

The prayers of Jeremiah

Rod Case

SINKING IN the sludge and slime of a stinking dungeon in a Jerusalem prison, a man prays. Depressed and exhausted from years of persecution, he prays to his God for deliverance, reminding Him of His worn-out servant's faithfulness and promised salvation. He prays with a characteristic sincerity and earnestness, realising, as he has realised many times in the past, that his God is his rock, the only one he can rely on in times of trouble. Trouble now seems never-ending. Where is the promised deliverance? Why am I in this situation? Why will my people not repent? Nothing seems to be as I imagined or as I want it. It does not make sense. But God is right; yes, my Lord, the Hope of Israel, is greater than I am, His understanding surpasses the understanding of all men. Whatever happens to me now, I know that God is in control.

So might the prophet Jeremiah have prayed as he endured imprisonment in the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech. It is an attitude of prayer which flows throughout the life of Jeremiah, an attitude born of a life of intense hardship and persecution for the Name of his God. Like Christ, Jeremiah had constant resort to prayer, finding, as David did, that the Lord is "a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1).

The prayers of Jeremiah demonstrate the character of the man, a humble man, a man who did not place confidence in his own abilities, a man affected by his circumstances, but a man of faith and a man who understood his God. His prayers recorded for us in his prophecy and Lamentations are prayers born of real need and a real reliance on God. They are not a form of words rattled off as he fell asleep, nor are they an erudite speech for outward show. Jeremiah's prayers are genuine communication with his, and our, God.

Understanding God

One aspect in which we see Jeremiah's excellent understanding of his God is the way in which he calls Him by various titles and describes various character attributes. Understanding the character of God will help us to understand just Who we are praying to. Jeremiah had grown up with an understanding of God, and saw the coming

judgements on his people as fulfilment of the words of the Law of Moses. He had seen the truth of God's prophecies demonstrated in the death of the false prophet Hananiah. He had experienced God's protection as he and Baruch penned the prophecy. To Jeremiah, God was a real being, with a real character, not some disembodied force or power.

This awareness and understanding of God adds a respect and sincerity to the prayers of the prophet. His form of address is always appropriate to what he is about to say, and he understands the meaning behind the title he uses. How many times do we reel off an assortment of titles without understanding their true meaning? If we say that God is 'all-powerful', do we mean it? When we call God 'Father', do we really see him as a father?

Apart from addressing Him always as 'LORD' (Yahweh), Jeremiah also calls God 'LORD of hosts' (11:20,22; 15:16; 20:12; 32:18), referring to Him as his strength, fortress and refuge (16:19), as great and mighty (32:18,19), saviour (14:8) and a creator (v. 22). Jeremiah's use of such titles shows the depth of the prophet's faith, and we shall consider them again later in the article. To most outside observers, these descriptions of God were totally contradictory to the way He appeared to be acting. The only host was the host of Babylon. The Israelites' fortress, Jerusalem, appeared to be on the point of collapse and anything but a refuge. It was the king of Babylon who looked great and mighty. Nothing could save the Jews, and what they had created looked like it was about to be destroyed.

But Jeremiah was able to see beyond this. Perhaps the most significant title used by Jeremiah is in 14:8 and 17:13, where the prophet calls God "the hope of Israel". What an understanding of God's purpose is shown here! At a time when there was no immediate hope for Israel, when the nation was about to be overthrown, when God's vast store of longsuffering was about to run out, Jeremiah still saw that his Lord had a long-term purpose with his people, a purpose which is still being worked out. And, while the rulers of the time sought help from Egypt (37:7), and those who remained after the Babylonian victory also sought refuge there, Jeremiah saw

that his people's only hope was with the God they continually forsook.

All these characteristics described by Jeremiah are certainly in contrast to the way in which his contemporaries saw God. In fact they refused to see Him at all. And our contemporaries can also look at the world and think, as they could have thought in Jeremiah's day, that if there is a God He is certainly not working in the way we say He is or will. Many of those whom we associate with may take this attitude, which can be testing to our faith, but seeing God as Jeremiah saw Him, as a real being, will help to fortify our foundations and help our prayers to become more sincere.

Just as the fate of the nation, and of Jeremiah himself, was in the hands of God, so too is our own, whether we want to believe it or not. Subconsciously we may already be in Egypt, but our only hope is in the God of Israel. The hope of Israel has almost become a cliché in prayer amongst our Brotherhood today, a phrase which we may not think too much about. But tied up in Jeremiah's appellation is the whole purpose of God, the promises made from Genesis 3 onwards, promises which have yet to be completely fulfilled. Do we think of this when we refer to the hope of Israel?

Intensity of prayer

This understanding of the character of God also, on occasions, adds an intensity to Jeremiah's prayers. We can imagine the prophet on his knees, fists clenched, tears pouring down his face, as he implores his God for deliverance or for the fulfilment of His judgements. Jeremiah is not afraid to fully engage God in what he is saying. For example, in 12:1 he begins by saying that God is righteous, but then questions why God appears to have planted the wicked and made them prosper. Whilst always retaining a respect for God, he uses familiar language, not stifling his feelings in clichés or platitudes, but rather casting his burden on Yahweh and letting Him know how he really feels.

God regards us as His children, not as pupils in a class or as numbers in a file. He wants to have a relationship with us like a father has with a child. These are meaningful relationships, with each building an understanding of the other, rather than relationships which are distant and simply involve paying our dues. While respect for God's position is essential at all times, there is no reason to distance ourselves from Him by

uttering traditional clichés which have long since lost their meaning. Many of the prayers recorded in the Bible use the language of the time, and Jeremiah's are no different. And this intensity, with real meaning behind his words, brought for him results.

Neither is the prophet afraid to pray about himself. In 15:15-18 (and also in 18:19-23) he reminds God of the work he has done in proclaiming the unpopular message. It is not the prayer of a man boasting and asking for a reward, but of a man struggling with what he has been asked to do, finding difficulty in carrying on. So he turns to his God and pours out his heart, questioning God, telling God everything in an effort to come to terms with his work and to find the strength to carry on. We can only begin to imagine the relief the prophet must have felt at the answer he received to his prayer on this occasion. Many of us could also testify to a feeling of relief at having shared our burden following an intense prayer when we have felt at our lowest.

His understanding of his relationship to God means that Jeremiah never questions whether God is right or not. He does not always understand why God has asked him to do something, as when he buys the field in Anathoth (32:24,25), but he never disputes God or tries to assert his own opinion.

Jeremiah's prayers and the Lord's Prayer

Much is said of Jeremiah as a type of Christ, and this includes prayer. The pattern of the Lord's Prayer is evident in the prayers of this prophet. Jeremiah, in the longer prayers recorded, always talks first about the greatness of God, about His power and works, and about the inferiority of man, before going on to plead or make a request. This puts the relationship between God and man in its proper perspective. Looking across the sweep of his prayers, this is one of the features that stand out. Jeremiah, no matter what he is saying, always knows where he stands in relation to God.

Continuing with the theme of the Lord's Prayer, it is interesting to see Jeremiah's continual prayers for judgements on his enemies. On the face of it this contradicts the type of Christ, who prayed for mercy. But when we look at the message of the prophet and the judgements God had said He would bring, we see that Jeremiah is in fact praying for the fulfilment of God's will, as Christ taught his disciples to do. Jeremiah's enemies were also enemies of the truth, whom God

would “miserably destroy” (Mt. 21:41), as He said He would do to the wicked husbandmen of Christ’s day. This desire for the purpose of God to be fulfilled is also shown when Jeremiah uses the term “the hope of Israel”.

Prayer was also Jeremiah’s first stop whenever he needed help. It was always to his God that he turned. Certainly there was no one else to turn to most of the time, but his prayers show that he knew exactly where reliable, sure help was. It is true that many will turn to God when they are in perilous situations like the prophet, but for many it is the last resort, and a problem may not have become so vast, at least in mind, had prayer been turned to first. It is evident that Jeremiah found a peace of mind in speaking to God. “Unto Thee have I opened my cause”, he says (20:12). Many of us could back up the feeling of Jeremiah. The feeling of relief at emptying ourselves to God is immense, and for Jeremiah it was the only relief he had.

And not only does the prophet from Anathoth see God as a relief, his consistent use of phrases

such as ‘LORD of hosts’ also shows his belief in the power of God. Jeremiah 16:19 especially shows how he regarded his God, calling Him strength, fortress and refuge in the one sentence: “O LORD, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto Thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit”.

It is perhaps that sentence which sums up the prophet’s attitude to his God. Despite everything that was thrown at him, he believed sincerely in God and trusted in His deliverance. It is hard to disassociate Jeremiah from an image of dour doggedness, negativity and gloom. There are a few bright spots, but generally he appears to be just a stoic, trying to endure. But his thundering denunciations and the privations of his life overshadow Jeremiah’s deep understanding of his God. It is an understanding evident in his prayers, the prayers of a man with a real relationship with the One he regarded as “the hope of Israel”.

The prayers of Daniel

Geoff Cave

DANIEL, LIKE all men and women of faith, was a man who regularly prayed to his God; it was his habit: “Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, *as he did aforetime*” (Dan. 6:10).

A quick scan through the book of Daniel will reveal him praying on many different occasions, not only when his ‘back was against the wall’, but also to give thanks for blessings received: “Then was the secret revealed unto Daniel in a night vision. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven . . . I thank thee, and praise thee, O Thou God of my fathers, Who hast given me wisdom and might, and hast made known unto me now what we desired of Thee: for Thou hast now made known unto us the king’s matter” (2:19,23). “The king’s matter” was a message from the God of Israel—Daniel’s God. This God was the very core and centre of Daniel’s life, and for this reason God used Daniel as a key player in His

purpose at this time. Thus it is not surprising to find Daniel referred to as “a man greatly beloved” (10:11). With such a closeness between Daniel and his God, prayer, along with the reading of God’s Word, must have been very prominent in his life.

The prayer of Daniel 9

The prayer of Daniel recorded in the most detail appears in chapter 9. Here Daniel is praying for the restoration of Jerusalem. The priorities in Daniel’s life are apparent: the righteousness of his God, the law of his God, the city of his God, the temple of his God, the holy Name of his God, the mercies of his God and the forgiveness of his God. Alongside all this, Daniel is painfully aware of the sin and rebellion of his nation, the deaf ears in his nation, the shame of his nation, the fact that his nation had caused the righteous Name of his God to be reproached by the nations around.

Daniel acknowledges the sharp contrast between the wayward nation and their righteous God: “O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto