

A GREAT PRAYER LIFE MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

by Doug Goins

I have been thinking in the last week and a half on how much celebrities arouse our curiosity and rivet our attention, whether they're in sports, religion, or entertainment. We want to know what they're like on the inside, what's going on in their private lives. The tragedy of Magic Johnson's disclosure about carrying the HIV antibody has overwhelmed us as a nation. I think part of what has fueled the media coverage is our insatiable appetite for confessions, for gossip, for inside information. For every person who read the headlines thoughtfully about Magic's national concerns for health and safety among young people, there are probably twenty who will scan the supermarket tabloids hoping that there will be some untold details about his sex life. We say that we want to know what a person is really like; we're not just content with the public image. So we pounce on every detail, even if it's totally insignificant, hoping it will reveal what's going on in the heart of that person.

This curiosity we have about heart motivation is not always sleazy or prurient. It can be an interest in the personal details of a great person's life which is healthy. There's an instinctive search for the common humanity that we share with that person. The question we ask is, "How are we like that other person?" For the last week Magic Johnson has stood before us and has been exposed to the evaluation of this whole nation. His greatness, at least in a moral and ethical sense, is open to question. The majority view him as a hero. They praise his candor and his desire now to be a positive influence for safe sex. Those of us who embrace a biblical world view pray for Magic. We pray that he'll surrender his life to Jesus Christ. We pray that he'll come to an awareness that sexual promiscuity is sinful and destructive. We should pray for a spiritual transformation in his life so that no matter what happens to him physically, he will inherit eternal life with the Lord.

Last Sunday morning we were introduced to another great man who was exposed to the evaluation of the nation of Judah. Jeremiah riveted the attention of Judah as powerfully as Magic Johnson has riveted our own national concern. In contrast to Magic though, nobody viewed Jeremiah as a national treasure or hero. Jeremiah spoke powerfully about human sexuality in his preaching. He denounced recreational sex and marital infidelity, and he said they were under God's judgment and wrath. He called the nation to repent of spiritual promiscuity and to return to a loving God who was jealous for their fidelity. In the sermon that we looked at last week, which he preached in the gate of the temple, he promised the nation that if they would amend their ways, God would let them dwell in that place. They really could be at peace in relationship to God. But they would have to repent of sin.

Unlike the national outpouring of support we've seen for Magic Johnson and for his message, Jeremiah at first was discounted by the nation; he was ignored. Then after the death of King Josiah, who had been his supporter, he was openly opposed and antagonized by the king that followed, King Jehoiakim, an evil ruler. His reign tried to undermine everything that Jeremiah spoke for. Jeremiah's ministry was resisted by the temple priesthood. But probably the most painful relationship with which he struggled was the one to his own family. He had been raised in Anathoth, a little village north of Jerusalem. He was raised in the home of a priest. He became an embarrassment to them, and they too ended up opposing his message. In addition, thirteen years after the temple gate sermon was preached, God warned Jeremiah in chapter 12, verse 6, "For even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you." This warning meant that his own family was behind an assassination plot against his life. His preaching made so much trouble for them that they tried to have him assassinated.

As we come to our text this morning in chapter 15 of Jeremiah's prophesy, he's about twenty years into his ministry of preaching. His sermons have been bold and powerful and biblically correct. They have been full of the confidence that God is a righteous judge, a wonderful savior. Jeremiah has been confident publicly that God is his own personal protector and defender. But in twenty years, he has not had a single convert. The public reaction to his preaching has been completely negative. The political trouble of the country is increasing. The invasion of Babylon is getting closer and closer---Assyria and Egypt have been defeated, and

Nebuchadnezzar is coming. The people are starting to panic. During the two years prior to the events of this chapter, Judah has experienced drought. The result has been famine, human suffering, and death. And in the midst of this turmoil, he is still dealing with the rejection of his own family and home town.

As with our own national celebrities, our questions are, "What was Jeremiah really like? When there was nobody watching, how did he conduct himself? What did Jeremiah do when he wasn't staging confrontations with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, when he wasn't thundering against the nation prophetically? What did Jeremiah do when he wasn't making headlines?" There is a single answer which is clear and straightforward: Jeremiah talked to God. There are seven passages in this book that are labeled confessional, and in each one, Jeremiah speaks in the first person, opening his heart and revealing what's going on inside of him while all the fireworks are going off all around him. These are private revelations. Now there is the potential for us to be disappointed or disillusioned by private confessions. Think of all the great people that we've admired in past history whose diaries or letters or tapes have given us access into their private lives. How many public reputations can survive a thorough exposure of the inner life? This is what we're going to get in these verses from Jeremiah. We're going to look at 15:10-21. The heart of this prayer is in verse 15, the first two lines of the verse. Jeremiah cries out:

"Thou who knowest, O Lord,
Remember me, take notice of me."

[In the NIV, this is translated, "Remember me and care for me." "Do not just pay attention but get actively involved in my life."]

A couple of things may surprise us about Jeremiah's inner life, but I don't think that we're going to be disillusioned. The first thing that surprised me is how passionately he prayed. That was his secret life, and it was also the foundational strength of his public life. For twenty years, Jeremiah has been deprived of any human relationship. He's got no one else to talk to except God, so he talks to God very directly, and then he listens to God. That's an important part. It's really a conversation with the Lord. This is what prayer is, even for us today. It's the act in which we approach God, a living person. God is the "Thou" that he addresses. He's the person we speak to. God is not an "it" that we talk about to other people. Prayer is the attention we give to the one, in Jeremiah's words, who attends to us, who knows us, who remembers us, who actively gets involved in our lives. Prayer is the decision to approach God as the personal center of our life. Prayer is very personal language; it's focused exclusively on God. Jeremiah prays with great intensity. In this prayer there is nothing casual or superficial. His prayer life accounts for much of why Jeremiah is so attractive to us.

The second thing that's surprising is what he says in this secret prayer. This isn't a prayer that's peaceful or accepting or soothing. Jeremiah is struggling with the universe. In our modern cliché, he is not "resting in the arms of Jesus." He's struggling in his relationship with God. In prayer he is struggling with personal feelings of anxiety, fear, loneliness, and emotional pain. We're even going to find that he's wrestling with anger toward God. His prayer is a cry of despondency, an accusation against God. And God listens and then responds to him in love. Beginning in verse 10, he opens with a cry of anxiety and depression. He's despairing of life itself. This is how he comes into God's presence. Verse 10:

"Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me
As a man of strife and a man of contention to all the land!
I have neither lent, nor have men lent money to me,
Yet every one curses me."

Jeremiah wishes he had never been born. In fact he echoes the agony of Job when Job wrestles with God about the difficulty in his own life. Jeremiah's lifestyle and ministry have caused a consistent legal wrangling with the people of Judah. The words "strife" and "contention" describe courtroom argumentation or testimony. He's forever pointing out to Judah her violation of God's covenant love and her disobedience of God's laws that he built into the fabric of their society out of concern for them. As a result, he's hated. It says he's hated

more than a money lender. He's even hated more than someone who borrows money and never bothers to pay it back. And he never did either one of those things. The people of the land are not just neutral toward Jeremiah; they curse him. Jeremiah's cry to the Lord is one of anguish and deep depression. He's staring into the abyss of his own despair. Then he waits for God's answer, and God responds in verses 11-14.

Another surprise is that God accepts full responsibility for Jeremiah's circumstances. God had told Jeremiah twenty years before, in his original call to ministry (1:18-19), that there would be opposition. He even told him specifically that it was going to come from the princes of the land, the priesthood of the land, and all the people of the land. And he said that they would fight against him. Jeremiah should not have been surprised. Look at what God says to Jeremiah in verses 11-12:

The Lord said, "Surely I will set you free for purposes of good;
Surely I will cause the enemy to make supplication to you
In a time of disaster and a time of distress.
Can anyone smash iron,
Iron from the north, or bronze?"

In that initial call God had also promised Jeremiah that there would be deliverance. He says that the bad guys are not going to win, although their defeat has not happened yet. But Jeremiah has to endure the tension of waiting. He says, "Jeremiah, there will come a time when your own countrymen will be in bondage to the Babylonians after the invasion. And additionally, the Babylonian invaders are going to set you free from captivity, and they're going to come to you for advice." And that happened historically. He's reminding Jeremiah of the spiritual reality that he is unbreakable. This is the allusion in verse 12: "Can anyone smash iron, iron from the north, or bronze?" Again in the original call to ministry, God had said that he would make Jeremiah like a fortified city, like a pillar of iron with walls of bronze, and he would stand impregnable before the whole land. God says, "Don't forget what I told you in the beginning." He goes on to speak to the nation itself in verses 13 and 14. This is God speaking, reminding Jeremiah of what's going to happen to Judah. Verses 13-14:

"Your wealth and your treasures
I will give for booty without cost,
Even for all your sins
And within all your borders.
Then I will cause your enemies to bring it
Into a land you do not know;
For a fire has been kindled in My anger,
It will burn upon you."

God tells Jeremiah that the message of coming judgment that he's been preaching is absolutely true. Judah will be pillaged by the invaders; she will be punished for sin. The sin referred to here is one of conspicuous consumption. God is saying that the wealth, which Judah values and is hoarding, is going to be carried away into Babylon. God's wrath is frightening; it's like a burning fire. God's hatred of sin, any kind of sin, is consuming. That Jeremiah's audience didn't believe God's view of sin was not going to stop the inevitability of God's judgment.

If you look at these opening verses, 10-14, Jeremiah's feelings contradicted who he was in God's ultimate plan and purpose. Jeremiah's not the only great Christian leader in human history who struggled with that. Anxiety and depression affected Martin Luther in his warfare in the reformation of the church. It affected Abraham Lincoln in his leadership of this nation. Leo Tolstoy struggled with this same problem. The spiritual reality for us today in Jesus Christ is that we are made of the same unbreakable material as Jeremiah. Our identity and security in Jesus Christ are complete, no matter how we feel about them.

The apostle Paul wrote 700 years later to the Christians in Rome on this very subject. In Romans 8:31-34 he said that there is no opposition on the face of the earth that can overwhelm us. There are no allegations that can

be made against us in any court of law. There is no condemnation that can overwhelm us because of two things---God is for us totally, he says, and Jesus Christ now stands as our advocate and as our intercessor in heaven. In fact, he goes on to say in verses 35-39 of Romans 8: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is the message that Jeremiah needed to hear. It was really tough for him to hang on to it though, just as it is for us. It can be difficult to claim this truth as our own when the going gets tough. As a matter of fact, Jeremiah continues his lament in verse 15. You're going to hear cries from him of fear and loneliness and pain, even anger toward God because of the life he has been called to. Verse 15 is a poignant cry of fear:

Thou who knowest, O Lord,
Remember me, take notice of me,
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
Do not, in view of Thy patience, take me away;
Know that for Thy sake I endure reproach.

Jeremiah is frightened. He's been cursed and rejected. He's been declared an outlaw by King Jehoiakim. There are plots against his life. All these things come out in his prayer. It is clear that Jeremiah neither accepted them nor liked them. He's saying, "Lord, you got me into this; now get me out of it right now." The second half of the verse contrasts his sense of urgency with God's deliberate patience. He's saying, "Don't be so lenient, Lord, with my persecutors that they have time to destroy me." That's what he's afraid of. There's desperation in that sentence. God is working with an unhurried, measured pace, and Jeremiah is starting to panic. Time is running out. The engines of persecution are running at high r.p.m., but the mills of God's deliverance are grinding along very slowly. Do you ever find that true in your own life? We have these compulsive time tables about things, and they collide with God's leisurely pace. We tell God not only what to do but also when to do it. We take God very seriously, for why else would we be talking to him. But we take ourselves more seriously, if the truth were known, because we tell God exactly what he's got to do for us and when.

Verses 16-17 unfold a cry of loneliness:

Thy words were found and I ate them,
And Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart;

For I have been called by Thy name,
O Lord God of hosts.
I did not sit in the circle of merry-makers,
Nor did I exult.

Because of Thy hand upon me I sat alone,
For Thou didst fill me with indignation.

From the beginning, Jeremiah received God's word with enthusiasm. Here in verse 16 he's remembering the joy at discovering the scroll of the law when Hilkiah the priest found it and brought it to Josiah. It was passed out to all the people. He was excited about studying and preaching the word of God because of its life changing truth. But the cost of that commitment included isolation---the isolation of study and reflection and an alienation from the majority of his contemporaries. It meant taking God's word more seriously than any human word, and he found that he was all alone. He's saying that the indignation that God put in him, indignation over the sin of the nation, made him lonely. He'd been called by God to the ministry. It even says that God's name is on him. This means that God owns his life, and Jeremiah acknowledges God's ownership of him.

Jeremiah even names God: "You are the Lord God of Hosts." That's the God of military might and strength, the God of the armies of heaven and earth. He says, "God, your hand controlled me and guided me. It's as if I'm sitting in forced loneliness, and your strong hand is holding me there." But the implied question is, "Lord, does it have to be this way?"

The prayer intensifies in verse 18. We hear a cry of pain:

Why has my pain been perpetual
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?

The pain he feels is over the sin of the people, whether it was the cruelty and violence of wicked men or the indifference of normal everyday folk. All of this created a deep wound in Jeremiah. He hurt because he cared about people so much. He was committed to speak for God. He kept telling the people how much God loved them and wanted to draw them back into relationship with him, but the people were fickle. So now he felt in his own being---physically, emotionally---the ache of God's love that wasn't responded to. He felt the rejection throughout his whole body. The only cure for that hurt was for the people to repent of sin and trust God to be their savior and deliverer, but there was no cure in sight. He could see that clearly, and the pain overwhelmed him.

The climax of his prayer comes in the second half of verse 18, and it's a cry of anger, as if he were shouting at the top of his voice. He questions God:

Wilt Thou indeed be to me like a deceptive stream
With water that is unreliable?

In the very first sermon he ever preached in chapter 2, he had told the nation that God wanted to be a fountain of living water for them---clear, refreshing, cleansing, and life-giving. Now this accusation stands in direct contrast to that. God isn't a fountain of living water anymore. He's a stream that can't be trusted, like a dry desert wadi. It looks like it's going to have water in it, but when you get up to the bank, it's bone dry. It's unreliable because it only fills up when the rains come, and then for months there's nothing in it. He's saying that God cannot be depended upon. He's saying that God made promises, but he did not deliver. Do you ever cry out to God that way? Or do Jeremiah's anger and frustration offend or shock you? Eugene Petersen is a Christian writer whom I respect a lot. He says this about anger toward God:

"Our anger can be a measure of our faith. Believers argue with God, skeptics argue with each other."

That's the indomitable Jeremiah at prayer---depressed, fearful, lonely, hurt, and angry toward God. It shouldn't be a surprise. Each of us knows what it feels like. But the question that struck me was, "Do I express these emotions in prayer?" That's what Jeremiah did. Most of the time, I talk to everybody else first---my wife, my friends on the pastoral staff, some of you in our congregation, my children, even strangers on the street. I've got good friends who are therapists or counselors. I'll talk to anybody about issues that concern me before I go to God. But Jeremiah prayed to the living, saving God about them.

There was a Carmelite nun who lived in the nineteenth century in France, Theresa of Lisieux. She said,

"Talking to God, I feel, is always better than talking about God. Those pious conversations, there's always a touch of self-approval about them."

Jeremiah did not talk about God, but rather to God. All of his difficult circumstances were put in relationship to God, and the wonderful news is that something began to happen to him. In fact, God responds to him in verses 19-21. Again, Jeremiah stops speaking, but the prayer continues. I hope you understand that prayer

doesn't end when we stop talking. In prayer, God is not just an audience; he is a partner; he is a communicator. Jeremiah had spoken honestly, and now for a second time, he listens to what God is going to say with expectation.

The first thing he hears from God is a call to repentance. The first half of verse 19:

Therefore, thus says the Lord,
"If you return [or repent], then I will restore [or forgive] you.
Before Me you will stand."

God tells Jeremiah to repent. Repentance had been one of the key words in all of Jeremiah's preaching for twenty years. It was a word that had to do with the sin in the life of the people. God would heal them and restore them if they would repent of the sin in their lives. And now God is telling Jeremiah to repent of sin. Jeremiah's outpouring of disappointment and pain had been tinged with self-pity. God responds to Jeremiah. He says that he understands the anxiety, fear, loneliness, and anger. But God will not indulge him in it because it's sin. So he tells Jeremiah to turn away from it. And if he turns away from that kind of talk, then God will forgive him and restore him to his prophetic ministry.

Jeremiah's part in this prayer was to be honest and personal. God's part in the prayer was to restore and save. There's an important word for us this morning. We don't remain the same in prayer. It's not a static experience for us. The emotional struggles are there for us, but they don't stay there. Jeremiah was feeling sorry for himself. God does feel our pain, but he doesn't indulge our self-pity. God was just as severe with Jeremiah as Jeremiah had been with the people. So God tells Jeremiah to repent of these feelings because they are sinful and destructive. Then God will forgive him, restore him, and give him back the prophetic ministry to which he had been called.

In the second half of verse 19, God calls Jeremiah to reestablish priorities in his life. God says:

"And if you extract the precious from the worthless,
You will become My spokesman.
They [the people that he's speaking to] for their part may turn to you,
But as for you, you must not turn to them."

God understands that Jeremiah is discouraged. For twenty years nothing has been accomplished through his preaching. There's a futility about it. The only response to his sermons is rejection and persecution. In the second half of verse 19 God is responding to the temptation of Jeremiah to change his tune, to tone it down a bit and maybe tell people what they want to hear. But God stiffens his resolve. He says, "You stick to your calling, Jeremiah. You've got to be my mouth." Jeremiah was concerned about what people were saying about him. That was the wrong concern. Jeremiah should only be concerned with God and what he wanted him to do.

For each one of us, our own spiritual priorities are reestablished in prayer. We are constantly reaffirming God's sovereignty over our lives. His lordship is faced in prayer over and over again. The questions are: "Do I care more about God himself than what other people think about me? Do I want to love other people, or do I want to flatter other people? Do I want to please people or God in what I say and how I lead my life?" The setting of priorities is not a once for all act that's accomplished at conversion. In prayer, we reaffirm and rework these priorities over and over again. Many things change in our lives---balances shift, circumstances change, moods swing---but the priority of standing and telling the truth about God has to constantly be reestablished. Prayer helps us to do that.

The final thing that God calls Jeremiah to do is in verses 20 and 21. He calls him to remember where he started:

"Then I will make you to this people
A fortified wall of bronze;
And though they fight against you,
They will not prevail over you;
For I am with you to save you
And deliver you," declares the Lord.
"So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,
And I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent."

As Jeremiah continues to listen, he hears a wonderful promise of renewal from God. He'd heard these words before; they were alluded to back in verse 12 of this prayer. At the end of chapter one, he'd heard them in full, and now they are repeated. God says that the promise he made to Jeremiah is still in effect. God remains faithful to him. It's not just enough for us to remember what God has done. We need to hear it over and over again. That's what prayer is all about. It's not enough for me to carry memory verses around with me. I've got to encounter the voice of the living God every single day, and that encounter happens in prayer. Amidst all the changes of life God does not change. In prayer we listen, and God speaks his constant word to us again. We're restored in our confidence in him. No matter what the painful struggle may be--the failure, the complicated circumstance--our confidence that God will take us through it is renewed. In fact, God identifies himself in the middle of verse 20 as the great "I am."---Yahweh. God will be our complete resource, no matter what the difficulty. And his promise is salvation.

There are three significant Hebrew words in verses 20 and 21 which are almost synonymous. They paint the total picture of salvation and deliverance, and they all refer to the Exodus when Israel was released from the bondage in Egypt. This concept of salvation is many sided. Each of these three verbs provides a different emphasis. The first verb in verse 20 is "save."---"I am with you to save you." The promise is salvation. That's the picture of someone who is in bondage. You might think of it in psychological terms as being restrained or confined, addicted if you will. The promise of salvation is that you will be brought into the openness of freedom without confinement, limitation, or addiction anymore. The second word for salvation, which appears twice in verses 20 and 21, is "deliverance"---"will deliver you", declares the Lord." That pictures the activity of one who dramatically and suddenly rescues the helpless victim from the possession of a powerful captor. God is a deliverer from victimization and captivity. And finally in verse 21, "I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent." This is the action of redemption. That's the liberation of one from the possession of another by the payment of a ransom. A price is paid that speaks of the value and the worth of the life that's in bondage. We are worth everything to God. And Jesus' death on the cross demonstrated how much he was willing to pay to buy us out of bondage.

All three of these words were seen powerfully in God's salvation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. But this physical, historical reality of the Exodus taught the nation about God's continuing acts of redemption in the daily life of the individual. It speaks of deliverance from sin, from the fear of sin, and from the fear of death and hell. We find deliverance from the pain and anxiety caused by trouble, from loneliness, and from existential despair. God's final word to Jeremiah in verses 20 and 21 reminds us that prayer provides rescue and renewal. The apostle Paul understood and miraculously experienced that same reality, and he tells the Corinthian church about it in his second letter. In II Corinthians 1:8-10, he says, "We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us."

During this last week and a half, Magic Johnson's inner life has been opened up to the scrutiny of a nation. Jeremiah's heart has been opened up with amazing vulnerability and transparency for us this morning. How would your heart--your hidden, secret life of the Spirit--stand up in comparison? Would we find in one another at the very center of our being a strong, confident relationship of communication with the living God of the universe? Would we find in one another a conviction that God is immensely important to us and that what goes on between him and each of us demands exclusive attention? Do we trust God as our Savior, as our Deliverer, and as our Redeemer? And do we trust him for those things more than any other human relationship

or human resource? Jeremiah had a radical relationship with God. There was nobody else to save him. There was nobody else to listen to him.

You and I tend to trust in all kinds of other things for salvation, and we demand that they save us. Maybe it's maximum marriage that we trust in. Maybe it's the discipleship process. Maybe it's concerned friends. Maybe it's the therapeutic process itself that will provide salvation. Maybe it's grateful children. Perhaps we trust in a church environment that's responsive to our unique individual needs. Jeremiah cried, "O Lord, you know and remember me, and you visit me." God sent his only son Jesus to be our Savior and Deliverer and Redeemer. His ministry on our behalf is ongoing and powerfully effective. And it's available to us right now if we choose to draw near to him whenever we're depressed, anxious, fearful, lonely, or struggling with emotional pain, even anger with God himself. We've got to make the choice not to look all around for every other savior and to trust Jesus to be our deliverer.

Listen now to the writer of Hebrews. He speaks of Jesus, our great high priest, who stands ministering always and who is available all the time to us:

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." Amen.

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Doug Goins
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