

Sermon Jeremiah 10-11:17

Praying when the covenant has been broken

We often find it hard to pray. Sometimes, it is because we struggle to find time for prayer. Sometimes it is because we don't believe God will hear or act on our prayers. And sometimes it is because we don't know the words to pray.

On one level, prayer is just us talking to God. Through Jesus, we can talk to God as a friend. We can talk to God about whatever we think. And yet there is also something more complicated. There is a sense that some prayers are better than others. True prayer must be from our heart yes, an honest calling out to God. Sometimes our prayers are almost inarticulate cries of distress, groans, as Romans 8 says the Holy Spirit groans and prays with us. But the best prayer is also shaped to truly honour God and to pray in line with his will. That's why the disciples ask Jesus how to pray. God listens to all our prayers. But some of our prayers he listens to as a parent listens to a young child's unreasonable ideas and requests. "Daddy I want our next holiday to be to go to Mars." We parents listen because we love them. But to a large extent our answer is "no, listen as I explain why I won't do what you have asked, because you have not understood reality." And so all of our prayers are listened to by God, who is far more patient and loving than even the best human parent. But some are not the best prayers.

So what we can learn from the Bible? We learn how to pray in a way that truly fits with who God is, and truly shares his heart and concerns. The Bible prayers, whether Psalms, Old Testament prayers, Jesus' prayers, or the prayers of the New Testament letters are all helping us learn how to

pray best, how to talk to God in a way that fits who he is and what he cares about.

So today, we are learning from Jeremiah an example of how to pray when seeing God's judgement coming for the society he lives. Before we come to his prayer, we'll see two ways Jeremiah describes the sin problem, and so the judgement problem, which afflicts humanity.

Two ways to understand sin:

1) Foolish worship of idols instead of the mighty God (10:1-22)

The first way of understanding sin is one we saw back in Jeremiah 2, the foolish worship of idols instead of the mighty God. The people of Israel were meant to be different to all the nations around. The nations all worship idols, but Israel has the real God. And yet just as humanity as a whole has abandoned the Creator God for idols, so Israel is abandoning their Creator God for the idols of the nations.

In 10:1-16, why is worshipping idols foolish?

They are made by us from wood- God is the creator

We keep it upright

It cannot speak

It must be carried- it cannot walk

They cannot do harm or good

They are senseless

They cannot save themselves from judgement and destruction.

The real God is mighty, the king of the nations, the incomparably great one v6-7. He makes everything v12, and is truly wise, he controls the powerful forces of the world v13 and by implication he is the one who can save. To worship God is to say and act as if he is the most worthy one- the glorious one, the beautiful one, the wise one. To worship God is to gaze on and live for God as the abundantly good one who pours his goodness out to us. To exchange the true God for idols is foolish, because the idols are empty- senseless, weak, human-made. To worship idols is offensive to the real God.

And he will bring judgement on Israel because of this sin. Vv17-18 exile is coming. ¹⁷*Gather up your belongings to leave the land, you who live under siege.* ¹⁸*For this is what the Lord says: 'At this time I will hurl out those who live in this land; I will bring distress on them so that they may be captured.'* Judgement is coming from the north- the Babylonians will carry the people into exile. This is because the people have rejected the real God to worship idols. Because they are senseless v14 and have tied themselves to empty and worthless idols instead of the mighty life giving God. And because the idols cannot save those who worship them. 11:12 *The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they will not help them at all when disaster strikes.*

And Jeremiah, speaking for Israel and perhaps also for God, speaks of the incurable wound of this judgement. The young ones are taken, and the shepherds, the leaders, are senseless and reject God, and so the flock is scattered.

Romans 1 applies this not only to Israel but to all humanity. Romans 1:18-23 ¹⁸*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the*

godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹*since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ²⁰*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

²¹*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* ²²*Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools* ²³*and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.*

So foolish idolatry is one way to understand human sin and God's judgement on sin. The second way to understand sin is that it is breaking a marriage covenant with God.

2) Faithless breaking of the covenant with God (11:1-17)

In Jeremiah 11, God goes back to the covenant that he made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Covenant is a word we may not fully understand. It's a bit like a contract- both sides committing to do something. But it is a special sort of contract- a lasting contract, a committed relationship. The classic example of a covenant relationship is marriage- husband and wife promise to love each other and live with each other "for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health". The marriage vows are for lifelong commitment. And that is what God wanted for his relationship with Israel, he would be their God, providing and protecting, and they would be his people, loyal and loving. If Israel remains loyal to God, they will enjoy God's rich blessings.

But it is possible for Israel to break covenant. And so back in Deuteronomy, God declared curses on those who did not obey his law, who did not remain loyal to God. For example, Deuteronomy 27:26 ²⁶ *'Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.'* Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Now in Jeremiah 11, God reminds people of his loving covenant. Vv1-5 **11** *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ² 'Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. ³ Tell them that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant – ⁴ the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace." I said, "Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. ⁵ Then I will fulfil the oath I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey"— the land you possess today.'* I answered, 'Amen, Lord.'

But while Jeremiah agrees with the covenant conditions, God exposes the reality- Jerusalem has been unfaithful to God, Jerusalem has broken the covenant. 11:6-8 ⁶ *The Lord said to me, 'Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: "Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them. ⁷ From the time I brought your ancestors up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, 'Obey me.'* ⁸ *But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep."*

The reason that people have not kept the covenant is not God's inadequacy. God is generous, loving, holy, almighty- a wonderful God. So

the people reject God because v8 of the stubbornness of the evil hearts. A man or woman who walks out of a loving marriage is doing something foolish and evil. So a people who reject their good God are doing something evil. They want freedom from God's law to do wicked things- to follow their desires, to be greedy, to follow sexual appetites, to throw off the burden of justice and caring for others. And it is also a freedom to worship idols- as we saw last chapter. Israel wants to commit spiritual adultery by worshipping other gods. It is evil, and there is a stubbornness of heart that will not allow God's goodness and truth bring them back to the goodness of God and covenant with him.

So God will bring disaster on them vv9-13, and their gods will not save them from God's judgement.

Now remember that God's Old Testament people often replay what is true of all humanity. God made Adam and Eve to be loyal to him, to trust him and to enjoy a lasting loving relationship with him. But Adam and Eve broke that relationship. And so all humanity lives as those who should be in loving covenant relationship with God- but break that covenant. All of us are facing the curse of death.

And verses 14-17 tell us that there is a point where God judges without hope of mercy. V14 ¹⁴ *'Do not pray for this people or offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.* I think that while Jerusalem as a whole had reached that point in Jeremiah's day, we do not know when that point comes today. But we do know that there does come a point where God judges and there is no chance of finding mercy. That is after death- when those who have rejected God all their life are judged with no chance to escape. Jesus tells stories in which people are shut out of the party, shut out of life. For

example, the parable of the 10 bridesmaids has the 5 foolish bridesmaids coming and calling Lord, *Lord, open the door for us, and the bridegroom (that is Jesus) saying "truly I tell you I don't know you."* In the next story in Matthew 25, of the bags of gold, Jesus has the worthless servant thrown out *"into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* There is a point where prayer for people is pointless, because God has determined to judge them.

But in general I think we are wise to assume that no one we meet is at that point today. We are all naturally covenant breakers, rejecting God and his good ways. But we remain in a time when covenant breakers can be rescued, as we'll particularly remember in the Lord's Supper.

But for now, let's see how Jeremiah prays at a time when judgement is coming on the nation for widespread idolatry and covenant unfaithfulness. We're using this Bible prayer to help us to pray in some difficult times

A prayer when people are breaking the covenant 10:23-25

God is still in charge, not us v23

The first thing Jeremiah says to God is: I know you are still in charge not me. *V23 Lord, I know that people's lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps.* Now Jeremiah is not saying that people are not responsible for their choices and steps. He has been saying that Israel is responsible for their wrong choices. But ultimately, God is the creator, the true storyteller. If I find myself at a stage in God's story where people around me are not listening to God- I am not able to teleport myself to a better bit of the story. God has put me here in this time and place. My life

is here in Northstowe on 9th March 2025 because God put me here. And every other person is where they are because God puts them there.

So God has not lost control of his people or human history. And God has not lost control in my situation- even if it is really hard. I am not in control. You are not in control. We do have choices to make, we are accountable for our choices. But there is much of our situation we are not responsible for. I may not have voted for the Prime Minister or President, but they are still in power. I may be going against the tide of my society, but I am not able to change the tide. God can. I can't. And truth to tell, I can't even change many deep-seated things in me. I may hate my sin, and yet I can't let go of it- I'm addicted. I may hate my anxiety, or insensitivity, or fear of people, or love of money, or sexual immorality, or anger, or harshness. Yet changing these things is beyond me- I cannot direct my steps to the self-improvement I long for. So God must act if I am to change. God is in charge, not us. That is the first thing Jeremiah declares in prayer- God is on the throne not us.

The last thing Jeremiah says is that God's wrath poured out is good, when it is poured out on God's enemies.

May God's wrath be poured out those who oppose him to the end v25

Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the peoples who do not call on your name. For they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him completely and destroyed his homeland. The final judgement of people who reject God and God's good ways is right. Emotionally, this can be hard for us to accept. But I think we can see it is necessary. If God does not remove those who oppose him, then there can never be safety and peace for those God is rescuing. In the flood, in the

Exodus, with the Philistines- God's rescue of his people to bring them to peace requires the evil enemies to be removed.

And so as we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are asking for two things. One, we are asking for more and more people to trust Jesus as King, and for King Jesus' peace and joy and healing and righteousness to grow in us. The fullness of the kingdom of Jesus will come when he comes back to renew the creation. Kingdom growth includes people being brought into the kingdom. But the second thing we are asking for is that Jesus kingdom will grow by pushing out those who don't trust Jesus as king. That will particularly be the case when Jesus comes back. There will be perfect peace in Jesus' kingdom then because everyone who rejects Jesus as king is pushed out of the new creation.

All of the enemies of Jesus are defeated. Some stop being enemies by trusting Jesus and being made his friends. Some continue as enemies of Jesus and are cast out of the good new creation into hell. But no enemies are left to disturb the peace of God's people.

God's judgement of those who persist in doing evil, who continue to break covenant and reject God, is necessary for there to be true and lasting peace in the new creation. We hope that everyone around us stops being an enemy of God by becoming a friend of God. But we know it is good for Jesus' kingdom to come even if it means the judgement of those who reject Jesus to the end.

Jeremiah starts by acknowledging God is in charge. He asks for God to destroy those who persist as enemies of God. But sandwiched between acknowledging God being in charge, and judgement being just, is a prayer for mercy.

May I know God's discipline not his wrath v24

Discipline me, Lord, but only in due measure – not in your anger, or you will reduce me to nothing. Jeremiah is part of Jerusalem society, and so the disaster of coming attack and exile will affect him. He will suffer. But Jeremiah knows there are two different sorts of suffering in this life. There is suffering that God is using for our ultimate good. And there is suffering that is simply judgement. Or in his terms, he asks for God's discipline not his anger.

Hebrews 12:11 gives us the nature of true discipline: *¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* Discipline is an unpleasant thing now to train us for our long term good. The focus is not on paying for what you have done wrong (though there is a place for justice) but on shaping us to be people who do what is right and benefit from that. So parents discipline their children to train them not to do wrong things. Schools have discipline not to be mean but to train children to study so that they can have opportunities.

By contrast, Jeremiah says, there is suffering that is anger which reduces a person to nothing. There is wrath that is poured out as just retribution, but there is not good outcome for the person being punished. They are destroyed not made better by that anger. Not necessarily annihilated but losing everything good.

We've seen that God is right to be angry at sin, right to be angry at those who persist in rejecting him to the end. And so Jeremiah is asking for mercy here. He has sinned- and so God's anger should rightly fall on him. But Jeremiah has trusted God's promises and relies on God's mercy. So he asks- may my suffering just be discipline that leads to eternal good. May

you Lord mercifully forgive me, and so give me eternal hope. Jeremiah does not see Jesus' cross as clearly as we do. But he knows God is a compassionate God who forgives sins. And so he asks for God's mercy.

And so can we. In our personal suffering. In the middle of a world of suffering. We can ask for God's mercy. Lord, I trust Jesus, so I know my suffering is part of your journey for me that will lead to eternal good. Please help me to know that, and not give up. Lord, for the people around me, please will difficulties lead to them trusting you, and so finding that even hardships were used by you for their good. Lord, discipline us for our good- and don't destroy us in your anger. For Jesus died bearing your anger, so that I might live with you.

And we can also ask for our sufferings to end- *discipline me Lord, but only in due measure*. While God himself knows the suffering and the good for us, we can ask for it to be limited. Jesus our high priest sympathises with us in our suffering. In the garden of Gethsemane he asked his Father if there was a path with less suffering. So we as God's children can ask- please limit our suffering Lord. We trust you bring good out of suffering, but please can it end. While our eternal good is certain if we trust Jesus, there is no promise of our sufferings always being ended soon. But we can ask for it to end, knowing our heavenly Father hears our prayers and loves us.

Jeremiah has modelled for us the prayer of faith in the middle of a society rejecting God, and about to face a terrible disaster as part of God's judgement. He recognises God is still in charge, not us. He agrees that God's wrath be poured out those who oppose him to the end. But he asks for mercy for himself and I think we can apply that to those around us. He asks for the mercy of salvation, so that suffering is discipline shaping us

for eternal good, not destruction. He does I think ask for a limit to the suffering he is facing. And so we can ask for God's mercy to limit our suffering. We can ask for God's mercy, for God to bring eternal good for us and for those around us through the sufferings we see.

We're going to pause now for personal reflection and prayer, before moving on to look at the cross, which gives us confidence we will not face God's anger.

Pause for prayer

We're going to go on to think more about God's mercy on us- how the curse of breaking the covenant is forgiven through Jesus. That will lead us into the Lord's Supper. But first, we're going to confess our sin, particularly our sin of idolatry. We'll stay seated as we sing two sins...

Two sins have we committed

Lord's Supper

Jeremiah 10-11 exposes our problem very clearly. It hints at the answer- a request for mercy, in which difficulties are for our ultimate good, rather than our destruction. But Jeremiah 10-11 does not explain how we can be confident of that. To see how we can be confident we are not facing God's curse for breaking the covenant with him, and turning to idols, we need to go to Galatians 3. There Paul points out that no one kept the covenant of God perfectly- except Jesus. And he has died to take our curse, so that we get his blessings.

Galatians 3:10-14 ¹⁰ *For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'*^[e] ¹¹ *Clearly no one who relies on*

the law is justified before God, because ‘the righteous will live by faith.’^[1] 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, ‘The person who does these things will live by them.’^[2] 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’^[3] 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

This is what we celebrate in the Lord’s Supper. We declare our faith in Jesus as the covenant keeper who rescuers covenant breakers by taking covenant curses. We declare our faith in Jesus to give us the covenant blessings he deserves, and take the covenant curses we deserve. His death on the cross, shown by bread and wine, representing body and blood, is the guarantee of mercy not wrath for all who trust in Jesus.

And so the question coming to this meal is not “are you good enough?” No one is. Rather, the question is “Do you trust Jesus who is good enough?” “Do you trust his death to take your curse, and his resurrection to give you blessing?” If you do, if you are following Jesus as Lord and Saviour- then you are welcome to this meal. If you don’t yet trust Jesus, or you have not yet declared that faith publicly in baptism, then please don’t take the bread and wine. Let them pass you by this time- and think of what Jesus did at the cross.

The bread is gluten free. The Wine is non-alcoholic grape juice. We’ll eat the bread as it comes around. And then please hold the cup so we can drink together- a sign that the body and blood of Jesus unites us as one.

We’ll give thanks for the bread and wine now. And then the servers will bring round the bread, followed by the wine, while we sing a song.

Prayer of thanks

Father, we thank you for this bread and wine. As creator, you gave us food and drink to feed our bodies. But as redeemer, you sent your Son to feed our souls. Thank you that by his death he took the curse our sin deserved. Thank you that in that exchange, we receive the blessings he deserved. May this bread and wine be to us reminders and tasters of your goodness, to sustain us in our journey to the new creation. Amen.

Jesus, you call us to this, your table,