

Jeremiah 4:10

Sin & Judgment I/II

Introduction:

So we're diving into Jeremiah again, and we're going to spend time both this week and next in the same broad section of Jeremiah, from 4:5 through the end of chapter 6. It's a long section, and I definitely haven't treated it with all the thoroughness it deserves. In fact, for much of today we're only going to look at a very small bit of it.

That said, when we look I think Jeremiah will be a mirror for us. We'll see ourselves, be invited to consider how we relate to God, and we'll consider some ways we relate to the things that come our way in life.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Oh, 4:10:

Let's start with that first verse that was read to us today. It was hard. Right before it God told Jeremiah that Assyria is at their gates, and Jeremiah says this, at 4:10:

Then I said, “Alas, Sovereign Lord! How completely you have deceived this people and Jerusalem by saying, ‘You will have peace,’ when the sword is at our throats!”

What that “promise of peace” Jeremiah is referencing here is hard to pin down. Is he referencing what we saw last week, how God promised peace “in those days?” In that case, Jeremiah misunderstood what God meant about future redemption, and overlooked all the “Assyria is coming” stuff he had to proclaim. Or is Jeremiah referencing something else, maybe some ancient promise from a prophet before Jeremiah of the peace Jerusalem would have? Or something God told Jeremiah that we don’t have? Maybe Josiah’s reform has started, and Jeremiah feels like because of that, Judah shouldn’t have to deal with any negative consequences from their total collective rejection of God.

We don’t know what Jeremiah is referencing. What we do know, for sure, is that Jeremiah feels like God is a total liar, and calls him out on it. “How completely you have deceived this people and Jerusalem.”

You’re a liar, God. A liar.

On God Being A Liar:

This isn't a lament. I want to make that clear. This isn't, you know, "God, everything's terrible, how can I believe you...help my unbelief." This is just, "How could you, you liar?"

You know, I love lamenting. We people made with deep emotion are meant to grieve and rage to the Lord, and what I love about Lament in the Bible is how great emotion is always extinguished in depths of God. God is a sink for all the anger we can toss at him.

What is so hard to read here in today's passage, is the way God isn't a sink for Jeremiah, not in this moment, because Jeremiah feels like God is the betrayer, the liar, the one who in the end isn't trustworthy.

And when you see God as a hypocrite, where can you sink your grief and rage? And this isn't rhetorical, because many of us have, I think, been Jeremiah. We have believed that God had tricked us, deceived us, is a liar, or if not us then our people and our place.

God, The Liar:

What do you do when you believe God has lied to you?

I was struck, as I prepared this message, of how for many people this past week--and I was writing this prior to any "calling" of the election--just how many people feel as if God had practically told them one thing or another would happen in the election, and it simply didn't, or hadn't yet. Expectations about what totals would look like in what places, how ethnic groups would vote, what the election would reveal about America's character, all sorts of things felt, to many Christians, as if they had been pre-determined by God, and when those things didn't happen...well, Jeremiah! "You have completely deceived us!"

Now: We Christians are generally cautious about calling God a liar. I mean, Jesus himself said that Satan, God's enemy, is the liar who only can lie, is the "father of lies." We tend to have enough of a "God is an all-consuming fire" perspective that while we're okay with lament, we're not ready to just, you know, tell God he's straight up lying. So, of course, we dislocate that and assume someone else is, and take out our rage and grief on them. Not ideal, and less biblical, it seems, than just calling out God would be.

But let's assume that Jeremiah is reacting here, not faithfully, but honestly. Let's pretend we can identify with him--although, our faith is so strong we'd never

accuse God of deceiving His People or tricking us. Let's pretend that we believe, sometimes, that God has deceived us.

Before we talk about what to do with that feeling, let's talk about how to prevent it.

Preventing A Sense of Betrayal:

One easy way to prevent a sense of betrayal is to just not trust someone.

I mean, for us, you know: You can just turn your back on God. It's not something I'd recommend, and given how many people cry out in lament to God when disaster comes, it's probably just a ruse we come to believe in. But the truth is that if you're not in a relationship with someone, you generally don't have high expectations of them. If you make an enemy of someone, you expect them to be a liar and deceiver.

So those are options, but not Christian options, right? The thing is, sometimes those around us are living where Jeremiah was in this moment, and they are doing so without a relationship with God. They blame God, but don't believe in Him. And that's not hard to hold together; in fact, a quick way to ruin a relationship with a person in this situation is to point

out how they're acting irrationally. If the relationship is what matters, it's not worth pointing it out.

But I just wanted to toss this out there, and be honest about it: If you don't expect anything from God, don't expect God to have integrity or care for you, then you'll never feel like God is betraying you. I mention it, I guess, because it's always good to examine our expectations of God.

But let's talk more *Christianly*. How can we avoid feeling like God has deceived us? How can we avoid believing like God has deceived us? Here are some things:

(And if were in the building, there'd be, like, a big slide on the screen that says "Deception Protection," which I'd be really pleased with.)

Deception Protection: Personal Promises

When it comes to what we believe God has personally promised us, we have to be very, very careful in setting our expectations.

And this is hard, because most Christians I know feel at some point like God has sort-of promised them personally something or other. They may not say it out loud--we're smart, after all--but they still feel it. They

were just so sure that this time was the time God was going to come through...with whatever it is: A job or a home, a relationship, good fortune, pregnancy or their favorite president. They would say, if pressed, "Well, it's not like I heard the voice of God or something." But they believed--we believe, for a moment--that God really has made us a personal promise of some sort.

And yet. We need to be very cautious when it comes to claiming that God has personally promised us something. Maybe God has. But maybe God hasn't. Maybe God's not lying to us, but we're lying to ourselves.

And here's why this matters: If we can acknowledge that sometimes our belief God has promised us something is really just our hopefulness, which is normal and human and Christian and good, then, when it doesn't pan out--whatever it is--we can turn to God in regret, find peace, and move forward with our relationship with God intact. This protects us from doing all the things that unmet expectations do--whether it's the full blame of Jeremiah, or the anger that can come of it, like the anger that led to crucifying Christ.

So how do we discern between our own hopefulness

and a direct personal promise from God? The same way we discern anything--by talking it out with each other, turning back to Scripture, praying and fasting and serving God as we do so that the Spirit can easily move us.

So, what do you think God has personally promised you?

But we can't talk about the personal without talking about the general.

Deception Protection:

And when it comes to more general things, we simply have to be very, very careful about truth itself. We always remember Jesus saying "I am the way, the truth, the life." Christian epistemology--that is, the study of truth, of knowledge, of how we distinguish between opinion and fact--Christian epistemology always has Jesus at its center, and that means, too, having Scripture at its center. This is relevant for us.

We don't know what Jeremiah was basing his claim on. We don't know what promise Jeremiah thought God was abandoning, but if it was the promise of future peace, then that means that Jeremiah simply got his facts wrong. He just got his facts wrong.

He did bad Bible study. He didn't realize what God meant by what God said. And we can excuse that, because it's hard to understand what God means sometimes. The Bible itself reminds us. I mean, Peter says, about Paul, "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Peter's intense here. I'm not saying any one of us is ignorant or unstable. Jeremiah wasn't unstable; he was destabilized by God Himself breaking into his life. But Peter is speaking to the simple truth that getting to truth is hard. And while we're always aloud to act irrationally, again it's not a great way to build a relationship. Our relationships with God--but even with one another--need to have some agreed-upon-set of facts at their center.

Sometimes what we believe is true is just a lie. It's based on poor information, bad information, bad Bible study, wishful thinking we nudge into fact through self and group-deception. Jeremiah thought God was a liar because he simply didn't understand what God had promised.

Understanding matters. Getting to truth matters. The facts we base our lives on matter. And we are terrible at talking about facts and truth, of course; but we're also (equally terrible) at ignoring them once we get a functional way of living. What I mean is that once we're stable in life, we don't generally peer into truth much anymore. We think our understanding is good enough, because it gets us through the day. That's not a great way to live if faithfulness is what you want. And honestly that way of living is almost impossible to sustain in a relationship with God, who has rights to move and do and act far more than we want God to. It's hard to sustain in a society which is undergoing massive change, which we have little control over. And it's hard to sustain when our way of life is traumatized, disrupted so fully because of some unexpected event.

What I mean to say is that we're fooling ourselves if we think we can ignore the arduous, life-long process of looking at what we really believe and why. We're fooling ourselves if we think we can ignore the arduous, life-long process of looking at what we really believe and why.

Jeremiah didn't examine what he believed about the peace God promised until he was reminded that destruction was still coming on Jerusalem and Judah.

He was forced into examining what he believed. I don't want us to be forced by trauma, by some move of God, by our changing society into having to examine what we believe is factual. I want us to get ahead of it, you know, so that we can improvise a response that is faithful, not do what Jeremiah does, which is say, "You are a liar."

So how do we discern what we believe? The same way we discern anything--by talking it out with each other, turning back to Scripture, praying and fasting and serving God as we do so that the Spirit can easily move us.

So, what do you believe? About God or the world?

Let me go back to Jeremiah for a moment, though, because there are two things that really, really intensely interest me in today's scene.

Two Things: No Response:

The first is this: God ignores Jeremiah. God doesn't defend Himself, explain himself, sit Jeremiah down and talk through the way Jeremiah's theology is bad. God doesn't blow Jeremiah over with his awesome power the way Job gets blown over. God just doesn't do anything.

And this is a valid response.

God doesn't need to defend himself to Jeremiah, not because God is a liar, but because whatever else is going on here, whatever the reason for Jeremiah's feelings, what Jeremiah says is not true.

And healthy adults can be falsely condemned by their children without needing to defend themselves. Healthy adults know when their kid is throwing a tantrum, know when to press their child to apologize and when to let something go. God is always moved by His love for us, but has never seemed to allow Himself to be manipulated by it. If we're choosing between God and Jeremiah for a role model in this moment, God's the one to follow. There are times of non-response when we are falsely accused. This is one of them.

I'm challenged to think of the ways I respond when I have no need to respond at all. We also can't forget that it's Satan who is the accuser, who falsely accuses, and when we are secure in God's love for us and our purposes, there are few reasons to react to

Two Things: No Closure

The other thing that strikes me deeply in this moment of Jeremiah is that it contains no closure at all.

Again, this is not a classical Lament that Jeremiah makes. It is simply a charge set against God, a claim that God's a liar. And God doesn't respond, because God doesn't need to, but neither does Jeremiah come to some great peace at the end, his anger dispelled.

In fact, Jeremiah is a book without closure. There are highs-and-lows, of course, but this scene in Jeremiah doesn't leave us with a sense that peace might come, hope might come. It ends...without an ending.

In a little bit Jeremiah will cry out,

Oh, my anguish, my anguish!

I writhe in pain.

Oh, the agony of my heart!

My heart pounds within me,

I cannot keep silent.

For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;

I have heard the battle cry.

20 Disaster follows disaster;

the whole land lies in ruins.

And Jeremiah is never given peace. He's hauled off to

Egypt at the end of the book. His anguish never really seems to go away. Every classic painting of him has him just, like, lying around weeping or moping or sad. Jeremiah's story doesn't have a happy ending.

And I think this is helpful. Jeremiah does eventually seem to realize the promise of peace is for way down the line. But his work, his life, ends up being not for him, but for, well...us, and those who come after us and those who came before, who trusted God and are themselves, like us, still waiting for Christ to return and set things right. Jeremiah is the patron saint of realists, pragmatists, and those who don't benefit from their own work. Jeremiah is the patron saint of those who don't get closure.

And that's one more way in which God has given Jeremiah to us as a gift, just as the Father gave the Son to us as a gift, because to be human is often to not get closure. We don't always get to "see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Sometimes we have to figure out how to keep living when the climax to our story isn't given. Jeremiah reminds me to look past this present moment, and take peace in what will come someday, no matter how tidy and neat the chapters of my life's story are.

Are there things in your life--relationships, seasons, chapters, dreams--which ended without closure, without a tidy bow weaving all sorts of themes together? By all means, if you can find meaning, can make meaning, find closure, do: But know that it's not always given, and much of life is coming to terms with the truth that we don't always get answers, we don't always get responses, we don't always get closure. We just have to persist in faithfulness, in hope, sometimes not even for ourselves but for those who will come after us. To do that is to be something like Christ, who Jeremiah prefigures in his selflessness, and perhaps in his grief, too.

Conclusion:

So, look: Almost **two** long chapters of Jeremiah and I've preached on a verse. We'll step way back next week and look at the broad narrative movement of these chapters, and what they reveal, but I do think this close look is a good thing to do.

It challenges us to consider what promises we believe God has personally made to us, and how we've come to believe that, and what a faithful response looks like if those promises go unfulfilled.

It challenges us to consider what we believe is

basically true--about God, about the world, about belief itself--and ask how we've come to believe these things, and, maybe, if those beliefs need revisited and reformed.

From the perspective of God, we're invited to remember that we don't always need to respond to those who accuse us. That sometimes healthy people let little ones throw a tantrum, and resist being manipulated by others. From the perspective of Jeremiah, we're invited to remember that however nice closure and answers and conclusions are when it comes to our life stories and relationships...they aren't given, not a right, and to act with faith is to choose to live in hope even when we don't get what we want out of the situations we find ourselves in.

So I'm not upset about taking such a close look at this section; I hope God can use it somehow.

Extras: Today's Selection In the New Testament:
We ought to talk about the ways this section from Jeremiah shows up in the New Testament, too...

Jer 5:21 in Mk 8:18: "Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people, Who have eyes but do not see; Who have ears but do not hear."

This shows up; a trope, really, to talk about a range of either insensitivity to what God has to say, or outright resistance...not really a “quote” so much as a quote of a standard thing...Jesus is using it to align himself with the prophetic voices in the past.

Jer 6:16 in Mt 11:29: – “Thus says the Lord, “Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’” (28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”)

By alluding to this, Jesus is lining up his teaching and person with the “ancient paths [and] good way,” with orthodoxy, and inviting his audience now to not be like Jeremiah’s, which was wiped out. It’s a powerful allusion we overlook.

Going Deeper: Jeremiah 4:10

- How does this passage make you feel? Why or why not? Look at the passages just before and after it. How do they relate to this moment?

- Is Jeremiah right or wrong in what he does? Have you been Jeremiah here?
- What is God's response to this? What do you think about it?
- Is there anything from today's reflection that you think you need to consider more with regard to your life and habits?