

12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity:

Praying When You Don't Feel Like It (#5)

By Derek Thomas

Jeremiah 20

I need to explain something about why we are looking at this passage. It is undoubtedly a very unfamiliar passage to most of you. We are studying together what I have called "Twelve Keys of Spiritual Maturity" and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if we were to conduct some kind of survey asking what these twelve keys might be if most of you, indeed, all of you, were to signal that prayer would have to be one of them. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said,

"There is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christians so much as our prayer life."

And, Robert Murray McCheyne put it this way:

"What a man is on his knees before God, that he is—and nothing more."

You would expect a sermon on prayer in a series such as this one. And you might expect a sermon on one of the great prayers of the Bible, perhaps. The prayer of Daniel 9, or Nehemiah 9 or Ezra 9, for example. Or, perhaps, one of the Psalms! (Calvin called them prayers that reveal the entire anatomy of the soul). Or, perhaps, one of Paul's great prayers, such as the one in opening chapter of Ephesians (1:15-23), or the marvelous prayer for power in the third chapter (3:14-21), or even the mighty prayer of the apostle for the ministry and especially preachers at the end of Romans 15 (vv.14-33).

Perhaps, you might have expected a sermon about the form of prayer, taking the Lord's Prayer or the Sunday School acronym we all have learned, A-C-T-S (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication) as our outline. All of these approaches would be appropriate and profitable. But, a little predictable!

Sometimes, when we hear sermons on prayer, we leave feeling discouraged, beaten down by the notion that we have not arrived at the dizzy heights the apostle Paul, or some other great Bible saint reached in his prayer life. It's all very well to talk about praying like that, and I want to pray like that, but I have to confess that I feel as though I rarely do. In fact, there's a sense in which prayer is one of the things I struggle with the most. And that is my point: many of us

struggle with prayer. It's very easy for preachers just to say things that, well, produce a sense of guilt about how badly we are doing. And sometimes that is precisely what we need. Prayerlessness is one of our perennial problems. "We have not because we ask not" Jesus said. But that is not where I want us to be this evening. I want to begin acknowledging that there is a struggle here that many of us are facing, and we are facing it, not because we don't know how to pray, but because we are so discouraged and bent out of shape by the various trials that come our way (some are real, some are not and some are of our own making), that "our prayers are" (to cite something C S Lewis said whenever he was facing the loss of his wife to cancer) "more like a scream than a prayer."

That is why we are turning to Jeremiah. "The weeping prophet" is what the Rabbis called him. Whenever Michelangelo painted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, his expression was as close to despair as it's possible to be. He was God's spokesman in Jerusalem in the period of history that led up to the destruction of the city in 586 b.c. by the Babylonians. The first half of the seventh century had seen the longest, darkest reign in Judah's history—the reign of Manasseh, a man who is described as "filling Jerusalem from one end to the other with innocent blood" introducing magic and even human sacrifice into the worship of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is born in a time following this dark period, a period of reform and light under the king Josiah. But he, too is now dead (killed in battle by the Egyptians at Megiddo) and his heavy-handed son, Jehoiachin, is now in control. It is the last decade of seventh century and things are turning sour. Babylon has already routed the Egyptians in a famous battle at Carchemish (605 b.c.) and they (the Egyptians) have been sent packing.

Babylon is already ruling the greater part of Judah and it's only a matter of time before Jerusalem will feel its power. And it is in this setting that Jeremiah ministers and what we have here is one of those "Dark Night of the Soul" passages. He blames everything on God, rejects his calling and curses the day he was born. It's a bit like Job 3, in fact, the language at times is almost identical.

Let me ask you, do you ever get those days when you wake up, take one look at the day and dive back under the covers again? If so, and I suspect that many of us do, this passage has a number of things to teach us. The first of which is this:

1. God's people can find themselves the victims of persecution

It's a man called Pashur. Actually, he is a priest and chief of security at the temple. There used to be an "office" in the church of Scotland known as the "beadle" (no, that's nothing to do with a pop group). He was the man who ceremonially carried out the Bible every Sunday and placed it in the pulpit and shook hands with the minister. The handshake before the sermon was no big

deal; it was whether or not you would get one *after* preaching the sermon that was the issue. Theoretically, if you said something erroneous, there would be no handshake (a dead-cert for having the "pink slip" in your mailbox that week!)

Pashur was the "prophecy police" and Jeremiah was in big trouble. He had preached one of those sermons where he sensed "a measure of liberty." He had "prophesied" that Jerusalem would be destroyed (it was such a stunner of a sermon, that it received a nickname, "the temple sermon"). And in a moment of sheer brilliance he had picked up a clay pot and thrown it on the ground to illustrate exactly what he meant. All those broken shards on the floor had driven some folk mad and Pashur had him arrested and tortured! (Elders, please note that this is in the Old Testament!). The word for *stocks* implies "twisting" and it signals that some pretty harsh bodily pain was inflicted on this poor man. Jeremiah was freed the next morning (perhaps Pashur thought it had gone too far: controlling brutes who do that sort of thing is difficult).

Jeremiah responds, as you can see, with one of those sermons that just leaves people writhing: he mentions the fact that Babylon (first mention of the city and 200 times after this) will invade Judah. She will be God's hand of judgment. But more personally, he begins the sermon (v.3) with a word for Pashur himself. *Pashur* means "fruitful on every side" but from now on he will be called *Magor-Missabib* which means "terror on every side." This is much more than just a childish game of name-calling; it is a wake-up call from God that trouble is about to ensue for this man.

And faithful servants of God may suffer this kind of abuse at any time. There are Christians in the world tonight who are in prison and being tortured for being faithful to God and His word. There are "a cloud of witnesses," of whom we are not worthy, that witness a good confession in the face of the most hostile forces. Let us remember them in our prayers. But, you, too may be suffering—not stocks and prison walls, but something just as painful to the mind and the emotions. Perhaps it is because you are in a marriage where your partner isn't a Christian. Or perhaps your partner is, but resents what is considered to be a discipleship that is extreme on your part. In this world, as Jesus said many times, you will have "tribulation."

But there is something else here, too.

2. There is absolutely nothing that we cannot take to God in prayer

The rest of the chapter is Jeremiah's prayer. It is more of a complaint than a prayer. It is deeply personal and, like Job 3, we get the impression of listening in to something that we shouldn't be listening to. But the most important thing we can learn from this chapter is this: we can (and we must) take our troubles to the Lord in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? You should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer

Of course, we can understand why Jeremiah feels the way he does: he's spent a night in the stocks, his head is hurting, his back is hurting. In addition, they are mocking him (v. 7b). They are also blaming him because of his constant preaching on judgment (v.8). In verse 10, they seem to be calling him by the very name he had used for Pashur! And there's a threat on his life. And Jeremiah feels it. He is physically and emotionally bent out of shape. And he tells God about it. *All about it!* There is nothing he cannot take to God.

Go to God and tell him how *you* feel! Honesty in our relationship with God is the most healing thing of all. Denial here, in our fellowship with God is a sure cause of further pain. That's the Bible's advice for pain and suffering. That's the kind of God He is, He wants you to come to Him and spill out your woes.

There is no guarantee that going to God will take the pain away. That is far too simplistic an approach to the matter. Paul's thorn in the flesh didn't go away even though he sought the Lord earnestly three times. Nor did Jesus' pain in the Garden of Gethsemane go away even though He longed that it might. But God gives grace, the grace of sustaining perseverance to endure whatever comes our way. And the way that comes is through the conduit of prayer and the pouring out of our souls to Him. This is all well worn ground, but it needs repeating over and over, for we are slow learners here.

Then again:

3. God remains an ever-present help in times of trouble

Jeremiah does something, finds comfort in something, that is enormously important pastorally. In verse 11 he refers to God as *gibbor 'aritz*. The NIV renders it "mighty warrior". The NASV puts it as "dread champion". Now the second word he uses, *aritz*, is used back in 15:21 and there it represents God's description of Jeremiah's opponents: they were "violent." or "ruthless." And now Jeremiah is using the same word about God: that He, too, is violent. A violent warrior, a ruthless warrior.

Now, that has me trembling a little; that there is an element of ruthlessness in God's actions. The problem is that our God is too small. We have confined Him in our imaginations, made an idol out of Him that is impotent and helpless. A god who is uncertain of the future, or powerless to act over our puny wills, or waiting helplessly for a response from us is not the God of the Bible. Jeremiah drew comfort that this God, this mighty God is "*with me*." That's the point! The God who made the world and divided the Red Sea, and conquered the Egyptians, and

Babylonians, and Assyrians, who walks on water, and changes water into wine and rises from the dead, and is coming again in power and glory to restore every detail of this broken world and make a new one, *this* God is *with me*.

With me in times of trouble. *With me* when I am at the end of my tether. *With me* when the world is collapsing in on me. *With me* when the lights go out.

This God is a comfort to His people, but equally a terror to evil-doers.

That, in part, explains why Jeremiah resorts to an imprecation in verse 12. We are perhaps offended by it, as have many Christians in the past and present. We baulk at the idea of calling upon God to execute vengeance on His enemies. We think it unworthy of the God of New Testament (even if that sort of thing did take place in the Old Testament). But this is simply immature thinking on our part. Whenever we pray the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done," we are, in fact, asking that God would bless His people and judge His enemies. That's what God's will is! He does execute His wrath upon the impenitent and unbelieving. It is not sub-Christian to want God to do that; it is the spiritually mature thing to do.

Luther understood that:

*A Mighty Fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe
his craft and power are great
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide
our striving would be losing;
were not the right man on our side
the man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is He,
Lord Sabaoth His name
From age to age the same
And He must win the battle.*

Singing that hymn, the battle-cry of God's kingdom, is to ask for God to defeat His enemies and grant victory to His church. Jeremiah was asking for no more, and certainly no less.

Then again,

4. God's people can sometimes find themselves utterly broken

Jeremiah's tone suddenly changes in verse 13. He is an utterly broken man. Like Elijah (in 1 Kings 19), or David (in Psalm 57), or Job (in Job 3), and even Jesus in Gethsemane, God's servants may find themselves in a similar situation. There is a sinful way that these feelings can be expressed, but they are not in themselves sinful.

This is a prayer sung to a minor key. Jeremiah is singing the 'blues.' This is the song that emerges whenever life turns sour. Even John Calvin balked here in his exposition of Jeremiah, unable to fathom how someone can change so suddenly. He can't understand the sudden mood swing from verse 13 to 14. But those who have been the victim of spiritual depression can understand it all too well. Sudden mood swings are a facet of the spiritual struggle with opposition and defeat.

Do you see how varied prayer can be? And how inadequate a formulaic approach to what prayer should be is? Whether that prayer be the *Prayer of Jabez* or some other prayer that is lifted to the heights of "This is what the Christian life should be." There is no place for the blues in Jabez's prayer and for that reason alone it is utterly inadequate to cover the bases of all Christian experience. It condemns those who are struggling to a second standard.

Jeremiah says something quite unexpected in verse 9. It's sometimes cited as something all preachers know: how they can't help but preach the word. That the word is like a fire in their bones that simply must find an outlet. But Jeremiah is actually saying something else: *he wants to quit!* He wants to find a lodging place in the desert and go there, away from all these people. That's what David meant whenever he wrote those words, "O for the wings of a dove...that I might fly away!" These words weren't written for little pubescent boys to warble, but for grown men to shout in frustration!

Do you think there might be days when ministers of the gospel want to quit? And what do you do when you discover that that might be the case? Are your prayers for your ministers taking such thoughts and feelings as these into consideration.

The point of these passages in Scripture may well baffle us, but if we have no place for them in our understanding of the Christian life, we are seriously deficient. We cannot counsel that which we do not appreciate. If we cannot understand why some Christians "sing the blues," we will not be in a position to help them. This, in many ways, was the error of Job's friends. It is precisely for this reason that Jesus is portrayed for us in the Gospels as one "made like His brothers in every way" (Heb. 2:17). He was "deeply distressed and troubled... overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34). He understands the complexities of human psyche to a degree that is altogether sublime.

That brings us to a final point:

5. Some things are best kept between us and God

I know that this prayer of Jeremiah's is recorded, and I can only take that to mean that Jeremiah must have reflected on it later and written it down or else dictated it to his amanuensis, Baruch. But what he said, *how he felt*—to put it in a very modern way—was something he did and related privately to God. When he was in his enemy's presence (Pashur) he was bold and courageous, threatening the judgment of God upon him for his wickedness; but inside he was breaking up. He didn't spill out his inner turmoil in public, before Pashur. The world doesn't need to know how we always feel. I know there is much to be said for public confession, but there are times when it's appropriate to keep things to ourselves.

Do you understand, my friends, that ministers and missionaries sometimes feel like this? They may appear to you to be strong and "have it altogether" on the outside, but inside they are screaming with anger, insecurity and frustration. I wonder if you are at all sensitive to that? And whether your prayers for ministers and missionaries take that into account.

Spiritual maturity doesn't always live on the mountain top! There's a view of Christianity that is popularized that suggests that unless you are experiencing miracles every day, that somehow you are not living to your full potential. That's bogus! That would call into question great tracts of Jesus' life and ministry. The point is: there are times when things are bad, and spiritual maturity shows itself in our ability at such times to go into the closet and pour out our woes to God. Was Jesus in Gethsemane spiritually mature? It's a question we don't even want to ask, isn't it. But if Jesus could be without sin and mature in the darkness of those moments, there are times in our darkness when a cry is the spiritually mature thing to utter. No boasting about miracles, no boasting about what God has given me, what deals I have landed, what "things" I have accumulated. But with empty, trembling hands crying: I don't understand, but I know that you do!

I wonder if you would regard Jeremiah's ministry as "successful" in the light of what you now know about him. I think it was, but then, I think I am using the word "successful" with altogether a different connotation.

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