

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

E. Jeremiah: the suffering of God's servant

Activity 8.7

Read Jeremiah 1, 11:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18

Interspersed with Jeremiah's public oracles are some of his private prayers or 'confessions'. As a result we know far more about Jeremiah's inner life than that of any other prophet. The theme of these prayers is the cost of his calling to be God's spokesman and the suffering he endured as a result of his God-given vocation. In previous sessions, we have already looked at some of the stories of the way Jeremiah had to suffer persecution as a prophet of the Lord. Here, we are allowed to hear his protest against that suffering and the Lord's reply.

11:18-23, 12:1-6, 17:14-19 and 18:18-23 describe the plots against him, some of which were from his own family and his home village of Anathoth, and include his prayers that the plotters would be punished. These are in the same vein as many of the psalms, mainly because Jeremiah wanted to be vindicated and could only be proved to be in the right if his enemies were exposed. But 15:10-end and 20:7-18 go further: they are his protests against the way the Lord was treating him.

15:10-end give the 'inside story' of the renewal of Jeremiah's call at a time of crisis. At his original call, God had declared that he had chosen him from his mother's womb and given him a message of judgement. Now he cries out against his birth and against the message, which had made him a man of strife. But the Lord simply replies, 'This is what I intended. I promised that I would strengthen you and I have done.'

Verse 15 goes back to the original experience in which he received the word of the Lord. Like the psalmist (Psalm 19:10) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:3) he could say that it was as sweet as honey and a joy and delight to his heart. But the outcome of being made a bearer of God's word had only been pain. He had set himself apart from his community as the Lord had instructed him. He accuses the Lord of being nothing but a dried-up spring, a promise of hope unfulfilled. He has had no more delight, only unceasing pain and sorrow.

The Lord's answer (as in 12:5-6) is uncompromising. In effect he tells Jeremiah to 'get on with it'. 'I didn't promise to make it easy for you,' he says, 'but I did promise to protect you and strengthen you, and that is what I have done.' And the Lord calls on Jeremiah to 'return', just as he had called on Judah. If he does so he will 'stand before me' (verse 19), that is, he will be readmitted to God's counsel to hear his words.

Finally 20:7-18 are a psalm-like lament, inserted by the editor after the story of Jeremiah's dispute with Passhur. The contrast powerfully suggests that while he might have appeared outwardly confident, to do so was enormously costly. Verse 13 in the middle of the lament is a declaration of confidence, but it finishes in despair.

For Jeremiah, God had 'seduced' him and 'thrown him down'. As a result, like a young girl ravished, he has become a laughing-stock. And it is the word of the Lord that has done this. Every time he speaks out prophesying judgement the people only laugh. But when he tries to stop speaking, he finds that he cannot. The word of God inside him is too strong: in 23:29 he describes it as like a fire or a hammer. In verses 11 to 13 he remembers that with this powerful word with him, he surely must prevail, but he is unable to keep up this hopeful stance and lapses into despair.

Again, in the case of Jeremiah, we find that it is God who is the author of suffering and that it is one of his own servants who has to suffer. It appears that God is prepared to tolerate suffering as a necessary price to accomplish his purpose.

Activity 8.8

Read Jeremiah 45

Consider: when you became a Christian, what were your expectations about the difference it would make to your life? Would you be prepared to accept the kind of suffering Jeremiah or Baruch had to undergo, if you knew God had called you to some special task?