

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revellers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

Therefore thus says the LORD: “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. 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, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.”

(Jeremiah 15:15–21)

## Introduction

The celebrity gossip industry is an interesting one? In May 2011, *The Week* magazine published an article highlighting some of the numbers of that industry. It noted that, according to *The New York Times*, combined revenue for the celebrity gossip industry tops \$3 billion per year. The article went on to give examples of why this industry is so massive.

A UCLA Medical Center employee was paid \$4,600 to release Farah Fawcett’s hospital records. Los Angeles Deputy Coroner Ed Winter claims that his department was offered \$2 million for photos of Michael Jackson’s corpse. ABC News acknowledged paying \$200,000 to the family of murder suspect Casey Anthony for home video and pictures. Dawn Holland, an employee of the Betty Ford Center, an alcohol and drug rehabilitation facility, pocketed \$10,000 for sneaking a copy of Lindsay Lohan’s confidential file to celebrity gossip site TMZ. (The facility had previously gone more than thirty years without “losing control” of a patient’s file.) When a reconciliation was rumoured to be taking place between Lohan and Holland, Holland’s lawyers agreed to accept \$25,000 for photographs of the two meeting. Jon Gosselin, a reality TV dad (*Jon and Kate Plus 8*) earned \$365,000 in a single year for TV and magazine interviews.

But it’s not only the actual flow of cash that drives the industry—it is the public’s insatiable desire for celeb gossip. *Radar Online*, one celeb gossip media outlet, averages thirty gossip stories per day. During one of Lindsay Lohan’s many court appearances, in which she was arraigned on theft charges, 150 reporters surrounded the Los Angeles courthouse.

The equation is quite simple: Profits are driven by demand. The public displays what *The Week* calls a “shark-like appetite for breaking celebrity gossip.”

Of course, there are differing degrees of this “shark-like appetite.” For some, the desire is insatiable: They must know the latest news about every celebrity. Others really couldn’t care that much about most celebrities, though there are probably a few—a favourite actor or singer or sportsman—that they are interested in knowing about. Many of us are driven, to a greater or lesser degree, by a curiosity of what goes on behind closed doors. We know that the public face of well-known figures is not necessarily who they really are, and we want to get beneath the veneer to see their true character.

We need to admit that this industry is often driven by an ugly curiosity, which just wants to know for the sake of breaking others down. As someone has said, “If I have to be a mole hill, by God there are going to be no mountains.” This is really the driving force behind celeb gossip: Rarely does *positive* news make headlines.

But there can also be a *healthy* interest in the details of a person’s life. It can be helpful to learn lessons from the life stories of those whom we admire. It is oftentimes helpful to know what the private life is like of those whom we admire publicly. And yet it is not always easy to delve into the private lives of others—to see what they are truly like behind closed doors. Even reading biographies, you don’t always see the *real* person. And yet sometimes it is possible to do so.

Our text concerns a man whom we have every reason to admire publicly. In fact, he was a man so publicly admired that people saw Christ in him (Matthew 16:14). He was a man who, publicly, stood boldly and unapologetically for God’s truth. But our text gives us some insight as to what he was like behind closed doors. I am speaking, of course, of the prophet Jeremiah, and our text is Jeremiah 15:15–21.

Previously, we considered Jeremiah 11:18–12:6. In that text, Jeremiah cried out to God when he learned of a plot against his life. The Lord responded by telling him that things were actually going to get worse, but that he needed to be committed to standing firm. His current persecution was but a footrace, but a time was coming when he would need to compete against horses.

In that study, I made reference to five “confessions” of Jeremiah: 11:18–12:6; 15:15–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18. Having considered the first of Jeremiah’s confessions, we will take some time in this study to deal with the second, and later the third, fourth, and fifth.

Jeremiah’s confessions are really intensely personal conversations that he had with God out of the limelight. They reveal what the man was like behind closed doors. What did Jeremiah do when no one else was looking? How did he behave? If the paparazzi leaked photos to celebrity gossip outlets about Jeremiah’s private life, what would they see? *They would see a man who prayed!* This man, who stood so boldly in the public eye for God, was, out of the public eye, a man of deep and sincere prayer. As Peterson has noted, “The cellar reality of Jeremiah’s towering humanity is prayer.”

What would you have expected the great prophet Jeremiah to be like when he was not preaching? A man sitting at his desk, feverishly pouring over the Scriptures in preparation for his next sermon? Consulting the works of pagan philosophers so as to counter them in an apologetics ministry? Writing a treatise in order to defend God in the eyes of those who might consider him to be overly harsh in judgement? No, for as Peterson observes, “God is not an idea to be studied. And we don’t find Jeremiah at his desk with pen and paper using his sharp mind and comprehensive intelligence to work out answers to the question of God.... God is not a problem to be solved.”

For Jeremiah, God was not an “it” to be spoken about, but a “you” to be spoken to. And so he spoke to God. He was a man of prayer. He was more interested in talking *to* God than talking *about* God. Therese of Lisieux once said, “Talking to God, I felt, is always better than talking about God; those pious conversations—there’s always a touch of self-approval about them.”

Jeremiah’s prayers always have a great deal to teach us, and this one is no exception. Our text can be neatly divided into two broad sections: Jeremiah’s prayer in vv. 15–18, and Jehovah’s reply in vv. 19–21.

## Jeremiah’s Prayer

First, let us consider Jeremiah’s prayer:

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revellers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

(Jeremiah 15:15–18)

As you read through the book of Jeremiah, it becomes quickly apparent just how difficult a ministry he had. In fact, reading the opening verses of this very chapter highlight this reality. Moses and Samuel were, humanly speaking, two of the greatest interceders for God’s people, but God opens this chapter by saying that Judah’s wickedness had become so great that he would not even listen to the likes of those two prayer warriors.

In v. 6, God says, “I am weary of relenting.” He had on a number of occasions relented from the disaster he said he would do, but no matter how much Jeremiah preached, the people remained stubborn. Through it all, Jeremiah remained publicly resolute in his ministry. But when he was alone with God, he poured out his heart.

One of the most noteworthy features about the prayers of Jeremiah is his honesty. If his prayer life could be summarised in a single word, it would be “intimate.” Of course, that is precisely what prayer is *designed* to be: intimate.

Far too often, we fail to grasp the intimacy of prayer. Peterson suggests that our prayers are often less like intimate conversations with a dinner party and more like casual interactions with a waiter.

There is a parody of prayer that we engage in all too often. The details are the same but with two differences: the person across the table is Self and the waiter is God. The waiter—God—is essential but peripheral. You can’t have the dinner without him, but he is not an intimate participant in it. He is someone to whom you give orders, make complaints, and maybe, at the end, give thanks. The person you are absorbed in is Self—your moods, your ideas, your interests, your satisfactions or lack of them.

When you leave the restaurant you forget about the waiter until the next time. If it is a place to which you go regularly, you might even remember his name.

Jeremiah's prayers were hardly like that. He prayed deeply, intimately, and honestly.

We sometimes have the idea that prayer is a soothing place where every anxiety is forgotten and fades into insignificance. An old hymn suggests:

I come to the garden alone,  
while the dew is still on the roses,  
and the voice I hear, falling on my ear,  
the Son of God discloses.

And he walks with me and he talks with me,  
and he tells me I am his own;  
and the joy I hear falling on my ear,  
none other has ever known.

Another paints a similar picture:

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!  
that calls me from a world of care,  
and bids me at my Father's throne  
make all my wants and wishes known.

In seasons of distress and grief,  
my soul has often found relief  
and oft escaped the tempter's snare  
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

I suspect that many Christians can certainly testify to such sweet, tranquil, and joyful hours of prayer. But I suspect that we can also all relate to times of utter turmoil, when it seems that life is falling apart. Sometimes we go to prayer and cry to God about our incurable wounds (see v. 18). Jeremiah, in this chapter, was experiencing the latter, and his honesty in bearing his soul to God is helpful for us.

Verses 15–18 reveal three things that Jeremiah was feeling as he took his prayer to God.

## Fear

First, we read of Jeremiah's fear: "O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach" (v. 15).

The prophet speaks here of the "reproach" that he bore from his "persecutors." This "reproach" was not the result of arrogance on his part but was "for your sake" (i.e. because of his faithfulness to God). He was suffering truly as a Christian (1 Peter 4:12–19).

But in this verse he also reveals his fear: "In your forbearance take me not away."

“Forbearance” speaks of God’s patience, and here it means his patience with Jeremiah’s “persecutors.” He understood that it was only because of God’s patience that his “persecutors” were allowed to continue persecuting him. But he was fearful that God’s patience would reach so far that his enemies would actually destroy him before God intervened. As Bright paraphrases: “Don’t be so lenient with my persecutors that they have time to destroy me.” Unwaveringly bold in public, Jeremiah candidly revealed his fears to God in private.

There are times when every one of us feels afraid, and pouring out those fears to God is not necessarily a sign of unbelief. The Bible frequently tells us to not fear, but in doing so it is not commanding us to not experience feelings of fear. It is telling us, instead, to not allow our fears to cripple us into inaction.

Jeremiah was candid with God about his fears, but he did not allow his fears to hinder his faithful ministry. In prayer he admitted that he was afraid of what his persecutors might do to him, but you would never have said it if you looked at his public life. He was at times afraid, but he didn’t run away from the work to which God was calling him.

There has been a fair amount of fearmongering in South Africa recently and a good many Christians have openly admitted their fears. Can I suggest that the primary outlet for those fears ought to be prayer? I don’t know how God will answer your prayer, but you haven’t dealt properly with your fears as a believer until you have taken them to God in intimate prayer. “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?” (Psalm 56:3–4).

## Loneliness

Second, our text reveals Jeremiah’s loneliness: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revellers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation” (vv. 16–17).

Jeremiah did not only take his fear to God; he also laid his loneliness at the throne of grace. In a culture that openly rejected the Lord’s truth, Jeremiah felt lonely. His loneliness stemmed precisely from his commitment to God’s truth. “Your words were found” is perhaps a reference to the discovery of God’s law in the temple early in Josiah’s reign (2 Kings 22:8–13ff). Jeremiah devoured God’s word and became the spokesperson for the reforms that Josiah would undertake. God’s word became his “joy” and his “delight.”

Can I just suggest that God’s law should be our delight? The book of the law discovered was the book of Deuteronomy, hardly our favourite among the 66 books of the Bible. Deuteronomy contains some difficult sections, but it is those difficult sections that became Jeremiah’s “joy” and “delight.”

Hard sayings can be our “joy” and “delight” because we are “called by” God’s “name.” Those who are called by God’s name delight in his word. If you have no hunger for God’s truth, no love for his law, perhaps you should examine yourself to see whether you are really called by his name.

However, Jeremiah’s love for God’s word had driven him to loneliness. Because he loved God’s word, he did not “sit in the company of revellers.” He did not “rejoice” by joining their parties. He became an outsider—he “sat alone”—because he was committed to God’s truth—because he was “filled ... with

indignation” over the sins of the people. He could not enjoy fellowship with his contemporaries while they were rebelling against God, and yet that isolation created in him a deep sense of loneliness. “It greatly pained him to be out of step with his contemporaries” (Feinberg).

Faithfulness to God’s truth will not guarantee you many friends. In fact, faithfulness does promise the friendship of those committed to the truth, but it will isolate you from a great many others. God’s truth often brings a sword rather than peace. Those committed to the truth may well lead a lonely existence and the right place to take that loneliness is to God in prayer.

Do you ever feel lonely, as if you alone are faithful to the truth of God while others around you routinely reject God’s word? Then take it to God in prayer.

## Pain

Third, Jeremiah’s prayer reveals his pain: “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (v. 18).

This third emotion was, in many ways, a summary of what he was going through. He had been faithful to his charge before God, yet all he had to show for it was an incurable wound. He actually cared about the people to whom he ministered. He was not unfeeling, giddy about the idea that they were soon to fall under judgement. He would not compromise his preaching on the truth of God’s judgement, but he did not take delight in it.

There would be something deeply wrong if he took delight in the thought of others falling under God’s judgement. I recall first watching the animated *Prince of Egypt* and being sceptical about the portrayal of Moses’ anguish over the destruction of Egypt. While I remain persuaded that some of the creative licenses taken do not accurately reflect biblical truth, I have had cause to rethink that initial criticism. I suspect that it deeply pained Moses to see people, made in God’s image, fall under divine judgement. Godly people take no delight in the destruction of the wicked.

Jeremiah’s pain was so deep-seated that he felt as if God had lied to him. God had described himself as “the fountain of living waters” (2:13), but Jeremiah felt as if God was more “like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” He felt as if promises had been made but not kept.

Of course, God’s promises had not failed. God had promised to be with Jeremiah, but had also promised that the people would “fight against you” (1:18). In fact, as we saw previously, the Lord had told Jeremiah that the opposition would only intensify (12:5–6). Nevertheless, Jeremiah felt hard done by and so took it to God in prayer.

Pain is a part of the Christian experience, and the right place to take your pain is to God in prayer. We sing this truth frequently, do we not?

What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,

all because we do not carry  
everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never stay discouraged;  
take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful  
who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness;  
take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden,  
cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Saviour, still our refuge;  
take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In his arms he'll take and shield thee;  
thou wilt find a solace there.

And yet, while we boldly sing these words, I suspect that we often fail to do what we know we ought to do. We fail to take everything to God in prayer—choosing, perhaps, to rather complain openly about how we have been mistreated. “All of us experience these things. No one alive is a stranger to them. But do we pray them? Jeremiah prayed them. Everything he experienced and thought he set in relationship to a living, knowing, saving God. And the moment these things are set in relationship to God something begins to happen” (Peterson).

Instead of taking our fear, our loneliness, and our pain to God in prayer, we take them to others. We complain to others instead of wrestling with God. In this respect, Jeremiah serves as a wonderful example. He took his burdens to the Lord in prayer. As we will see, however, he appears to have taken things a little too far, and God’s answer to him is as revealing as is his prayer to God.

## Jehovah’s Reply

Jehovah’s reply was a stinging one:

Therefore thus says the LORD: “If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. 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, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.”

(Jeremiah 15:19–21)

Jeremiah had been intimately honest with God in prayer, and now he waited expectantly to hear from God. God would indeed speak. He would speak a message that Jeremiah desperately needed to hear—and it is a message we desperately need to hear too. God’s reply to Jeremiah is a twofold reply.

## You Must Return

First, he urged Jeremiah to return: “Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them’” (v. 19).

Jeremiah had frequently called upon the people to return to God, and now God called him to do the same thing. He had called them to repent, but now it was time for him to repent.

While we cannot fault Jeremiah for laying his soul bare before God, he had taken his speech a little too far when he had accused God of being a “deceitful brook”—when he had accused God of lying to him. Thompson captures the gist of the Lord’s reply:

“If you turn (from such talk as is found in vv. 15–18), then I will turn to you (that is, restore you to the prophetic office).” ... The bitterness of the prophet’s experiences had almost closed his mouth and brought him close to losing sight of his divine commission and his confidence in the one who had commissioned him. He had almost renounced his calling. Yahweh now bids him to ‘turn back’ to God and to renew his trust in God.

The phrase “stand before me” is frequently used in the Old Testament of kings or prophets in the sense of their divine office. As long as Jeremiah was consumed with his own fear, loneliness and pain, he could not fulfil his prophetic office. He needed to submit these things to God so that he could once again “stand before” God as a prophet.

Jeremiah had been guilty of uttering untrue, “worthless” thoughts about God—specifically, perhaps, his comments about God being a “deceitful brook” and “waters that fail.” If he would once again stand as God’s “mouth,” he needed to renounce those “worthless” thoughts and words and instead speak what was “precious.” In order to serve God effectively, he needed to think about God rightly.

If he did not return, if he did not think right thoughts about God, he would become like the people he was rebuking. There was the danger, if he did not start thinking right, that the people would not “turn” to him but that he would instead “turn to them.” If he held onto unworthy thoughts about God, he would become just like the rest of the people.

Jehovah’s reply teaches us, first, the necessity of thinking right thoughts about God. If we do not immerse ourselves in truth, in right thinking about God, we will find ourselves in danger of compromising for the sake of popularity. It pained Jeremiah to be separated from his contemporaries, but the only way to be reconciled to them was to compromise the truth. He needed to guard against that temptation.

One of the reasons that we should be concerned about right doctrine is because our doctrine affects the way that we behave. Doctrine is always a reflection of our understanding of the character of God. If we embrace *thinking* that is not true about God, we will soon find ourselves tempted to embrace *behaviour* that is untrue to God.

The call here was a call to renewal: “return” and “restore.” Jeremiah had once made this commitment to God’s truth, but it was a commitment that needed to be renewed. “The setting of priorities is not a once-for-all act. It has to be redone frequently” (Peterson). This is, in one respect, the purpose of the Lord’s Supper. When we observe that meal, we have opportunity to repent of our sin and recommit our service to the Lord.

## I Will Restore

The Lord’s call to Jeremiah to repent was attended by a promise: “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, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless” (vv. 20–21).

Jeremiah had heard these words before (1:18–19) but he needed to hear them again. If he renewed his commitment to God, God would renew his commitment to him. He needed to hear these words, and he learned from them, for he left this encounter with God with a renewed commitment to faithful ministry, even though the opposition continued to mount.

Prayer is designed to change us. Jeremiah’s prayer did not change God’s mind; it changed Jeremiah’s heart and mind.

The call to Jeremiah, once again, was to run the race. Rosie Ruiz famously cheated to win the 1980 Boston Marathon. She stood on the podium without having run the race. She never admitted to cheating—even after it was proven conclusively that she had not run. In fact, as recently as 2006 she gave a televised interview in which she said, “I could not [admit that I cheated] because I ran a complete 26.2 miles.” She was diagnosed as a sociopath who really believes that she did run and has no concept of right and wrong.

Sadly, there are a lot of professing Christians who are the same: They want to stand on the podium in the end and receive the reward, but they don’t want to run the race. They want to live the life of a “religiopath” (Peterson).

The call to run the race is not a call to ease. It is a call to a life of fear, loneliness and pain. It is a call to endure hardship—hardship that may well mount when you feel that you have reached the end of your rope. But the prize is worth the slog—for the call to run is also a call to sweet fellowship with God.

We serve a God to whom we can take our fears, our loneliness and our pain as we run the race. In fact, we serve a God who *knows* what it is to feel fear, and loneliness, and pain, because he felt the very same things. Christ is our high priest, who cannot but sympathise with us, because he went through the same human experience that we do. And what did he do when he was overwhelmed with human emotion? *He went to his Father in prayer!* And his prayer strengthened him for further faithfulness.

In prayer, Jesus found the grace that he needed to continue running the race. It is there that we will find grace to do the same.

## Conclusion

Peterson writes, “No one becomes human the way Jeremiah was human by posing in a posture of victory. It was his prayers, hidden but persistent, that brought him to the human wholeness and spiritual sensitivity that we want. What we do in secret determines the soundness of who we are in public. Prayer is the secret work that develops a life that is thoroughly authentic and deeply human.”

If you want a life that is “thoroughly authentic and deeply human,” you must spend time with God in prayer. Your public commitment to Christ must be guarded by secret fellowship with him in prayer.

AMEN