
Jeremiah 16

In the House of Mourning

Setting the Stage

Life has its rhythms. We celebrate weddings and births. We gather around tables. We sing and laugh. And then there are other days when we sit in the house of mourning. Jewish life knows both sides well. There is a time for the chuppah and a time for shiva, a time for rejoicing and a time for grief.

I was reminded of that dramatically in March 2014. I was in Ireland for a wedding around St Patrick's Day, celebrating the marriage of a couple I knew from Sydney. There was great music, great whiskey, great golf and plenty of joy. Then I flew to the United States. After one of the bumpiest flights I can remember, we finally landed in New Jersey, and I was grateful simply to be safely on the ground. Then came a message from my sister: our older brother had died. Suddenly I was changing flights, rearranging plans and, somewhere in the confusion, even forgetting to collect my luggage from the carousel. In a heartbeat I had moved from wedding celebration to grief and soon to shiva. Years later, I still remember the emotional shift.

Jeremiah 16 removes both experiences from Jeremiah's life. God tells him not to marry. Then He tells him not to enter a house of mourning. Finally, He tells him not to enter a house of feasting. Jeremiah himself becomes another of God's object lessons. The ordinary rhythms of Jewish life are disappearing because Judah is approaching an extraordinary judgment.

Big Idea

Judgment in Jeremiah 16 is pictured not only through armies and exile, but through the disappearance of ordinary life. Marriage, family, burial, mourning and celebration are all disrupted. Yet that terrible silence is not God's final word. The same chapter that removes the voice of the bride and groom promises a restoration greater than the Exodus and looks forward to the nations coming to Israel's God. Judgment is real, but God has not surrendered His purposes for Israel or for the nations.

Jeremiah Is Prevented

The first command is intensely personal: "You shall not take a wife for yourself nor have sons or daughters in this place" (16:2). God tells Jeremiah to remain unmarried. There is no way around it. Jeremiah's personal life is going to become part of his prophetic ministry.

There wasn't even a normal category in ancient Jewish society equivalent to our modern idea of the lifelong bachelor. Marriage was expected, reinforced by family and community and often arranged. That is worth remembering when people occasionally argue that Yeshua simply had to have been married because a Jewish man of his age could not possibly have remained single. Fiction author Dan Brown notwithstanding, unusual does not mean impossible. Jeremiah is explicitly commanded to live that way, and Yeshua was also unmarried.

For Jeremiah, however, singleness carries a particular prophetic meaning. God explains that the sons and daughters born in Judah are going to die from disease, sword and famine. They will not be lamented or buried but left on the ground, their bodies becoming food for birds and animals. That is especially confronting to Jewish ears. We do not casually dishonour the dead. The chevra kadisha (Burial society) prepares the body carefully and respectfully. Burial follows quickly. There is no wake and no viewing of the body. The casket is closed. We remember the person as a living person rather than making the dead body the centre of our memory.

Jeremiah 16 deliberately turns that dignity upside down. There will be so many dead that the normal practices of honouring them will disappear. Jeremiah will have no wife and children, while those

around him will lose their families. There will be no continuity and no ordinary family future. His unmarried life is not merely a private sacrifice. Every day Jeremiah lives alone he becomes a visible prophecy of what is about to happen to Judah.

No Mourning and No Feasting

Then the restrictions widen. Jeremiah is told not to enter a house of mourning and not to go there to lament or console. That is astonishing enough. Then God tells him not to enter a house of feasting either. Jeremiah is excluded from both emotional ends of ordinary communal life—the funeral and the wedding.

Verse 9 contains words familiar in Jewish celebration: kol sason v'kol simcha, kol chatan v'kol kala—the voice of rejoicing and the voice of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride. Jeremiah says those voices are going to disappear. We meet similar language repeatedly in the book because those voices represent normal life continuing from one generation to another. A bride and groom imply a future. Children imply another generation. Funeral rites allow a community to honour the generation that has passed. In Jeremiah 16 both are removed.

God explains why in verse 5: “I have withdrawn My peace from this people.” The Hebrew verb asaf has the idea of gathering. I find the picture fascinating. The false prophets have been telling everybody that peace and safety are theirs, but God says, in effect, “You never possessed the peace you imagined. I have gathered My peace away from this people.” Their confidence was based upon something God had never promised them.

But notice the words “from this people.” God has not ceased to be the God of compassion. He has not somehow lost His character. His shalom, chesed and rachamim—peace, lovingkindness and compassion—remain who He is. Yet this people, under this judgment, cannot presume upon them while continuing to reject Him. That distinction matters. Even in our own difficult days, we can appeal to God because He remains merciful and gracious. His character does not disappear simply because His people experience His discipline.

“What Did We Do?”

Then, remarkably, the people ask why.

“When you tell this people all these words, they will say to you, ‘For what reason has the LORD declared all this great calamity against us? And what is our iniquity, or what is our sin which we have committed against the LORD our God?’” (16:10).

Really?

It reminds me of watching sports. Take, for instance, US college basketball. March Madness is a great tournament in the United States each year. My wife and I follow it carefully. Soon, in each game, a player commits an obvious foul. The referee blows the whistle and immediately the player throws up his hands with that familiar expression: “What? Me? What did I do?” Then the replay appears on the screen usually from several angles, and everybody can see exactly what he did.

We are remarkably skilled at declaring ourselves innocent. Some people in prison genuinely are innocent, but “I didn’t do anything” is hardly unusual language among people facing penal consequences. Judah has spent chapter after chapter rejecting God, following other gods, ignoring Torah and refusing the prophets, and now asks, “What did we do?”

Amazingly, Jeremiah answers them.

Worse Than Your Fathers

God's answer comes in two stages. First, "Your fathers have forsaken Me." They followed other gods, served them and bowed down to them. They abandoned the LORD and did not keep His Torah. But verse 12 makes the accusation more severe: "You too have done evil, even more than your fathers."

That is important. Judah cannot blame its troubles on its ancestors. The sins of the previous generation should have become warnings to the present generation. They had both the record of their fathers' failures and the record of God's judgment, and they learned from neither. Instead, they intensified the same rebellion.

Every generation inherits something from their predecessors. We inherit wisdom as well as foolishness, faithfulness and failure. The question is what we do with what we inherited. The people Jeremiah addresses cannot say, "Our fathers made us this way." They have made their own choices. In fact, knowing the story should have made them wiser. Instead, they became worse.

Hurled Out

The result is exile. God says, "I will hurl you out of this land" (16:13).

That is a violent word. It reminds me of Jonah. In the storm, cargo is hurled overboard, and eventually Jonah himself is hurled into the sea. This is not Judah gently relocating to another country. They are being thrown from the Land.

And there is a terrible irony in what follows. Judah wanted other gods, so God says that in the land of exile they will serve other gods day and night. Sometimes judgment takes the form of receiving what we insisted upon having. If you want a world organised without the God of Israel, God may allow you to discover what such a world is actually like.

The exile is geographical, but it is more than geography. Israel is being removed from the Land God gave the fathers because the people have repeatedly rejected the covenant relationship associated with that gift.

Fishermen, Hunters and a Bank Account

Jeremiah then gives us two more pictures of the comprehensiveness of judgment. God will send fishermen who will fish for the people and hunters who will hunt them from every mountain, hill and crevice. There is no hiding place. If a fish can escape one part of the net, there is another. If someone runs into the hills, the hunter follows. The point is not fishing or hunting as pleasant recreation. It is inescapability.

Then we get what sounds almost like banking language: "I will first doubly repay their iniquity and their sin" (16:18). That reminds me of an old Jewish joke. Three religious men are shipwrecked on a desert island. The Catholic begins praying and creates a little chapel. The Muslim arranges his clothing like a prayer carpet and faithfully prays. Meanwhile Maury, the Jewish man, sits quietly reading his book. Eventually the others become frustrated. "Why aren't you doing something? Why aren't you praying for rescue?" Maury calmly replies, "Look, I've just made a large pledge to the Jewish Relief Fund. Don't worry; they'll find me."

Cute in the joke. Not so cute in Jeremiah.

God will find them. "My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes" (16:17). There is no secret account and no hidden transaction. What we imagine is concealed from God is not concealed at all. As Numbers puts it, "Be sure your sin will find you out." Repentance matters because hidden sin does not remain hidden forever.

Every Knee Will Bow

That brings to mind Paul's words in Philippians 2:10-11, that at the name of Yeshua every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Yeshua Messiah is Lord. Paul's language deliberately echoes Isaiah 45:23, where God says, "To Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance."

Paul applies that language to Yeshua. He wants us to understand who Yeshua is.

But bowing at the final judgment is not the same as willingly trusting Him now. Eventually reality will be acknowledged. Every person will know that Yeshua is Lord, including those who spent their lives rejecting Him. That acknowledgment does not retrospectively turn unbelief into faith. Judgment remains judgment.

Jeremiah's point and Paul's point intersect here: God gets the final word. We can deny, hide, rationalise and protest innocence, but none of that changes reality. The wiser response is to bow willingly now rather than discover later that the One we resisted really was Lord all along.

An Exodus Greater Than the Exodus

And then, suddenly, there is hope.

Jeremiah has been speaking about death, disrupted families, exile, fishermen, hunters and judgment. Then verses 14-15 open a window:

"Therefore behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, when people will no longer primarily speak of the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, but of the God who brought the children of Israel back 'from the land of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them.' For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers."

That is extraordinary. The Exodus is the great redemption event of the Tanakh. Every year during Passover we are taken back to it. God delivered our people from slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Yet Jeremiah says there is another act of restoration coming that will be spoken about alongside—and in some sense will eclipse—the Exodus as a testimony to God's saving power.

Judah is going into exile, but exile is not the end of Israel's story.

What a flash of chesed in a chapter filled with judgment. No matter how far the nation is hurled away, God has not surrendered His covenant purposes. Others will return. The God who brought us from Egypt can bring us from the north and from the countries where we have been scattered. To borrow Paul's language, He is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond what we ask or think. (Ephesians 3:20)

The Nations Come Too

And if that were not enough, the closing verses widen the horizon beyond Israel.

Jeremiah says:

"O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, And my refuge in the day of distress, To You the nations will come From the ends of the earth."

The nations will confess, "Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, futility and things of no profit" (16:19).

Christopher Wright points out a recurring biblical irony here. Sometimes Gentiles recognise what Israel has forgotten. King Abimelech teaches Abraham something about truthfulness. Rahab the Canaanite turns to Israel's God while Achan the Israelite rejects His command. The Queen of Sheba

recognises why God made Solomon king even as Solomon later loses sight of it. The widow of Zarephath and Naaman respond to Israel's God while Israel's own rulers resist Elijah and Elisha. Yeshua himself reminds His hometown congregation of those stories in Nazareth, and they are furious. At the cross, a Gentile Roman soldier recognises something many of Israel's leaders have rejected.

Jeremiah asks the wonderfully obvious question: "Can man make gods for himself?" Of course, people can manufacture idols. Humanity has always been remarkably good at that. But Jeremiah immediately gives the real answer: "Yet they are not gods!" Human beings can manufacture an object of worship; we cannot manufacture God.

The nations will finally discover that what they inherited was falsehood and futility. And notice the frame around this final section. Verse 19 begins with the LORD, and verse 21 concludes with God saying that the nations "shall know that My name is the LORD." The chapter begins with ordinary life disappearing from Judah, but it ends with God making Himself known to the world.

Gentiles for Yeshua. Who would have thought?

From the House of Mourning to Hope

Jeremiah 16 does not allow us to choose between judgment and hope. Both are here.

Jeremiah must live alone. He cannot enter the house of mourning or the house of feasting. The voice of the bride and groom disappears. Judah will be hurled from the Land. Fishermen and hunters will ensure that nobody escapes the consequences. God sees what His people imagine is hidden.

But that is not where the chapter ends.

Israel will be restored. God will perform acts of redemption that recall and even surpass the Exodus. And the nations themselves will come from the ends of the earth, renouncing inherited falsehood and learning the name of the LORD.

That gives urgency to the message. Whether we are Jewish like Jeremiah and me, or from the nations of the world, we share the same fundamental need. We fall short of God's standards. We create idols who like and cheer what we do. We hide what God already sees. And God calls us to Himself.

For me, that call ultimately brings us to Yeshua. Receive Him as Messiah and Lord. Yield to the God who calls, knows, judges, saves and restores. And if you know Him already, tell others what you know. You do not have to know everything. Share what you know of the One who has made Himself known.

The house of mourning is real. But it is not the last house in the story.

Takeaways

God may use our circumstances to be part of His prophetic message.

God's character does not change when His people experience judgment.

The nations of the world have always been in God's heart for redemption.

There is a time to rejoice and a time to mourn. And a time for neither.

Memory Verse

"O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, And my refuge in the day of distress, To You the nations will come From the ends of the earth and say, 'Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, Futility and things of no profit.'"

— Jeremiah 16:19

What's Next?

Jeremiah 17 — What Is Written on Your Heart?

Jeremiah 17 takes us back to covenant language. Judah's sin is written with an iron stylus on the tablet of the heart, but Jeremiah quickly moves from what is written there to the deeper question of where our trust lies. "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind," but "blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD." One produces a life like a bush in the desert; the other is like a tree planted beside water, green and fruitful even when drought comes.

But can we trust our own hearts to make that choice? Jeremiah gives us one of his best-known lines: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" Then comes one of the chapter's great Hebrew wordplays: Mikvah Yisrael—the Hope of Israel—is also evocative of the gathered waters of a mikvah. The One in whom Israel hopes is the fountain of living water.

And there is more. Jeremiah 17 gives us a fascinating doorway into Yeshua writing on the ground in John 8, Jeremiah's prayer, "Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed," and finally Shabbat—not merely as a collection of rules, but as an expression of trust. Can I stop carrying the load, stop earning for a day, and trust that God remains my provider?

Next: Jeremiah 17 — What Is Written on Your Heart?

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