

Have you ever wished that you had never been born?

That’s okay.

Jeremiah did too!

So did Job.

Still, the end of Jeremiah 20 seems very strange.

Lament in verses 7-10,

confidence in verses 11-12,

praise in verse 13,

and then curses on his birth in verses 14-18.

This only makes sense

if you back up and look at the big picture of the book of Jeremiah thus far.

Chapters 1-10 laid out the basic message of Jeremiah.

Israel and Judah have rejected the LORD (chapters 1-6)

Even the temple cannot save them (chapters 7-10).

Disaster is coming.

Chapters 11-20 have now set forth how judgment is coming upon Jerusalem.

Because Jerusalem has broken covenant with the LORD,

therefore famine, sword, and plague will destroy God’s people.

In chapter 20 we have a couple clues that Jeremiah is bringing this section to a close.

First, verse 12 is identical to 11:20.

In Hebrew literature, the repetition of a verse

is often used to signal the reader that there is a connection between the passages.

And since chapter 21 plainly starts a new section,

we are encouraged to see chapter 20 bringing a conclusion

to the oracles of chapters 11-20.

Second, verses 14-18 go a step further,

and connect back to chapter 1!

Remember Jeremiah’s call:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Now Jeremiah asks, “why did I come out from the womb”?

Even as Jerusalem is returned to dust,

so also the prophet returns to the womb and begs that he not be born!

1. “I Will Break This People and This City” – the Potter’s Flask (19:1-13)

a. The Rubbish Heap in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (v1-6)

Thus says the LORD, “Go, buy a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests,² and go out to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

Last time Jeremiah was commanded to watch the potter.

Now he is commanded to buy an earthenware flask.

He is told to take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests.

Later, in chapter 26, we will hear that some of the elders defended Jeremiah,
so it is possible that Jeremiah had some friends among the elders –
and maybe they went with him.

(That may explain why no one objects until Jeremiah returns to the temple!)

But he is to take them out to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom,
at the entry of the Potsherd Gate.

We heard about the Valley of the Son of Hinnom back in chapter 7.

In chapter 7, verses 30-33, Jeremiah was commanded to stand at the gate of the temple
and proclaim pretty much the same message.

The same themes are found in chapter 7 and chapter 19:

changing the name from Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom,
to the Valley of Slaughter;

the reason for judgment – because they burned their children in the fire to idols –
and the reminder that “I did not command [this], nor did it come into my mind” –
and giving the dead bodies for food to the birds of the air
and the beasts of the field.

When we looked at chapter 7, we saw that the first part of chapter 7
is probably the temple sermon referred to in Jeremiah 26.

The last part of chapter 7 may well be the temple sermon referred to here in chapter 19.

After all, at the end of chapter 19, verses 14-15,

we are told that Jeremiah repeated the sermon from Topheth.

And the end of chapter 7 sounds very much like the same message as chapter 19.

The Valley of the Son of Hinnom was the rubbish heap outside Jerusalem.

That's why it was called the “potsherd gate.”

In the book of Jeremiah this is the “ge-ben-hinnom.”

Later, the word “son” [ben] will drop out,

and this valley will be known as “ge-hinnom” – or in Aramaic, “Gehenna.”

In the NT, “gehenna” is a term used for hell by Jesus throughout Matthew's gospel.

And you can see in Jeremiah's description

how ge-hinnom is being transformed into “hell.”

In verse 3 the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel,

declares that he is bringing “disaster” on Jerusalem –

such that the ears of those who hear of it will tingle.

³ *You shall say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.*

Disaster is the same word translated “evil” elsewhere.

I know that we don’t like to hear that God brings disaster –
that God brings bad things as well as good things –
but that’s why we need to pay attention to the reason in verses 4-5

⁴ *Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents,⁵ and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind—*

Why does God bring disaster?

Because God’s people have forsaken him.

And what happens when people forsake the LORD?

What happens is that they fill this place with the blood of innocents.

The picture in verses 4-5 is that the people of God
have made Jerusalem into a foreign city –
a city that God does not recognize as his own.

Worship and ethics go together.

If you do not love the LORD with all your heart,
then you will not love your neighbor as yourself.

When God’s people forget the LORD,
they also mistreat each other.

We’ve seen how Jeremiah has criticized the priests in the temple.
Just doing the “right things” in worship does not *guarantee* love –
but doing the *wrong things* in worship definitively pre-empts love.

It is important that God’s people worship him in the way that God says to worship.
In the early 20th century, Presbyterian and Episcopal missionaries
started saying that every religion could be a way to God.
Not surprisingly, by the late 20th century, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches
were supporting abortion – and now conduct gay weddings.

And God warns that failure to love God and neighbor will result in the rubbish heap
becoming “the Valley of Slaughter.”

⁶ *therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.*

And verses 7-9 describe how Ge-ben-hinnom became “Gehenna”:

b. The Horror of Judgment (v7-9)

⁷ And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. ⁸ And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds. ⁹ And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.'

Jerusalem has become an alien city – a foreign city – to the LORD.
And therefore, the LORD hands the city over to destruction.
Goliath had said that he would give David's body for food
to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.

But here it is not Goliath who gives Jerusalem to destruction.
It is not the Babylonians!

It is the LORD.

“I will make void... I will cause them to fall...
I will give their dead bodies for food...
I will make this city a horror...
I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters...”

It is not just that God will “withdraw” and *let* others do his dirty work.

No, the LORD God of Hosts will do this.
Yes, he will do this through the instrumentality of “their enemies” (v9),
but the enemies are almost an afterthought.

I suspect that Henriette is the only one in our congregation
who has any personal experience of what this really looks like.
Twenty-one years ago she was running and hiding from the execution gangs
hoping and praying that her little children whom she had sent in various directions
were still safe.

In Jerusalem the famine would reach a point during the siege
that mothers would eat their own children.

How does one recover from that?

There is a reason why people say, “War is Hell.”
I saw the relics of it in Eritrea –
the one-legged veterans who had stepped on a landmine –
the hollow, hardened gaze of those who had seen (and maybe done)
things that no one should ever see (or do).

In Revelation 19, it is the exalted Lord Jesus Christ who comes on the white horse
and rules the nations with a rod of iron,
and the sword that comes from his mouth slays the wicked –
“and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.” (19:21)

And to give a picture of what he is describing, God tells Jeremiah:

c. God Will Smash Jerusalem to Bits (v10-13)

¹⁰ “Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, ¹¹ and shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended.’

What do you do with smashed pottery?
You throw it away.
We’re not talking about a chip or a crack.
We’re talking about a flask that has been smashed to bits.

God says that he will “break this people and this city...
so that it can never be mended.”

Never.

This is not Jeremiah’s prophecy of the 70 years of exile.
There is a sense in which the exile will last for 70 years,
and then God’s people will return to the land.
But that’s not what Jeremiah is talking about.

Jeremiah is talking about *never*.

Jerusalem will *never* be mended.

If Jeremiah had said “70 years” – they might not have liked it,
but they could reconcile that with the rest of Scripture.

But Jeremiah says *never*.

Men shall bury in Topheth because there will be no place else to bury. ¹² Thus will I do to this place, declares the LORD, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth. ¹³ The houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah—all the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the host of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods—shall be defiled like the place of Topheth.’”

God says that he will turn Jerusalem into Topheth –
the houses of Jerusalem – even the house of David – will be defiled like Topheth
(the Valley of the Son of Hinnom – Gehenna).
In other words, Jerusalem will become Hell.

For how long?
When will God restore us?

Never.

This is it.
This is the end of Jerusalem.
This is God's final judgment.
There is no going back!

Remember who was listening:
"some of the elders of the priests."
Jeremiah himself is a priest.

It is entirely possible that Jeremiah takes with him those who are sympathetic.
The first announcement of coming judgment may have been received by faith.

Certainly there is no hint of opposition as Jeremiah delivers the ultimatum –
until he moves to a more controversial setting.

I will not say "more public" – since the city gates were public settings.
But it is one thing for a prophet to make controversial claims among the hoi polloi –
among the common people at the city gates,
with only a few sympathetic elders as witnesses.
It is another thing entirely for a prophet to stand in the court of the LORD's house...

2. Beaten, but Not Silenced – the True Prophet and the False (19:14-20:6)

a. Jeremiah Repeats the Message in the Court of the LORD's House (v14-15)

¹⁴ Then Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the LORD's house and said to all the people: ¹⁵ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words."

Like I said earlier, it is quite likely that the end of Jeremiah 7 contains the sermon.
It is so much like the first part of Jeremiah 19
that at the very least it is a record of another sermon
when Jeremiah said the same thing!

Jeremiah says that the LORD is bringing disaster upon Jerusalem.
There is that word again: "disaster" or "evil."
God is bringing "bad things" upon his own city –
the city and the house that is called by his name.

Why?

"Because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words."
Chapter 20, verses 1-2 record Pashhur's response:

b. Pashhur's Response (20:1-2)

20 Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. ² Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD.

Pashhur is a priest – the “chief officer in the house of the LORD.”

He hears Jeremiah say that God will destroy Jerusalem
like a clay pot that can never be repaired.

And he says, “Heretic!”

He has Jeremiah beaten and put in stocks –
publicly humiliated before everyone who comes in and out of the temple.

Pashhur is simply doing his job.

Jeremiah has said that God will destroy Jerusalem –
never to restore it!

That's heresy!

Jeremiah cannot be a true prophet –
because God said that Jerusalem would endure forever!

Brothers and sisters,

when people say that God only does good – and never brings disaster –
they are false prophets on the order of Pashhur.

They are destroying God's people by lying about God
and saying “peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

Listen to what God says to Pashhur:

c. The LORD's Reply to Pashhur: “To Babylon You Shall Go” (20:3-6)

³ The next day, when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, “The LORD does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. ⁴ For thus says the LORD: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. ⁵ Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon. ⁶ And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely.”

Pashhur, the chief officer in the house of the LORD,
has forgotten the “if.”

God promised that he would bless Jerusalem *if* Jerusalem followed the LORD.

God promised that he would bless David *if* his sons followed the LORD.

Jerusalem has turned away from the LORD.

Therefore the king of Babylon will strike down Jerusalem
and take the people and their wealth to Babylon.

Pashhur's friends will be struck down by the sword,
while Pashhur himself will be taken into captivity.

And above all, Pashhur's name is changed to "Terror on Every Side" –
or "Surrounded by Trembling."

To some extent, Pashhur faces a fate worse than death.
The temple that Pashhur served would be destroyed.
He will be alive – but alive only to go into captivity –
and to die there – and be buried *far* from Jerusalem!

In chapter 19 Jeremiah was clear:
God is the one who will do this.
In chapter 20 Jeremiah explains
that the king of Babylon will be the instrument.

But verses 7-18 of chapter 20 seem strange at this point.
Perhaps we need to hear verses 7-12 as Jeremiah's prayer while he was in the stocks.
Verse 13 as his relief at being released.
And verses 14-18 as his concluding lament.

Because as we have seen,
verses 7-18 form not only the conclusion to this story,
but also the conclusion to this segment (chapters 11-20)
and indeed the conclusion to Part One of the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah has announced that Jerusalem is going to Hell.
Or more precisely, that Jerusalem will *become* Hell.
God's final judgment is coming upon Jerusalem.
And Jeremiah cannot bear it anymore!

3. The Lamentation of Jeremiah (20:7-18)

Paul's language in Romans 8 summarizes verses 7-13 very well:

a. "Perplexed, but Not in Despair; Persecuted, but Not Abandoned" (v7-13)
(Of course, verses 14-18 are another story!)
But let's start with the easy part!

i) God Prevails Over Me (v7)

⁷ O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;

That's the easy part?!

God has given us a beautiful gift in the book of Jeremiah.
Not only do we get to hear the voice of the LORD proclaiming judgment –
turning Jerusalem into Hell.

But we also get to hear the voice of the prophet –
we get to hear the *cost* of proclaiming the Word of the LORD.

The verb translated “you have deceived me” could mean something stronger:
“you have abused me” – or even “you have seduced me.”

It’s not a nice word.

It’s used to speak of how a man might seduce a virgin (Ex 22)
how Delilah enticed Samson (Judges 16),
or how the evil spirit from God deceived Ahab (1 Kings 22).

And in Ezekiel 14:9 God says

“if the prophet be deceived and speak a word,
I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet,
and I will stretch out my hand against him,
and destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.”

What does Jeremiah mean?

God had been very clear from the start:

“they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you,
for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.” (1:19)

And yet Jeremiah has been beaten by the temple guards,
and is now sitting in the stocks.

O LORD, you said that you would be with me!
You said that they would not prevail!
What am I doing here?

⁷ *O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.*

The key to this whole passage is the word taken from Jeremiah 1:19
“They shall not *prevail* against you.”

The word “prevail” is found in chapter 20, verses, 7, 9, 10, and 11.

In verse 7, God has prevailed over Jeremiah.

In verse 9, the last word in the verse is “I cannot prevail.”

In v10, the enemies say, “Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can prevail over him.”

In v11, Jeremiah replies, “they will not prevail over me.”

In verse 7, Jeremiah realizes that God’s promise of protection
meant something different than he expected.

God said that my enemies would not prevail against me.

Obviously getting beaten and put in stocks *feels like* my enemies are prevailing!

You *said* they would not prevail.

But I have no choice in the matter:

ii). I Cannot Prevail (v8-9)

⁸ *For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.*

⁹ *If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot **PREVAIL**.*

When I speak, I get beaten.

When I am silent, a fire burns in my heart.

I can't win.

Verse 10 shows us how closely connected this lament is to the Pashhur episode:

iii). My Persecutors Seek to Prevail Over Me (v10)

¹⁰ *For I hear many whispering.
Terror is on every side!*

[remember the new name that God gave Pashhur! – Terror on every side!]

"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

say all my close friends,

watching for my fall.

"Perhaps he will be deceived;

then we can overcome him [we can prevail against him]

and take our revenge on him."

And this is *precisely* what has happened.

Jeremiah blew it!

He said that Jerusalem would be destroyed like a clay pot –
never to be mended.

Jeremiah has denied the covenant – he has rejected the word of Moses –
the promises to David – God's covenant with Aaron and Zadok.

Except for one thing.

Jeremiah *knows* that he has *only said* what the LORD commanded him to say!

“Proclaim there the words that I tell you...

Hear the word of the LORD...

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel...

...declares the LORD...

Thus says the LORD of hosts...

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel.

Six times in the fifteen verses of chapter 19, the LORD said!

And so Jeremiah concludes:

iv). They Will Not Prevail Because I Trust the LORD of Hosts (v11-13)

¹¹ *But the LORD is with me as a dread warrior;*

therefore my persecutors will stumble;

they will not overcome me. [They will not prevail against me]

They will be greatly shamed,

for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor

will never be forgotten.

¹² *O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous,*

who sees the heart and the mind,^[a]

let me see your vengeance upon them,

for to you have I committed my cause.

Jeremiah is confident that God will make things right.

He knows that vengeance belongs to God.

He has committed his cause to the LORD.

He remembers what God said –

back in chapter 1 – “I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you.”

So Jeremiah *knows* (even in the stocks) that his persecutors will stumble.

They will not prevail.

This is why I am so nonchalant about current affairs.

Is serious persecution coming to Christians in America?

Will South Bend become hostile to the gospel?

Maybe.

But they will not succeed!

No weapon formed against you can stand.

Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

Will we suffer?

Of course! We are servants of Jesus – and a servant is not greater than his master!

Those who afflict you will be destroyed by the sword that comes out of Jesus’ mouth

when he comes to judge the world at the last day!

¹³ *Sing to the LORD;
praise the LORD!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hand of evildoers.*

This would be Jeremiah's song of joy as he is delivered from the stocks.

It is our song of joy as we remember that Jesus will deliver us,
as Paul says in Romans 8:18,
"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."
Or again in Romans 8:31,
"What then shall we say to these things?
If God is for us, who can be against us?
He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all,
how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

And if Jesus had already come, that's where Jeremiah 20 would end.

But Jesus hasn't come yet –
and so Jeremiah 20 must go one step further:

After all, remember what Jeremiah has said in chapter 19!
Jerusalem will be destroyed like a clay pot – never to be restored!

Never?

What does that mean?

Jeremiah may have confidence that the LORD has (and will) deliver *him*,
but his own message still grieves him to the core of his being!

b. Would that My Mother Had Been My Grave! (v14-18)

The Law of Moses forbids you to curse your father or your mother.

So Jeremiah does not!

Instead he curses the day when his mother bore him!

And he curses the man who brought the happy news to his father!

i). Cursed Be the Day (v14)

¹⁴ *Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!*

This is a stunning transition from praise to curse

Back in chapter 15, verse 10, Jeremiah had said,
"Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me,
a man of strife and contention to the whole land!"

But there, the LORD answered immediately.

Here Jeremiah launches into an extended malediction on the day of his birth and the man who brought his father the news.

This is very similar to Job 3,
where Job curses the day of his birth.
Why does Jeremiah do this?

ii). Cursed Be the Man (v15-18)

- ¹⁵ *Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,
“A son is born to you,”
making him very glad.*
- ¹⁶ *Let that man be like the cities
that the LORD overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,*
- ¹⁷ *because he did not kill me in the womb;
so my mother would have been my grave,
and her womb forever great.*
- ¹⁸ *Why did I come out from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?*

Jeremiah is a messenger.

He has been appointed by God to be a messenger of death.
Now he wishes that the messenger who brought tidings of life to his father,
“a son is born to you”
would become “like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity.”
If only the messenger had refused to do his job –
and rather than bring the message of joy,
instead he should have killed the infant Jeremiah while he was still in the womb.

Jeremiah was the LORD’s appointed prophet from the womb.

He was the one whom God had appointed to destroy Jerusalem by his word.
If Jeremiah had died in the womb, then maybe Jerusalem would not have been destroyed!

How do you hold together the praise and the confidence of verse 13
with the curses and the anguish of verses 14-18?

By recognizing that Jeremiah is *not* Jesus.

Jeremiah has been called to *destroy* Jerusalem.
“I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.” (1:10)

Jeremiah has been called to smash Jerusalem to bits –
never to be restored.

There will be a partial restoration in 70 years.

But the earthly Jerusalem – the city and the temple where God placed his name –
will *never* be restored.

Paul will say that the “Jerusalem that now is” is Hagar – Mt. Sinai in Arabia –
and she is in captivity with her children.

But the Jerusalem that is above is free – and she is our mother!

Paul sees the heavenly Jerusalem – and so has greater confidence and joy!

But Jeremiah isn't there yet.

And, if we are honest, sometimes neither are we!

If Jeremiah could say – as a part of inspired scripture –
that he wished that he had never born,
so that he would not have to do what God called him to do!
then it is okay for the people of God to struggle,
to lament and mourn.

It's even okay to wish that God had never called you to do what he has called you to do!

After all, we have been called to bring a similar message of judgment to those around us.

Let me give you excerpts from the early sermons in the book of Acts:

“Save yourself from this crooked generation” (2:40)

“every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed” (3:23)

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears,
you always resist the Holy Spirit” (7:51)

“Since you thrust aside [the word of God]
and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life,
behold, we are turning to the Gentiles” (13:46)

“The times of ignorance God overlooked,
but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,
because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world” (17:30-31)

The message of the gospel includes the warning that Judgment Day is coming.

The city of man – like the earthly Jerusalem – will be destroyed.

All that is in rebellion against God will be smashed like a clay pot –
never to be repaired!

And we should weep – with Jeremiah (and with Paul) – that we have such a fearsome message.

But like Jeremiah – and like Paul – woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

As C. S. Lewis said, everyone you meet is headed to one of two final destinations:
heaven or hell.

And your interaction with them will help them towards one or the other!

Lord, have mercy!