

# "Lord, Please Don't Leave Us"

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Jeremiah chapter 14. I'd like us to read again at verse 7. Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us. We are called by your name. Do not leave us.

Well, we can see from the context here that this was a time of drought for Jeremiah and for the people of Judah. Jeremiah's book, it's sometimes difficult just to work out where exactly in the history of Jeremiah's ministry and the people we are, because it's not arranged chronologically. Some of the later chapters belong near the beginning of Jeremiah's own ministry.

So it makes it difficult just to pinpoint exactly, but it's not really all that important at times to know that anyway. What we know from the chapter is there was a time of severe drought. And of course, in regard to drought in Israel in those days, it was very much a sign of God's covenant judgment or displeasure.

Think, for example, of the days of Elijah, which God made very clear that the drought in that time was related to the disobedience of the people and the rejection of God.

And that's very much in mind here as we come to this passage. You have to think of that as a background of the passage, that that's the kind of context, the covenant context, the relationship between God and his people, the people of Judah and the prophet that he has sent to them, is ministering in terms of conveying to the people the mind and the will and the word of God in that context.

[ 2 : 0 3 ]     Of course, as a nation, we're not ourselves, as Israel were in those days in that kind of covenant relationship with God. So we can't just take everything here and just apply it in every detail to our own situation as a people.

Nevertheless, there are many things here which correspond to our circumstances today. It's a reminder to us as you read verses one to six of the plight that we are in through the COVID pandemic.

And if you change the imagery of drought for the imagery of a pandemic, you'll find that many of the details there still apply. The languishing, the lament on the part of the people, the cry that goes up from them, the way that there is a desperation on the part of many, the way there's a longing for a way out of the situation and so on.

And people are, as Martin mentioned in prayer and murder, people are very much concerned about where is this going to go? Where is it where are we going to find relief from this?

How many more lockdowns must we have? All of these kind of questions. And of course, all the related trauma of people who are ill with the virus have recovered but left with health issues.

[ 3 : 2 5 ]     And so the passage that you have here really leads us very much to the kind of prayer that we should have in that sort of context. As we go through the prayer of Jeremiah here, there's much in it that we can actually just translate into our own situation and use it as our appeal to God.

And there are two things in it that mark Jeremiah's prayer. There's first of all, a confession of national sin. That's in verse seven. Though our iniquities testify against us, our backslidings are many.

And then from verses eight, from verse eight and nine, you find an appeal on his part to God for him to act, for him to come in with his own intervention and deal with the situation.

That, of course, is something we recognize in our own context as well. So here's a confession, first of all, of national sin. Look what he's saying here. Out iniquities, out backsliding.

And just as Kenny mentioned with regard to Daniel's prayer in Daniel nine, the word our here, Daniel identified himself very much with the people.

[ 4 : 35 ] And this is what Jeremiah is actually doing here. And it's a remarkable feature in itself. Here is Jeremiah, a man of God, a man faithful to God, a man that God indeed has appointed and called to be a faithful witness to himself.

And yet he's using this word our, our iniquities, a holy man confessing the sin of the people, a holy man confessing to backslidings in which he himself finds a place in the confession that he's actually confessing this here to God.

And so that's important for ourselves. We're never in the position, irrespective of the fact that we're not a nation in covenant with God. Nevertheless, when we come to pray, as we've been doing, we have to maintain our own particular identification with a problem.

We belong to a people who have a plight that affects us all. And even if we were the holiest people and persons in existence, Jeremiah is telling us we have to identify with that problem.

And especially when people don't pray for themselves, we need to pray on their behalf. We identify with them in the situation. So we intercede as Jeremiah is doing here.

[ 5 : 54 ] And it's our iniquities and our backslidings. And we have sinned against you. That's an important point in itself. But you notice what he's saying, though, our iniquities testify against us.

You find so often in the prophets, they use the language of court proceedings, of a courtroom scene. This is really consistent throughout the prophets. It's one of the main illustrations that they use to convey God's message to them.

And what he's saying here is our iniquities testify against us. There's God, the judge, God sitting on his judgment seat, God sitting in his courtroom.

And he's calling the sins of the people in as witnesses against them. You can just picture it as Jeremiah is conveying it there. There is God seated on his throne as their judge, as their king, as their covenant lord.

And one by one he's calling. And God knew each and every sin that they committed against him. And what he's really saying is this is the imagery. God is calling all of these sins in so that they'll testify to God himself against the people.

[ 7 : 04 ] That's a very graphic and a very powerful image. When God is putting it like that, that he himself is listening to the sins as witnesses against the people and their behavior.

And the word iniquities here, there are three words, three main words in Hebrew for sin. There's the word sin itself, there's iniquity. Iniquity, and it's the word iniquity as it's used here, that literally means something twisted, something gnarled.

Of course, sin has that element to it morally and spiritually. That it's a twisted thing and it leaves us twisted as we follow it. And it leaves us twisted as we find ourselves having sinned against God and having sinned at the root of our being.

It's that twistedness that we call upon God to deal with. And effectively, that is really what he does in our redemption and our salvation. But Jeremiah is saying here, our twistedness, our twisted sins, our iniquities actually testify against us.

He's really calling the people themselves to give attention to this. The fact that their behavior is a twisted behavior away from the covenant standard that God expects and requires.

[ 8 : 33 ] And then he uses the word backslidings. For our backslidings are many. Some translations have our backslidings are great. But the emphasis really is on the amount.

It's on the many backslidings. The word backslidings itself includes the idea of a willful action on their part. It's not accidental. It's not something that they're doing without being aware of it or without being aware of the wrongness of it.

It's something that they are actually aware of. And deliberately, they have gone away from God. They've backslidden. They've gone to idols other than God as their God.

And so, when he's using that language, what he's really saying, and again, this is really important for ourselves in our context as well. When he's saying our backslidings are many, behind that, you have the idea that he's really saying our sins are of such magnitude that only God's act, as he calls on God to act, as we'll see in a minute, only that can deal with this properly.

Now, it's important that we, as we've been doing, pray for medical breakthroughs with regard to the virus, with regard to our circumstances.

[ 9 : 54 ] We pray for a vaccine. We pray for further insight for those that are actually trying to bring this about and produce it. And all of that is important to pray for.

God will actually have us to pray for that. But we cannot actually lose sight of the fact that without God's own intervention, as you look out over the long years of departure from God, of twistedness away from the standard God expects, of the introduction of so much else in the place of God, we're surely in the position where we're saying, despite the fact that we're not in exactly the same covenant position as Israel, yet we can say, if the Lord does not intervene, if even more than a vaccine, because let's face it, if a vaccine is found as we pray and as we hope for the COVID pandemic, that's not going to remove the twistedness away from God, from us as a people.

God alone can do that. And that's what Jeremiah is actually building into the language that he's using. So he's identifying with the problem.

He's identifying with the people. He's confessing to be part of that. He's interceding for them. He's speaking about their iniquities, their twisted behavior as witnesses against them.

He speaks about their backslidings being many. And as he does so, the magnitude of that is so great that only God's intervention is really going to effectively deal with it.

[ 11 : 37 ] But before we leave that, look at this word, though, at the beginning of verse 7. Our iniquities testify against us. God is calling them against us, he's saying.

And our backslidings are many. We have sinned against you. But now he's saying, though this is the case, Lord, take action. In other words, the fact that their situation is so critical morally and spiritually, it's not yet quite at the stage where he cannot pray.

We're going to see at the end of the chapter that that's actually what God is saying. And we're not in that situation ourselves. God has not said to us, don't pray for the people you belong to.

He did to Jeremiah. Just imagine how difficult for a man of God, for a man burdened for these people, burdened for their welfare, burdened for their recovery. Just imagine how difficult that must have been for him.

For the Lord to say, do not pray for the welfare. After he had finished this prayer, don't pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I'll not hear their cry. Though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them.

[ 12 : 50 ] Things have gone that far, God is saying to Jeremiah. It's the exile that now confronts them. That's where they're going. Yet, here is Jeremiah. Now he knows what they deserve.

Yet he's using this word, though. In other words, Jeremiah is, as he's earnestly dealing with God, he's appealing to covenant mercy. There it is for you and for me tonight as well.

We can say, though, Lord, we have done so much against you. We confess our iniquity. We confess our backsliding. We confess the magnitude of that. But, Lord, there is still forgiveness with you.

There is mercy with you. And it's your mercy that we appeal to in the confession of our sin. So he confesses their national sin.

And we have the privilege of bringing before God not only our own personal sins, but our national sins. The ways in which we can see we have departed from the standard that God expects.

[ 13 : 54 ] From the righteousness that alone exalts a nation, a people. We bring that to him in our confession. Secondly, in verses 8 and 9, you find an appeal on Jeremiah's part, appeal to God to act.

He's using the word, Lord, the covenant name of God, which so much fits the context. It's to the covenant, Lord, that he's appealing. And what he's saying here, act.

Though our iniquities testify against, act, O Lord. Literally, in Hebrew, that's where he's saying, do something, O Lord. And it's as if, indeed it is, beyond Jeremiah's own ability just to describe to God what exactly he should do.

I'm not saying that Jeremiah would want to do that in any case. But when he's saying, act, O Lord, what he's basically saying is, take action, O Lord, to do something for us.

In other words, he's leaving the detail of how God will do that, what God will do in his action. He's leaving that to God himself.

[ 15 : 01 ] How he will do it, what he will do, is simply calling upon God to act as the covenant Lord. Despite all of what we've done, Lord, do something.

And we've had prayers ourselves since this outbreak appealing to God to intervene, to bless even the outbreak itself, so that we'll be delivered from this terrible, this terrible spiritual deadness and spiritual enmity against God.

That's so much a part of our society. Act, O Lord. But you see, he's saying, for your name's sake. And isn't that interesting? Isn't that important, too?

Because the first thing that Jeremiah says in calling upon the Lord to act is, he's not saying, act, O Lord, do something for our sake. Do something for our rescue.

That's not what he's saying. He says, first of all, do this, Lord. Act for your name's sake. It's not their own plight as a people that he has in mind first and foremost.

[ 16 : 08 ] It's God's name. It's God's reputation. It's God's honor. And there could be much behind that, because the word, the name of God, is associated so often with different aspects of God's character, and of his covenant dealings with the people especially.

But in this kind of context, you're thinking about God's own covenant commitment, and also God's steadfast love, which is a great covenant word used so frequently in the apostles, in the prophets.

So when he's saying here, act for your name's sake, he's really saying, Lord, I appeal to your covenant commitment, to the covenant that you have established with us.

I appeal to your steadfast love, which is really on your side, your covenant relationship with us. And so on the basis of that, Lord, please take action.

Please do something. And we can actually use those as well ourselves. Although, as a people in the entirety of our society, we cannot say we are in covenant with God, but we are.

[ 17 : 18 ] We as his people are. And we appeal to his steadfast love that he has with his people. We appeal to his own covenant commitment for his church to be blessed.

And you see, the basis of that appeal, really, is in who God is. And he uses these two descriptions in verse 8. Oh, you hope of Israel.

And then secondly, its saviour in time of trouble. And when he uses the word hope there, it brings to mind the hope that's in the heart of those who believe.

The hope that they have towards God's own covenant promises. The expectancy they have. The longing they have for them to be fulfilled. But you see, hope is here being also brought to God as the originator and the source and the very foundation of that hope.

Because it's a name given to God himself. You who are the hope of Israel. So often, you find also in the Bible these kind of names given to God so that the focus comes to be upon that aspect of God's nature in relation to his covenant.

[ 18 : 35 ] He's the hope of his people. The hope that they have themselves, that they exercise, is based upon God himself. Which is why they can refer to him as their hope.

Now, some commentators point out to the fact that this word also in Hebrew, the word hope in this context, can also actually mean a pool of water.

That would make sense, too, in the context here, where he's talking about a drought and the effects of the drought. And drought as a covenant, a sign of God's covenant displeasure against the people and his judgment against the people.

While he's saying, Lord, you are still the well. You are still the pool of water that we require. And near the beginning, of course, of the prophecy, he referred to the people having shewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, which cannot hold any water.

And that imagery carries through in the prophecy as well. But here he's saying, there is such a source of water as we need for our spiritual dryness.

[ 19 : 50 ] Lord, that's in you. Isn't that so important for ourselves, too? We know that the well has not gone dry. The dryness is in us as a people.

We are the ones who live far from the well, as Samuel Rutherford put it. And we complain but dryly of our dryness. But the well is there and it's as full as it's ever been.

But we have gone this distance from God as a people. And here is Jeremiah reminding us that God is still a source of life for us.

And so we're appealing to him as the hope, the fountain of his people, the fountain of life. He talks to you about the saviour in the time of trouble. Here's the importance of historical reflection.

The importance of knowing the history of his people. And Jeremiah knows that very well. He's looking back on histories. Looking back to the way God intervened at other times in the history.

[ 20 : 52 ] The great big events of the history of this people that he belongs to. How he came so often to the rescue, whether it was in Egypt or against other nations that were seeking to wipe them out, take them captive, whatever.

Here is Jeremiah reflecting on the fact that he's still the saviour of his people in time of trouble. And if you look back over our own history as a nation and as a church in this nation, this is something that is very obvious in our history.

There are many occasions when the church in our land, the faithful people of God, became very small in number, were hounded. Covenanters out on the moorside, not able to meet in church buildings, hounded out of them.

Many of them imprisoned, put to death. But the Lord came so often when they expected this would be the end. The Lord intervened. The Lord came sometimes miraculously to the rescue.

The saviour in time of trouble. And the time of our trouble at the moment has not changed God's ability to intervene.

[ 22 : 06 ] And we pray to him as the saviour in times of trouble for us. So he calls on God to act. To do something on their behalf, but for his name's sake.

The basis of that appeal is in God himself being the hope of Israel and its saviour. And then he has three questions. He have four questions.

Well, two questions, but divided into different sections.

Now, of course, the word why, you recognise that word yourselves very well. You find it so often in the book of Psalms with regard to the plight of the psalmist in relation to what he knows of at the time.

Psalms 2, for example, that's how it begins. Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine vain things? Psalm 10, verse 1, and others have the same.

[ 23 : 14 ] It's the longing of the psalmist and the longing of Jeremiah for an answer. The longing to enter more into it so that God will actually reveal something more to him that will help him deal with the situation.

Maybe there will never be an answer to the question why, but it's not wrong to ask it, even if God chooses not to answer it specifically. But what he's saying is why.

Why should you be like a stranger in the land? He's presenting this to God as if God had chosen now not to be in his native land anymore.

He had made this land, this people, his people. This was their inheritance. He was their God. He was the one who allocated this land for himself and for his people.

But now it appears because they're under so much judgment, because of their disobedience, as if it's no longer his native land or his resting place.

[ 24 : 13 ] And he's saying in his appeal, well, why should this be, Lord? Why should you go on being this? It's a very bold way of addressing God. And he adds to that by saying, why should you be like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night?

You see lots of people coming to the islands, at least before the COVID outbreak, with their tents. And you'll find them pitching the tent. Think of summertime.

Think of the likes of the Celtic festival, various things. And people come with their tent. They pitch the tent. Sometimes it may just be for a night in one place. Then it's moved on. Jeremiah is saying, Lord, why should you be like a tent carrier who just pitches the tent?

To dwell somewhere for the night and then moves on. Or he says, why should you be like a man confused? Like a mighty warrior who cannot save.

And there's two images within that, really. It's the first of all, like a man confused. It's the image of somebody who's had such a shock as to be paralyzed, momentarily at least, and really is not in a position to take action.

[ 25 : 27 ] And Jeremiah is saying, this is how I'm picturing you, Lord. But is it not the case? Is this the case that why should you be like a man that's confused? Of course, he knew that God wasn't.

But this is the language he uses to appeal to God. And then like a mighty warrior who cannot save. A mighty warrior who was able to save in the past.

But now is not showing himself as one mighty to save. And here are the questions. And these elements built into them.

And when we think of the situation that we've had for so many years, with more and more, it seems, of the gospel being eroded.

More and more, even of the confessing church giving in to the pressures of the world, the pressures of secularism, the pressures of the immorality, the pressures of lobbyists that lobby for things to be changed so that it appeals more to the world instead of just leaving the gospel as it is.

[ 26 : 38 ] All of that. Here's what you can take to God. Lord, why should you be like a stranger in the land? Why should you just be passing through?

Why should you be like a traveler that pitches his tent for a night? Why should you be like a man confused that really isn't able to act? Why should you be like a mighty warrior who cannot save? In other words, what he's telling us to do is bring our situation to God and appeal, Lord, please stay with us.

Don't move on. Don't actually be in our midst just for a little time. Don't act as if you're not able to take measures to rescue us.

Show yourself as you have in the past as a mighty warrior who is able to save. And then he comes to the climax of the appeal.

You find that really in the second half of verse 9 there. And again, it's a wonderful emphasis. Yet you, O Lord, he's saying all of this to God is bold enough to put these things to God in the way of questions.

[ 27 : 48 ] He's appealing to God not to move on from them. And this is the final climax of his appeal. Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us.

You've not left us yet, so please don't do it. They still have the temple. They still have the holy place. Even if they've very much misused that in their idolatrous ways.

He can still say, Lord, you've not completely left us. You're still in the midst of us. Lord, your ordinances are here. Your sacrifices are here. Your temple is here.

Your altar is here. So, Lord, we appeal to you to show yourself. And we are called by your name.

They are owned by the Lord as his people. That's what it means, part of what it means to be in covenant with him. Lord, we are called by your name.

[ 28 : 49 ] You have come to own us as a people. So, please, don't leave us, is what he's saying. And these final words are words the prospect of which should really terrify us.

That the Lord would leave us. That the Lord would just walk away, go somewhere else, and no longer bless his gospel amongst us.

We never want to see that as a nation. We never want to see that as a church or as individuals. Jeremiah didn't want to see that in his own day.

Yet he had to appeal to God in prayer to actually stay with them, to fulfill his covenant promises for them.

And when he says here, leave us not, do not leave us. Again, the imagery there in Hebrew language that's used is very interesting.

[ 29 : 54 ] It literally means someone who's been carrying a burden and just offloading it. Jeremiah is more or less saying to God, Lord, you've been carrying us thus far.

You've had us on your back. In your strength, you've upheld us. We have been a burden to you. We've done so much against you that has caused us to be a burden to you.

But don't cast us off. Don't lay this burden down and leave us and move on. Don't offload us. Please, he's saying. So I hope that's given us tonight some encouragement to pray boldly to God, using the terms that God himself gives us through the likes of this passage.

To confess our national sin, to take time to do this. One of the benefits of lockdown, benefits of restrictions as it is now, rather than complete lockdown.

But we have more time available, most of us at least. We're setting time aside to pray. And as you know, we do that regularly anyway.

[ 31 : 06 ] But Monday evenings, the presbytery still has a call to prayer for us individually. And anyone who wants to join from eight o'clock to nine o'clock every Monday night.

We'll be doing that, God willing, next week on Zoom as well. So we can join that way. But this is the privilege. This is the facility that this time of restriction has given us.

And here is what we bring before God. God willing, confessing our national sin. Appealing for God to act on the basis of who he is. Boldly with the questions that appeal to him to remain and not move on.

And finally to say, Lord, our history is such that we know what you've done in the past. And please don't offload us now and leave us and go somewhere else.

Because that will be the death of us. Lord of God, we thank you for the time that you give us to dwell upon your word and its teaching.

[ 32 : 11 ] And despite the fact that we know that there is much in it, Lord, that is so challenging and so disruptive at times of our own preferences. We thank you for that.

We thank you for the way that you bring before us these great events from history. From the history of your church and especially from these great men that you called to be in leadership at that time.

To call a nation back to the roots in the covenant that you made with them. We ask that you would help us, Lord, to use that as our example too, as far as we are able.

We do appeal to you, O Lord, despite what you see in us, even as your people. And despite what you see throughout the nation of an abandoning of your ways and an erection, an erecting of much that is contrary to your will and displeasing to you and idolatrous.

We ask that you would not leave us. That you would not be amongst us as one who abides for a night. As one who comes and then moves on. Gracious one, hear us as we call to you.

[ 33 : 19 ] And do these things for us more than we are able to ask or even think. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, let's conclude.