
Jeremiah 15

When God Says Enough

Setting the Stage

Most of us remember Tevye the milkman, probably not from Sholem Aleichem's original Yiddish stories, but from either the movie or the Broadway play, "Fiddler on the Roof." Tevye has an extraordinary relationship with God. He talks to Him. He complains to Him. He argues with Him. When his horse turns up lame just before Shabbat, Tevye asks God, in effect, "Was that really necessary?" God has already blessed him with five daughters and a life of poverty. What, Tevye wonders, does God have against his horse?

That ability to converse honestly with the Almighty makes Tevye a surprisingly good companion for Jeremiah 15.

Chapter 14 ended with Jeremiah pleading for his people. Chapter 15 opens with God's answer, and it is not the answer Jeremiah wanted. Judgment is now settled. Even the greatest intercessors from Israel's past could not change what was coming. Then, in the second half of the chapter, Jeremiah does something Tevye would understand very well: he complains to God. He tells God what hurts, what seems unfair, and even wonders whether God has somehow failed him.

This is a chapter about judgment, but it is also about relationship. God is not frightened by Jeremiah's questions. He answers him and calls him back.

Big Idea

There comes a point when persistent rebellion has consequences that cannot simply be prayed away. Yet even when judgment is unavoidable, God does not abandon His servant. Jeremiah discovers that honest complaint is permitted, but self-pity is not a place to live. God calls him—and us—to turn again, trust again, and discover that the One who judges sin is still the One who saves, delivers and redeems.

Even Moses and Samuel Could Not Change This

Chapter 15 begins with a startling statement: "Even though Moses and Samuel were to stand before Me, My heart would not be with this people." That is quite a pair.

Why Moses and Samuel? Because both were remarkable intercessors. After the sin of the golden calf in Exodus 32, Moses pleaded with God for Israel. His identification with his people was so complete that he was willing for his own name to be blotted out rather than see Israel destroyed. Moses knew how to stand in the gap.

Samuel did the same. When Israel was threatened by the Philistines, the people begged Samuel to cry out to the Lord for them, and he did. God listened. Samuel became known not merely as a prophet who spoke God's word to the people, but as a man who brought the people before God.

But now God says, in effect, “Bring Moses. Bring Samuel. It will make no difference.” It’s a wrap. It’s in the can. The conclusion has been written. Full stop.

That sounds terribly severe until we remember how long God has been warning Judah. Jeremiah has not arrived suddenly with bad news from an irritable God. God has warned, pleaded and waited. Prophet after prophet has spoken. There has been opportunity after opportunity to turn. But there comes a time when consequences arrive. The old school word is “longsuffering” meaning patience. And the key is that long suffering does not mean suffering forever. God’s patience has a limit.

The exile is fixed. Sin will be punished. Judah is going into captivity.

There is an interesting contrast with the Transfiguration in Matthew 17. There Yeshua takes Peter, James and John up the mountain, and Moses and Elijah appear with Him. Moses represents Torah and Elijah the prophets, and both point toward Yeshua. Peter sees what is happening and wants to build three sukkot. I’ve never been convinced that Peter was simply blurting out nonsense. If the King is appearing in glory, Peter quite reasonably thinks the Kingdom is here. That points to Sukkot.

But then God speaks: “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.” Shema, Peter. Listen. Here in Jeremiah, even Moses and Samuel cannot reverse the judgment. At the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear as witnesses to Yeshua. And finally the disciples look up and see Yeshua alone.

Four Destinations and Four Families of Doom

The people naturally ask where they can go. God’s answer is sobering: there is nowhere to hide.

Jeremiah gives us four possible destinations: death, the sword, famine and captivity. Disease and death will take some, warfare others, starvation others, and those who survive will be carried into Babylon. There is no safe house and no escape route.

Then verse 3 gives another group of four. God says He will appoint “four kinds” of doom. The Hebrew is more vivid than our English translations sometimes suggest. The word is mishpachot—families. Four families of judgment: the sword to kill, dogs to drag away, and the birds of the sky and beasts of the earth to devour and destroy.

“Families of doom” is an extraordinary expression.

It highlights how close the problem has come. Sin is no longer something outside the house. Judah has become comfortable with it. What once should have shocked the people has become familiar. They have invited it into the neighborhood and finally into the family.

There is a warning here for every generation. We rarely move from faithfulness to outright rebellion overnight. We become accustomed to things. What once disturbed us becomes tolerable, then normal, and eventually something we defend.

Manasseh and the Long Patience of God

Verse 4 takes us back to King Manasseh.

Manasseh ruled Judah for fifty-five years. His father was Hezekiah, remembered as a good king, and his grandson Josiah would also lead significant reform. But Manasseh's reign was disastrous. He promoted idolatry and practices directly contrary to the covenant, and the people followed him.

Yet we need to be careful here. Judah is not being punished merely because Manasseh was wicked. God could judge Manasseh for Manasseh's sins. The people are responsible because they embraced what he promoted. That distinction matters. A bad leader does not remove the responsibility of those who willingly follow. The people accepted Manasseh's values and made his rebellion their own.

And still God waited. Manasseh died decades before Jerusalem finally fell to Babylon. God did not wake up one morning and lose His temper. He gave Judah years to repent. That is what Scripture means when it speaks about the long-suffering of God.

His patience should never be mistaken for indifference.

"I Am Tired of Relenting"

In the middle of this terrible announcement comes something easily overlooked. God laments.

"Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem?

Or who will mourn for you?

Or who will turn aside to ask about your welfare?"

Who will ask about your shalom? Then comes one of the most striking statements in the chapter: "I am tired of relenting." We need to hear that carefully. God is long-suffering, but long-suffering does not mean that sin costs Him nothing.

Peter later writes that the Lord is patient, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) We love that—and rightly so. But patience is not apathy. God cares deeply about the people who repeatedly turn away from Him.

Christopher Wright, drawing on Terence Fretheim, makes an important point: divine restraint involves God continuing to bear with His people and their infidelity rather than immediately bringing upon them the judgment they deserve. There is a kind of suffering involved in that continued relationship.

Think of a car travelling rapidly toward disaster and the driver suddenly applying the brakes. The car does not stop instantly. The tyres scream. Rubber marks the road. Everything strains against the momentum as the vehicle slows.

Restraint has a cost. God has been putting on the brakes with Judah for generations. But Judah has continued toward the edge.

Jeremiah Has Had Enough Too

Then the chapter changes. Beginning in verse 10, the national crisis becomes intensely personal. Jeremiah cries:

“Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me

As a man of strife and a man of contention to all the land!”

He isn’t a moneylender. He hasn’t borrowed from everyone in town. Yet everybody curses him. Remember the children’s singsong sound, “Nobody likes me. Everybody hates me. Guess I’ll go eat worms.” That is about the level of Jeremiah’s mood.

He has obeyed God and discovered that obedience has made him lonely. He didn’t sit with the merry-makers. He skipped the pub crawl, so to speak. He separated himself because God’s hand was upon him, and now he sits alone. And he wonders: What was the point? Why did I live this way? Why did I stay faithful? Why did I choose the harder road when this is where it got me?

That is not theoretical theology. That is a servant of God hurting.

Some know exactly what Jeremiah is talking about. You may have poured yourself into a ministry and watched it collapse. You may have invested in people who later rejected God or you or both. You may have tried to do what was right and discovered that doing right did not produce the outcome you expected. Jeremiah knows that feeling.

“Will You Be to Me Like a Deceptive Stream?”

Jeremiah goes even further in verse 18:

“Why has my pain been perpetual

And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?

Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream

With water that is unreliable?”

That is quite a thing to say to God. Jeremiah is essentially asking whether God has become like one of those streams that promises water but is dry when you arrive. I followed You. I trusted You. And now—where are You?

Do you hear Tevye? More importantly, are you comfortable speaking to God like that? I think we should be.

God does not require us to pretend in His presence. Prayer is not a performance. Yeshua did not tell us that the real place of prayer was standing on the street corner impressing people with religious language. He told us to go into the private place and speak to our Father. That is where honesty belongs.

I am quite comfortable praying written prayers. As a Jewish man I know the value of the siddur and prayers passed down through generations. Christians have their own traditions:

the Book of Common Prayer, hymnals and liturgies. And of course we have the Psalms, prayers written by others that somehow manage to say exactly what we ourselves want to say.

But what happens when the written prayer does not say what is inside you? Talk to God. Rosalind Rinker famously described prayer as conversation with God. That may sound obvious now, but it was liberating for people who thought prayer had to consist entirely of prescribed words. God wants honesty from Jeremiah, and He wants honesty from us.

But Don't Live in the Pit

Honesty, however, is not the same as remaining in self-pity. God answers Jeremiah in verse 19: "If you return, then I will restore you." That is fascinating because Jeremiah is the prophet who has spent years telling everybody else to return. Now God tells Jeremiah, "You return." Jeremiah has turned inward. His pain is real, his loneliness is real, and his complaint is understandable. But he cannot make his wounded self the centre of his world.

Self-pity is a pit.

God does not rebuke Jeremiah for speaking honestly. He calls him out of the place where his honest pain has begun to dominate him. There is a difference between telling God, "This hurts," and deciding that the hurt is the final truth about our lives. Humility turns toward God again. And again.

A Fortified Wall of Bronze

The chapter closes not with Jeremiah abandoned but with Jeremiah recommissioned.

God says:

"I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze;

And though they fight against you, they will not prevail over you;

For I am with you to save you and deliver you."

And then:

"So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,

And I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent."

Notice what God does not promise. He does not tell Jeremiah that everyone will suddenly like him. He does not promise that the people will listen. He does not cancel Babylon. He does not tell Jeremiah that obedience will now become comfortable.

He promises His presence. "I am with you." That is enough. The God who says judgment must come is the same God who tells Jeremiah, "I will save you. I will deliver you. I will redeem you." Jeremiah can speak honestly with God because the relationship is real. And because the relationship is real, God can also speak honestly with Jeremiah. Don't linger in self-pity. Don't linger in sin. Turn to Me.

That invitation still stands.

Takeaways

- 1 God's patience is enormous, but patience should never be mistaken for permission.
- 2 We are responsible for what we embrace.
- 3 Honest prayer is not irreverence. Relationship with God gives us freedom.
- 4 Honest complaint must not become permanent self-pity.
- 5 We are promised, "I am with you."

Memory Verse

"Therefore, thus says the LORD,
'If you return, then I will restore you—
Before Me you will stand.'"
— Jeremiah 15:19

What's Next?

Jeremiah 16 — In the House of Mourning

Jeremiah's life itself now becomes part of the prophetic message. God tells him not to marry and not to enter the ordinary houses of mourning and celebration. Judah is about to lose the normal rhythms that make a society feel secure.

Yet Jeremiah 16 is not without hope. Beyond the coming exile is an extraordinary promise: a future act of restoration so great that it will be spoken of alongside—and even beyond—the Exodus from Egypt. And beyond Israel, Jeremiah sees the nations themselves coming to the God of Israel and recognising the emptiness of the gods they inherited.

Judgment is coming, but God has not surrendered His purposes for Israel or for the nations.

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