

Spiritual Depression **Jeremiah 15:10-21**

I'm not a fan of boxing, but when a boxer is taking too many hits in a fight, and he's in a bad way, and it's obvious he's going to lose, what does his trainer do? He throws in the towel. It's a sign: the game's over, this is only going one way, the opponent is too strong - we're beaten, we quit.

And today we're going to look at a passage where the prophet Jeremiah lets God know that he feels like throwing in the towel. He's discouraged and disillusioned, he's taking too many hits, and he wants this fight over. And there can be times in our lives when we feel the same. There can be stuff going on in your life that drags you down into a kind of darkness, that can leave you feeling emotionally and spiritually exhausted and depressed. And you feel like walking away - from your problems, or the church, or the faith.

But we're also going to see how God turns Jeremiah around, and how God does it tells us how the sunlight can shine again in our own lives when the dark cloud falls on us.

Reading: Jeremiah 15:10-21

We're going to look at three things: the causes of spiritual depression; the shape of spiritual depression - and how God lifts Jeremiah out of it - which is the path back to joy.

The Causes of Spiritual Depression

Do you ever wake up feeling grumpy? There's no real reason for it, you just start the day feeling grumpy. And when you were a kid your mum would have said, 'I think you got out of bed the wrong side today!' - which is always such a helpful thing to say.

Well, that's not Jeremiah. Jeremiah is not feeling down for no good reason. He has very good reasons. He has been tasked by God with delivering a message to the nation of Judah that is deeply unpopular. And v13-14 give us a taster of it: "Your wealth and your treasures I will give as spoil, without price, for all your sins, throughout all your territory. I will make you serve your enemies in a land you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever."

In other words, because of the nation's sin, they're going to be invaded, sent into exile and experience economic and political ruin on a devastating scale.

Now, imagine a musician playing in an orchestra. Let's call her Linley. And all the other instruments are playing in one key, but our musician, Linley, starts playing in a totally different key. What would it sound like? And how would the conductor and the other musicians react? It would sound out of key and discordant, and everyone would be saying, 'hey, please, stop, you're out of tune, or key', because it sounds offensive to their ears. But, what if our musician was still playing in a totally different key to everyone else, but she was the one who was right, playing how the composer wrote it, and everyone else was wrong? It wouldn't sound any less discordant, or out of tune, or offensive, would it? And everyone would still look at her as if she was the one who was wrong.

And that's Jeremiah. His message was deeply discordant with what everyone else was saying and playing. As a culture, what was sinful and unjust had become the norm - and wrong was considered right. And chapter 14 tells us that there were numerous other religious teachers who were bringing

messages of hope and encouragement to the people. And that made Jeremiah's message of coming judgment sound totally off key. He was out of tune with the whole culture. But that didn't make him wrong. But it did make him a target.

And in v10, he describes himself as 'a man of strife and contention to the whole land... [and] all of them curse me.' And Jeremiah is clear why: v15, 'for your sake [God] I bear reproach.' And he is being persecuted and socially isolated: v17, 'I did not sit in the company of revellers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me.'

And Jeremiah discovered that to believe, and to preach, something so out of tune with society takes a very personal toll. And as the punches of criticism and opposition were raining it, it dragged him down emotionally and spiritually.

But what's extraordinary about Jeremiah's despondency is that he's not alone, is he? - in the Bible, I mean. The great prophet Elijah was so beat down by opposition that he ran away and prayed that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." (1 Kings 18:4). When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent people to ask Jesus - 'are you really the messiah, or have I backed the wrong horse?' Why? Because, in his suffering, doubt was creeping in. After Peter denied Jesus three times, it seems a despondency at his own failure crept over Peter and he said to the others, "I am going fishing." (John 21:3). I'm going back to my old life, I've failed and nothing can be the same again. And even Paul, that giant of faith, in his last letter from prison, feels his loneliness deeply, 'Do your best to come to me soon... at my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.' (2 Tim 4:9, 16)

So, if opposition, and personal failure, and loneliness, and the failure of friends, or tragic life events can drag these giants down, what can do it for you? What leaves you feeling discouraged or disillusioned with the faith, or with life in general?

Well, like Jeremiah, it could be the criticism you face for staying faithful to the truth in a culture that's abandoning it, couldn't it? I mean, the message of God's judgment against sin hasn't got any more popular, or more in tune with society, has it? I don't know if you saw, but over the last few weeks three Christian rugby players have been attacked because of what they've posted on social media. Now, whatever you think of the wisdom of the way they did it, it's the message, that God judges sin and that Christ has to die for our sin, that has got them into trouble - because it's so out of tune with where we are at as a culture.

And maybe you've experienced either the difficulty of choosing your words carefully, or the pressure to stay quiet altogether, lest you offend anyone. And that can undermine your confidence and joy in what you believe. And you can become disillusioned by it.

Or it could be your own sin. And you know only too well how far short you fall, and you wonder whether the Christian faith really makes any difference to your, or others, lives. Or you could be in a situation where either you as a person, or your performance, is constantly criticised, maybe at work or at home - and the day in, day out of it all drags you down. Or maybe someone you care about has walked away from the faith, and it is deeply discouraging. Or maybe, like Jeremiah, some thing in your life started out with great hopes - maybe your marriage, or a dream job, or a longed for child - but that was then and now is now. And now what you experience is constant heart ache things haven't worked out the way you wanted and the dream has died.

So, if those are some of the cause of spiritual depression, what form does it take?

The Shape of Spiritual Depression

Look what Jeremiah says in v10: “Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me.” Now, if you have ever felt like you wanted to run away and that life would just be easier if you could escape your problems, Jeremiah went to an even lower place.

You see, when God first called Jeremiah he said to him, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” (1:5). So this isn’t Jeremiah getting out of bed the wrong side, like a grumpy teenager. This is him wishing he’d never got caught up in this prophet thing in the first place. This is him wishing God had never intervened in his life, that he had a different life. That he’d be better off dead. And that’s a desperate place to be. But maybe, for some of us, you’ve experienced dark days like that.

And think where he’s fallen from. You see, when Jeremiah first heard and tasted God’s word, how did he describe it? It thrilled him: v16, ‘Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.’

But now, preaching that same word has left him isolated. And when in v17 he says ‘I sat alone’ he’s not just talking about a social isolation that your average introvert could shrug off - he’s talking about a deep inner loneliness.

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher of the Victorian era, once gave a talk to a group of students training to be pastors called, ‘The Minister’s Fainting Fits’. And in it he tries to help them understand why they’ll experience the kind of black moods that Jeremiah experiences here. And at one point he says, ‘Men of God who rise above their fellows into nearer communion with heavenly things, in their weaker moments feel the lack of human sympathy... This loneliness, which if I mistake not is felt by many of my brethren, is a fertile source of depression’.

And Jeremiah feels that depression of spirit that comes with the loneliness of his calling. And in v15, he wants God to ‘take vengeance for me on my persecutors.’ And one of the dangers of going through a time like Jeremiah is going through is that you can begin to feel sorry for yourself. And the problem with self-pity is that it is self-centred, because it says, ‘I don’t deserve this, in fact I deserve better than this.’ And if we let it fester, self-pity can lead to bitterness. As one writer says of this passage: ‘Bitterness and resentment are among the most poisonous and lethal of all emotions... Anger...can flare up and die down very quickly. But bitterness stays; it smoulders on, gnawing away at our minds and hearts. No wonder the New Testament speaks of it as a ‘bitter root’. It is indeed a root that goes deep down, grows very long, and bears nasty fruit, sometimes for a lifetime.’

And this discouragement and disillusionment has become like an open wound in Jeremiah’s soul: v18: ‘Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?’

And in his pain, Jeremiah says something frankly shocking for one of the Lord’s prophets to say. But it’s also very honest. Verse 18, God, “Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?”

God, I desperately need to drink from the waters of your love and comfort, but I don't know whether I trust you to deliver. Are you going to be like a mountain stream, that you can see on the map, and it's there in theory, but when you get there it's dry and there's no water to quench your thirst?

And that's a remarkable thing to say to God because back in chapter 2 Jeremiah described God as 'the fountain of living waters' and that people who run after idols, false gods, are like those who have 'hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.' (2:13)

And so Jeremiah has come so low that he fears that God is no better, no more to be trusted than these false gods like money, sex and power, who promise you so much but fail to deliver.

And whatever the cause of any discouragement or disillusionment we might face, there can be this nagging doubt, or worse a growing feeling, God, are you really there when I need you? Or is all this a waste of time?

So, when the fire in your spirit is going out, how can you get the flames going again? What's the oxygen, what's the wood that your heart needs to get joy and delight in God burning again?

The Path Back to Joy

Now, when you're feeling down, about life, or about yourself how can you deal with it?

You see, someone might tell you that when you're facing stuff that's dragging you down you've got to think more positively about yourself. You've got to imagine yourself in that boxing ring - and instead of being beaten up, you're winning, and the crowd are cheering you, so think about yourself like that the next time you're feeling down.

The problem is that either leads to unreality - because you're not a winner - or to pride because you are - neither of which are attractive.

Or, you could bury your emotions - but even if you could, that would result in you becoming emotionally repressed, which would hardly be healthy.

Or, when you're feeling sorry for yourself, you could try and comfort yourself couldn't you: and you look to porn, or food, or alcohol to do it. The problem is, they just bring a whole extra set of problems.

So what does Jeremiah do, and what does God do with Jeremiah?

The first thing to say is that Jeremiah prays. You see, deep down he knows where he's going to get the answers from. Verse 15, "O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me." He knows that what he needs is a fresh experience of God's love and presence.

And in response to his praying, God does visit him. And the first thing God does, in dealing with his heart, is call him to repentance. Verse 19, 'Therefore thus says the Lord: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me."' You see, it's not that God has abandoned Jeremiah when he most needed him, it's that Jeremiah has wandered away from God. And that's always the

danger of hurt, and self-pity. And God is inviting Jeremiah back to the banquet table, back to the source of living water, to taste and see again that the Lord is good.

And not just taste it, but speak it: v19, 'If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be my mouth.' So if the cloud is to lift, the critical, negative talk has got to go and be replaced by the kind of talk inspired by Psalm 16, 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' In the past, Jeremiah's known that, he's experienced that - and now he needs to come back to it. We all do. And like Jeremiah we do it through prayer, and the word of God.

You see, when you feel isolated, and spiritually down, it can be tempting to compromise and conform to the world. But God says to Jeremiah, don't - v19, 'they shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.' You won't find the joy you're looking for through compromise Jeremiah, you'll find it in me - in your reading, in your praying and in your speaking.

Secondly, God reminds Jeremiah of his calling. Verse 20, "And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you." Now that's not just God promising Jeremiah he's going to be invincible all the time he has work for him to do, it is God reminding him of the words he spoke over him when he first called him to be a prophet. Chapter 1:18-19: "I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls... they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you." So when Jeremiah's tempted to throw in the towel God reminds him, 'Jeremiah, I've put you here, I've called you to this task, don't give up.'

And maybe when you're down and disillusioned you need to remember the same. Maybe, if things are hard in your marriage, that means revisiting your marriage vows and reminding yourself what God has called you to. Maybe it's to look again at those verses of Scripture the Lord gave you when he led you to take a certain decision. Maybe it's to remind yourself of how he opened the doors and engineered the circumstances to have you where you are now. Whatever the specifics might be, all of us can remember our calling in Christ. As Paul says 'those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.' (Rom 8:29-30). So when the darkness seems to envelop you, remind yourself: because of Jesus, I'm chosen and called to be a son or a daughter of God. He has put his hand on me - regardless of what anyone else is saying about me.

Thirdly, God reminds him of the gospel - or at least the glimpse of the gospel Jeremiah saw. Verse 20, "For I am with you to save you and deliver you." When David and his men were away at battle, the Amalakites raided their camp and captured their wives and children. And when David and the army returned and found the city burned to the ground the man started to talk about killing David. So what does David do? Well, the writer of 1 Samuel says, 'David strengthened himself in the Lord his God' (1 Sam 30:6). In Psalms 42 and 43 the psalmist admits to how low he feels. But instead of sinking into the pit of self-pity, he speaks to himself, 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God' (42:11). In Psalm 57 David describes how his soul 'is in the midst of lions' - he's in a lions' den of people who criticise and attack him: 'whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.' (57:4). And yet in that same psalm he praises and thanks God for his help. And he tells us how he can do that, v10, 'For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.'

Now, if Jeremiah and David and the Psalmists could encourage their hearts in the truth that God was with them and saves them, how much more can you do that, this side of Jesus? God says to Jeremiah, 'I am with you'. But you have Christ, the ultimate Immanuel, the ultimate God-with-us. And he doesn't just know our frame, that we are dust, he became a man of dust like us. And he comes and makes his home with us, sending his Spirit to live in us, telling us we're his children.

And Jeremiah says to God in v15, 'For your sake I bear reproach' but Jesus came to bear *our* reproach. Jeremiah has the honour - even if it doesn't feel like it right now - of suffering for the One perfect in every way, but Christ came and suffered for us who are imperfect in every way, and he does it because he loves us. And when you know he loves you enough to die for you, you know he won't let you down.

As Paul says in Romans 8, 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (v31-32). So when you are in danger of entering a tail-spin of discouragement, speak the truth to your soul of who God is and what he has done for you and the gloom will begin to lift.

And finally, God reminds Jeremiah that the outcome is certain. Verse 21, "I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." Note he doesn't promise him a trouble free life - any more than Jesus does. Instead he tells him that in all the trouble God will rescue him. And you and I know so much more about God's rescue than Jeremiah. You know that Christ has risen. You know that he has ascended on high. You know he sits enthroned at God's right hand. So you know who the real king is and how this story is going to end. So tell that story to your soul and let the light in.

So, when life is dark, come back to God - and taste and see that he is good. Remember your calling. Remember the gospel and preach it to yourself. And remember, the outcome is certain.