

## The Prophet in Depression (Jer 20:1 - 21:10)



This section may have come from Jeremiah's diary. It reveals his deepest pain as a prophet (c.f. 15:10). Here we look into Jeremiah's depression. He is viciously attacked and ridiculed, and he hits rock bottom, and God lifts Jeremiah out of the pit. Many of God's servants went through the 'dark night of the soul' and met God in the valley. In his despair and pain, Jeremiah lashed out at God, saying some awful things about Him, 'God! You tricked me. You used me.' Jeremiah's bitter words are recorded in the Scriptures, showing us God can take our honesty. He would rather have us be honest with Him than be pretentious.

- a) Time - Ch 20 took place in the days of Jehoiakim (609-598 BC), and Ch 21 during the early days of Zedekiah under the Babylonian siege around 597BC (C.f. 37:3-10; 2 Kings 25).
- b) Structure - Jeremiah's depression is expressed in poetry (20:7-18), sandwiched between the two prophecies of judgement written in prose (20:1-6; 21:1-10). What led to Jeremiah's depression and what followed afterward?

### A. Jeremiah under Trial (20:1-6)

1. Jeremiah was tortured by Pashhur. The temple had two main officials: the priest and the chief officer. The chief officer's job was to maintain order in the temple. His name was 'Pashhur', which means ease or tranquillity. Without a proper trial Pashhur flogged Jeremiah, perhaps 40 minus 1 times (C.f. Dt 25:3). This is the first time Jeremiah had to endure physical violence. He was taken to the north side of the temple and put in 'stocks', in Hebrew 'mahpeketh' which means 'causing distortion.' It was not only a device to 'restrain' and 'shame' people but also to 'torture' them, potentially resulting in long-term injury (c.f. 29:26). Jeremiah became a 'laughingstock' in the city. As a sensitive man who suffered deeply inside, he spiralled down into dark depression.
2. Why Jeremiah so viciously attacked? Remember Jeremiah's prophetic act of dashing the clay jar to pieces in the previous chapter? Then delivering God's word of judgment in the temple court (19:14)? It did not endear him to the authorities. Jeremiah was a disturber of the temple order. Pashhur was determined to beat Jeremiah into submission. But the next day Jeremiah was waiting for Pashhur with a new name for him from the Lord, '*The Lord has not called your name Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib. For thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends, and they shall fall by the sword of their enemies and your eyes shall see it.'* (21:3-4).

One day God would turn the table and cause Pashhur to become a 'terror' to 'himself' and to 'his friends' who follow him. The fear and intimidation Pashhur tried to put on Jeremiah would be turned loose on him. Pashhur was one of the 'false prophets' who prophesied to the people, '*You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.*' (c.f. 14:13)

3. How was God going to punish Pashhur? Jeremiah prophesies, 'The Babylonians will come to plunder all the treasures of the city, the temple, and the royal palace. You and your friends will be carried off to the foreign land and die there.' (v4-6)
  - a) For the first time Jeremiah identifies the 'northern army' is from 'Babylon' where Pashhur would die. Israel was located right on the 'fertile crescent' that connected Africa, Europe and Asia. So, Israel was always run over by the superpowers in war - Egypt from the south and Assyria from the north (modern Iraq) where Abraham was from originally. In Jeremiah's days Chaldea (Babylon) in the north was growing in power with their capital city in Shinar (c.f. Gen 11 – The Babel tower). A huge power shift was taking place between Babylon and Egypt. It is as if God was saying to Pashhur and the people of Judah, '*I will take you right back to where Abraham came from. I am ready to start all over from the very beginning.*'
  - b) This prophecy was fulfilled by 597BC, less than 10 years later. Pashhur was already replaced by another man named 'Zephaniah' (29:24-29).

## B. Jeremiah's Depression (20:7-18)

After the traumatic event when Jeremiah sat alone with God, a heavy cloud of depression settled on him. The mockery, taunt, torture, shame, rejection, and who knows that kind of physical injuries he had sustained? Jeremiah felt trapped by his prophetic calling. If the 'clay jar' prophecy brought such persecution, what fate awaited him in the future? Jeremiah's confession here shows hyper mood swings, a tell-tale sign of depression. It shows Jeremiah was a vulnerable human being like any of us, not a prophesying machine.

1. Jeremiah accuses God of trapping him in the ministry, then dropping him a hot potato when Jeremiah needed Him the most, letting him become a 'laughingstock' of the town. Was Jeremiah right in saying this? When we are depressed, it is hard to be fair or objective. Jeremiah's complaints are :-
  - a) *'You never told me I will get into such trouble. You promised me You will protect me.'* (20:7)
  - b) *'You never give me anything nice to say when people want to be uplifted and comforted.'* (20:8)
  - c) *'You won't even let me stay quiet. When I try to not to speak, You make Your words burn like fire in my bones so I can't even hold it back.'* (20:9)
  - d) *'Listen to what people are saying about me. They say, Jeremiah is Magor-Missabib - fear on every side! Their constant taunt has become my nickname. Why did you deceive me and trap me to this horrible ministry from which I cannot escape? They want to kill me all the time.'* (20:10)
2. Let's look at Jeremiah's accusations:
  - a) *Did God give Jeremiah only words of doom and gloom?* God has also given him words of hope, though thus far he was given lot more words of doom and gloom than of hope. It was what the people needed to hear, so at least some of them would repent. This changes after Jerusalem's destruction.
  - b) *Did God promise Jeremiah he will not into trouble?* *'They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.'* (1:19) God told Jeremiah people would fight him, but he would come out of it strong. Jesus said, *'In the world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.'* (Jn 16:33) Paul says, *'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or swords? For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yes, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.'* (Rom 8:35-37)
3. Jeremiah was the one who misunderstood God's promise. God kept His word and delivered Jeremiah out of the stocks. Later on, Jeremiah would be thrown into a pit, but God would deliver him out of it too. But it was very difficult for Jeremiah to see at the time that God did not fail him.
  - a) Now suddenly Jeremiah's mood changes (20:11-13). Jeremiah lifts his soul to praise God for 'delivering him' from the evildoers, but he just can't keep up his spirit. (v13)
  - b) Jeremiah comes crashing down again and sinks even lower. He hits rock bottom and becomes suicidal. He hates himself and his life, and he curses the day of his birth (v14). Jeremiah even curses the *man who delivered the 'happy' message* of his birth to his father because he cannot curse his father or mother (Lev 20:9) for bringing him into the world. He just can't face another day. *'Why was I not destroyed at birth only to face labour, sorrow, and shame all day long?'* (20:18) Was this Jeremiah's bitter protest to God?

## C. Jeremiah Vindicated (21:1-10)

Fast forward a few years to Ch 21-23. They record the prophecies close to the time of Jerusalem's destruction. There were two sieges on the city, the first siege in Ch 21 and the second siege in Ch 37. When the Egyptian armies advanced to reassert their authority over Judah, the Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem temporarily, only to come back later to finish the job (c.f. 37:5). So, Ch 20 and Ch 21 are many years apart, but are presented together as a 'sequel'.

1. There is a new king on the throne now. Zedekiah is the last king and a wicked king. Babylonian troops are surrounding the city and Israel could hold out only for so long. To whom does the king turn for advice?

Jeremiah, the man who was a laughingstock in the city a few years ago. It is both bitter irony and sweet vindication for Jeremiah. Zedekiah sends the new priests and governor to consult Jeremiah, *'Shall we fight against Babylonians or not?'* (21:2) They must have remembered that in Judah's past God graciously delivered King Hezekiah and the nation through prophetic words.

2. Jeremiah gave them difficult choices.

a) To Zedekiah: *'God is directing the Babylonian armies, so you don't stand a chance. In fact, I saw a famine coming to the city, so terrible that you were eating each other until nothing is left.'* (21:3-7)

b) To the people: *'My advice for every man, woman and child is to surrender now. Defect to Chaldeans who are besieging you, then at least your life will be spared. But if you fight, death is certain. God is setting before you life or death. Choose life and surrender.'* (21:8-10)

3. Zedekiah did not take up Jeremiah's advice. The siege was lifted only temporarily with the help of the Egyptian army. When the Babylonians returned, Zedekiah was captured in Jericho while on the run. They killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him before gouging out his eyes and taking him to Babylon where he died as a prisoner (2 Kings 25:1-7). What happened to Jeremiah? He was put on trial for treason. Surprisingly, Jeremiah did not take up his own advice, but stayed in Jerusalem to share the fate of his people. But God faithfully delivered Jeremiah from death.

4. Why don't we hear from God when Jeremiah was suffering from depression in Ch 20? There is no record of God responding to Jeremiah after his bitter words. Perhaps Jeremiah could not hear God's voice because of the depth of his depression? Or was God simply being silent in the face of Jeremiah's accusation? God does not defend Himself when Jeremiah accuses Him of mistreating His servant.

We cannot help but think of the One who would come many centuries after Jeremiah, to bear all our sins, sorrows and grief and ultimately to become 'curse' for us. Just as Jeremiah was taken to the north side of the temple on stocks to be tortured without a trial, so at that same place Jesus who is well acquainted with our sorrows cried out centuries later, *'My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?'* Just as God was silent to Jeremiah, God was silent to Jesus. Just as God delivered Jesus from death and vindicated Him, so He delivered Jeremiah out of his trouble and vindicated him.

There may be times when we are overcome with sorrow. We too may accuse God of injustice and wrongdoing. But God can take our honesty and pain. He may be silent but hang in there and give God and yourself time to work through your pain. God will vindicate you in His time, and He will raise you up and make you into a vessel of His beauty and glory. When you hit rock bottom, you will find that Christ is your rock on which you stand.