Prison and Prayer
Jeremiah 33:1-9; 14-18

We're looking at Jeremiah - one of the great Old Testament prophets. And Jeremiah's ministry is reaching its endgame, because Jerusalem, the city he's been preaching to, is reaching its endgame. The Babylonian army is camped outside the city walls and inside there's a growing sense of chaos and panic. And yet, into that situation, God makes some extraordinary promises about the future - and he links them to prayer.

And that's why this passage has something to say to you. You see, like Jeremiah, there are times when you feel powerless to change your circumstances, or things are happening to you that are outside of your control, or stuff that matters to you is heading in the wrong direction, and the passage we're going look at today tells you that you can experience God in the middle of all that in ways you may never have before.

Reading: Jeremiah 33:1-9; 14-18

So we're going to look at three things: the prison and prayer, the problem of prayer, and the promise of prayer.

The Prison and Prayer
Look at v1: 'The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still shut up in the court of the guard.' So Jeremiah's in prison, and his freedom's limited, because the authorities have had enough of him. All along he's been saying that the Babylonians would invade, and now they have, Jerusalem's surrounded and the Babylonians are laying siege to it.

And verse 4 gives us a clue as to what things were like inside the city: 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah that were torn down to make a defence against the siege mounds and against the sword.' So the people are demolishing their homes and tearing down the king's palaces to build barricades against the enemy.

So just imagine the dread inside the city. They're outnumbered. Their food and water supply is only going to last so long, and the end is all but inevitable. As David said two weeks ago, siege warfare is like a long, slow death.

And in all that chaos, Jeremiah is imprisoned - unable to do anything to protect himself, or help others. He's trapped.

But in v5 God says it's going to get even worse: the houses they've torn down are going to become like graveyards, filled 'with the dead bodies of men whom I will strike down in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their evil.'

So the city's at rock bottom, and so is Jeremiah - because his future is inextricably linked to the city's, isn't it? And yet, it's when things are this bad, when the situation seems hopeless and Jeremiah's powerless, that God makes him this incredible offer: v3, "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."

Just think about that. At this point when Jeremiah's freedom is limited, and his future looks grim; when he seems more at the mercy of events or others' behaviour than ever before, God invites him to encounter him in a way Jeremiah has never experienced. "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things *that you have not known*."

Call to *Me*. But who's the 'Me'? Verse 2, 'The Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it - the Lord is his name. Call to me.'

And the word LORD there translates God's covenant name, YHWH - I AM WHO I AM.

And so for Jeremiah, prison, and the loss of personal freedom, his powerlessness, and the seeming inevitable bad outcome that's coming, becomes the opportunity to encounter God as his Maker. The One who knows Jeremiah better than he knows himself; who really knows him, deep on the inside. But not just as Maker, but as YHWH, the God of never-ending, never-running out, covenant love. And so for Jeremiah, prison becomes the place of experience - experiencing this God who knows him deeply and loves him deeply, and experiencing that *through prayer*.

But you can only experience God like that through prayer, can't you. But you *can* experience him like that even, *especially*, when you feel like you're in prison, when your enemies surround you, when your options are limited, when you feel powerless and the waiting is frustrating, or the future looks bleak: Call to me and you'll hear me speaking to you.

King David wrote Psalm 34 before he was king. In fact, when David wrote Psalm 34 David ever being king seemed a million miles away. He was on the run from King Saul. And to escape that set of enemies he went to hide among another set of enemies - the Philistines. But then they grew suspicious of him and he had to pretend he was mad to get away with his life.

Things could hardly be worse, could they? Like Jeremiah, David's options are narrowing, his position is vulnerable, and his problems are encircling him. But listen to what he writes in Psalm 34:8, 'Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.'

Now, one of my daughters loves Ovalmaltine. Chocolate and crunch combined. And if she wanted you to know what she knows about Ovalmaltine, she could open the jar and show it to you; or, she could describe it to you - what it tastes like; or she could tell you about its contents - what percentage of malt, and cocoa, and milk and fat there is - and why it's that unique combination that makes it taste so good. But eventually, if you're going to experience what she experiences, what have you got to do? You've got to taste it.

And David is saying, You can know that God is good in theory. You can read about it, you can hear about others' experiences, you can have all the verses at your finger tips, but to really know, you've got to taste it, you've got to experience it, you've got to encounter him as good.

But that's what's fascinating isn't it? Because when does David say that can happen? When all your other refuges are taken from you. When every other defence is stripped from you. When all your other options are running out. When you discover that God is your refuge. Then - and maybe in ways you've never experienced before - then you can know that God is good. Taste that it's true, David says.

And that's what God's inviting Jeremiah into. In your prison, Jeremiah, call to me and I'll answer you - taste, Jeremiah, and see that I'm good.

But maybe you're sat there thinking, 'sounds great, but that's not been my experience. When things are bad I don't experience the closeness of God like that; in fact, it's the opposite.'

The Problem of Prayer

In a recent interview, a pastor who had been imprisoned by the Turkish authorities, said on his release that while he had expected to be persecuted as a Christian, what he hadn't expected was the experience of feeling abandoned by God in prison. That at the beginning of his imprisonment, God simply didn't feel as close to him as he expected, or hoped. In fact, he felt distant. He felt let down, let go of. And maybe you know what that feels like. Far from your relationship with God growing deeper and warmer, when life feels like it's slipping out of your control, or things aren't going the way you want, your relationship with God has grown colder or more superficial, or less relevant rather than more.

Or maybe you hear God say to Jeremiah, 'Call to me and I will answer you' and you think, well, I called but he didn't answer. I rang his number but he never picked up.

So, why can these kinds of tough, prison times, *not* be times of experiencing God in prayer like this?

Well, firstly, it's not a given that we will pray, is it? Instead, we can try and tough these times out. I mean, we're good at solving problems and working out solutions. We're good at taking control of a situation, and we've got through hard times like this before, so we grit our teeth and get through it. And, hey, as Nietzsche said, 'That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.'

But prayer and drawing near to God is only going to happen when we realise we can't tough it out on our own. That the ways in which he wants to make us stronger involves him revealing stuff to us about him and about ourselves. And that requires an admission of weakness and vulnerability that Nietzsche would never have you admit. So to experience this we have to humble ourselves; but sometimes, we don't want to humble ourselves.

Or, maybe, rather than gritting your teeth to get through this, you try and rise above your problems by denying they're really as bad as they seem. Maybe you've been influenced by the prosperity gospel, and you tell yourself, 'I'm a child of the king, nothing bad can happen to me.' Or maybe you've drunk from the wells of eastern religions, and these problems aren't really real, they're an illusion, and you've got to escape them by keeping your mind above them. Either way, we're in denial, and so we don't go to God with it, and we don't let him speak deep into our hearts about it - because there's no 'it' to go to him about.

Or maybe, deep down, we resent what's happening to us. And we feel let down by God. Because we think we don't deserve life to turn out like this, because we've kept our side of the bargain. You've gone to church, you've given your time and your money, you haven't committed any gross sins - but God hasn't kept his side. And deep down we feel bitter, even angry about the way things have turned out. And when that's the case, why would you reach out to the person who's let this happen to you?

Every Friday morning I meet up with my elderly neighbour. And we spend an hour talking French together - politics and art and nature. And about three weeks ago we got chatting about Absinthe - the infamous alcoholic drink - between 45-75% alcohol - that's made up in the Jura. So the following week, I did a bit of research and took with me some of the art work around the issue of the banning of Absinthe, and we chatted some more. And then last week, when I turned up to his house at 9 in the morning, guess what was on the table? A bottle of Absinthe. Because you can discuss the politics of Absinthe, or the manufacture of Absinthe, or the history and the art and the harmful effects of Absinthe - but eventually, you've got to taste it - even at 9 in the morning. 45-75% alcohol. And it was bitter. And he looked at me and said, not great eh. And I had to agree.

But that's what these prison times can taste like, can't they? Our options are being narrowed, control is slipping from us, the waiting's frustrating, and God says, call to me and I will answer you; taste and see that the Lord is good. But instead our frustrations or anxieties or resentments just taste as bitter as Absinthe.

One commentator says of God's invitation to Jeremiah that, 'God speaks to an upturned face, not a preoccupied back.' But that's the problem isn't it? When life isn't going the way we want, it preoccupies us and distracts us and in ways that consume us.

So… how can it be different? How can you go through times like this and experience God in them?

Well, look again at v3, "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." And it's when you see what those great and hidden things are that can leave you wanting to pray, wanting to taste, and see that he is good, and finding that he is, even when you don't get the answer you want.

The Promise of Prayer

And just when the city is being starved into submission and slowly destroyed from without and within, God promises three things. There's going to be a New City, a Righteous King and A Never Failing Priest.

Firstly, he promises ***a New City***. Look at v5-6: "I have hidden my face from this city because of all their evil. Behold, I will bring it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security." And then look at v9, "And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them." In other words, God's future for them - a future of blessing and health and wholeness isn't just for them, but for the world - for you and me.

And it doesn't stop there. Look at v16, 'In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' So not only is this new Jerusalem going to be a blessing to the nations, its relationship with God is going to be transformed.

But as we've seen before, Jerusalem never experienced those glory years, did she? Sure the Babylonian exile ended, and the people were allowed back, and the city and temple were rebuilt, but they never got close to what God describes here. In fact, when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple as a baby, elderly Anna took him up in her arms, and Luke says, 'She began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all *who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem*.' (Luke

2:38). So, 500 and more years after Jeremiah, people were still waiting for these promises to come true.

So listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says of people like Jeremiah and Anna: ‘They desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” (Heb 11:16). And the last book of the Bible, Revelation, ends with that city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. And it’s the place were all wrongs are made right - the place of health and healing. The place where all your desires and longings in your prison moments are met.

But here’s the thing. So much of our frustration and anger with life is because we want heaven on earth now, we want everything made right on our terms now. But the Bible tells us, you can enjoy a foretaste of glory now, but the full glory of New Jerusalem lies up ahead.

But how can you trust that? Because isn’t that exactly what Marx said the problem with religion was - that’s it’s an opium - getting you to accept your pain now with the false promise of something better later. So why trust that promise? Why not do all you can to have your heaven on earth now? Why not live as if this world is all there is?

Well, that’s the second great and hidden thing God promises: ***A Righteous King***.

Look at v14-15, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.’

Now, in Jeremiah’s day, things looked bleak for David’s royal line, didn’t they? One king had already been taken into exile, another was about to follow. The royal palaces were being torn down and soon there wouldn’t be a throne left in Jerusalem for the king to sit on.

Years before the prophet Isaiah had compared David’s family tree to a tree that had been cut down, leaving just a stump. But listen to what he said would happen: Isaiah 11:1, ‘There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.'

Just picture a shoot beginning to grow from a cut down stump. It’s way off being a strong tree, isn’t it? In fact, it’s weak. But that’s how Jesus came. Born as a baby, to an unwed mother, in a poor family. As Isaiah said of him, 'He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.’ (Is 53:2).

And here, Jeremiah experienced what it was to have his freedom limited and his options narrowed and to be at the mercy of others. But when Christ left the freedom of heaven, he experienced a far greater narrowing down, as he gave himself up to the will of others. And we’re unsettled when we feel like God doesn’t answer our prayers the way we want, but in the Garden of Gethsemane, as his enemies were approaching and encircling him, Jesus prayed that God would take the cup of suffering from him, but his prayer went unanswered. And here in v5 God says he has turned his face away from the city. But at the cross God the Father turned his face from His son, as he called out, ‘my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

So why was Jesus narrowed down? Why was his prayer unanswered?

Well, that's the third great and hidden thing God promises Jeremiah: **A Never Failing Priest.** Look at v17-18, "For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices for ever." You see, if things looked bad for the line of David, it wouldn't be long before the temple itself, and the priesthood with it, was reduced to rubble.

But what was the point of the priesthood and the temple? The temple was the place where heaven and earth met. And the temple and the priests and their sacrifices was what meant a holy God could dwell among his sinful people. So they could experience his goodness right in their city centre. But if the temple was destroyed, and if there were no priests, how would the people ever know the goodness of God among them? And who would atone for their sins now?

Well, listen again to the writer to the Hebrews: '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 is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Heb 4:14-16).

And through his sacrifice on the cross, Christ has become that never failing High Priest, so that you can approach God's throne of grace and find all you need in your time of need - in those prison times, when your options are narrowing and your securities are being stripped away.

You see, Jesus' prayer went unanswered so that you can know that you're always heard. And when God doesn't give you what you want, you can know his reason is love for you, because true love doesn't always give what we want. And Christ was cut off and cast out so that we can draw close - and taste and see that God is good. And when chaos seems to be reigning in your life, or things seem out of control, you can know that Christ the righteous king is in absolute control. And because you know he is always good, you can trust him, knowing that your hope, your joy, doesn't depend on all your circumstances coming good in this life, but that one day God will finally make all things right in the New Jerusalem to come.

So, when you face times like Jeremiah or David faced, draw near to God. Call upon him, hear again his promises of a New Jerusalem where everything will be made right, of a Righteous King, of a never failing priest. And you'll taste and see that the Lord is good.