

## ***January 31: 17:1-27: Highlight 17:14-18***

### ***Prelude:***

Well, friends, we're continuing our run through Jeremiah. And, honestly, it is a run, a sprint. There's all sorts of stuff we're skipping past that's interesting, although a lot of it is repetitive, honestly. So I'm trying to find passages that bring something special for us to consider.

Today, we're looking at a small section of Chapter 17. It's a scrapbook-y sort of chapter: Stuff that reads like Proverbs, bits of Psalms, a bit of other things, all basically without context, at least historical context. There's literary context, of course, the stuff that's happening in the chapter itself. And the way this collection of Proverbs and Psalms and Dialogue is structured seems to tell a very specific story about Jeremiah himself, and his relationship with God.

### ***Jeremiah's Story:***

Immediately before what was read to us today, Jeremiah declares, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Now. God doesn't say this; Jeremiah does. I know people who have quoted this at me as wisdom, as a

reminder when I shouldn't trust my gut or trust my heart. Honestly, I think most of the time that's done it is regret-filled projection. And look, Jeremiah himself is broken and being broken down by those around him; no wonder he distrusts the hearts of others. But God responds to Jeremiah by saying, powerfully, "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." God is saying "I myself--me--understand the heart, and the mind. I understand people. And I reward people not for what they feel or think, but for the effects of their feelings and thoughts, for how they live."

And this is a great, great response to Jeremiah's hopeless claim about the untrustworthiness of the heart. Because right before Jeremiah spoke his hopeless statement on what people are, God had promised this promise:

***"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,  
whose confidence is in him.  
8 They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.  
It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.***

***It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit.”***

So follow me: God promises that those who trust Him will thrive. God uses the analogy of a thriving tree to describe the person who trusts God. They don't have fear or anxiety.

And Jeremiah, I think, deeply personalizes this. His response is: "The heart's a mess. You can't cure it. Who can understand it?" You can push back on this as you think of it, but to me this reads like a dodge. If Jeremiah is responding to God here, I think Jeremiah is dodging this truth. I don't think, in this moment, Jeremiah believes what God is saying.

But God doesn't allow Jeremiah to dodge this. God responds and persists: "I know the heart. And I will reward those who trust me." And, if Jeremiah is spouting self-protective wisdom, personalizing his own doubt, I'm convinced here that God is doing the same for Jeremiah.

When God responds to Jeremiah's dodge by saying, "I know the heart," God wants Jeremiah to hear him say, also, "I...reward each person according to their

conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.” I think God wants Jeremiah to hear that God knows Jeremiah is conducting himself faithfully, no matter what those around him are doing.

And, if this small section of Jeremiah is telling a crib-notes story, Jeremiah’s response to God saying “I reward those who trust me.” Is to declare that God does reward those who trust Him.

***So: Again, the Beats:***

So again, the narrative beats:

God promises that those who trust him will thrive.  
 Jeremiah responds by projecting his doubt.  
 God reiterates His promises.  
 Jeremiah declares his belief.

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There’s all sorts of agonizing processing that’s absent here, but this is the back-and-forth emotionally of this passage.

And then, and then we read the passage that was read to us today.

***Today's Special:***

***Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;***

***save me and I will be saved,***

***for you are the one I praise.***

***They keep saying to me,***

***“Where is the word of the Lord?***

***Let it now be fulfilled!”***

***I have not run away from being your shepherd;***

***you know I have not desired the day of***

***despair.***

***What passes my lips is open before you.***

***Do not be a terror to me;***

***you are my refuge in the day of disaster.***

***Let my persecutors be put to shame,***

***but keep me from shame;***

***let them be terrified,***

***but keep me from terror.***

***Bring on them the day of disaster;***

***destroy them with double destruction.***

Now. We want to talk about the end of this, I'm sure.

Jeremiah's "let my persecutors be put to shame...let them be terrified," but keep me from shame and terror. There's a polite person inside all of us who is a little shocked, you know? "Jeremiah! How could you say those things!"

### ***A "Have To" Not A "Want":***

I don't want to focus on this too much. I know I have to.

So remember: No one believes Jeremiah. Over his career he's hunted, persecuted, dismissed as irrelevant, chased after, physically hurt, has to do all sorts of things that make no immediate sense, including never marrying. He's oppressed and silenced.

And we saw last week how even though that was the case, he nonetheless acted as an advocate for those who needed him to speak up for them, interceded in solidarity with those who were trying to sideline and ignore him, so that they wouldn't get what they wanted and deserved.

Jeremiah is literally attacked in this book, literally sidelined, literally persecuted and antagonized. But

instead of responding in kind, he allows his anger to be channeled through God. To pray “God, do this,” is to resolve to not do it yourself, and to believe that God really will return to people what they dole out. This matters enormously. We’ve talked about the power of “Imprecatory Psalms” and “Imprecatory Prayers.”

“Imprecatory” basically means “curse,” the opposite of blessing. And Imprecatory prayers and psalms are enormously important, because they remind us that an authentic relationship with God gives voice to our anger, our grief, and every emotion that we have. An authentic relationship with God gives voice to our creaturely anger, grief, and emotions. It does not take out anger and grief on a person, it offers anger and grief to God. I’ve always loved what one author has said about Imprecatory Prayers. In praying them, “... [one’s] rage is not only brought into [God’s] presence. It is submitted to [God] and relinquished to him. In the end this psalm shows the way in which free, unrestrained speech of rage is given over to the claims of [God]” (The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, 85).

So, look. Just giving voice to what Jeremiah prays here, as someone who is being actively, deeply oppressed

and persecuted, is itself another act of faith, another sign in this cliff-notes story that Jeremiah really does trust God again. He's become re-centered in God again, believes God again. This prayer is a symptom of his restored relationship. He doesn't need to say "Who can trust the heart," because he isn't side-stepping his own doubt anymore. He's dealt with it, and so he can declare with trust:

***Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;***

***save me and I will be saved,***

***for you are the one I praise.***

***I have not run away from being your shepherd;***

***you know I have not desired the day of  
despair.***

***What passes my lips is open before you.***

Jeremiah knows who he is again. He's remembered his creaturely purpose, and His Creator God's power. He's remembered his faith, and what God has done for him in the past and what God will do for him in the future. Save him. Heal him. And God is the one Jeremiah praises, today and tomorrow.

***Some Of Us:***

Some of us can relate to this story, even though all we

get is the high notes. This story of our doubt in God's promises, in God's character, and then remembering. Coming to ourselves, the way the Prodigal Son came to himself in the muck, remembered the character of his father and what it could mean to him.

We need reminded, let right now be a reminder, of the things Jeremiah remembered, which again are the same things Jesus knew about himself: That we are God's children, who make God happy, and when we are living in the truth of that identity, we ought to be heard.

Look. God loves you. You bring God great pleasure. I never want, but fully expect us to forget this. Neglect it, stray from it, abandon it, even. Given our pandemic days and our cultural ways it can become easy to let the intimacy of relationship that Jeremiah and God had just...slip away, so much so that we don't even dodge questions of faith and trust, because they aren't all that present in our minds.

But, listen: There is almost nothing more important than knowing the truth that Jeremiah was brought back to, the truth we're meant to tend and nurture and contemplate, which Jesus knew, too. God loves

you; you make God happy; when you're embedded in that truth, you speak with authority.

I can't transfuse urgency to us. I can't instill a sense of desire for this. I don't need to, of course; the Spirit can, and will, and must if we're to live with any bearing and conviction.

I could ask these questions: What gives us hope? What gives us courage? What gives us security? What brings us peace?

And, look, Jeremiah dodged the question when God asked for trust. We can do better than that. We can start with the authenticity it took Jeremiah awhile to get to. Neither God nor you deserves trite, memorized, Sunday-School answers to the hard questions of your life. What gives you hope, or courage, or security, or peace?

### ***Conclusion:***

If it's not the love of God it will fail you. I promise. And not dramatically, like on TV, just...in the end. "All things passeth; God never changeth." It is not that the love of others, or the security of our wealth, or the hope of an ideal, or the peace of nature are not real

things, it's just that they are all made, and only God is not. To make your feelings and actions dependent upon something you can lose is to set yourself up for failure when the world crashes in: It's to almost lose yourself in grief, instead of gain the Lord in grief. It's to almost lose yourself in hopelessness, instead of remember God's persevering solidarity with you. It's to lose yourself in the lies of others, and the devilish taxonomies they sort you into instead of knowing who you truly are: One God sprints to in pleasure and longs to show love and believes you have incredible importance as you are for the world as it is.

We know what we need, we responsible, mature, thoughtful, generous people. Maybe what we need has nothing to do with defining ourselves as children loved by God. But we all define ourselves some way, and we all face circumstances--global pandemics or tech troubles or relationship failures or muscle sprains, death or birth or any of the million unmet expectations that destroy us--we all face circumstances whose response is determined by what we believe is most true about us.

And what is most true about you is what Jeremiah came to realize again, and what Jesus knew, and what

all the great cloud of witnesses who surround us do not ever doubt anymore: You are God's beloved, in who God is well-pleased. You have authority to speak when you remain in that secure center.

***Last Thing:***

And, look. When you forget yourself, find someone who can help you remember. Because all the bad stuff that comes when we forget ourselves is exactly all the bad stuff that Judah was embracing and Jeremiah was experiencing. We only hurt ourselves--and others, and the world, and strangers--when we give into that. And I know we don't want to. So, instead, give into the persistent pleasure God has in you, the love God feels for you, and the powerful ways God wants to shape the world through you. Let's return to ourselves, the way Jeremiah did. And I pray--help my unbelief--we can stay there.