was his faithful secretary and disciple who stayed with him until the end. As the saying goes, ‘In life to have one friend is much, to have two is even more, and to have three is almost an impossibility.’ Jeremiah had at least three.

Ebed-Melech risked his life to rescue Jeremiah. When his friend was condemned, there was no sentimentalism or fatalism. Ebed-Melech did not protect his employment in the palace; nor did he allow himself to be influenced by those in the king’s court but was motivated by friendship.

The fact that Jeremiah had friends tells us something important about him. Even though his ministry stopped him from participating socially in the life of the community, he needed friends and he had them. In giving we share strength, in receiving we share weakness: both are vital to friendship.

Reflection: Biblical history is characterised by strong friendships: Ruth and Naomi; Deborah and Barak; Jesus and his disciples, ‘I have called you friends’. What about me? Do I offer friendship? Am I open to receiving friendship?

Thought: The greatest love that one can have is to give his life for his friends (John 15:13).

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, I give you thanks because we are friends. Help me to be a faithful friend. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What feature of Jeremiah’s actions strikes you most strongly as an act of faith?
- 2 In what ways is your faith strengthened by God’s faithfulness in fulfilling, through Jesus, Jeremiah’s prophecies of hope?
- 3 What is extraordinary about friendships based on shared faith in God?

WEEK FIVE

MON

Go wherever you wish

Jeremiah 40: 1– 6

Despite King Nebuchadnezzar's orders (Jeremiah 39: 11), upon conquering Jerusalem the Babylonian soldiers had taken Jeremiah with the other prisoners to Ramah. There the commander had discovered Jeremiah and freed him.

'What shall I do?' is a question for free people. Jeremiah had just been freed and could live comfortably in Babylonia in the house of the commander. He would enjoy good food, the niceties earned by old age and the opportunity to preach and to write. He would also have influence at the centre of the current world power.

The alternative was to stay in his hometown. Here we see Jeremiah's integrity because he decided to stay. Those who had questioned, 'Is he a patriot or a traitor? A true or false prophet? Sane or insane?' are silenced forever. In the life of every person there are moments of crisis, of decision. Jeremiah chose the life of the marginalised, of service to his people. He said, 'No', to comfort.

Reflection: Many times we ask ourselves, 'What shall I do?' 'Do I go or do I stay?' To stay in difficult situations is challenging. We must not confuse abundance with life (Luke 9:23-25).

God does not necessarily put us in a place of material abundance. It could be that the God puts us in the middle of ruins, amongst marginalised people: vulnerable and without resources. Jeremiah did not confuse the abundance of Babylonia with abundant living. Being a servant, following Christ, carrying the cross: this is the abundant life!

Thought: 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve' Mark 10:45.

Prayer: Lord, I want to be a useful servant and if you send me to 'the ruins', help me to accept it and to be thankful. Amen.

Jesus took time out to pray and the disciples remained sleeping. ‘Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray’ (Mark 14: 37).

Jeremiah prayed during ten days, wouldn’t Jesus have liked him there in Gethsemane!

What motivated the people, both old and young, to approach Jeremiah? The prophet knew: ‘Don’t be afraid of the King of Babylon, whom you now fear’(v.11). A group of rebel Jews had killed the Governor, Gedaliah, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to govern the people who remained in Judah. Even though the rebels had fled, the remnant feared the reaction of the King and turned to Jeremiah, ‘Pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant. Whether it is favourable or unfavourable, we will obey the LORD our God’.

Jeremiah prayed and waited ten days for the word of God, pressured by a fearful and agitated people. God replied, ‘If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you. Do not be afraid of the King of Babylon for I am with you’ (cf. Jeremiah 1: 8, 10).

‘To flee to Egypt’ signified that their lives were governed by fear and not by the Lord God Almighty. Ironically, war and hunger, which they feared so much, would reach them in Egypt, the very place to which they fled in disobedience.

Reflection: What we do in secret determines what we do in public. What did Jeremiah do when he was alone? When he wasn’t denouncing the government, or preaching in the Temple or writing? The centre of the life of Jeremiah was in his meeting alone with God. Prayer was the key that developed his authentic and profoundly human life. After some forty years, the people finally came to recognize this in Jeremiah.

‘Lord, teach us to pray.’ Jesus, like Jeremiah, was a man of prayer. What about us, do we make time to be alone with God in prayer? Do people come to us for prayer? Could they?

Thought: ‘Always keep on praying’ Ephesians 6:18.

Prayer: Lord, I want us to communicate more. Help me to make time to be alone with you and to pray for my people. Strengthen me in Christ. Amen.

‘You are lying!’ What a great way to thank Jeremiah after they had said to him, ‘Whether it is favourable or unfavourable, we will obey the LORD our God, to whom we are sending you’ (Jeremiah 42:6). They asked Jeremiah to pray but they did not trust in God sufficiently to obey the reply.

Jeremiah spoke with the ‘deaf’ at their invitation; but they did not listen to him, which doesn’t come as any surprise! They accuse him of being a Babylonian ‘stooge’. So against his will, Jeremiah was taken to Egypt and there the proclamation of God’s word to the people continued. How was it proclaimed? Through a symbolic action; which was also ignored. Above the large stones which God ordered to be buried, Nebuchadnezzar would one day sit on his throne as a ‘servant’ of the Lord to destroy Egypt.

What hypocrisy to promise, ‘May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us’ (Jeremiah 42:5), without the intention of keeping their word.

Reflection: God seeks to communicate with relevant language; now choosing symbolic actions – visual language. On other occasions he had used the baskets of figs (24:1), a broken clay jar (19:1), a yoke (27:1), etc. How do I communicate with others, my friends and my family? Am I prepared to remain close to people?

God acts in the history of each person and each people to uproot and to plant. Am I praying for the Holy Spirit to act in people I know?

Thought: ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’ Luke 11: 28.

Prayer: Lord, I pray for my people; that they will listen to you and obey you. Amen.

Even though in that moment, Judah was in ruins, God did not want the Jews to go to Egypt because he had prepared prosperity for them in Judah. But because of fear, they fled and on reaching Egypt they became contaminated with its religion and superstitions. Fear caused them to deny the Lord and to worship false gods.

In Jeremiah's first vision (the almond tree) God said to him, 'I am watching to see that my Word is fulfilled' (Jeremiah 1:12) and God's final words to him reiterate, 'I am watching' (44:27). Even though a people forgets God, they do not escape from him. God watches the life of each person and each nation, and fulfils his word.

Jeremiah was a bit like a boomerang: he was crafted, thrown, bloodied and found firmly in God's hand. He lived a stunning life of discipleship.

Reflection: This is chronologically the last biblical scene we have of Jeremiah and it shows him doing what he had done almost all his life: preaching the message of God to a rebellious people. Perhaps it would have been nice to see him achieve some 'success' (positive response) in his ministry, but God calls us to faithfulness, not to success. Jeremiah was in a race that never finished and he doggedly hung in there; he was like an iron pillar, a bronze wall. He was a faithful servant who finished his life in a country he didn't want to live in, with a people that did not want him: persevering, courageous; an awesome servant of God.

Thought: 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith' Hebrews 13:7.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I thank you for the life of my brother Jeremiah. Help me to follow his example of faith. Amen.

From a human perspective, Egypt had won already. Its army was prepared and powerful; officials shouted orders, 'Prepare... march out...harness...mount!' Four years previously they had beaten the Israelites, killing King Josiah and now they were about to defeat the Babylonians. But what is the prophet saying? 'They are retreating...' The battle had barely begun and the Egyptians fled against all expectations and the Lord announced that the army of Pharaoh would be destroyed.

Even so, there were perhaps people who were not convinced that the army of Egypt, which had grown like the Nile, could be destroyed. We hear again the Egyptian officials: 'Charge... march on...' and we see the mercenaries from Lydia and Cush. Nevertheless, 'that day belongs to the Lord, the LORD Almighty – a day of vengeance on his foes' for the death of his servant King Josiah and the inhabitants of the land of Israel. The destruction of the powerful Egyptian army was God's punishment for their previous hostilities. No matter how Egypt seeks to escape 'there is no healing for you'.

Reflection: God is either the Lord of all or he is not God. Jeremiah's prophecies in chapters 46 to 51 show that the Lord is not only God of Israel but the Lord of all the earth, whose destiny depends on his hand. Jeremiah is prophet to all the nations. In the same way we Christians are also sent to all the nations because God is the Lord of all creation (Jeremiah 1:10 and Matthew 28:18-20).

At times, we think that because we are unable to control the world it is better to stay home. But with such fears we become spectators and do not risk participating in the full, yet challenging life with the Lord Almighty.

Thought: For God so loved the world . . . (John 3:16).

Prayer: Almighty God, Lord of the nations, help me to trust in you, even in the midst of the confusion of this world. Help me to commit myself to your mission to all the nations. In the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

God's people had been 'hunted' or 'scattered', literally so, because they had been carted off to Assyria in the north in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:1-6) and now to Babylon in the far north-east of the fertile crescent in approx. 609 B.C. (2 Kings 24). God's calling of them to turn back to true worship had been ignored and inevitably judgement had come upon them in the form of invasion and exile from the promised land. The 'lions', Assyria and Babylon, had driven away the people of God producing 'hunted sheep'. Would restoration ever be possible? Had all been forfeited forever? Would worship in Jerusalem ever be rekindled?

Is forgiveness possible? Socrates did not believe so. He had cried, 'Plato, Plato, I do not see how God can forgive sins!' And neither may we. But we trust in God's word and here restoration is coterminous with forgiveness; with iniquity and sins totally gone, 'none shall be found'.

God promises both restoration and forgiveness. (a) Restoration. 'I will restore Israel to its pasture . . . and its hunger will be satisfied'. God is a Shepherd who will bring the people of God back to its pasture so that it will 'feed'/ 'graze' on its rich pastures. (b) Forgiveness. 'I will pardon'. Forgiveness with God is so strong that the iniquity of the northern kingdom, Israel, and the sins of the southern kingdom, Judah, even when they are sought they shall not be found because there shall be none of them!

Reflection: Having spent five hours retrieving our (four!) sheep from a neighbour's distant hilltop I have a certain empathy with the difficulty of returning scattered sheep to 'graze' - a word depicting a tranquil and restful scene bringing quiet to the spirit. Sheep naturally 'hang out' together. If sheep are scattered it is because they have been disturbed - our one year old 70 kgms Belgium cattle dog had decided to play 'touch noses' with them and they were not amused! God goes to endless trouble to seek out lost sheep and to bring them home. 'I am the good shepherd', rings true to our experience of the One who spared not himself to save sinners.

Thought: Our hope resides in the character of God: 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways.' Ezekiel 33:11

Prayer: Restoring God, bring us back from scattered separation and fear to 'graze' together at peace in your presence. I thank you that you are a forgiving, seeking Shepherd who knows your sheep by name. Amen.

It was not the first time that Jeremiah had sung this song (see 10:12-16) and it is unlikely that it would be the last. This song expressed for Jeremiah truths that lay deep in his heart; truths most probably captured in liturgy, regular worship of God, and thus remembered. Songs of worship are both sung majestically in corporate worship as well as hummed during daily life. In this way the great truths about God become etched into our lives and our remembering of our life in God and God's world.

The song sets forth the reality and creative power of God (51:15-16), the judgement faced by both the idols and their creators (17-18), culminating in a ringing recognition of the supremacy of the Lord of hosts (19). It is quite likely that this contrast between the true God and false gods comprised part of a liturgical form used in the Jerusalem Temple. Certainly, there are similar forms in the Psalms (115, 135) and in Isaiah (40:18-20, 44:9-20 and 46:5-7).

These themes resonate with Jeremiah's passion to see God worshipped as God. Jeremiah thundered against the evils of false worship encouraged by the Canaanite religious practices. There is a tragic irony in craftsmen worshipping their own creations. It was not just that it was intellectually nonsensical and that the material objects so created were incapable of imparting spiritual light and love, but it was ultimately destructive of life. As idols are lifeless, so are their worshippers: 'Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.' (Ps 135:18)

The concluding line, 'The Lord of hosts is his name' richly expresses the rule of God over everything. The 'hosts' were possibly the stars and the sky but became synonymous with God's mighty power to rule over all creation. A mighty song of praise to a mighty God – little wonder that Jeremiah recorded it not just once, but twice!

Reflection: I vividly recall Alan Tippett, arguably one of Australia's greatest missionary anthropologists, lecturing at St Andrew's Hall Missionary College on the impact of cults on the Churches of the Pacific Islands in the 20th century. He noted that the churches that best withstood the not inconsiderable efforts of the cults were those churches that had a liturgical tradition. The Christians at worship had so often said and sung the truths of God that they were etched into their hearts and minds. At a time when false gods were presented, the truths of the Gospel were so ingrained that faith's foundations were unmoved and they held firmly to the Living God.

Thought: Worship the true and living God in songs of praise.

Prayer: Living God, I thank you for the relationship of commitment and love into which you have called me. Help me to sing your praises, today and everyday, here and everywhere, so that the memory of faith is more deeply etched into my life. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the qualities that stand out in Jeremiah?
- 2 What did the people of God have to learn from the experiences in this section.
- 3 What evidence do we find of God's faithfulness?
- 4 What aspects of Jeremiah and his people do we identify with?
- 5 Share with the group how the Lord shows us his will: in your own personal life and in your community of faith.

WEEK SIX

MON

God's People Weep

Lamentations 1:1-7

The occasion of these lamentations was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. This brought to an end the religious and civil structures of the Kingdom of Israel. In the previous Book, Jeremiah, we had the prophecies of God's judgement and the history of them. Here we have recorded in poetical form the sorrow and grief that accompanies the judgement of God on his people. Lamentations follows directly on from the Book of Jeremiah and I take it to be also authored by the prophet Jeremiah.

The grief of the survivors is unashamedly expressed: it is 'in your face', to put it in contemporary speak! The City of Jerusalem is personified to demonstrate the depths of the suffering. 'How lonely sits the city . . . a widow . . . weeps bitterly . . . no one to comfort her . . . dealt treacherously with her . . . finds no resting place . . . the foe looked on mocking over her downfall.' The conquering army has destroyed the city, killed many of the men, left widows and orphans and is taking the majority into captivity in a distant and alien land. Their grief is palpable. Their rebellion against God, their sin, is readily identified as the cause of their suffering and sorrow (5b).

Reflection: Rembrandt in 1630 painted a magnificent work, which depicts Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. An old man is seated leaning against a stone column in a large grotto, his left arm supporting a very sad head and he is leaning on a big Bible. The man is painted in the light while to the left, as it were through the side of the grotto, we struggle to distinguish amidst the dark the city of Jerusalem. There is a hunched figure with its back to other figures scaling the city walls. Flames from the burning city herald its destruction. Rembrandt has captured the agony of Jeremiah's lament for this rebellious people.

Jeremiah's lament strikes me as extraordinary. Would he not have so tired of remonstrating with them, suffering mockery, imprisonment and physical abuse for some four decades that surely he would feel vindicated by so great a catastrophe? But, no. Jeremiah laments for the suffering and pain of love betrayed. God's prophet knows God's heart: a heart that seeks 'your love as a bride' (Jer 2:2) and that yearns that 'this city shall be to me a name of joy' (Jer 33:9a).

Thought: The Lamentations of Jeremiah reflect the lament of God.

Prayer: Dear God, we weep for ourselves, we weep for others. Save me from myself. Save your people from themselves. Save your world from itself; for Christ's sake. Amen.

The God of Jerusalem is told in no uncertain terms that something needs to be done, and that he is the One to do it! ‘O Lord, look at my affliction’ (9), and ‘Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become.’ (11).

But, is it right to speak to God in such a direct and confronting way? Shouldn’t Jerusalem simply ‘cop it on the chin’, knowing that the terrible things happening to her are the ‘consequences of her sin’ (9)? In other words, is ‘lamentation’ a bad, even an evil thing for a believer? Samuel E. Balentine in his, ‘Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue’ has this to say,

‘Prayers of lamentation speak pain to God as an act of faith. Lamentation is an act of faith that persists in believing that God can be addressed with the hard questions that suffering always brings: ‘Why Lord?’ ‘How long, Lord?’ Lamentation persists in believing that God is not only open to such address but responds to it. Lamentation persists in believing that the future is not finally determined by either the past or the present; that it is open to new possibilities; that the cry of pain addressed to God is an important step toward the realization of these possibilities. Such is the ministry of lament in Hebraic faith.’

Genuine dialogue is capable of asking the honest but hard questions about the things that are not working! Passive silence, pious praise or vicious vindictive give no opportunity to grow a healthy relationship. The soul-searching agony necessitated by failed commitment, disloyalty and relationship breaking is integral to any hopes of healing. A relationship is seen perhaps at its most robust when the ‘weaker’ member seeks re-establishment of the relationship by appealing to the character of the ‘stronger’ member and the characteristics of their former healthy relationship.

Reflection: “A holy man was engaged in his morning meditation under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him.

An observer came along and said to the holy man, ‘Don’t you know that’s a scorpion, and it’s in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?’

To which the holy man replied, ‘That may well be, but it is in my nature to save, and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?’

(Joseph B. Modica, Elmhurst, New York. Copyright Leadership.
from “Context”, Martin Marty retells a parable from the “Eye of the Needle” newsletter.)

Thought: The character of the One whom prayer addresses determines the nature of prayer.
[or, ‘Call to me and I will answer you.’ Jeremiah 33:3]

Prayer: Listening God, hear our distress, even when it is self-inflicted. Give us faith to talk to you, even to sob and to shout. At our weakest and most deserving of misery we call on You, to hear and to act, because we trust in You: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here Jerusalem is personified as a suffering person calling out alternatively to any passer-by and the Lord.

The distress is palpable, 'Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow . . . for these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears . . . my stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me.' (12, 16,20)

Also the honesty makes clear the reason for this horrific suffering, 'The Lord is in his right for I have rebelled against his word (18) . . . because I have been very rebellious (20) . . . as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions' (22)

It is this aspect of honesty in relationship, and in particular of my own responsibility in undermining or weakening it, that especially strikes me. O Lord, that I should be so honest both with You and with my neighbour! The exclamation, 'God, you did this to me!' comes from an honest assessment: God did it because I rightly deserved it! Now that is a basis for healing and renewal.

Reflection: Honesty is critical to restoration. In our national life the importance of this has been reflected in the 'Bringing Them Home': National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997. In Tasmania we researched our own 'story' of Aboriginal and Anglican Church relationships. This research, 'God's Own Country? The Anglican Church and Tasmanian Aborigines' by James Boyce, has revealed very painful episodes of wrongdoing and neglect on the part of our Anglican family. 'Why dredge up the pain of the past?' Because a knowledge of the past is essential for us to recognize the truth of our present situation. Every relationship has a history. A relationship brings into the present the joys and sorrows of the past. Without an honest appreciation of a relationship, of its successes and its failures, we are imprisoned in misconception or prejudice or amnesia. And amnesia is not a lasting basis for celebrating and confessing the past and thereby building future.

Thought: Honesty before God and each other is the basis for restoration of relationship.

Prayer: God of history, help us to remember our wrongdoing that we might confess it and so be restored to You and to one another. Amen.

[NOTE: The similarity between this lament and that of Christ over 'God-ignoring' Jerusalem. Mt 23:37ff; Lk 13:34ff]

THUR

God withdrew his protection Lamentations 2:1-7

Talk about an upside down world! God himself is destroying the God-given means of worshipping God. And as if this is not enough, enemies are celebrating their destruction of these God-given means of worship inside the grandest temple of them all: the temple built by King Solomon!

God had given gifts of temple and ritual to celebrate the covenant relationship between himself and his people. When the people of Israel and Judah disregarded the love of God they set themselves on a course that would destroy the covenant. The seriousness of their violation of God's love could be seen in the destruction and desecration of the sacred sanctuary. Israel's turning from God to idols and self-indulgence betrayed the trust of love set out in God's call, 'To fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.' Deuteronomy 10:12

Mourning and lamentation came because, 'The LORD has become like an enemy' (5). There is no dispute here, the One who has protected them in times past, but who now brings punishment upon them for their sin brings Lament upon them. No amount of outward ceremony can mask the hollowness of lives empty of God. Their rejection of covenant love has resulted in God giving them up to the fruits of their rebelliousness.

Reflection:

So often our relationship with God is pictured in terms of marriage: God as husband, his people as the bride. One marriage partner forming relationship with a third person breaks the law of love and so splits the marriage. By acting in this way the partner pollutes him or herself and also the marriage relationship. Our relationship with God is to reflect the character of the God: devoted love, faithfulness and justice.

God is holy and does not enter into partnership with behaviour contrary to his character. God is a 'pollution free zone'! In Jeremiah's day, when God's people became involved in that which is ungodly, God withdrew his protection (2:3) and rejected and abandoned his people and the symbols of relationship – the altar and the temple.

In bringing to God that which is not God, we pollute and therefore destroy not just ourselves but our relationship with God. We drive God from us. We are abandoned to our own folly. We reap what we sow. We live in our own pollution. We die in our own wretchedness.

Thought: God delivers us into the hand of our own iniquity (Isaiah 64:7)

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to love you with all our heart and with all our soul. Amen.

The words, 'Iniquity', 'sin', what do they really mean?

Jeremiah's incessant calling to the people of God was that they return to God. That they live God's way. That God occupy first place in their lives. That they return to their devotion of God.

When God is not first in our lives, then something or someone occupies that place. This is idolatry. God declares, 'You are to have no other gods before me'. The Canaanite gods had attracted the following of the people and they had followed after the ways of these false gods. Left to ourselves, sin is the way we are, and it is not what God wants.

Sin can be described in many ways: as missing the mark; lack of gratitude; insisting that $1+1=3$; a broken relationship; running for the wrong finishing line; and 'SIN' is having 'I' in the middle/center (of my life). Augustine said, 'Sin is believing the lie that you are self-created, self-dependent, and self-sustained'. [p.1238 in Green, Illustrations Biblical Preaching.] It is interesting to reflect on all the words compounded with 'self' that have a negative or pejorative meaning: self-indulgence, self-important, self-love, self-satisfied, self-seeking. Apparently we need a large vocabulary to adequately express our self-centered nature! Sin is self-centeredness, placing ourselves at the center of our lives instead of God.

Reflection: We do struggle to recognize sin in ourselves. A Russian Christian whose writings have greatly helped me had this to say about our struggle, 'If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?' (Aleksandr Solzenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975)

Many Australians seem reluctant to recognize 'the line dividing good and evil (that) cuts through the heart of every human being'. We allow our self-esteem too great a space: 'I might not be perfect, but I'm not that bad!' In Australia an appreciation of the severity of sin has been high jacked by the idea of suffering for sin. This is captured in caricatures of Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, 'When I get there, Old Pete will let me straight through those pearly gates after everything I've been through!' Australians identify with Jesus on the cross, abandoned by a Distant God against whom we cry, 'God, it isn't fair! Life stinks.' We fail to see ourselves as rebels against God. We are reluctant auditors of our own heart.

Thought: Sin is self-centeredness. Sin is living as though I am the center of the world I see.

Prayer: Liberating God, change me from within. Free me from the bondage of my own self-centeredness. Remind me of my true center in You. Amen.

‘They have not exposed your iniquity’. In the midst of mourning and lament comes the reflection that the prophets had failed the people: a failure resulting in horror upon horror. That this was now patently obvious would seem an understatement and yet at the time the optimistic message of the false prophets was overwhelmingly received by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jeremiah’s ‘turn from your ways to God’ was mocked. The lamentable consequences of their persistence in sin had broken across them like a tidal wave.

Jeremiah’s conflict with the prophets of his day formed a significant part of his message. Firstly, the prophets failed to confront the people with their responsibilities under the covenant. The rights of relationship are to be met by the responsibilities of relationship. Secondly, the prophets had proclaimed a false message of prosperity and peace (Jer. 23:17). God’s condemnation, ‘In the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no-one turns from wickedness.’ (23:14).

A prophet’s task is to speak forth God’s word. The people of God were deserting the way of life centred in the Sinai covenant. God has strong words for those failing in their leadership of God’s people, ‘Shame on the shepherds who let the sheep of my flock scatter and be lost.’ (Jer. 23:1) The prophet’s call on other people to follow God demands that the prophet speak and live the truth of God.

The prophet’s were to remind the people of God’s ways of life, where they had strayed from it, and to remind them of God’s longing for their return to him.

Reflection: At the outbreak of the Falkland Islands War in 1982 the Argentine dictatorship adopted the slogan, ‘Paz con Justicia’ (Peace with Justice). The Dictatorship interpreted this to mean, ‘Peace with the Islands’! Our local Pastors’ Association decided to hold a weekly prayer meeting for ‘Peace’. When we arrived that first week the church building was cordoned off by police cars and police carrying submachine guns awaited us. Threats had been received and bombs claimed to have been placed in the church. We could not enter. The pastors gathered around in the dusk ‘Would we pray for ‘Peace’ or ‘Peace with Justice’? While the latter was clearly biblical, it was not being interpreted biblically! Deciding to stick to ‘Peace’ we offered to enter the church at our own risk. The police reluctantly agreed.

The elderly catholic bishop and the Hungarian refugee pastor who lead our pastors’ group saw clearly how the national government wished to align the people of God with their own agenda. A corrupt argentine dictatorship had started this war as a last ditch effort to retain control of the Argentine people. The dictators followed the well-worn principle: if you want to reunite your squabbling family, throw a brick through your neighbour’s window! Thankfully the pastors discerned truth and saw through this deception. At the risk of their lives and the lives of the people of God who joined them, the prophetic voice of God was heard in their prayers for ‘Peace’, that the killing might stop, no matter who occupied the Islands.

Thought: Speak God’s words.

Prayer: Searching God, give us wisdom and boldness that we might discern and proclaim your word to the world. Amen.

This heart-rending cry of the heart to God surges forth from the desolation and despair of Jerusalem's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. This was no theoretical discussion of sin and death, but rather the living agony of real life. In 586BC in Jerusalem reality television programs no longer received high audience ratings; real life had repositioned reality television to the trash can.

The weeping inhabitants of Jerusalem are encouraged to 'pour out your laments like water before the presence of the LORD' (18). At times there is no other human response than to weep and we do right in giving reign to our emotions at such times. Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus and over unrepentant Jerusalem. Six hundred years before Jesus' shed his tears over Jerusalem, we hear these lamentations of Jeremiah.

The divine judgement comes as the inevitable out working of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Warning is given with the threat of punishment if behaviour is not changed. The Babylonians are the agents of God's punishment on unrepentant Israel. The immense tragedy that betrayal invokes is set out in sickening detail.

'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me!' The cry from the cross, the writhing figure on the cross, shows the seriousness of sin. Sin is that destructive. Forgiveness is that powerful. Christ's death on the cross reveals God's love because it accomplished something which we could not do for ourselves, and which Christ could not do without dying.

Reflection: There comes a moment when we see the dereliction of our own hearts and come face to face with the inner darkness that ebbs and at times surges through us.

'Les Miserables' conjures many pictures: a stunning musical production, intense drama and larger than life characters depicting love, greed, grace and unrelenting pursuit. After the fugitive convict, Jean Valjean, has received his freedom and the extraordinary gift of silver candlesticks from the forgiving bishop, he comes across a boy flipping a silver coin. The boy's coin falls near Valjean and he intuitively places his foot on it and so robs the distressed boy of his hard won earnings. When the wrong of his action hits Valjean, he gives chase to the boy but fails to find him. In despair he gives the coin to a passing priest, 'for your poor'. He breaks down and exclaims, "Vile wretch that I am!" . . . and he wept, for the first time in nineteen years'.

Through these tears of personal failure and profound contrition the forgiven fugitive reflects, 'Forgiveness was the most formidable assault he had ever sustained'. (1)

Thought: Betrayal is an immense tragedy; forgiveness a formidable assault.

Prayer: Hear our cry, O Lord. Draw us home to you, draw us home even against our inability to return. Save us from ourselves! For Christ's sake. Amen.

NOTE 1: ['Les Miserables' by Victor Hugo, 1862 and 1982 English Translation, Penguin Classics, pp. 115, 116]

Discussion Questions

- 1 'Honesty is critical to restoration'. Identify areas of our national and community life that need restoring.
- 2 What false messages do we receive today that blind us to God's word?
- 3 In what ways may forgiveness 'assault' us?
Recall examples of forgiveness and its effect on people and / or organizations.

WEEK SEVEN

MON

A prayer of the afflicted

Lamentations 3:1-18

Here the sufferings of God's people are spoken of as if they are of a person: either the person of Jeremiah or a personification of the people. 'I am the one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath (1) . . . though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer' (8) The call is to God. In this sense the bitter weeping is properly directed. Hope amidst tears is placed in God who will yet have mercy on them.

God is clearly seen as the One bringing the suffering and distress: 'he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light' (2). Forgotten are God's pleas, many decades previously in Jeremiah's ministry, to return to 'your love as a bride' (Jer. 2:1), and the Lord's anguished, 'What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things and became worthless themselves?' (2:5) 'Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, while he led you in the way? (2:17) . . . Know and see that it is bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God. (2:19) . . . Why do you complain against me? You have rebelled against me, says the LORD. (2:29) . . . Now I am bringing you to judgement for saying, "I have not sinned."' (2:35)

We turn to God because God is both the One wronged and the One who can bring about restoration. Why were God's words so difficult to act upon? When do God's people stop saying, 'Life's unfair.', and start saying, 'Your judgement is just. Forgive us Lord, for we have sinned against you.?'

Reflection: In the Number One US bestseller, 'The Color of Water', the author's white mother, born a Jew, says of her youth, 'I did have low self-esteem as a child (she had suffered greatly). I felt low. Folks will run with that won't they? They'll say, "Oh, she felt low, so she went out and married a nigger." Well, I don't care. Your father changed my life. He taught me about a God who lifted me up and forgave me and made me new. I was lucky to have met him or I'd have been a prostitute or dead. Who knows what would have happened to me. I was reborn in Christ.' Her son comments, 'Ma was utterly confused about all but one thing: Jesus. Jesus gave Mommy hope. Jesus was Mommy's salvation. Jesus pressed her forward.'

Thought: You, Lord Jesus Christ, are the Saviour of the world.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I turn to you, I repent of my sins, I renounce all that is evil, I join your people. Help me, by God's grace, to strive to live as your disciple, loving God with my whole heart, and my neighbour as myself, until my life's end. Amen.

Given the desolation and despair brought by the all conquering Chaldeans, the appearance of 'therefore I have hope' (21) took me by surprise. What would the 'therefore' refer to? 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (22,23). It is the character of God that substantiates this hope. The particular characteristic of God is faithfulness: the unchanging constancy of God. This relationship values commitment, devoted loyalty and God's mercy in holding back on that which we deserve, bringing utter confidence that this relationship has a future.

Reflection: During the Civil War, the so-called 'Dirty War', in Argentina, 1976-84, our train was suddenly surrounded by blazing vehicle lights piercing the black of night. Its jarring brakes screeched us to a jumbled halt. Soldiers leaped aboard and began searching all the passengers. I had only been in the country 6 months and was traveling with a university student on the 'milk train' (it stopped at every station to pick up farm produce – a 36 hour trip). An elderly peasant woman failed to produce sufficient identification and was forced from the train amidst the flurry of her chooks' feathers and screaming abuse that my Spanish teacher had not seen fit to teach me! As the armed soldiers approached I remember being terrified, I did not understand their shouted commands. Their bayonets pointed the way - I was to empty my bag. Going through my personal belongings, there were suddenly more shouting; ferocious and doubly threatening because I couldn't understand their Spanish. My student companion, with back turned to the soldiers whispered, 'Juan, open the book!' I picked up 'the book', my new Spanish Bible, lying at the bottom of my bag. The soldiers stepped back warily. It was not an easy moment. I opened it slowly. Nothing was hidden inside it. More shouts. They moved on.

At a moment of such distress, slumped on the floor of the train, what had I found myself doing? I was humming, 'Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.' (Yes, in English!)

I have a picture of an elderly Argentine gaucho (jackeroo) framed on our wall, drinking mate' (Argentine tea), looking pensively into the distance, and reflecting through the years on the three words at the foot of the picture, 'Dios es fiel' – God is faithful. My prayer is that I too, as an aged mate' drinker will affirm, 'Dios es fiel'.

Thought: God is faithful.

Prayer: Dear God, your steadfast love never ceases, your mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Thank you. Amen.

WED

Until God looks down from heaven

Lamentations 3:40-58

‘Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord’. (3:40) This is perhaps the hardest thing: to honestly face ourselves and undergo that change of heart and mind which chooses God’s way. Lifting up ‘our hearts as well as our hands to God’ True repentance has to do with attitudes and motivation. Outward changes to appearance or ritual are not the stuff of a new relationship. (Hosea 6:6) The covenant relationship between God and his people spelt out the negative consequences, and indeed the judgement and punishment for breaking the agreement. Now that the penalty of rebellion is all too deeply etched, God’s people are finally recognizing their rebellion for what it is, rebellion against God.

The appeal here is that when genuine repentance occurs God can be sure to recognize it. ‘My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees’. (50) Then, when a genuine turning back to God occurs, when their rebellion has ceased, then forgiveness of their sin is assured. This is the way to restoration of their relationship. God has taken up their cause and redeemed their life (58). In the New Testament, John writes, ‘If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ (1 John 1:9)

Reflection: The climax in Morris West’s novel ‘The Second Victory’ nears as the old priest, Father Albertus, takes confession in the parish church. Firstly, we share in his sadness: ‘Sometimes, as it did today, the sheer repetition and continuity of human folly drove him to the brink of despair. In spite of two thousand years of redemption . . . the sum of sin never seemed to diminish. The very patience of God was made a mockery. . . His children left him to follow strange gods, and even after he had forgiven them they went back, like dogs to the vomit, and he could do nothing but wait and hope, and pray for their return.’

Then, quite unexpectedly, the major character, Mark Hanlon, enters the confessional seeking forgiveness. In due course Father Albertus gives the absolution and asks for a penance to be performed. Hanlon questions the apparent leniency of the penance, ‘As easy as that, Father?’ ‘Forgiveness is always easy, my son,’ says Father Albertus soberly, ‘The hardest thing of all is to bend the will to ask for it. It has taken these years and a singular mercy to bring you to this moment.’

Thought: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ A tax collector, as told by Jesus (Luke 18:13).

Prayer: Merciful God, our maker and our judge, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do: we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves; we repent, and are sorry for all our sins. Father, forgive us. Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The conquerors have devastated Jerusalem and the people of God plea, ‘Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!’ (5:1) Homes are lost, parents are lost, water and wood must be paid for, life is very difficult under an occupying army. 2 Kings 25:9

In all of this the people now turn to God to remember them. If only they had remembered God! If only they had listened to God through his prophet Jeremiah. He had told the leaders and inhabitants to surrender long before the final over-running of the city’s defences. So much of the suffering depicted would have been avoided. But, the rebelliousness that led them to ignore God, also led them to ignore his prophet’s words of warning. Moreover, other prophets had been urging them to return to the Lord their God and to live the covenant relationship. If this had happened the destruction and occupation of their land would never have occurred. Micah 5:1; Joel 2:13; Amos 5:24;

Judgement is a key theme in Jeremiah and Lamentations. The people are suffering because they rebelled against God and his judgement and punishment has fallen on them. The people want to be saved. But what is the salvation they seek? Is it salvation to do as they wish? Well, they have done that, and that is precisely why they are in this tragic situation! What are they to be saved for – to what end? Let us hear God’s voice, ‘Return to me. Return to our devoted love and faithfulness.’ Salvation is to a relationship with God and each other: to love God and love our neighbour.

Reflection: ‘Salvation’ is a key concept for us: rescue, deliverance, liberation from peril and pain. The people of God were rescued from slavery in Egypt. ‘Jesus’ means ‘God saves’. Joseph is told in a dream just prior to Jesus’ birth, Mary ‘will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ (Matthew 1:21)

Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, in his book, ‘The God of Life’, writes, ‘Deliverance from oppression in Egypt and journey to the promised land mark the celebration of the first Passover . . . It is on this same feast that the Lord celebrates his final meal with his friends (Luke 22:19-20). . . . The blood that is shed then is connected with the covenant.’ (p.41) At the Lord’s Supper we celebrate the new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah (31:31-33) and instituted by Christ, ‘Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ (APBA, p.129)

Thought: You, Lord Jesus Christ, are the Saviour of the world.

Prayer: Father of all
 we give you thanks and praise
 that when we were still far off
 you meet us in your son and brought us home.
 Dying and living, Jesus declared your love,
 gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
 May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life;
 we who drink his cup bring life to others;
 we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Amen.

The city gate where judgement was administered is now vacant. No music is heard, and 'our dancing has turned to mourning' (14). Their sovereignty lost. Mount Zion, the place of celebration and worship so wonderfully written of in psalms lies desolate, inhabited by prowling predators, jackals that seek to devour. The picture of national powerlessness and ruin is complete.

Why has all this occurred? - 'woe to us, for we have sinned'. (16) The failure of God's people to live by the covenant has brought about the judgement and punishment so vividly lamented.

Jeremiah had earlier (2:13) expressed the truth that our sin of forsaking God, making a lifestyle for ourselves with our own hands, not only cannot and will not satisfy, but leads to our death. Our lifestyle away from God is in fact our 'deathstyle' – our way to death.

Reflection: The Reproaches sung in Worship on Good Friday offer a window into the heart of God on this extraordinary and so distinctively Christian day. Instead of hearing our human lament, we hear the lament of God over our abandonment of his love. Hear some of the verses, as God laments:

*My people, what wrong have I done to you?
What good have I not done for you?
Listen to me.*

I am your Creator, Lord of the universe;
I have entrusted this world to you,
but you have created the means to destroy it.

My people, what wrong . . .

I have made you in my image;
but you have degraded body and spirit
and marred the image of your God.
You have deserted me and turned your backs on me.

My people, what wrong . . .

In the fullness of time I sent you my Son,
that in him you might know me,
and through him find life and peace;
but you put him to death on the cross.

Thought: By the end of Good Friday I am ready to give up on myself. I am driven to the edge.

Prayer: Father, hear our prayer and forgive us.

Unstop our ears
that we may receive the gospel of the cross.
Lighten our eyes
that we may see your glory
in the face of your Son.
Penetrate our minds
that your truth may make us whole.
Irradiate our hearts with your love
that we may love one another for Christ's sake.

Father, forgive us.

NOTE Reproach from 'Lent, Holy Week, Easter Services' in the revised rite of the Church of England.

The impossibility of a faithful and loving God giving up forever on his people is brought before God. God's eternal character is the basis of the appeal: 'O LORD', the One who rules over all that is, all that was created is created by the LORD God, 'in the beginning God . . .'. Moreover, while the flowers wither and we return to dust, God's reign is forever, eternal: 'your throne endures for all generations'.

Yet, could it be that we are completely forgotten? Has our sin so shredded our covenant of love that there is no reconciliation possible? Can redemption occur? Can a slave be bought from the slave market? Can a profligate ever be accepted home?

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we might be restored; renew our days as of old.' The appeal to the only source of life and hope is made. We, of ourselves recognize our total inability to save ourselves. Only God can save. The self-help manuals and therapies of the New Age are powerless to save. Can a computer virus heal itself? Sin is like the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst: its instincts will not save. Only God can save.

Reflection:

Will God act? And, if so, how? This dilemma is treated by an Egyptian Muslim in his novel, 'City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem', which was awarded the State Prize for Literature in Egypt. The novel is set around the events of Good Friday, and recognizes, firstly, the human sin and depravity that condemned Jesus to crucifixion. Secondly, that Jesus of Nazareth was a god-fearing man, and thirdly, that God chose to deal with this situation by delivering the good man through substituting another in his place. The first two points are not insubstantial areas of agreement from which to seek dialogue with our Muslim friends and contacts.

The novel captures the dilemma of if and how God may act. It works within the Quran's acceptance of human sin and the godlike character of the prophet, Jesus, even though denying his death on the cross. 'But they killed him not, nor crucified him. Only a likeness of that was shown to them.' (Sura 4, verse 157) But, could it be that a person would 'give up his life for his friends'? Could it be that God would permit a prophet to 'give up his life for his friends'? Who would such a prophet be? What would it mean? What hope would it bring?

Thought: God's action or inaction demonstrates his character. What is God like? 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. Jesus of Nazareth. (John 14:9)

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for showing us your 'waiting, hoping' nature in the life of the Preacher of the Mount; crucified by us, yet in your grace, for us. In Christ's name we wait and hope. Amen.

The final verse of Jeremiah's Lamentations, 'unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure', was not a positive note on which to leave the synagogue! A similar issue confronts the reading of the endings of Isaiah and Malachi. To overcome this, it became usual for the synagogue reader to repeat the second last verse of the book. In the case of Lamentations verse 21 would be repeated after verse 22: The reading of the lamentations would thus conclude, 'Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.' God's people live in hope, their confidence placed in the character of the faithful, forgiving and powerful God. The same Lord whose property is always to have mercy, and who had decades earlier sought reconciliation, 'Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness.' (Jer 3:22)

Reflection: 'Christ is risen!' As a new Christian, I was startled by the joy of this spontaneous farewell, as my boss walked off to the car park on the eve of the Easter holiday. 'Yeh.' I mumbled. 'Right on.' I thought. And then on Easter Sunday our Vicar greeted us, you guessed it, 'Christ is risen!' and the response reverberated around the church, 'He is risen indeed!' I was learning. Following on after Christ was full of surprises!

In Argentina the response was an emotive and passionate, 'Es verdad! El Senor ha resucitado. Aleluya!' (It is the truth! The Lord has been raised. Alleluia!) What joy! Praise the Lord of life!

A great surprise and delight upon returning to Australia were the Easter 'Awakening' marches. The fun of Christians celebrating in the city center, hearing our Archbishop proclaim the simple, shattering truth of Christ's resurrection, was an absolute thrill. In later years my wife was up the front of the march leading God's people with our donkeys. It was all so wonderfully crazy! Christians partying in Bourke street, donkeys leading the way, tourists taking photos, Granny Smith apples given to passers-by, balloons blowing in the wind. Different races, different Christian denominations, people of all ages, shapes and sizes – celebrating the One who rose from the dead and brought light, life and love. Praise God for such madness! A world turned upside down!

Thought: Resurrection!? How could it be? Could it be? Who could it be? It would turn the world upside down!

Prayer: Glorious Lord of life,
 by the mighty resurrection of your Son
 you overcame the old order of sin and death
 to make all things new in him:
 grant that we who celebrate with joy
 Christ's rising from the dead
 may be raised from the death of sin
 to the life of righteousness;
 through him who lives and reigns with you
 and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This study was published November 2001 by Anglican Press Australia
PO Box A287, Sydney South, NSW 1235
and is now out of print.

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Acknowledgements

Prayers on Days 43 and 44 are from *An Australian Prayer Book*, published by the Anglican Press Australia and used with permission.

The prayer on Day 45 can be found at
www.oremus.org/liturgy/lhwe/gf.html

Reproach from 'Lent, Holy Week, Easter Services' on Day 46 is from the revised rite of the Church of England.

National Library of Australia
ISBN 1 876960 09 4

Cover Art by T-bone