

Jeremiah 14:19-15:21 What does true spirituality look like?

I wonder what image you have in your head for a truly spiritual person, for spiritual maturity. Different people may have different role models in mind. Some will think of real-life older Christians who you admire. Others will think of fictional characters who embody maturity and wisdom. But my guess is that many of us carry a mental image of spiritual maturity that we measure ourselves against- and feel inadequate. I think two common pictures of the truly spiritual person are the unbothered calm person, and the always victorious joyful person.

For some, the image is of an unbothered calm person so spiritually mature that nothing seems to bother them. They face life with impassive calm. They have reached a level of faith and wisdom that means they no longer seem to feel fear or anger or sadness or anxiety. They are serene, above it all, always know what to say. They are not rushing about with activity, but peaceful. In the cartoon Kung Fu Panda, Master Oogway shows this sort of calm ideal. This unbothered calm person is the ideal of spiritual maturity for some.

For others, the image in their head of spiritual maturity is active, indeed contending against challenges, but always overcoming, and so always joyful. Perhaps we might think of Gandalf in Lord of the Rings. The ideal of true spirituality is someone whose faith in God enables them to dive into every situation, and though there are struggles along the way, through prayer and faith, always come out victorious the other side. They are joyful and successful, prevailing in life through faith.

Now these images of spiritual maturity both have some truth. In becoming a Christian, a person leaves behind the anxiety of a meaningless universe with no long term hope. They enter into walking with the God

who made us, who gives us meaning, who guarantees eternal life. To become a Christian is to know that every sin I have committed, every evil thought and word and deed, is forgiven entirely, through Jesus- and that brings a real peace. Becoming a Christian means knowing that I matter as a loved child of God, and that love brings real joy. There is a right sense of seeing that growing in Christian maturity, in spirituality, will lead to peace and joy. If you are here and you are not a Christian, trusting Jesus answers the biggest questions about life, and gives true hope and love- it is totally worth it.

And yet, Jeremiah reminds us that in this fallen world, true spirituality, really walking with and serving God, has another aspect as well. Before working on this sermon series, I think I had a kind of caricature of Jeremiah as a bit of wimp, a bit of a second-rate prophet, who got down in the dumps easily. But as I am immersed in Jeremiah, as I consider his situation, I think we are meant to see Jeremiah as a profoundly spiritual and godly man facing a terrible situation faithfully. Jeremiah sees wickedness in his society, injustice flourishes, and what is coming is the terrible disaster of invasion. He is faithful in his ministry, and he feels the anguish of loyalty to God in a day of wickedness and disaster. Being on God's side, having peace with God, means a new sort of conflict and distress- not about ultimate questions, but because of evil in the world and confusion about why God allows it to continue and to seemingly win.

So in the passages today, we are exploring a glimpse into an aspect of mature spirituality. There are other aspects from other passages we also need for the full picture of spiritual maturity- there is joy and peace. But in these verses we are seeing how Jeremiah wrestles with God in the troubles and seeming failures of life and ministry. He is a picture ahead of time of the Lord Jesus. Jesus who wept at the tomb of his friend, and over

Jerusalem when it rejected him. Jesus who was troubled by the unbelief and callousness of the leaders, and whose soul was troubled in the garden of Gethsemane. So as we learn from Jeremiah, we are also being pointed to the most spiritual man who ever lived, Jesus, and learning of his heart. And we are being encouraged to include this aspect in our picture of mature spirituality- which I hope will lead some of us to feel better about our emotions and wrestling with God. And for others it may give permission to be more honest with God, and sympathy for others in their struggles.

Interceding for a sinful society 14:19-22

We start with Jeremiah interceding for the people of God in Judah. Now there are a number of great prayers of intercession that are effective in the Bible, including Moses interceding for the people after the golden calf idolatry. This prayer is a good model prayer- in which Jeremiah identifies with the sinful nation he is part of.

He lays out the experience of the nation in v19 *Have you rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion? Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed? We hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there is only terror.* We hoped for peace but no good has come. Does that sound familiar to you? Does that fit your own experience at times, or how you see society or world politics unfolding? Jeremiah is honest with God about how his hopes have been disappointed.

But interceding for the nation, he then recognises it is Judah's fault that this terror and affliction has come. V20 *We acknowledge our wickedness, Lord, and the guilt of our ancestors; we have indeed sinned against you.* As we pray for people and situations, we must not imagine

God is unfair while people are righteous. No, the people we are praying for, including ourselves, are guilty, and so we are asking for God's mercy.

Jeremiah appeals to God's name and glory, that God will show himself greater than the worthless idols if he saves Judah. Vv21-22 *For the sake of your name do not despise us; do not dishonour your glorious throne. Remember your covenant with us and do not break it. ²² Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain? Do the skies themselves send down showers? No, it is you, Lord our God. Therefore our hope is in you, for you are the one who does all this.* We cannot appeal to our goodness, or how our efforts will serve God. No, we appeal to God's character- God you are the one who does not break your covenant, you are the one whose name should be glorious among the nations. "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come..."

Jeremiah models for us interceding for a sinful community we are part of. We can be honest with God about our disappointment- we hoped for something better. We confess the sin of the community. We appeal to God's glory and character, the fact that the real God is the saving God. The real God is the Creator God who brings rain and sun, and so we put our hope in the real God who made us. We hope for him to save us. But in Jeremiah's case, it does not work.

When intercession does not work 15:1-9

God tells Jeremiah that his mind is made up- that for Judah at that time, there is no one who can stop the disaster. 15:1 *Then the Lord said to me: 'Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!* The problem is not that Jeremiah had the wrong words in his prayer, or that he was not a spiritual enough prophet. No, if the great heroes of the

faith, if Moses and Samuel, were to intercede, the results would be no different. God has made up his mind. The people of Judah are to leave his presence. This is important for us to grasp- Jeremiah is not less successful in prayer because he lacked faith or spirituality or the right words. His prayer was not granted because God, has made the choice that the limit has been reached and he will judge this people rather than saving them.

There have been seasons in church history of mass conversions and the gospel growing quickly. The day of Pentecost when 3000 people became Christians in one day. The spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire. The great revivals of the 18th century, with preachers like Whitfield and Wesley seeing huge numbers of people becoming Christians. In the 20th century, Africa saw the number of professing Christians grow from 9 million in 1900 to 380 million in 2000. And the church in China, in Iran, and many other places is growing.

But there have also been seasons of decline, and destruction of churches. The early Islamic conquests led to north Africa going from Bible belt to Islamic. In the 1600s Japan wiped out Christians, and in the same century the French state persecuted the growing protestant community, the Huguenots, massacring many, and driving the rest into exile. In the UK, the century after 1660 and the 1900s were centuries of Christian decline. Were the Christians and Christian leaders of those eras worse than those who lived in the eras of growth and revival? Maybe. But maybe God mysteriously makes his choices of seasons for mercy and seasons for judgement. Jeremiah is faithful in his intercession- and God says- no, this is a time for judgement. The people of Judah will be cast from God's presence, cast out of the land.

Vv2-3 *And if they ask you, "Where shall we go?" tell them, "This is what the Lord says: "Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity." 3 'I will send four kinds of destroyers against them,' declares the Lord, 'the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy.*

God's presence is the only place of eternal blessing and safety. And so to be thrown out of God's presence is to face disaster and destruction. That is not because God is mean. It is because the only lasting blessing and safety is found in God's presence. And only those who trust God as God, and who are made holy by God, can stay in his presence- his utter goodness will not allow sin to enter, will not allow destructive rebellion to damage eternal goodness.

Jeremiah has confessed the people's sinfulness. But when God announces his verdict it remains painful. V6 *You have rejected me,' declares the Lord. 'You keep on backsliding. So I will reach out and destroy you; I am tired of holding back.* Here is the sin in relational terms. God's people have rejected him. They have walked out on him. It's like a marriage where the wife wants to keep the house, and have the husband move out while her lover moves in. But she expects the husband to keep paying the bills. It is that kind of rejection- a painful rejection in what should be a loving relationship. And there is backsliding- every time God rescues Judah from their mess, and they say they will return to God, but shortly afterwards the same process happens. They slide back into the rejection of God.

So God says- I am tired of holding back. I'm fed up. I've been gracious again and again. And now I don't see hope of change. So I'm ending the relationship. So I'm going to stop paying the bills. So I will reach out and

destroy. We don't know whether God has reached this point with individuals or societies today. We can intercede, as Jeremiah did, and still hope for this to be a day of salvation, a day where God graciously and powerful turns things around. But if it proves to be a day of judgement, or the final judgement comes first, we learn here why God judges. He has had enough of the rejection and backsliding.

Lamenting the hardness of life 15:10

If God does not answer prayers, if situations don't improve, if people don't respond to Jesus, then we are allowed to lament the hardness of life. Jeremiah is not impassive, a kind of Oogway monk, unbothered. Listen to his lament in v10. *Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends! I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me.* Jeremiah is saying it feels like it would be better never to have been born than to live and suffer. He serves God- and the whole land seems to be against him. His life experience is being hated more than the exploitative money lender, the loan shark, or the person who borrows and does not pay back.

We're allowed to say to God- serving you has been really hard. We're allowed to say- I feel crushed and disappointed, and life in this world feels miserable at the moment. That is actually godliness in a situation where God is not acting to save but is acting in judgement. It is right to find it hard when people oppose us for doing right, or will not listen to God's loving truth so they end up facing judgement. Lament is a godly response to disappointment.

Personal hope despite ministry weakness 15:11-14

And God responds to Jeremiah's lament with a word of personal encouragement- and perhaps some people here today need that. V11.

The Lord said, 'Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose; surely I will make your enemies plead with you in times of disaster and times of distress. There is no promise here of success in ministry, or of Judah being saved- no vv12-14 make clear judgement is coming. But for Jeremiah personally, there is a promise that he will be delivered for a good purpose, that there will be a rescue for Jeremiah himself in the times of disaster. We'll see this theme repeated and expanded in vv19-21. But for now, just hear God's word of encouragement to you- your own walk with God does not depend on the nation you live in being godly, or your ministry being successful. And with God, trusting Jesus, you are personally safe for eternity, given full access to the Father, and he will keep you, deliver you, for a good ultimate outcome for you. God is not only in charge- he is also good to you, if you trust Jesus.

Prayer in the pain of disaster 15:15-18

Read 15:15-18. What does Jeremiah say about his own life?

Is there anything surprising in the way he describes God or God's actions?

So Jeremiah describes his own life in terms of being faithful to God and suffering for being faithful. V15 *"think of how I suffer for your sake"*. Jeremiah describes his attitude to God's word in v16. *When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight,* If the people around reject God's word, Jeremiah is the opposite. He takes in God's word, and digests it, and lets it change him. That is what we should be doing right now- we let God's word in, and we welcome God's word to change us. God's words are Jeremiah's joy and delight- the creator God

speaks, and his words are true and good, and the living water for my soul. Jeremiah is doing what the manna from heaven was meant to teach God's people- that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3).

So Jeremiah as prophet is not just a DVD player, passing on God's message. He himself is transformed by the word of God he passes on- he bears God's name, and represents God. As one convinced by God's word, he shares God's ways, refusing to sit in the company of revellers, in language that echoes Psalm 1's way of the wicked. *Psa 1:1-2 Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ²but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.* That's Jeremiah. Jeremiah finds himself alone against his society, because he has fully committed himself to God, and his society has fully rejected God. It impacts his social life, because he is indignant at sin, and while everyone else tolerates or even celebrates it.

And because God is not transforming society but judging it, Jeremiah feels like he is being torn in half. *V18 Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?* Because he loves God and God's word, he hates the sin around him, he wants it to stop. Because he shares God's heart, he longs for people to be saved and society to be transformed. But instead he lives in a time of injustice and wickedness, of persecutors. He is giving up everything to serve God, and it seems to be having no effect. His heart is breaking, the pain is unending.

And in that way Jeremiah shows us something of Jesus, and what Jesus endured on the cross. On the cross, Jesus loves his Father, and hates sin. On the cross, Jesus loves us, and wants us to be saved and transformed,

so he takes on himself our sin. And in that tension between hating sin because he loves God, and yet loving us sinners, Jesus suffers more intensely than anyone else in history. On the cross, Jesus could have said *"Why is my pain ending and my wound grievous and incurable?"* That is the pain he takes as the faithful word of God become flesh, standing alone for God to rescue God's people. But unlike Jeremiah, Jesus knew that the plan would succeed in rescuing many- *for the joy set before him he endured the cross* (Hebrews 12:2)

Jeremiah knows God is understanding and caring, even long-suffering, which means patient. But his experience leads him to cry out- my experience of you is *v18 You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails.* In the dry countryside around Jerusalem, there were little streams, brooks, that flowed for a few days when it rained. There were springs where water came out of the ground. But if the stream dried up in the dry season, if the spring stopped bubbling up when there was drought, then it was deceptive- anyone who had built a house there thinking they would have water would need to abandon it. Jeremiah feels like that- he's been 100% for God, and God hasn't shown up and worked when it has got tough. Jeremiah expresses that to God- and so can we. We can live in the tension of declaring faith in God, and telling God when going his way doesn't seem to be working, when God himself seems to not be working.

A promise for the faithful individual 15:19-21

What God does in response is to make a promise to Jeremiah.

19 Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. Here's the good news- you don't need society to turn to God for

you to be restored and saved. You just need to turn to God yourself. You need to “repent” to turn away from sin and rejecting God, to turn to trusting and following God. What other people do might be sad, might make life hard, but no one else can stop you connecting to God. Turn to him- and God will restore you.

And no one else can stop you from serving God and being his spokesperson. You can speak the worthy words, the words God gives us in the Bible. You can stand firm against society and speak truth. Truth about the value of every human being. Truth about good and evil. Truth that worshipping idols is foolish, and that the true God is the one we should worship. Truth about the wickedness of taking innocent life, whether in knife crime, or abortion, or in assisted suicide. Truth about the wickedness of sexual exploitation, and abuse. Truth about Jesus as the God who has come to rescue us and reconnect us to our Creator. Any Christian can do this- you don’t need to be appointed to church staff or office. Any Christian can do this even if they are the only Christian in their class or office or home. Only stand firm with God’s word, and welcome people turning to listen to God, and do not drift off to join the world.

God promises Jeremiah that if Jeremiah stands firm speaking God’s word, God will rescue him. Vv20-21 *I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you,’ declares the Lord.* ²¹ *‘I will save you from the hands of the wicked and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel.’* For Jeremiah, this is a literal promise of physical rescue- he will survive all the sieges and battles and plots and persecution. Given how many of the apostles died, we know that no individual Christian is guaranteed to escape persecution or death by being loyal to God. But we do know God will strengthen us with his Spirit, and bring us safely to his

side in heaven when we die. We have a great promise if we have trusted Jesus. We are not bound to the fate of our society or the success of our ministry. We are free to turn to Jesus, and to stand for him, and God promises to be with us and to guarantee eternal joy and peace with him.

That may have felt like bit of a rollercoaster sermon- lots of ups and downs, lots of different truths. That’s ok. Through Jeremiah’s interactions with God, we are learning that spiritual maturity and faithful ministry can sometimes feel very up and down. That we can both cling to truths of God’s love and power and yet also tell God we feel forgotten and let down.

If you are here and not yet a follower of Jesus, I hope this passage helps you see that you don’t need to wait for the rest of society, or your friends, or your family, to become Christians first. God rescues individuals- and you can turn to him today, and receive his forgiveness, his presence, his help.

If you are a follower of Jesus, I hope this focus on the struggle of faithful ministry helps you include this aspect, this truth, in your thinking about spiritual maturity. I hope it will help those who feel burdened or failures to rejoice more. I hope it will help those doing well to not look down on those struggling, nor to assume that life will go smoothly forever.

And I hope we all know Jesus better as a result of thinking about how lament and struggles were part of his earthly ministry, part of his perfect spirituality, part of how he sympathises with us in our weakness.