

Help! (Jeremiah)
Psalm 70; Jeremiah 20:7-18
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
July 28, 2024

Jeremiah 20 is a tough text. Those of us who love Jeremiah - who cherish his words about the new covenant in chapters 31-34, who love the story of his call as a young boy in chapter 1, when he is summoned to pluck up and tear down, to build and plant, who thrill to the way that he confronts the corrupt temple leadership in his temple sermon in chapter 7 - those of us who love Jeremiah can find ourselves being tongue-tied when we are confronted with his desperate, complaining prayer in chapter 20. "O Lord you have enticed me, you have overpowered me. I have become a laughingstock, and it's because of you. But then when I try to keep my mouth shut, it's like a fire in my bones that burns me up. If I speak, I'm in trouble, and if I keep my mouth shut, I'm in trouble. It's all trouble, and it's because of you, Lord. Help me!"

Jeremiah 20 is a tough text, and the only reason to include it in a summer sermon series about the life of prayer, is because it reveals a deep dimension to our lives of prayer. There are times in our lives when life is tough, and when prayers of celebration and praise are hard for us to pray. There are times when all we can manage is a helpless cry, in which we can't summon the strength for anything but, "HELP ME!"

The good news for us is that it turns out that "Help me!" is one of the most essential prayers. Anne Lamott, who is like an angel for many of us, wrote a book a few years ago about the heart of prayer, in which she said that there are 3 core prayers: "Help, Thanks, and Wow." It's a bit like how 1 Corinthians 13 teaches us that 'faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.' Anne Lamott says that there are 3 types of prayer - Help, Thanks, and Wow - and the first of these is Help!

We commonly say that “there are no atheists in foxholes,” which I take to mean that when you’re in a foxhole in war, the situation is so serious, so threatening, that even people who would never dream of darkening the door of a church will find themselves turning to God for help.

When we are in a crisis, we can find ourselves hitting our knees, asking for God’s help. It’s reflexive, almost instinctive. When we have nowhere else to turn, our hearts and souls instinctively cry for help. This is the groan of pain, the elemental cry of hurt, that comes from our bodies, completely bypassing our intellectual center. This sort of cry of pain eventually comes to pretty much everyone, so if you haven’t had this kind of hurt yet, it may well come to you later. And when it does, it does not mean that you’ve done something wrong. It means that you are human, and part of being human is that we hurt. It won’t last forever, but the prayer for help has important work to do on your soul.

But if we don’t feel like we are currently in crisis, we may find that parts of us can actually *resist* praying for help. Praying for help puts us in the position of *being needy*, and a lot of us do not want to be thought of as being needy. The words of Psalm 70, “I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God!” are words that a lot of us do not like to utter. We like to think of ourselves as strong and independent.

Tyler Staton, pastor of a church on the west coast, has said that, growing up, his family told stories about their ancestors who fought hard to establish their lives. They had to rely on themselves, and they made their lives work by sheer determination. Tyler said that he deeply admires these ancestors of his, but the message that came through loud and clear was that “Independence is admirable. Need should be eliminated. Hard work is what

gets you there.”¹ This message was drilled into him, and it can make prayers like Psalm 70 hard for him to pray.

It can also make the wisdom of the 12-step movement hard to accept. The 1st step in the 12 steps, the 1st step to recovery from addiction to alcohol, is to “admit that we were *powerless* over alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable.” Admitting our powerlessness, accepting our helplessness, according to the 12 steps, is not a tragic failure. Rather, it is the reality of our lives, and it is the 1st step towards healing. In 2 Corinthians 12, the Lord says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” According to the Bible, true strength comes, not from within ourselves, but from God. God’s strength flows to us when we are weak and needy and vulnerable.

Jeremiah is one of the most intense books in the Bible. It is right up there with Job, with the Passion narratives in the Bible, and with the psalms of lament. Jeremiah was anointed by God as a prophet as a young boy. But his prophetic career was grueling and hard. When he brought God’s word of judgment against the religious and political powers of Jerusalem, they responded harshly, throwing him into jail. Jeremiah 20 begins with the priest Pashhur, chief officer of the Jerusalem temple, hearing the prophetic words of Jeremiah, and throwing Jeremiah in the stocks. Jeremiah got knocked down, brutalized.

That’s the context in which Jeremiah complains to the Lord in our text. Life was not going Jeremiah’s way, and so he reached out to God in his need. The people who pray Psalm 70 is surrounded by people who are taunting them, people who are shaming them. “Help me, Lord! Deliver me!”

¹ Tyler Staton, “Unforced Rhythms of Grace: Prayer,” John Mark Comer Teachings podcast, originally broadcast April 12, 2024.

Tyler Staton says that, "Helplessness fuels prayer. Independence silences it."

Helplessness fuels prayer. Powerlessness drives us to God. Helplessness reduces our reliance on ourselves, and drives us to rely on God. As we are driven to God in prayer, what we find is that our prayers aren't always answered the way we want them to be. We ask God for one result, and we get something else. Or we ask God for something, and it seems like it doesn't happen the way we think it should.

And with this, we are brought to one of the deepest mysteries of our faith. It turns out that prayer is not a means to an end. Prayer is not a way to get a specific result. Prayer is not like putting some money in a cosmic soda machine, and then pressing a button, or saying a specific formula, and getting the product you want to come out. That would be magic, that would be sorcery, and the Christian faith is not sorcery or magic.

The Christian faith is a relationship. Prayer is a way for us to dwell in communion with the God of grace, the God of love, the God of truth. Prayer is fundamentally relational. It is not transactional. Prayer is about dwelling with God, abiding with God

In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples, "Abide with me. Dwell with me. Abide in me as I abide in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Apart from me, you can do nothing. Apart from me, you are helpless. When you dwell with me, when you abide in me, you can do all things. Apart from me, your sins are too strong. With me, there is forgiveness for your sins, there is a new start. Apart from me, you will try to manipulate situations to make them come out the way you want, and you will often end up making things worse. With me, you will be given a new heart and a new mind, and you will be able to address your situations with grace and with steadiness.

As we bring our helplessness to God in prayer, we learn to fear our helplessness less. *On our own*, helplessness is a terrifying thing. *With Christ*, helplessness is an open channel for his love and his grace. *On our own* in the world, powerlessness is something to run away from. *With Christ*, powerlessness is something to embrace, for when we are weak, he is strong.

Jeremiah 20 is a hard text, but it is an honest text. And over the course of the book of Jeremiah, we may imagine that it is precisely because he brought his powerlessness, his helplessness to God – as ugly as that could be – that God was able to shape and form Jeremiah into the prophet who would proclaim the new covenant that God was making with God’s people.

Friends, in what part of your life do you feel helpless? In what area of your life do you feel inadequate? If you’re like me, those are areas that you don’t feel good about. But I’m here to tell you today that those parts of your life are where you can be closest to Christ. This is the counter-intuitive wisdom of the gospel. Psalm 118 tells us that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” Those parts of your life, the parts you are embarrassed about, the parts you are angry about, the parts that are breaking down, the parts you wish you could leave behind – friends, those parts of your life are where Christ is building his kingdom in your life, those parts are where Christ has access to you in the deepest ways. Take them to the Lord in prayer. To God and to God alone, be all glory, honor, and praise. Amen.
