

Jeremiah 16-20

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 0 0] We're in Jeremiah chapter 16, and we're going to get to chapter 20, I hope, by the end of the sermon. Next week, your homework is 21 to 25. I'm hoping there's five more sermons in Jeremiah, but we will see.

Jeremiah chapter 16. If you need a Bible, you will need a Bible tonight. They're just by the door, or one of the stewards will bring them to you. The Lord of the Rings. I've read the books. I've only read them once.

But I've seen the movies multiple times. We try to watch them once a year. But I was told this week of a family who watched the extended versions of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit back-to-back, and no stops at all.

20 hours and 14 minutes. 1,214 minutes. It's too much, isn't it? Just too much, even if you like Lord of the Rings.

If you don't, it's certainly far too much. It's too much. And I think that's got similarities with Jeremiah 1 to 20. I don't think there's any sustained stretch of the Bible quite like these chapters, which has been occupying us the last five weeks.

[1 : 1 3] The highly charged emotions, the relentless intensity, the looming reality of terrible judgment, the raw angst of the prophet. I don't know how you found it. I found it just a little bit too much.

God assaults our emotions and our assumptions through Jeremiah. Through this prophet, God speaks into the messy world of Judah as they stare down the barrel of a Babylonian exile.

And he tells his spokesman that it's his job to announce to the people who will not listen that it's over. It's over. And they're to come back to him, and enough is enough.

And we've watched Jeremiah pouring himself into trying to convince God's people that their religion was killing them. And he calls them back to the God who can give them life.

He confronts their spiritual hypocrisy and their deafness. And as he does all this, Jeremiah exposes to us the heart of God. And he reveals to us what does it mean to serve God, authentic ministry.

[2 : 1 4] And we've seen in Jeremiah something of the Lord Jesus Christ. The wounded prophet speaks God's word, suffers the pain, does whatever it takes to get the words across, who sticks to the task, even when it means being broken, and it's almost too much.

These words are an overdose of confronting urgent reality. And now in chapters 16 to 20, this great wave of intensity reaches its climax. And we're confronted with not just the shape of what gospel, ministry, church life looks like, but with the cost of it.

The cost of it. And I want to walk you through these towering chapters in four steps, which highlight the cost of serving God our King. I won't cover every detail, but I want you to get the basic texture of these chapters.

To feel the weight of them. As again, Jeremiah invites us to listen in as God speaks to him, and urges and demands that he speak the truth, and that he embody the truth to his people, and how that will cost him.

And I'm not sure there is anywhere else in the Bible that matches the intensity, intensity, and the cost of ministry that comes into sharp focus.

[3 : 3 5] We need to feel, and to see, and to grasp. Now, you know that you are not Jeremiah, and the cost is not identical. I think we can safely say that none of us will have quite so an important role in salvation history as the prophet Jeremiah.

But don't forget that there is this basic continuity from the prophets to Jesus. It is Jesus who pays the ultimate cost.

But that cost is anticipated and sketched out for us ahead of time by those like Jeremiah who served God faithfully before him. And then Jesus calls you and I as his people to face up to the real but restricted cost that we have to pay.

There is a connection between the cost that Jeremiah paid before Jesus comes and the cost that Jesus expects you and I to bear as we follow him on this side of the cross.

So the ministry of Jeremiah in the 8th century BC shows us something of what we can expect. So first in chapter 16, verse 1 to 21, can you see the cost of being committed?

[4 : 45] Flashbacks, flick back to chapter 16, verse 1. The cost of being committed. The word of the Lord came to me, You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. We don't know if Jeremiah was ever married, but one thing is clear, there wasn't to be a wife or children for the prophet this side of the exile.

Being committed for Jeremiah meant a real relational cost. Knowing and speaking the truth meant for Jeremiah that he couldn't just pretend life was going to continue as normal.

He knew that in the words of verses 3 to 5, that the children of Judah would die of deadly diseases. And they wouldn't be lamented or buried. They would lie as dung on the surface of the ground, perishing by the sword or famine.

There'll be food for the birds of the air. And the sign for that dreadful reality God told Jeremiah was, Don't get married. Then in chapter 16, verse 5, Not only was it a case of no marriage, no sex for the prophet, but also no sympathy to be shown to the people.

In particular, he wasn't to go to any funerals. For thus says the Lord God, Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or grieve for them, for I have taken away my peace from this people.

[5 : 55] My steadfast love and mercy declares the Lord. Now, you might not be a fan of funerals, but think of this for a second. It's not just a prohibition on going to church services. God is telling the prophet that he cannot have normal human relationships.

Both great and small shall die in the land. They shall not be buried. No one shall lament them, or cut himself, or make himself bald for them. No one shall break bread for the mourner to comfort him for the dead.

Nor shall anyone give him the cup of consolation. And God is not finished yet. The ban extends to parties and wedding receptions. You shall not go, verse 8, into the house of feasting, to sit with them, to eat and drink.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days. The voice of mirth, the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride, silence.

And when the prophet says, why all of this? What is our iniquity? What is the sin we've committed? Jeremiah the party pooper has to pronounce, because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord.

[7 : 01] And they've gone after other gods. They've saved and worshipped them. And have forsaken me, and have not kept my law. Verse 12, and because you've done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows your stubborn, evil will, refusing to listen to me.

Therefore, I will hurl you out of this land. These are the harsh words that Jeremiah has to announce to his next-door neighbour, to his community, his schoolmates, his extended family.

And his life is to match the dark message. For this is the cost of being committed. And it's always been like this. The relationship, the intimacy that the prophet has with God does come at a cost.

The grace that God pours out in drawing us into his family, and joining us to Christ, and then sending us out into the world, always comes with a cost.

For Jeremiah, his ministry specifically affected his marriage, his future, his social life, even his happiness. There was a real cost. And you might be sitting there tonight and thinking, well, the cost actually is relatively low.

[8 : 06] And we live and breathe in an environment which is pretty unusual in the history of the church. It has been for the last 200 years, really. But the cost of being committed to Christ will at some point go through the roof.

None of us has any idea what the Lord has in store for us in the years ahead. But if you are committed to the Lord Jesus, there will be a cost. And don't take that from me.

Take it from Jesus himself. Luke 14, if anyone comes to me and doesn't hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you desiring to build a temple does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he's enough to complete it. Otherwise, when he's laid a foundation and he's not able to finish it, all who see it will mock and say this man began to build and he wasn't able to finish.

Or what king going out to encounter another king in a war will not sit down first and count the cost of war? So therefore, any of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple, Jesus Christ.

[9 : 13] Being committed to the Lord Jesus complicates your relationships. It introduces tensions with parents, siblings. It can make life with your spouse more painful.

In some cases, it can narrow down your marriage options to virtually nil. Following Jesus complicates family life, upping the demands on us as fathers and husbands and wives and mothers and brothers and sisters.

Being committed to Christ will drastically affect your finances, your career path, and your ego. Being committed to Jesus may well cost you your life. So why put up with this?

Why is this a cost worth paying? And it's a slightly surprising answer that God gives to Jeremiah, a compelling answer to that question in the middle of all his own tension. Why should he put up with this?

We'll look at chapter 16, verses 14 and 15. And therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, as the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but as the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of the countries where you've driven them, for I will bring them back to their own land, and I will give to them, give to their fathers, that I give to their fathers.

[10 : 24] God says to Jeremiah, remember the pain now is the precursor to the joy that will eventually follow. Yes, there is judgment now, but there will be dramatic salvation to come, which leads Jeremiah to cry out, verse 19, O Lord, my strength, my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble.

To you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say, our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit. Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods. Therefore, behold, I will make them know this once.

I will make them know my power on my mouth, and they shall know, the nation shall know, that my name is the Lord. A day is coming when the Lord will be recognized and acknowledged and worshipped by people from all nations.

And that is why Jeremiah can put up with the sacrifices, the abuse, the pain, the angst. It's all worth it because of what God will do. Or to sharpen it slightly, for us, it's actually worth it because of Jesus.

And we can easily lose sight that we belong to Jesus Christ. And we've been rescued by Jesus Christ. And we are united by faith to Jesus Christ.

[11 : 43] And we will worship Jesus Christ around his throne forever. And sometimes I think you wouldn't actually know that we love Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus himself who makes it worthwhile following him. It is Jesus who calls us to take on his yoke. It's ultimately about Jesus. And I wonder if it could be tonight that you've lost sight of that and lost sight of him.

And if we've lost sight of him, then we'll think the cost is not worth paying. Unless our gaze is fixed on Jesus' beginning and end, then sooner or later it will all just seem too much.

It is Jesus who makes the cost of being committed more than worth it. Secondly, as is the cost of embracing the message. In the next section of chapter 17, 1 to 18, the focus is on this fused words of God and Jeremiah.

Because remember in Jeremiah you flip back and fall between Jeremiah's words and God's word almost without distinction. It's hard to work out which is which sometimes. The focus shifts from what Jeremiah must give up and put up with to what Jeremiah actually needs to embrace at the deepest level of his personality.

[13 : 00] And it all revolves around the nature of the human heart. The chapter begins with an expose of the sins of Judah. The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, with a point of a diamond.

It's engraved on the tablet of their heart. And their sin spills out from there in a whole manner of ways. But it starts with a heart problem. And in that, Judah is typical of all of us.

That's made clear in verses 5 to 7, isn't it? What do 5 and 7 remind you? It's Psalm 1 language. Cursed is the man who trusts in man who makes flesh his strength whose heart turns away from the Lord.

Verse 7, Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. He's like a tree planted by water that sends out its root by the stream and so on. So the covenant-keeping man is blessed.

The covenant-breaking man is cursed. The problem is, of course, and this is the lesson Judah should have learned from Israel and we should have learned from Judah is that we are all the covenant-breaking man.

[14:00] And it's because of our hardness of heart. In the Bible, the heart is the control center of our personality. The heart is where we think.

The heart is where we decide. And it makes chapter 17, verse 9, all the more confronting and damning. Can you read it with me? Look at this. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Who can understand it? And that is the message that Jeremiah and we are called to embrace. Because God searches our hearts, verse 10 to 13, and he will judge us. Yet there is hope for those who don't forsake God.

But like Israel, like Judah, we surely, even though we know he's the fountain of living water, we turn away. Why? Because the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

And who can understand it? There is no more difficult, no more painful, no more costly truth to embrace from this. But embrace it, we must.

[15:02] You may have not thought about it in this way. But embracing Jeremiah 17, verse 9, may well be the hardest thing that you ever have to do. We are hardwired, aren't we, to think well of ourselves.

And we instinctively excuse ourselves. Without a moment's hesitation, we are all able to explain how circumstances have conspired to make us behave badly.

How our actions look so much worse than they actually are. If only you knew what was going on in my heart, you wouldn't see that it's that bad. You would see that I'm much nicer than you currently think.

But for the sake of our long-term spiritual health, there's nothing more vital or urgent, no more painful, no more ultimately more freeing than this truth. What does it look like if we embrace this truth? Well, perhaps, speaking about what it looks like if we haven't embraced this truth is easier. We wander through life in this kind of haze of self-congratulation and self-justification. We give ourselves license to act as if we're nicer than we really are.

[16:20] Do you talk too much about yourself? Or do you ask questions? Do you constantly talk yourself up and others down? Do you assume that you know best?

Instinctively, do you know, do you seek the wisdom of others? They're hard questions, aren't they? Do you resist facing and owning your own sins and instead point out the sins of others?

Or will you deliberately and courageously face and own your sin and seek to encourage others to find great as they do the same? That's the basic choice we face. Whether or not to face the reality of our sinfulness and the truth of Jeremiah 17, verse 9.

No decision, no doctrine, no admission matters more in real time than the real world for the future of your life with Christ than this.

Killing off self-love will allow the Holy Spirit to take this truth and plant it deep in us so that it explodes at the nerve center of our spiritual self.

[17:29] The death of our pride, that's no small thing. And this, I suggest, is the reason why Jeremiah cries out in chapter 17, verse 14. Look what he says. He says, Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed.

Save me, and I shall be saved. For you, my praise. It's hard to embrace this message. The cost of embracing and speaking the truth about sin, verse 15. Behold, they say to me, where is the word of the Lord?

Bring it on, let it come. I've not run away from being a shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips. It was before your face. I spoke about all this, and they attacked me.

It's so hard, Jeremiah says. Be not a tarry to me. You are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me. Let me not be put to shame. Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed.

Bring upon them the day of disaster. Destroy them with double destruction. For Jeremiah, the only relief and the only vindication in the face of his enemies is the coming judgment.

[18 : 29] For you and I, it is a bit different. For us, the cost of embracing this message is instantly met with the tender forgiveness of Jesus, running to Christ in repentance and faith in the light of this brings.

James sums it up, doesn't he? James says, and God opposes the proud. He wants nothing to do with them, but he gives grace to the humble. He can't keep away from them. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hearts, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched.

Mourn, weep. Take Jeremiah 17, verse 9, to heart. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. It's the sweet, sweet cost of embracing the message of the gospel, and finding relief in Jesus Christ himself.

[19 : 32] The third aspect of the cost is in verses 19 and 27, and you see the cost of calling for a response. Jeremiah switches back to prose and records how he urges God's people to respond specifically to his teaching, and he calls for a very particular response.

You pick up the thread in 17, in 17, verse 19. Thus said the Lord to me, go and stand in the people's gate by which the kings of Judah enter, and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, and say, hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem who enter by these gates.

Thus says the Lord, take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. Keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.

Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck that they might not hear and receive instruction. It's classic Deuteronomy. He says, you'll be blessed if you obey, you'll be cursed if you disobey.

If you obey, there will be Davidic kings ruling in Jerusalem, and everyone will be happy. If you disobey, you'll go into exile. In all likelihood, this is one of his earliest sermons, where there's still some hope that people might listen.

[20 : 44] And what happens, what's the response to this sermon by this great preacher? We'll look at the end of chapter 17, and you'll see nothing. Absolutely nothing. And Jeremiah preaches his heart out.

He preaches his heart out, knowing something that we never will, knowing that every syllable that comes out of his mouth has come from God himself. It's truly an inspired sermon, and the result is nothing.

God's people don't pay any attention at all. They keep careering to the curse of exile. And how hard that must have been. I don't know if you realize this, but there is, isn't there, an emotional cost to calling people to respond.

Every time you urge people to repent and believe, every time you lay before them the stunning beauty of our God and King, and you invite them to gasp in amazement, every time you seek to persuade people to bring every part of their lives under the lordship of Jesus, whether it's parenting, whether it's talking about your children's social media activity, whether it's talking about giving, whether it's talking about our priorities in life, every time you proclaim God's word in whatever context, and you call for response, you're laying yourself wide open.

What are you laying yourself wide open to? Discouragement, disappointment, self-doubt, self-recrimination. There is a cost to calling people to respond. And nowhere, I think, in the Bible is that clearer than in the life and ministry of Jeremiah.

[22 : 22] It's not just sharing what you've learnt. There's this horrific phrase in, oh, I go to preach places, and they say, well, now Paul will come and explain the Bible as if I'm some kind of English teacher. That's not what preaching is at all.

It's much, much more than that. It's not just sharing what you've learnt, but persuading others to take hold of the truth. As God takes hold of our hearts, so we long, don't we, for others to respond in the same way too.

And that's what it means to follow Christ, to speak the words of Christ, to weep the tears of Christ, to suffer the pain of Christ in the strength that he supplies. And then in chapters 18 to 20, there's the cost of saying the hard thing.

The final cost. In a way, the cost of saying hard things, but that's what he does. And it reaches a real climax in this long section. Jeremiah has to arise.

He goes to the potter's house in chapter 18, verse 2, where the potter is having another go at his first messed up pot. Oh, house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?

[23 : 29] God could smash them, or he could remake them. It's over to them. Verse 11. Now therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, thus says the Lord, behold, I'm shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you.

Return everyone from his evil way. Amend your ways and your deeds. And unfortunately, God already knows what their response is going to be. Verse 12. But they say, this is in vain.

We'll follow our own but it's announcing judgment to God's people. And he does it again. Well, what happens to him? Shock, horror. Verse 18, they attack him. Come, let's make plots against Jeremiah.

For the Lord shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. We're not going to give up everything that everyone is saying to believe, Jeremiah. Let's strike him with the tongue.

Let's not pay attention to any of his words. Verse 19, Jeremiah cries out, hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil, yet they dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you.

[24 : 28] Therefore, deliver up their children of famine. Give them over to the powers of the sword. Let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence. Their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them.

For they've dug a pit to take means. So on. Don't forgive them. Do not blot out their sin. Let them be overthrown before you. Deal with them in the time of your anger, Lord.

Now I think on balance, it's fair to say this isn't Jeremiah's finest hour. But we need to hold on to two things. The first is that Jeremiah's enemies are really God's enemies.

That he has brought a direct word from God and they've attacked him. And that in itself heightens it above any situation that you are I'll face. Secondly, his words are recorded in part of the least to show you the real cost of saying hard things when they're obviously true.

Same patterns repeated in chapter 19. God tells Jeremiah to go and take some pottery and gather the elders and priests and go to the interestingly named pottery fragment gate. I wonder what's going to happen there.

[25 : 35] Chapter 19 verses 3 to 9 brings another horrific message. Chapter 10 says, well then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you and you shall say to them, thus says the Lord of hosts, so will I break this people in the city as one breaks a potter's vessel.

And then just for good measure verse 15, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, behold I'm bringing upon the city and upon all its town all the disaster that I've pronounced against it, because they've stiffened their neck refusing to hear my words.

Jeremiah, like no other man in the Bible, sticks relentlessly to a thankless task of saying hard things that it costs him. Jeremiah 20, Pasho, the priest, sticks him in the stocks.

What does he do, verse 3, when he's released from the stocks? Jeremiah said to him, the Lord does not call your name Pasho, but terror on every side. The Lord is going to judge you. He's got guts, hasn't he?

And when it's all over, Jeremiah collapses in a heap. And the words in chapter 20, verses 7 to 18, are probably the most intense outpouring of discouragement in the whole of the Bible.

[26 : 41] He's drained, defeated, depressed, exhausted, empty. Oh Lord, you've deceived me, and I shut up the word and it burns within me. If I speak it, they just mock me.

Verses 11 to 13, his theology momentarily kicks in to steady him before verse 14, he plunges deeper into despair than ever before. Cursed be the man who brought the news to my dad, a son is

born to you, making him very glad.

Why did I come out of the womb? Verse 18, why did I come out of the womb to see sorrow, toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame? Now imagine for a moment you are Baruch the scribe, and you're writing this down.

He lifts his pen and he says to Jeremiah, are you sure? You want me to write this down? You want me to include you? This isn't exactly you at your best, Jeremiah. And Jeremiah nods and says, stays in.

It's exactly how I felt, it's what I said, it's what it cost. And you can imagine the same conversation being rerun after Jehoiachim has thrown all of Jeremiah's work into the fire, and Baruch is having to write it out all again, and he comes to the same bit, we're at chapter 20, Jeremiah, do you really want this in?

[27 : 46] It's got to stay in. Because Jeremiah knows that saying hard things is costly. And often speaking the truth of the gospel into the lives of our friends or relatives is not something that we're thankful for.

In fact, we are more than likely to be misrepresented and slandered and sidelined. And often things don't change when we speak the truth, even when we speak it lovingly. Because when God is at work through his word, he exposes and he confronts, and he often breaks down before he builds up.

God's word in our lives is often painful. And just as often those who speak the truth into our lives, they suffer, don't they, the collateral damage. You think about it, they don't like it.

You probably didn't like it when your parents or whoever it was spoke God's truth to you at first. Christ. But we are prepared to say hard things lovingly for the sake of Jesus Christ. Well, if we want to be faithful, we've got no option.

Because as John says, whoever follows Christ must walk as he did. And that just about brings us to the end of this fiercely intense first half of Jeremiah.

[28 : 55] From here on, it seems that Jeremiah has embraced the fact judgment is coming. And from this point on, he calmly and courageously devotes the rest of his life to persuading his people, his peers, that this is what is happening.

And he holds out to them the hope. The hope of a new covenant on the other side of judgment. So what are we to make of this? Well, I think we are to marvel at the sheer commitment of this man who paid an immense cost.

For speaking the truth. To marvel at him embodying and living and teaching the very words of God himself. And he did it all before the coming of the Lord Jesus. But we have, of course, seen the one whom Jeremiah only caught glimpses of.

The one whom as God in the flesh became the perfect suffering servant. The one who pressed on even at points where Jeremiah wilted. The one who loved where Jeremiah raged.

Even dying on a cross for us. And it is this prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the keys for us. Because he is the one who's worth following.

[30 : 08] And he is the one to whom we commit ourselves. And he is the one we receive when we embrace the message of the gospel. And he is the one who we are calling people to respond to.

And he is the one who calls us to love one another with a real truthful costly love. And he is the one in whom and for whom and through whom we live and suffer and rejoice.

And it is worth it because he is worth it. His love has no limit. His grace has no measure.

His power has no boundary. No none to man. For out of his goodness in Jesus he gareth and gareth and gareth again.

The cost is worth paying because he is worth it. Let's pray.