

## Jeremiah 20

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### *Who's Really in Charge?*

#### Setting the Stage

In chapter 19 Jeremiah bought an earthenware jar, gathered some of Judah's senior leaders, and took them to the Valley of Ben Hinnom. There he announced God's judgment and smashed the jar before their eyes. The message was unmistakable. The nation had resisted God's repeated warnings, and the consequences could no longer be avoided. The elders should have recognized their own responsibility, repented, and called the people to do likewise. Instead, chapter 20 opens with the prophet being beaten and imprisoned. Apparently, the religious establishment has decided that the problem is not Judah's rebellion against God. The problem is Jeremiah. Heed the message? No—remove the messenger.

We visit Jeremiah in the stocks and then listen to him in prayer, if we can call it that. His words are not the carefully polished expressions we sometimes expect from a great prophet. He is angry, wounded, confused, and deeply distressed. At one moment he praises the LORD and invites everyone to join him. A few verses later he wishes he had never been born. How did a man who spoke like this become one of the most prominent figures in Jewish religious history? And what might his struggles teach us about our own relationship with God? Behind these questions lies another, one that runs throughout the chapter and indeed throughout the Bible: who's really in charge?

#### Big Idea

Faithfulness to God does not guarantee freedom from suffering, and honest prayer does not require us to conceal our pain. Jeremiah's experience reveals the cost of speaking God's truth, the freedom to bring our deepest distress before Him, and the necessity of recognizing His authority even when life seems unbearably difficult. The question is not whether we can control our circumstances, but whether we will entrust ourselves to the God who remains sovereign over them.

#### When Religious Authority Opposes God (Jeremiah 20:1–6)

We meet a man named Pashhur, the son of Immer, who is both a priest and a prominent official in the Temple. He has heard Jeremiah's preaching, and he is not pleased. Remember what should have happened after the dramatic demonstration in chapter 19. The leaders should have recognized the seriousness of Judah's sins and helped the people return to God. Instead, Pashhur responds by having Jeremiah beaten and placed in the stocks at the Upper Benjamin Gate of the Temple. The prophet remains there until the following day. Whatever the precise form of the beating, this was no minor disciplinary action. Jeremiah was publicly humiliated and physically restrained by someone who should have been helping the people hear God's word through Jeremiah.

Some believers today insist that those who belong to God should not have to endure such treatment. They confidently announce that no harm will come to the faithful citing a text that “no weapon formed against them will prosper” (Isaiah 54:17). But Jeremiah is doing precisely what God commissioned him to do, and look what happens to him. He is beaten, humiliated, and imprisoned. Paul later reminds Timothy that all who desire to live godly lives in Messiah Yeshua will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Following God does not exempt us from the troubles of a fallen world. Sometimes faithfulness is the very reason trouble comes our way. Jeremiah's wounds would have remained long after he was released from the stocks, and the memory of that humiliation would surely have remained longer still.

Pashhur's position makes the episode especially interesting. He is described as an official or overseer in the Temple, and the Hebrew terminology invites us to remember Jeremiah's commission in chapter 1, where God appointed him over nations and kingdoms. Here is a man with recognized religious authority using that authority to silence the man who has been commissioned by the Almighty. Who is really in charge? Pashhur has the office, the power, and the means to punish. Jeremiah has the word of the LORD. The conflict is not simply between two strong personalities. It concerns the difference between authority granted by an institution and authority exercised in obedience to God.

The stocks themselves were apparently designed to inflict considerable discomfort. The Hebrew term is associated with twisting or restraint, suggesting something more painful than a simple pair of handcuffs. The Upper Benjamin Gate was located in the Temple precincts, making Jeremiah's humiliation visible in a place associated with worship and instruction. It was there that the people should have been listening to Jeremiah's words. Instead, their mockery no doubt would have accompanied his stocks. The location matters because the people responsible for guarding the holiness of God's house are now using that house to punish His messenger. Religion has become a means of resisting the very God it claims to serve.

When Pashhur releases Jeremiah the following day, the prophet does not apologize or withdraw his message. Instead, he announces that God has given Pashhur another name: Magor-missabib, meaning “Terror on Every Side.” Jeremiah uses this expression elsewhere, and its appearance in Psalm 31:13 is worth noting. The new name is a judgment upon the man who presumed to judge God's prophet. Pashhur will witness the destruction of his country, the captivity of his friends, and the collapse of the security he has tried to defend. He himself will go into exile and die in Babylon. His official position cannot protect him from the consequences on every side of resisting God.

This is also an important moment in the development of Jeremiah's prophecy. Babylon is now explicitly named as the destination of Judah's captivity. The warning is becoming increasingly specific. The nation is not facing some vague possibility of future trouble. The disaster has a name and a destination. Pashhur may have imagined that imprisoning Jeremiah would put an end to the disturbing message, but the message continues, and the prophet speaks it with even greater clarity.

**Prayer Without Religious Pretending (Jeremiah 20:7–10)**

Then the scene changes. We move from the public confrontation at the Temple to the private anguish of the prophet, and what we hear may surprise us. Jeremiah turns toward God and complains that God has deceived or persuaded him. Some translations choose the gentler word “persuaded,” but I understand why others retain the sharper expression. Jeremiah feels overwhelmed by the consequences of his calling, and he tells God exactly how he feels. He has been made a laughingstock. People mock him continually, and every time he speaks, his message of violence and destruction brings further ridicule.

What is prayer, anyway? Is it the recitation of carefully selected religious expressions? Is God impressed by elegant language, King James English, or our ability to sound particularly spiritual? I don't think so. Prayer is honest conversation with the Almighty. It is the expression of a real relationship in which we bring our convictions, fears, disappointments, and questions before the One who knows us already. Jeremiah does not conceal his anger behind otherwise polite religious language. He brings it directly to God. I rather like that. Don't you? He may be confused about what God has allowed, but he has not stopped talking to Him. Prayer is conversation. Prayer is honest.

Jeremiah's complaint reminds me of his earlier prayer in chapter 17: “Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved.” He knows that what God does is effective. If God saves, salvation comes. If God persuades, Jeremiah finds himself persuaded. But now he is struggling with the consequences of having responded to that divine calling. He could almost say, “You told me to preach, and I have preached. Now everybody hates me. What am I supposed to do with that?” The prophet is not offering us a tidy theological statement about the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He is expressing the pain of a man who feels trapped by the very calling he once accepted.

The ridicule is especially painful because it comes not only from strangers but also from those he trusted. Jeremiah refers to the people who should have been his friends, his companions in peace, yet they are watching for his downfall. They hope he will stumble so that they can prevail against him. Betrayal by an enemy is one thing. Betrayal by someone you trusted is something else entirely. The prophet has been rejected by religious officials, mocked by the public, and watched suspiciously by people he regarded as friends. Is it any wonder that his prayer sounds so desperate?

And yet he cannot stop preaching. Verse 9 gives us one of the most memorable descriptions of prophetic calling in all Scripture. Jeremiah considers remaining silent, but he says God's word becomes “like a burning fire shut up in my bones”. He grows weary of holding it in and discovers that he cannot. What a predicament! If he speaks, people mock and punish him. If he remains silent, he experiences an inward pressure that he cannot endure. He is caught between the hostility of the people and the compelling power of God's word. The prophet may wish to resign, but the message will not release him.

By praying about this, Jeremiah is already on board with God's plan. He reaffirms it by speaking honestly with the Almighty. God's calling is not a taped, voicemail message. It's the beginning of a conversation which will never end.

#### From Anguish to Praise (Jeremiah 20:11–13)

Just when we expect Jeremiah's complaint to grow darker, his tone changes. He declares that the LORD is with him like a mighty warrior and that his persecutors will not ultimately prevail. He calls upon the LORD who examines the righteous and sees the heart and mind, entrusting his cause to the One who judges rightly. Then, in verse 13, he invites others to sing praises to God because He has delivered the needy from the hand of evildoers. Suddenly Jeremiah sounds like a worship leader calling the congregation to join him. Come on, everybody! Sing to the LORD! Praise His name! The God who has heard the prophet's complaint is still the God who deserves his worship.

That would be a wonderful place to end the chapter. Jeremiah has suffered, complained, remembered God's faithfulness, and returned to praise. We could close our Bibles, congratulate ourselves on a satisfying spiritual lesson, and go home encouraged. God is sovereign. The prophet has remembered that truth. His enemies will not have the final word. What a fine conclusion to a difficult experience.

But buckle your seatbelt. That's not where the chapter ends.

#### When Praise Gives Way to Despair (Jeremiah 20:14–18)

Immediately after inviting everyone to praise the LORD, Jeremiah curses the day he was born. He wishes the announcement of his birth had never been made. He imagines the man who brought the news to his father becoming like the cities God overthrew, and he asks why he ever emerged from the womb only to experience trouble, sorrow, and shame. The language is startling, especially after the confidence and worship of the preceding verses. We might have expected the prophet to conclude with assurance and thanksgiving. Instead, the chapter ends with an anguished question about the purpose of his very existence.

The language recalls lament, the saddest style of poems in the Bible. Especially the lament of Job, who also cursed the day of his birth. Jeremiah's reference to the cities God overthrew evokes the destruction associated with Sodom and Gomorrah, and his appeal for the absence of comfort deepens the sense of desolation. The Hebrew vocabulary is rich with associations of overthrow, relenting, and consolation. Yet we should not become so absorbed in the linguistic details that we miss the human being speaking through them. Jeremiah is exhausted. He has endured rejection, public shame, violence, and ridicule. He knows what is coming upon his people, and he cannot persuade them to turn away from it. The burden of his calling has become almost unbearable.

Some readers may be tempted to turn these verses into a debate about particular ethical questions concerning birth or the womb. I don't think that is where the prophet wants to take

us. His language is the language of lament, not a carefully constructed argument about reproduction. He is not presenting a settled philosophy of human existence. He is crying out from the depths of personal and soon-to-come national sorrow. The prophet who has spent so much of his life announcing judgment now experiences something of that judgment's emotional weight within himself.

Why would Scripture preserve such a prayer? Why allow one of God's great prophets to speak with such bitterness and despair? Perhaps because lament does belong within the life of faith. I know I have sometimes imagined that faithful people must always sound confident, cheerful, and victorious. Jeremiah gives us another picture. Here is a man who knows God, speaks God's word, and continues to bring his pain before God even when he cannot make sense of his circumstances. His lament is not the abandonment of prayer. It is prayer stripped of religious pretense.

Notice also that the chapter does not resolve the tension for us. Jeremiah praises God, and then Jeremiah laments. Both expressions stand in Scripture. We are not told that one cancels the other. His confidence in God's sovereignty is real, and so is his suffering. His worship is genuine, and so is his despair. Perhaps we should be less eager to demand that every difficult experience end with a neat spiritual Hollywood-type conclusion. Sometimes faith means continuing to address the Almighty when our questions remain unanswered.

### Who Is Really in Charge?

Now we return to the question raised at the beginning. Who is really in charge? Pashhur appeared to have authority because he controlled the Temple precincts and could order Jeremiah's punishment. Jeremiah had been commissioned by God to speak to nations and kingdoms, yet he could not protect himself from a beating or prevent his friends from turning against him. Neither man exercised ultimate control over the events unfolding around him. That authority belonged to the LORD. The question for Jeremiah, for Pashhur, and for us is whether we will recognize His sovereignty and respond accordingly.

I remember serving in Poland and Ukraine during the early months of the Russian invasion in 2022. The suffering of refugees was everywhere, and the terrible consequences of decisions made by powerful people were impossible to ignore. What should we pray about someone like Vladimir Putin? Should we pray for him or against him? I heard of a young person in Ukraine who prayed that God would either change Putin's heart or stop it suddenly. That sounds rather like Jeremiah, doesn't it? It is a prayer born out of the recognition that human beings can cause enormous suffering and that God alone has ultimate authority over their lives.

Those weeks in Poland/Ukraine also left me wrestling with my own sense of inadequacy. I had been able to help some refugees, but only a few. When I left, I felt rather like Oskar Schindler in the closing scenes of *Schindler's List*, regretting that I had not done more. Could I have sold my wristwatch and given the money away? Could I have provided more bread, cheese, vitamins, or other supplies? Could I have stayed longer or found another way to help? The

questions followed me home. I wanted to do more, and perhaps I would have further opportunities, but I was painfully aware of the limits of what I had accomplished.

Yet all our good works, valuable as they may be, pale beside the great works of the Almighty. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13 that even extraordinary acts of generosity accomplish nothing for our spiritual standing if love is absent. Giving food to the hungry genuinely helps the hungry, and we should never minimize that. But good deeds do not replace the relationship God desires with us. They are meant to flow from that relationship. The religious people of Jeremiah's day boasted in their religion, while others were running as quickly as possible away from God's instructions. Both groups could become absorbed in themselves. Both could imagine that their own choices, achievements, or righteousness were sufficient. Neither attitude brought them into the relationship God desired.

### Back to the Potter's Wheel

Perhaps the best way to conclude chapter 20 is to remember chapters 18 and 19. At the potter's house, Jeremiah saw clay that could still be reshaped. Later he shattered a fired jar as a warning that Judah's persistent refusal had consequences that could not be undone. Now we have seen what happens to the prophet who delivers those warnings. He is beaten, imprisoned, mocked, and driven to the edge of despair. Yet the word of God continues to burn within him, and he continues to speak to the Almighty. The same God who commissioned Jeremiah remains the One who can shape his and our lives.

That is where I want to leave us. While the Potter is still working and the clay remains pliable, will we entrust ourselves to Him? Will we stop boasting in our religion, our achievements, our independence, or even our good works? Will we acknowledge that our lives and our times are in His hands (Psalm 31:15)? Joshua challenged Israel to choose whom they would serve (Joshua 24:15), and that challenge remains before us. We can serve ourselves, our religious systems, our ambitions, and our failures, or we can serve the LORD.

For me and my house, we will serve the LORD. Not ourselves. Not our religion. Not our supposed goodness. We will serve the One who made us, knows us, and invites us into relationship with Him through Messiah Yeshua. Jeremiah's chapter has not given us a neat answer to every painful question, but it has shown us where to bring those questions. We bring them to God, even when we are angry, even when we are exhausted, and even when we cannot see the way forward. He is still in charge. The question is whether we will allow Him to rule our lives.

### Takeaways

- Faithfulness to God does not exempt us from suffering.
- Religious authority must remain accountable to God's word.
- Honest prayer, even lament belongs within a life of faith.
- God's word may compel us even when obedience is costly.
- Choose whom you will serve; the LORD remains sovereign.

**Memory Verse**

Jeremiah 20:9

“But if I say, ‘I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,’ then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it.”

**WATCH**

Original Jeremiah 20 teaching: [WATCH on YouTube](#)

**What's Next?**

Jeremiah 21 — Where Is Your Hope?

Another Pashhur appears in chapter 21, but this time he comes as an emissary from King Zedekiah. The king is facing the threat of Babylon and wants Jeremiah to ask whether the LORD might perform one of His wonders and deliver Jerusalem. It sounds like a promising development. At last the king is seeking the prophet's counsel! But is he genuinely turning toward God, or has he simply run out of other options?

The answer Jeremiah gives is devastating. The God who once delivered Israel from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm now declares that He will fight against Jerusalem because of the nation's persistent rebellion. The king wants divine intervention without covenant obedience, and Jeremiah will not give him the reassurance he desires. Yet even in this announcement of national catastrophe, God places a choice before individuals: the way of life or the way of death.

Where is your hope when the institutions you trust are collapsing? Do you turn to God as your first choice or your last resort? And what does it mean to choose life when obedience requires surrender rather than victory? Jeremiah 21 will challenge our assumptions about security, leadership, justice, and the mercy of God.

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