

Jeremiah 14 — Drought Then, Storms Today

Lesson Summary

Jeremiah 14 opens on a land without water. The land of Judah is suffering drought which touches everyone: nobility, servants, farmers, animals, and the land itself. The physical emptiness mirrors the spiritual condition of a people who have repeatedly turned from God. Jeremiah responds not by standing outside his people and condemning them, but by identifying with them. God's answer is difficult. The national consequences will not be prayed away. Exile is coming, although individuals must still decide how they will respond to God within that judgment. Jeremiah wrestles with false prophets, unanswered prayer, and God's justice, but ends where faith must finally end: "Therefore we hope in You."

Big Idea

There are circumstances we cannot pray away, but there is never a circumstance in which our response to God ceases to matter. Judah's national judgment is settled, yet Jeremiah still prays, confesses, intercedes, and hopes. He teaches us the difference between asking God to remove consequences and turning to God in the midst of them. The drought exposes Judah's helplessness, but it also exposes the only source of real hope. Our hope is in God.

When There Is Too Much Water—and None

Floods happen everywhere. Whether it be in Australia, Nepal, New Orleans, engineers are busy trying to release enough backed-up water from dams to manage the level while politicians are trying to release information. Tens of thousands of people are often forced to evacuate homes and businesses. What had previously been called a once-in-a-hundred-year event was suddenly being described in even more extraordinary terms. It can feel a little like the days of Noah, only we don't yet have a boat.

Jeremiah 14 gives us exactly the opposite picture. Instead of too much water, there is none. Verse after verse describes devastation caused by drought, and out of that devastation come the cries of people who know something has gone terribly wrong. "We have sinned," they say. Yet God seems strangely unwilling to answer. It is as though the phone line to heaven is engaged. Worse than that, it seems the line has been disconnected. How can the God who has repeatedly invited his people to call upon him now tell Jeremiah not to pray for them? That difficult question takes us to something we have been learning throughout this prophecy.

Three Audiences, Three Opportunities to Listen

Jeremiah speaks to at least three audiences, and remembering them helps us understand what follows. The first audience consists of the people who actually heard Jeremiah preach. Their national situation has reached the point of no return. They will experience exile because of the collective sin Jeremiah has chronicled chapter after chapter. Their prayers will not cancel Babylon. That does not mean an individual who genuinely cries out to God will not be heard. The distinction is important. The national consequence is settled; the individual's relationship with God is not. As Yeshua taught, rain falls on the just and the unjust. Faithful and unfaithful people can find themselves caught in the same national calamity, but they do not therefore have to respond to God in the same way.

Everybody in a community can be affected by the same crisis. Roads close. Bridges go out. Businesses shut. Sporting events are canceled. Emergency crews work tirelessly. Nobody gets to vote the flood away. Yet within that shared reality, individuals still make choices about how they will live and respond. So it is with Judah. Their choice is no longer whether Babylon will come. The choice is, “What kind of person will I be today and tomorrow? How will I respond to God's justice as it is being meted out to us as a people?” That distinction between the circumstances we cannot choose and the person we choose to be within those circumstances matters well beyond Jeremiah.

The second audience is the generation living in exile. After seventy years, people will have an opportunity to return to the Land. Jeremiah's prophecy will become part of the explanation of how they got to Babylon in the first place. Knowing the consequences of their parents' and grandparents' choices, how will they live while displaced? Will they listen to God's word? Will faithful shepherds, teachers, and prophets arise among them? Jeremiah's warnings are therefore not wasted merely because the first audience refuses to listen. They become instruction for a later generation.

The third audience is us. We live long after Jeremiah and the Babylonian exile, but we have the advantage of possessing the whole story. We can listen to the prophet without Babylonian soldiers standing outside our gates. We can make choices before consequences arrive. God, in his mercy, has allowed us to hear the warning. Chapters 14–17 form a new section in which Jeremiah delivers four messages and includes prayers associated with them. Those prayers give us unusual access to the prophet himself, because Jeremiah isn't simply delivering God's message; he is wrestling with God and his own perspectives on religion while he delivers it.

The Plight of the Land

The first message concerns the drought, and nothing escapes it. People living beside great rivers may not immediately appreciate Judah's dependence upon seasonal rain. Egypt had the Nile, but Judah had no equivalent. The Jordan River could not simply irrigate the whole country. Agricultural life depended heavily upon rain arriving at the proper time enough to sustain crops, animals, and people. Jeremiah's point is brutally simple: the rain did not come.

Four expressions in the opening verses emphasize the emptiness. Verse 3 has “no water.” Verse 4 has “no rain.” Verse 5 has “no grass,” and verse 6 has “no vegetation.” That's batting zero for four. The drought starts at the top of society, with nobles sending their servants to find water, but money and position cannot produce what isn't there. Their servants return with empty vessels. The farmers are equally devastated, and even the animals suffer. Does, normally attentive to their young, abandon their newborn because there is no grass. (14:5) Wild donkeys stand on barren heights gasping for air. Human sin has consequences that spread beyond the people who committed it; the whole land groans beneath the loss.

Jeremiah also uses the imagery of a funeral. (14:3-4) Covered heads signify humiliation, shame, and grief. Judah isn't simply experiencing an inconvenient dry season. The land is mourning. Something is dying, and the physical landscape has become another of Jeremiah's object lessons. Last chapter it was a ruined waistband. This time it is empty cisterns and cracked ground.

From Plight to Plea

The scene may seem hopeless, but Jeremiah knows he has a responsibility within it. He is the son of a priest and the weeping prophet, called to proclaim God's truth regardless of the cost. Now that calling means participating in his people's plight. I want to distinguish carefully between participating in their sin and identifying with them in their suffering and judgment. Jeremiah has not committed all the apostasies he condemns, but he refuses to speak as though Judah's problem belongs only to somebody else.

Listen to the pronouns in his prayer: “Although our iniquities testify against us, O LORD, act for Your name's sake! Truly our apostasies have been many, we have sinned against You” (14:7). Jeremiah moves from “you people have sinned” to “we have sinned.” Many others in the Bible do this as well. Daniel will pray that way. Isaiah does it. Moses identifies with his people. Paul carries anguish for Israel. Most notably, Yeshua identifies himself with the people he came to save. There is something here for anyone who wants to speak prophetically or evangelistically. Can I identify with my people enough to say “we,” or do I remain safely outside saying, “They sinned; they deserve what they get”? The cries of a prophet—and, dare I say, an evangelist—ought to come from the inside rather than from a comfortable distance.

Hope, Savior—and Stranger?

Jeremiah's names for God in verses 8–9 are striking. He calls him the “Hope of Israel” and Israel's “Savior in time of distress,” but then asks why God seems “like a stranger in the land.” That's a remarkable prayer. He who is the Hope and Savior appears to have become the visitor who is just passing through. Jeremiah is effectively saying, “You seem far away. Come back into the conversation. Take your place among us again.” Of course, God hasn't gone on vacation. The people have spent years distancing themselves from him, but now that disaster has arrived they experience the distance as though God were the one who left.

Jeremiah also appeals to God's reputation: “You are in our midst, O LORD, and we are called by Your name; do not forsake us!” There is truth in that appeal because Chapter 13 has just told us that Israel was intended to display God's name, praise, and glory. What happens to God's people does reflect upon the God whose name they bear. Yet Jeremiah sees only part of the picture. He wants God's reputation protected through immediate rescue, while God intends ultimately to vindicate his name through justice and restoration. We naturally want the restoration without the painful middle. We want kindness without cost, mercy without consequences, and preferably we want it now. God has a larger horizon. His justice is not the last word, but neither can it simply be skipped.

When God Says, “Stop Praying”

Then comes the difficult answer. This is now the third time in Jeremiah that God tells the prophet not to pray for the people (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). That sounds almost offensive to those of us accustomed to hearing, “Prayer changes things.” Sometimes it does. But sometimes what prayer changes is not the circumstance we are asking God to remove. There are moments when consequences have arrived and neither God nor we should pretend they haven't.

God says that even if Judah fasts, he will not listen to their cry, and even if they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, he will not accept them. Sword, famine, and pestilence are coming

(14:12). Jeremiah had complained that God seemed like a stranger, but God's answer turns the accusation around: “They have loved to wander” (14:10). The estrangement did not begin with God. Jeremiah has already cataloged that wandering in earlier chapters. Judah has repeatedly moved away, and now the judgment is comprehensive. The exile is coming.

That does not contradict what we said about individual repentance. Jeremiah's contemporaries cannot repent out of the historical consequences facing the nation, but an individual can still turn toward God within those consequences. That is why last chapter's command to “Give glory to God” mattered. The sentenced nation is still being called to acknowledge that God's judgment is just. The person going to Babylon can go as someone who continues to resist God or as someone who has finally begun to listen. Geography does not settle that question.

A bumper sticker I saw on the back of many cars in the 1980s reminds itself to me again just now. “If you feel like God is distant, who moved?”

But What About the False Prophets?

Jeremiah isn't finished arguing. He protests that the people have been misled: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, the prophets are telling them, ‘You will not see the sword, nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place’” (14:13). Jeremiah has a point. False prophets have told the people exactly what they wanted to hear. They have contradicted Jeremiah's warnings and promised peace.

God agrees that those prophets are false. He did not send them, command them, or speak to them. Their visions are false, their divination worthless, and their message comes from their own minds. But that does not remove the people's responsibility. Torah had already given Israel tests for prophets in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. The people are responsible for whom they choose to follow. A deceptive teacher is accountable for deception, but listeners are not automatically innocent because they preferred the deceptive message. Sometimes we choose our prophets because they tell us the future we already want.

Tears, Agreement and Intercession

The final section of the chapter brings us again to tears. Jeremiah is told to speak of eyes flowing with tears “night and day,” because the virgin daughter of his people has been crushed. Sword is outside; famine is inside. Prophet and priest wander through a land they no longer recognize. Jeremiah has protested, argued, and pleaded, but gradually his prayer begins to align itself with what God has said.

Again the language is communal. “We know our wickedness, O LORD, the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against You” (14:20). Jeremiah becomes the intercessor who stands among his people rather than above them. Ezra and Nehemiah will later pray in the same way. There is no attempt now to persuade God that Judah is actually innocent. The prayer begins with agreement. We have sinned. Our fathers sinned. God's judgment is deserved. The plea for mercy remains, but confession has replaced argument.

That is an important movement in prayer. There is nothing wrong with bringing our protests to God; Jeremiah certainly does. Biblical prayer is not pretending that we understand everything. But somewhere along the way, faith has to allow God to be God. Jeremiah moves from trying to explain why God should act differently to acknowledging who God is and placing his hope there.

Bottom line: prayer is acknowledging that there is a God, and you are not He.

Therefore We Hope in You

The chapter ends with a question perfectly suited to a drought: “Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers?” (14:22). The answer is obvious. Baal and every other idol are powerless. Even the heavens themselves are not ultimate. Rain is not finally a mechanical gift of the sky. Jeremiah turns to the LORD: “Is it not You, O LORD our God? Therefore we hope in You, for You are the one who has done all these things.”

I love that “therefore.” The drought has not ended. Babylon has not disappeared. God has not withdrawn the judgment He announced. The circumstances Jeremiah wanted changed have not changed, and yet he says, “Therefore we hope in You.” That's biblical hope. Hope is not confidence that God will immediately arrange circumstances to our liking. It is confidence that when circumstances remain exactly what we did not want, God remains the One on whom we can rely. He alone can send rain. He alone can forgive. He alone can restore.

Jeremiah points us beyond himself as well. Yeshua identifies with his people in the deepest possible way. Hundreds of years after Jeremiah said these words, from the cross Yeshua prays, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” He does more than stand alongside sinners and say “we.” In his atoning death he bears sin as our substitute. Jeremiah's intercession cannot prevent the Babylonian exile, but Yeshua's sacrifice deals with the deeper exile caused by sin itself. That exile is the great gap preventing our relationship with the Almighty. My answer? Keep your eyes on Yeshua, the author and finisher of our faith. What a Hope for Israel. What a Savior of the world!

Takeaways

1. I am not able to choose my circumstances, but I can choose whether I will listen to God within them.
2. I need to learn to say “we,” not merely “they.”
3. I am responsible for whom I allow to shape my understanding of God.
4. My hope rests ultimately in the character of God, not in my preferred outcome.

Memory Verse

“Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not You, O LORD our God? Therefore, we hope in You, for You are the one who has done all these things.”

Jeremiah 14:22

WATCH

This is the original Jeremiah 14. Taught in 2022. <https://youtu.be/VFa-MzFTgYI?si=9S67BN3BHEFeO6j3&t=71>

WHAT'S NEXT?

Jeremiah 14 ends with Jeremiah praying, confessing, and hoping that God will respond. Chapter 15 opens with an answer that could hardly be stronger. God tells Jeremiah that even if Moses and Samuel stood before him, his decision concerning Judah would not change. These are two of Israel's great intercessors—men whose prayers had mattered enormously in earlier generations. But not now. The exile is fixed. The heavenly conversation continues, but the answer Jeremiah receives is not the answer he wants.

Then the conversation becomes deeply personal. Jeremiah has spent his life speaking for God, and what does he have to show for it? Loneliness, opposition and regret. He sounds almost like Tevye talking with God in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Was that necessary?” Jeremiah has stayed away from the merrymakers and walked with God instead, and now he wants to know why faithfulness has hurt so much. God doesn't rebuke him for speaking honestly, but neither does he allow Jeremiah to settle permanently into self-pity. “If you return, then I will restore you.” Chapter 15 takes us into a remarkably candid conversation between a weary prophet and the God who still promises, “I am with you to save you and deliver you.”

Next: Jeremiah 15 — A Heavenly Conversation

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