The choir is going to sing a fairly serious meditation for us that will prepare us for the reading of God's word. *'Thou Knowest Lord'.*

***Singing (2 Minutes)***

That song might very easily have been sung by Jeremiah, as we shall see from reading chapters 14 and 15 in his prophecy...chapter 14 and 15, the book of Jeremiah, and we can enter into it very sympathetically because it comes out of a bad season for ***RAIN***. That's the background to these two chapters---and for us too, this has been the ***WORST*** year for rain in a very long, long time, and the long-term effects of it are only just beginning to be felt. So, we can understand these two chapters.

*The message came to Jeremiah from the Lord explaining* ***WHY*** *he was holding back the* ***RAIN****. "Judah mourns. Business has ground to a halt. All the people prostrate themselves to the earth, and a great* ***CRY*** *rises from Jerusalem. The nobles send servants for water from the wells...but the wells are DRY. The servants return baffled and desperate, and cover their heads in* ***GRIEF****. The ground is patched and cracked for lack of rain. The farmers are afraid. The deer desserts have fallen because there is no grass. The wild donkeys stand upon the bare hills panting like thirsty jackals. They strain their eyes looking for grass to eat, though there is none to be found.*

*"Oh Lord, we have* ***SINNED*** *against you grievously; yet help us for the sake of your own reputation. Oh, Hope of Israel, our Savior in times of trouble.* ***WHY*** *are you as a stranger to us, as one passing through the land who is merely stopping for the night? Are you also baffled? Are you helpless to save us? Oh Lord, you are right here among us, and we carry your name. We are known as' your people'. Oh Lord. Don't desert us now."*

*But the Lord replies, "You have loved to* ***WANDER*** *far from me and have not tried to follow in my paths. Now, I will no longer accept you as my people. Now, I will* ***REMEMBER*** *all the* ***EVIL*** *you have done and punish your sins."*

*The Lord told me again, "****DON'T PRAY****, don't ask me any more to bless this people.* ***DON'T PRAY FOR THEM ANYMORE****! When they fast, I will* ***NOT*** *pay any attention. When they present their offerings and sacrifices to me, I will* ***NOT*** *accept them. What I will give them in return is* ***WAR*** *and* ***FAMINE*** *and* ***DISEASE****."*

 *Then I said, "Oh Lord God. Their prophets are telling them that all is well, that no war or famine will come. They tell the people you will surely send them peace...that you will bless them."*

 *Then the Lord said, "The prophets are telling* ***LIES*** *in my name. I didn't send them or tell them to speak or give them any message. The prophecy of visions and revelations they have never seen nor heard; they speak foolishness concocted out of their own lying hearts." Therefore, the Lord says, "I will punish these lying prophets who have spoken in my name, though I did not send them, who say no war shall come, nor famine. By* ***WAR*** *and* ***FAMINE*** *they themselves shall die. And the people to whom they prophesy: their bodies shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and war. There shall be no one to bury them. Husbands, wives, sons, and daughters all will be gone; for I will pour out terrible* ***PUNISHMENT*** *upon them for their* ***SINS****.*

*"Therefore, tell them this, 'Night and day my eyes shall overflow with tears. I cannot stop my crying. For my people have been run through with a sword and lie MO****RTALLY WOUNDED*** *on the ground. If I go out in the* ***FIELDS****, there lie the bodies of those the* ***SWORD*** *has killed; and if I walk in the* ***STREETS****, there lie those dead from* ***STARVATION*** *and* ***DISEASE****.*

*' And yet the prophets and priests alike have made it their business to travel through the whole country reassuring everyone that all was well, speaking of things they knew nothing about.' "*

*"Oh Lord," the people will cry, "have you completely rejected Judah? Do you abhor Jerusalem even after punishment? Will there be no peace? We thought, 'Now at last he will heal us and bind our wounds,' but no peace has come. There is only* ***TROUBLE*** *and* ***TERROR*** *everywhere. Oh Lord, we confess our wickedness, and that of our fathers too. Do not hate us Lord, for the sake of your own name. Do not disgrace yourself and the throne of your glory by forsaking your promise to bless us. What heathen god can give us rain? Who, but you alone, oh Lord our God, can do such things as this. Therefore, we will wait for you to help us."*

 *Then the Lord said to me, "Even if* ***MOSES*** *and* ***SAMUEL*** *stood before me pleading for these people, even then I wouldn't help them! Away with them! Get them out of my sight! And if they say to you, 'But where can we go?' Tell them, 'The Lord says, "Those who are destined for death, to death; those who must die by the sword, to the sword; those doomed to starvation, to famine; and those for captivity, to captivity." ' I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers," says the Lord, "the* ***SWORD*** *to kill, the* ***DOGS*** *to tear, and the* ***VULTURES*** *and* ***WILD ANIMALS*** *to finish up what's left, because of the wicked things that* ***MANASSEH****, son of Hezekiah, king of Judah did in Jerusalem. I will punish you so severely, that your fate will horrify the peoples of world.* ***WHO*** *will feel sorry for you Jerusalem?* ***WHO*** *will weep for you.* ***WHO*** *will even bother to ask how you are. You have* ***FORSAKEN*** *me and turned your back upon me. Therefore, I will clench my fists against you to destroy you. I am tired of always giving you another chance. I will sift you at the gates of your cities and take from you all that you hold dear; and I will* ***DESTROY*** *my own people, because they* ***REFUSE*** *to turn back to me from all their evil ways. There shall be countless widows. At noontime I will bring death to the young men and sorrow to their mothers. I will cause* ***ANGUISH*** *and* ***TERROR*** *to fall upon them suddenly. The mother of seven sickens and faints, for all her sons are dead. Her sun has gone down while it is yet day. She sits* ***CHILDLESS*** *now...disgraced, for all her children have been killed."*

 *Then Jeremiah said, "What* ***SADNESS*** *is mine, my mother! Oh, that I had died at birth, for I am hated everywhere I go. I am neither a* ***CREDITOR****, soon to foreclose nor a* ***DEBTOR****, refusing to pay. Yet they all curse me. Well, let them curse. Lord, you know how I have* ***PLEADED*** *with you on their behalf---how I have* ***BEGGED*** *you to spare these enemies of mine."*

*The Lord said, "Can a man break bars of northern iron or bronze? This people's* ***STUBBORN WILL*** *can't be broken either. So, because of all your sins against me, I will deliver your wealth and treasures as spoil to the enemy. I will have your enemies take you as slaves to a land where you have never been before, for my anger burns like fire and it shall consume you."*

 *Then Jeremiah replied, "Lord, you know it is for* ***YOUR*** *sake that I'm suffering. They are persecuting me because I have proclaimed your word to them. Don't let them kill me. Rescue me from their clutches and give them what they deserve. Your* ***WORDS*** *are what sustain me. They are* ***FOOD*** *to my hungry soul. They bring* ***JOY*** *to my sorrowing heart and delight me.* ***HOW******PROUD I AM TO BEAR YOUR NAME, OH******LORD****! I have not joined the people in their 'merry feasts'. I sit alone beneath the hand of God. I burst with indignation at their sins. Yet you have failed me in my time of need. You have let them keep right on with all their persecutions. Will they never stop hurting me? Your help is as* ***UNCERTAIN*** *as a seasonal mountain brook---sometimes a flood, sometimes as dry as a bone."*

 *The Lord replied, "Stop this foolishness, and talk some sense. Only if you* ***RETURN*** *to trusting me will I let you continue as my spokesman. You are to influence* ***THEM****, not let them influence* ***YOU****! They will fight against you like a besieging army against a high city wall; but they will not conquer you, for I am with you to protect and deliver you," says the Lord. "Yes, I will certainly deliver you from these wicked men, and rescue you from their ruthless hands."*

***Having a Balanced View of God***

People who don't read and study the Old Testament usually come to an ***UNBALANCED*** view of God, because God is the God of the whole Bible, Old and New Testament; and if we pick and choose in the Bible, we are virtually making God in ***OUR*** own image, or at least in the image that we want him to be. You see, the God of the Jews, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God. The only Bible Jesus had was the Old Testament. And yet for many, many centuries people have set the Old Testament against the New and drawn a contrast between the two Gods. This heresy is at least 1,300 years old, if not more. There was a man called ***MARCIAN*** who claimed to be a Christian centuries ago who said the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus are two different Gods; and, therefore, he proposed that Christian should stop reading and studying the Old Testament. Very significantly, only a few years passed before he began to advise Christians to cut out parts of the New Testament too, because he found that the Old Testament God appeared in the New Testament also. And for example, he began by cutting out the Book of Revelation, and he worked backwards through the epistles. And then he found that, even in the gospels, the God he didn't like was still there in certain passages. All of which underlines: you can't say the Old Testament God is like this and the God of Jesus like this. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was the God who brought the Jews out of Egypt---and the God of Jeremiah---because Jesus was a ***JEW*** as well as the ***SON OF GOD***; and that's why we're studying Jeremiah.

However, having said that, there are differences of ***EMPHASIS*** between the Old and New Testaments. They are ***COMPLIMENTARY***, not contradictory. But the Old Testament certainly lays a heavier emphasis on the ***JUSTICE*** of God, whereas the New Testament places more emphasis on his ***MERCY***. The Old Testament places more emphasis on the ***LAW***, the New Testament on the ***GOSPEL***. The Old Testament puts more emphasis on ***PUNISHMENT***, the New on ***PARDON***; but they're complimentary. And the reason why there is a difference of ***EMPHASIS*** is this: the Bible tells you which part of God's character you need to understand ***FIRST***. And if you try and help people to understand his ***MERCY*** before you have conveyed to them his ***JUSTICE***, if you try to preach to people about ***PARDON*** before you have talked about ***PUNISHMENT***, if you try to preach the ***GOSPEL*** before you've talked about the ***LAW***, then you will finish up with a sentimental, romantic, ***SOFT*** view of God, which will result in people never taking sin seriously and saying, like the dying Frenchman Heiner, *"Dieu, me pardonnera, c'est son métier."* (*"God, forgive me, that's His trade.")* That's the word of a man who'd never been taught the Old Testament and who simply thought of God as an indulgent grandfather who would ***ALWAYS*** have us in heaven---no matter when, no matter what.

Now that's ***NOT*** the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. And when we read Jeremiah's chapter 14 and 15, we come across something about God which at first sight will hurt and hit us. We come against this simple truth: that God can get tired of forgiving people, that God can come to the end of his patience, that God can reach the end of his tether and that there can come a point where, even if people confess their sins, God will not listen to that prayer and forgive them. Now at the end of this morning's sermon, we should ask how that lines up with the story of 'the prodigal son' in Luke 15--- with the teaching of Jesus that the heavenly Father waits to forgive, with the emphasis of the New Testament on the grace of God, longing to pardon. Somehow, we've got to tie these together, because it's the ***SAME GOD***. And in Jeremiah 14 and 15 the people cry, *"We've sinned. We confess, we've sinned against you. We're full of wickedness and iniquities."* And God said, *"Take these people away. I'm tired of them. I'm tired of listening, I'm just not going to answer that prayer."* And we've got to ask when does God reach the ***END OF HIS PATIENCE***? When does God get to the point where he says, *"I'm finished. No more* ***PRAYERS*** *from now on. No more* ***CONFESSION*** *from now on. It is from this moment* ***TOO LATE*** *to ask for forgiveness."* And we shall find that Jesus taught exactly ***THIS*** kind of a God.

I'll give you one example now so that you can be thinking about it: the *'parable of the 10 virgins'*. Do you remember that? And there came a point where the door was shut; and even though the five came and prayed and pleaded to be let in afterwards, they were told it's ***TOO LATE***. The door of opportunity had closed. And you'll find that Jesus taught this same truth: We must never trade on the patience of God; it will not last forever. God reaches the point where he said, *"I've had enough. I close the door; and I close my ears even to a prayer of confession."* But we've got to look into it more deeply.

***These Chapters Focus on Jeremiah's Prayer Life***

Now, these two chapters are concerned with Jeremiah's ***PRAYER*** life, not with his ***PREACHING*** life. Do you remember a Sunday morning or two ago, we saw that there was a great contrast between Jeremiah when he preached and Jeremiah when he prayed. The contrast we saw then was that Jeremiah when he ***PREACHED*** was bold, dogmatic, definite, sure of himself; but when he ***PRAYED,*** he was full of doubts and very unsure of himself. When he talked to ***MEN***, he was strong and clear. When he talked to GOD he was just the opposite.

Now in these two chapters we're going to see another great contrast between Jeremiah-the-***PREACHER*** and Jeremiah-the-***PRAY-ER***, and we're going to have to learn something for ourselves from this. And the contrast now is this: when Jeremiah ***PREACHED***, he stood firmly on God's side over against men. But when he ***PRAYED,*** he stood firmly on men's side over against God. And God had to deal with this ***INCONSISTENCY***; and we shall see how God dealt with it. But when Jeremiah prayed, he found himself on the side of men. He felt for them so deeply that he began to say things to God that really should never have been said.

I give you a very down to earth example: when ***DISASTER*** strikes, we tend to take the side of men rather than God. There is a memorial service taking place at this very moment in the cathedral for the five girls from St. Catherine's school who were killed by the aircraft crash down at Dunsfold a week last Thursday evening. And that's raising very big questions in the minds of many of the girls and of the staff. It's a trauma for the whole school. Three of the members of our church are teachers in that school, and they are feeling the trauma of the whole school going through this unexpected tragedy. We have to face the facts in these situations. If we really believe what we preach when things are going well, we have to face the fact that some of those girls were not ready to meet God. But in tragedy like that, don't we tend instinctively to take the girls' side and say, "Surely, surely God will have mercy on them and take them to glory." And I want you to pray for those three Christian teachers that they will not say anything they will have to un-say later...that they will not give any false assurance that is in contradiction to what they really believe. It's going to be very hard for them to take ***GOD'S*** side and not the ***GIRLS''*** side in this tragedy. Have I given you the conflict: when disaster comes, your human sympathies so easily go straight to those who've suffered it, and pray from their angle, and think from their angle, and want to say, "God, why did you do it? God, why are you behaving like this? God, why did you allow it?" And we will find that as these disasters of ***DROUGHT*** and ***FAMINE*** and ***WAR*** came to Israel, that Jeremiah in his prayer life took the ***PEOPLE'S*** side time and time again. Oh, he confessed their sins, but he kept saying, *"Why? Why? Why God, are You behaving like a stranger to us, a stranger passing in the night? Why are You smiting us? Why?"* And indeed, at one point he starts telling God, *"God, You're like a dried-up brook. You help us sometimes, and other times when we come to You, You're not there."* And he's saying all kinds of things that should never be said to God because his sympathies are with the people, and he's being torn.

Now we're going to learn a deep lesson from this. Because in the troubles that are coming on our nation, our sympathies are going to be very much with the ***PEOPLE WHO ARE GOING TO SUFFER*** --- people on low fixed incomes, people who are unemployed---and our sympathy is going to go more and more that way unless we learn the lesson Jeremiah had to learn, and learn to stand firmly on ***GOD'S SIDE*** even when we ***PRAY***. It's easy enough to do that when we ***PREACH***; but it's not so easy to do it when we ***PRAY***.

***Jeremiah Has Two Cycles of Prayer in These Chapters***

And so, let's get into this lesson. Let's get into it. Now there are ***TWO CYCLES OF PRAYER***, if you like, that follow the identical pattern. They probably happened within a few months, or a year or two of each other. And Jeremiah, bless him, has told somebody what happened in his prayer life so that they could write it down--- probably that scribe called ***BARUCH***, who wrote most of Jeremiah down for us. And he's shared with us these two cycles of prayer in which he ***ARGUED*** with God. And each time God had the last word, as He usually does. And Jeremiah's recorded them for us so that we could learn. The ***FIRST*** cycle is from verse one to verse 16 of chapter 14. And then the ***SECOND*** cycle, which follows an identical outline, goes through to the end of chapter 15. And on the bulletin, there's an outline: A, B, C, D, E for the ***FIVE*** stages in each cycle. And number one, under each heading: A-1, B-1, C-1, D-1, E-1, are the five stages of the ***FIRST*** cycle. And then, A-2, B-2, C-2, D-2, E-2, are the stages of the ***SECOND*** cycle. But I've put them like that so that you realize: the same thing happened exactly in the same pattern twice. And dear Jeremiah went through the whole business ***TWICE***. He got the message at the end of the ***SECOND*** time. Such is the patience of God with his servants, that He sometimes has to take us right through the same lesson ***TWICE*** before we begin to get the message.

***The First Prayer Cycle: Inconsistency of Human Prayer***

Now let's look at the ***FIRST*** cycle, chapter 14 verses one to 16. The first step is a ***DESCRIPTION OF JUDAH'S PROBLEM***, which at this time was ***DROUGHT***. And in the Middle East that is serious, because they lived on limestone hills, which were porous, and the rainwater just went straight through. Therefore, they were very dependent on a continuous supply of rain. And this only came if the wind came from the west, and drew the moisture from the Mediterranean, and dropped it when it hit the rising slopes of the Judean hills. Soon as the wind veered round to the east---and there are only two winds in the Middle East, east and west---soon as the winds veered round to the east, they came from the desert...the hot Sirocco wind, which still comes to this day. And so, they either had hot, dry weather, or cooler, wet weather. And they had had no cooler, wet weather all summer. The grass was brown and dry, and the earth was cracked. It's a vivid description of ***DROUGHT***. The animals are just standing, panting. Mother deer are forsaking their babies because they just can't produce the milk. There isn't enough moisture in their desiccated bodies.

It's hitting rich as well as poor. The nobles send their servants right around the country to well, after well, after well, to try and bring back. You see in a time of shortage, the ***RICH*** can do something about it. And so, the rich are employing servants to travel miles to bring back a bucketful; but even they can't find it. The ***POOR*** can't even send servants...well they may be traveling around themselves with an empty bucket. It's a vivid picture. You can get the feel of the situation. We have rarely, if ever, experienced ourselves such drought; but if you went to Sudan, or Chad, or Ethiopia today, you'd see it. We don't know what drought is in this country, living in a temperate zone, with prevailing Southwesterlies that bring from the Atlantic the moisture that makes Ireland the *'Emerald Isle'*, and makes England a *'Green and Pleasant Land'*. We don't know. This summer was only a little touch...a little touch; but they had real drought.

Now Jeremiah realizes that this was not just a natural event but a ***SUPERNATURAL*** event. He knew his Bible. He knew ***DEUTERONOMY***--- that comes out again and again. And in Deuteronomy, God said, *"I'm bringing you into a land flowing with milk and honey. But, if you do not look after that land properly, if you do not obey Me, then I will* ***STOP THE RAIN****...I will stop the rain."* Now Jeremiah also knew about Elijah, one of his predecessors, who had stopped the rain for three and a half years by ***PRAYER ALONE***. And they had suffered drought. Now Jeremiah realizes that God is saying something to his people. What is He saying? The answer is very simple. *"You have* ***FORSAKEN*** *the fountain of living water, so you cannot have any fresh rainwater."* That's what He's saying.

Now comes Jeremiah's prayer. It's a prayer addressed to God. It's in the first-person plural - ***'WE'***. But whose prayer is it? It's on Jeremiah's lips. Had the people told him what to say? Had he listened to other people's prayers in the Temple? Or is he trying to pray FOR, and on ***BEHALF*** OF the people? I think that's the real answer. Jeremiah, in saying *"We have sinned,"* is trying desperately to express what he feels God needs to hear from the nation. He's ***IDENTIFYING WITH*** the nation, ***INTERCEDING*** FOR the nation. And so, he's saying, *"Even if they're not saying, 'We have sinned,' Lord, I understand what You're doing."* And so, it's a prayer of ***CONFESSION***. And yet...and yet, he is so mixed up in his prayer, that even though he says, "We have sinned against you; we are full of iniquity and wickedness," he then says, "But why Lord, are you treating us like this?"

And this is so typically a ***HUMAN*** prayer. We admit we ***DESERVE*** disaster, and then say, *"But Lord, why have you sent it?"* That is so human. We are still not seeing things clearly from ***GOD'S*** point of view. We admit we've done wrong, and yet somehow, *"We're really nice people underneath, Lord, we don't really deserve it. So why have you done it?"* Do you get the ***INCONSISTENCY*** of a very human prayer?

And so, he says, *"God, I'm puzzled by Your attitude. You seem like a stranger---just spending the night and passing on. You don't seem like our God; and yet, You're the Hope of Israel. You're the Savior of Israel."...*Notice the titles: ***HOPE OF ISRAEL, SAVIOR OF ISRAEL***... *"Why aren't You helping us through? I don't understand it one bit. But Lord, I beg You, don't desert us now. Don't desert us now."* Now that's the very ***HUMAN*** prayer.

It was a prayer that, on the face of it, should have got through to God; but it didn't. It was a prayer of ***CONFESSION***; but God didn't forgive. It was a prayer for ***HELP***; but God didn't come to help. It was a prayer challenging God to ***LIVE UP TO HIS TITLES*** of Hope and Savior, yet God ***DID NOT LIVE UP TO THEM***. And that's the problem that Jeremiah had. For Jehovah's answer---and He did answer the prayer, but not with the answer that Jeremiah wanted--- His answer was "***NO***." That's not the problem of unanswered prayer. I'm afraid the problem of ***ANSWERED*** prayer, when it ***ISN'T*** the answer you want, is even greater than the problem of ***UNANSWERED*** prayer. It's one thing for heaven to be ***SILENT***---that's the problem of ***UNANSWERED*** prayer. But when heaven says "***NO***," that's an even bigger problem. That's the problem of ***ANSWERED*** prayer.

And so, God says "***NO***." In fact, He goes on to speak of Israel as if He is a stranger passing in the night---as if they don't belong to Him. He doesn't say *"You."* He says, "***Get THIS PEOPLE OUT OF MY SIGHT***."...*'This people'*... *'them'*... *'them'*... *'them'*... *'them'*. Do you notice that? I've underlined in my Bible: *'them'*... *'them'*... *'them'*. He talks to Jeremiah, not to, *"You My people,"* but *'them'*... *'them'*... *'this people'*. "*Don't you talk to me about being the Hope of Israel. They're* ***NOT*** *My people!* ***THEM****? Get* ***THEM*** *out of My sight."* It's an extraordinary reaction. And God says, *"Look, my decision is already made."* You see, *'this people'* love to ***RUN*** ***AWAY*** when things are going ***WELL***. They only run ***BACK*** when things are going ***BADLY***. Where does their heart really lie? You see when things are going well, you find out if your heart is really loving God. Anybody will run to God when things go ***BADLY***. And that doesn't prove one little thing, I'm quite sure that up at the Cathedral, many are thinking about God this morning and normally never do---because disaster's come. But when the immediate trauma has worn off in 12 months time, will they still be thinking about God when things are all right again... ...when things have got smooth again...when they're comfortable again; will they love to ***WANDER AWAY*** from God then or will they love to ***STAY*** with God? That's the real issue. And God is saying, *"I'm fed up with people who only run to me in trouble. I know perfectly well that when things are all right, they love to wander away. They make no attempt to live right. They put no restraint on themselves, and they only come to me in trouble."* And, he said Jeremiah, *"I'm not listening anymore, because they love to be away from me. And that's the real truth. It's no use your saying they admit their faults; it is no use your saying they're in trouble. I know that; but I know also that their* ***HEART*** *is still* ***AWAY*** *from me, and you're* ***ONLY*** *praying because this* ***DROUGHT*** *has come, aren't you? And that as soon as I give the rain, they'll run away again."* And God says, *"I'm just not going to put up with it any longer."* It's a ***SEVERE*** word. *"And in fact,"* he says, *"the punishment is already decided. My people are going to suffer from* ***WAR*** *and* ***FAMINE*** *and* ***DISEASE****; or to put it in one word,* ***DEATH****."* The wages of sin is death...and every cemetery and crematorium is a reminder of that stark fact. And God says, *"I've decided to punish them. It is* ***TOO******LATE*** *for you to* ***PRAY****, Jeremiah.* ***STOP PRAYING****!!"*

Jeremiah makes one ***FINAL ATTEMPT*** to persuade God to change his mind. He says, *"But don't you see, Lord, that really this can be excused, because they've had false prophets who told them that disaster wouldn't come. They've had so many preachers that have gone around the country saying, ‘It's all right. God will bless you. God will bring peace someday. God will put it right. It's all right. He's not that kind of a God who would finally close the door.’ "* And Jeremiah says, *"Don't you realize they've had this kind of preacher for so long? Can't you excuse them?"* And God says, *"Jeremiah, I know those preachers, they tell lies concocted out of their own hearts; and* ***THEY*** *will suffer war, feminine, and disease along with their congregations.”* In other words, *"Because of their false preaching, I won't excuse their congregations. I'll see that they suffer with their congregations."* That's tough talk. And poor Jeremiah is feeling beaten into the ground. He feels he just can't win. Have you ever felt like that in prayer---that you're just beating against a heaven that just will not listen...that isn't open to entreaty... that can't be ***ARGUED*** with, can't be ***PLEADED*** with. Do you ever get that feeling? Well, Jeremiah certainly had it; and the preachers and their congregations would suffer a fate worse than death. What is that in God's sight? The fate worse than death in God's sight is not only to die, but to have no one to bury you. The ultimate indignity, the ultimate horror of a human being's corpse left in the streets for the animals. ***IT'S TOUGH TALK***. So, Jeremiah ***RETREATS*** from that one.

***The Second Prayer Cycle: Jeremiah Finally Learns the Lesson***

The ***NEXT CYCLE*** is from verse 17 of that chapter to the end of chapter 15; almost identical to the first cycle, but much more detail. And I want you to remember, we're dealing with ***FACT*** now, not fiction. All of these things ***HAPPENED***. Those bodies were left in the streets for the animals. It all came ***TRUE***. So, we're learning from ***HISTORY*** now. And those who will not learn from history are condemned to re-live it. So, let's look at the ***SECOND*** cycle. Now, Judah's problem is ***DEEPER***. From the ***DROUGHT*** has come ***FAMINE***; from the famine has come ***DISEASE*** and ***WEAKNESS***; and from disease and weakness has come ***WAR***, because the enemies around Israel---when they saw how weak she was---began to attack her. The Egyptian troops attacked. ‘*Nebuchadrezzer’* (not ‘*Nebuchadnezzar’*) ...Nebuchadrezzer sent raiding parties against her. And the nations around began to take advantage of her physical weakness. So, it was a ***WHOLE*** ***CYCLE***. The drought led to shortage of food. The shortage of food led to a lowering of the national health service. The health service, bringing weakness, went down and down until they were a ***PREY*** to other nations to attack, and they couldn't even fight.

And so, Jeremiah came back again to God to pray for the people...to intercede. His sympathies were now even deeper, because, as he said*, "If I go into the* ***FIELDS****, I see bodies lying. The raiders have attacked. The terrorists have been in, and they've just left the bodies. If I go into the* ***STREETS****, I see rotting corpses from disease and famine."* He said, *"Wherever I go, the whole situation is cracking up."* And he said, *"The worst thing about it all is that there are still plenty of priests and prophets plying their trade around the country and doing a good trade, still telling people that things are gonna be all right, still giving hope where there is no hope, and speaking of things they have no knowledge about.”* So, Jeremiah feels the burden even more deeply. And he's going to ***LEARN THE LESSON THIS TIME***. So, we'll go even deeper with him.

He comes back to God, and he prays again. And the prayer is almost word for word what he prayed some months earlier. And the prayer is, *"Lord, we've sinned. We acknowledge, we confess our sins; but, Lord, you're the* ***HOPE****."* There it comes ***again***. *"You are the hope of Israel. Lord, you've saved us in the past. You're our* ***SAVIOR****. Lord, you made a covenant with us---Lord, your name, your reputation, your glory! Lord!!"* And then comes the same note again. "***WHY*** are you smiting us? You're not just a stranger, you're now a ***SMITER***. ***WHY***?" Same prayer, almost identical. And he's trying a ***SECOND*** time to ***PRAY*** for his people and to ***INTERCEDE*** for them and get God to ***CHANGE HIS MIND***.

But God does not. Back comes the ***SAME REPLY*** from God. *"This people," 'them," "them," "them."* Do you notice it? Mind you, it's a ***LONGER*** reply this time, and halfway through God forgets himself and says, "*You*," for just two verses---verse five and six. And then, as if he realized that his relationship had got the better of him, he immediately goes back to, "*them*," "*them*," "*them*." God is finding it difficult to say, “*Them,"* for this is his covenant people. He's finding it very difficult to write them off...very difficult. But he starts by saying, *"Get this people out of my sight; get them away!"* And Jeremiah says, *"Where to?"* He says, *"To death, to famine, to pestilence. Get them away, get them outta my sight."* And then comes this ***ETRAORDINARY PHRASE***. I'll read it from both the Revised Standard Version and the Living Bible. In the end of verse six, God says, *"I am weary of relenting...I'm* ***WEARY OF RELENTING****."* Or the living Bible has it, *"I am tired of always giving you another chance."*

Now, I tell you that God's patience is much greater than man's. It goes a long, long way---much further than men's. God is ***SLOW*** to anger, but that doesn't mean he ***NEVER*** gets to it. God is ***SLOW*** to lose his patience, but that doesn't mean he ***NEVER*** loses it. And we dare not trade on God's patience, as if he's gonna be patient forever. There comes a point where even God gets tired of giving people another chance. That's the ***TRUTH*** we've got to grasp this morning. It's a vital truth, because most people in this country who believe in God, do ***NOT*** believe this truth about him. The way they behave shows they don't believe this. The way they think about life after death shows that they believe that there'll be an ***INFINITE NIMBER*** of second chances, even ***AFTER*** death. "If there is life after death, then God will always let us into heaven someday." And ***HELL*** gets changed into the doctrine of purgatory.

But this is the stark truth: that there comes a point where God says, *"I'm sick of giving you another chance."* I've used this illustration before, but it'll bring it home. If you're walking on Brighton Pier, and you see somebody drowning in the water and you jump in and you save them at risk to your own life, and you pump them dry and bring them around, and they say, "Thank you so much; you've saved my life." And then they turn right around, walk off the end of the pier and shout, "Save me, save me". So, you pull them out again, you bring them round and they say, "Thank you so much, you've saved me". And they walk right off the end of the pier. How many times are they going to go on doing that ***BEFORE YOU WALK AWAY?*** How many times would you go on jumping in? Have you ever asked yourself that kind of a question? Some of you have had this problem with your own children, even with your own partner. How many times do you give them another chance before you say, "It's no use? You've exhausted me now; I cannot give you another chance". Well, praise God, he gives us ***MORE*** than men would. But nevertheless, there comes a point where God says, *"I'm* ***NOT*** *going to come in and save you again. The door is shut. You may shout, 'Save me, save me,' but I can't hear. I just won't listen."*

 So, God says, *"Get this people out of my sight. I'm tired of them".* And he says to Jeremiah something that was a bit humbling for Jeremiah; but nevertheless, he said, *"Jeremiah, even if* ***MOSES*** *prayed...even if* ***SAMUEL*** *prayed, I* ***WOULDN'T LISTEN****."* That's as much as to say, *"Jeremiah, there are even* ***GREATER*** *men than you who could pray."* And, you know, both Moses and Samuel---when you read the stories...both of these great men prayed ***SUCCESSFULLY*** for the forgiveness of their nation. ***MOSES*** prayed on ***FOUR*** separate occasions as they wandered through the wilderness---when the children of Israel went away from God and worshiped a golden calf, or grumbled against God. And Moses used to come and pray to God and say, *"God, please change your mind. Please let them off. And if you don't, then you can blot me out of your book too, because I'd rather be with* ***THEM*** *than be with* ***YOU****".* You see, Moses' prayer was very ***HUMAN***, just like Jeremiah's. He was putting himself with the people. But with Moses, every one of those four times, ***"GOD CHANGED HIS MIND,"*** it says. And God ***REPENTED*** and heard the prayer.

***SAMUEL*** did it ***TWICE***. And Samuel again, when he saw what his nation was doing, he pleaded with God to change His mind. And it says in the second book of Samuel, *"God changed His mind."* And now, Jeremiah does the same thing. And God says, *"No, Jeremiah. Even if Moses or Samuel prayed, I wouldn't listen now."* Of course, both Moses and Samuel had got the ***PEOPLE'S REPENTANCE FIRST***, which was a difference. Jeremiah hadn't got that yet. But I'll tell you why God wouldn't hear now: because I can actually give a ***DATE***, an actual date (Funny enough, I can't give it to you exactly this morning. I was going to look it up.). But there was an exact date when God decided to shut the door.

And he told Jeremiah here, when that date was---when his patience ran out. And it happened ***BEFORE*** Jeremiah was born. That's one of the hardest facts to face here. God says, *"I made a decision not to listen to any more prayer---not to change my mind regarding the punishment of Judah---during the reign of* ***MANASSEH****.”* And Manasseh was king of Judah just before Jeremiah was born. And God says, "***YOUR WHOLE LIFE IS TOO LATE!"*** Can you imagine the agony of being called to be a preacher in an era of *'too late'*? And, in fact, that was Jeremiah's position. Then why on earth did God tell him to preach, if it was too late...if God had shut the door? I'll tell you why. because God had shut the door to the ***NATION***, but not to the ***INDIVIDUAL***. That's why Jeremiah had to go on preaching. And, in a sense, I am being driven ***MORE*** and ***MORE*** to that view...though I'm not quite there yet. I'm being driven more and more to the view that God has ***SHUT THE DOOR ON BRITAIN***.

But I'll go on preaching because He has ***NOT*** shut the door on ***INDIVIDUALS***. He was not shutting the door on Jeremiah, for example. But he said, *"In the* ***REIGN OF MANASSEH****, I made up my mind."* What happened during the reign of Manasseh? If you go back, Manasseh was the son of a very good king called Hezekiah. And Hezekiah destroyed the pagan religion of Judah, and he got people back to God. But then, he had a son who didn't follow in his father's footsteps. And Manasseh came. Do you know what he introduced? He introduced ***ASTROLOGY*** into the very Temple of God---astrology, star worship. He introduced ***SPIRITISM***, he introduced ***WIZARDS*** and ***MEDIUMS*** into Judah. He introduced ***HUMAN SACRIFICE***, so that babies were being offered to pagan gods. And he ***SHED INNOCENT BLOOD*** through the streets of Jerusalem. He was a ruthless man. If anybody opposed him, they were a dead man. And Manasseh did this. And so, the whole pagan religion came in. And the word of God says in the second book of Kings, that ***MANESSEH*** seduced the people of Israel...or rather people of ***JUDAH***, to do ***MORE*** evil in God's sight than the nations whom God had cast out before Israel. In other words, the holy land became ***LESS HOLY*** than it was before the Jews got into it. And that's saying something. And it was during the reign of Manasseh that God said, *"This nation is* ***FINISHED****. Nobody can* ***PRAY*** *for it anymore. I will listen to the* ***INDIVIDUAL****, but the* ***NATION*** *is finished."* And it happened ***BEFORE*** Jeremiah was born.

And so, Jeremiah tried ***ONE MORE PROTEST***. He was always trying, wasn't he? And Jeremiah comes out now with a ***PRAYER*** that is the ***DEEPEST*** part of our reading---oh, it's very ***HUMAN***. He started by talking to his own ***MUM***. He said, *"Mum, why did you ever have me? I wish I'd never been born"*. Do you understand that cry? It's a heart cry. *"My mother, why did you ever bear me? I'm disliked. I'm hated on every side. It's not as if I've put anybody in financial embarrassment. I'm not a creditor trying to foreclose or a debtor who won't pay up. Why do they hate me."*

*"And God, you know, I've prayed for them. Why do they hate me? And why do you let them hate me? You're ALL against me. Everybody's against me. You're against me, God. The people are against me. I just feel all* ***ALONE****."* In fact, in that final protest, Jeremiah says, *"I sit alone".*

Now, you know most men of God go through this kind of a depression. Elijah did: *"I, even I, only am one left".* Have you ever felt you were the ***ONLY ONE***? You felt all alone. And dear Jeremiah is reaching a ***CRISIS POINT***; and God has to see him through this crisis, or his ministry will be finished. If God doesn't bring him through this one, there'll be no more preaching from Jeremiah, for he's at rock bottom. He wishes he'd never been born. He feels the loneliness of being hated. He said, *"Lord, the* ***ONLY*** *thing I enjoy is studying your word... I eat it...I devour it... It delights my heart."* He said, *"I don't enjoy parties anymore. I don't sit among the feasts--- those who make merry at feasts. I sit* ***ALONE****. I sit alone. And God, I thought you were gonna be* ***LIVING WATER****, springing up within me. Instead, I find You're a* ***DRIED-UP BROOK****. And when I feel most alone, you feel so far away. Lord, what's the matter?"* It's a heart cry, a lonely, anxious man who feels that, he has somehow been ***DESERTED*** by ***PEOPLE*** and by ***GOD*** because he tried to ***PREACH***.

***The Key: Get on the Lord's Side***

So, God speaks to him. He says, *"Jeremiah."* He doesn't speak very tenderly; speaks very firmly. He says, *"Jeremiah, get back on* ***MY*** *side. Return to Me and I'll restore you."* And the rest of what God says is almost a word for word repetition of the ***CALL*** that Jeremiah received, (You can read about it in chapter 1---years before when he was 17); and it's almost ***WORD FOR WORD***: *"You can then be my* ***MOUTHPIECE****. You can be my* ***SPOKESMAN****. You will be like a* ***FORTRESS*** *of bronze. They will attack you, but I'll* ***PROTECT*** *you and I'll* ***DELIVER*** *you from these ruthless men. But, Jeremiah, do you not see what's gone wrong? You've got into this depression; you've got into this state because you got onto* ***THEIR*** *side! And that's why you're feeling that neither they nor I are with you. You've got all mixed up. Your sympathies have gone astray. Jeremiah, get back on my side. If you* ***RETURN*** *to Me (look at the situation from* ***My*** *point of view), your sympathies will lie with* ***ME*** *and not with those people who are suffering disaster. Your sympathies will lie with* ***ME****."*

And you know, that is our problem because I am ***HUMAN***. My sympathies will lie with those who are human. But if you just consider for a moment what God had done with these people and with this land: ***BRINGING*** them in, ***DRIVING*** out the people before them, ***GIVING*** them a land flowing with milk and honey, ***GIVING*** them everything they could ask for---***GIVING*** them a king, prosperity, peace, (everything they could ask for)---and they just threw it back in His face and went down and down... until His holy land was ***LESS HOLY THAN IT HAD BEEN BEFORE GOD BEGAN***. Can you not spare sympathy for ***GOD***, Jeremiah? Can you not feel for ***HIM***? You see, if what happened to God happened to a human being, my, your sympathy would be with him, wouldn't it? If a ***MAN*** had done that, and had that done to him, would your sympathies not be with ***HIM***? Of course, they would! *"Jeremiah, get back on* ***MY*** *side!!"*

***Two Closing Thoughts***

So, I'm going to round off this morning by saying just ***TWO THINGS***... two things. The ***FIRST*** thing is to those of you listening to my voice who have not yet found forgiveness for your sins---who come here because you're interested or because somebody you know comes (for many and various reasons), I just want to say as solemnly as I can: ***"DON'T TRADE ON GOD'S PATIENCE!!"*** You see, when you turn to the New Testament, you find that God has already appointed a day, beyond which it will be too late: ***THE DAY OF JUDGMENT***. And for you personally, there may be a day before that when it'll be too late because, the Bible is quite clear that the minute you die, God closes the door to repentance and forgiveness. There is a great gulf fixed beyond that. But that day can happen in a man's life even ***BEFORE*** he dies. He can push God so far that God will say, as He does in the first epistle of John, *"Don't pray for that man. He is sinning to death."* In other words, *"His sin is too serious to pray for."* And therefore, I beg you don't trade on the forgiveness of God. Don't think that the door will ***ALWAYS*** be open---that you have plenty of time, that you can get on with all the more immediate things; and then someday (when you feel like it), trot along to Millmead and become a Christian. You cannot treat God that way!! And God alone decides the day when it's ***TOO LATE FOR YOU***. How important it is: *"****TODAY****, if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart."* ***TODAY***, is the day of salvation, not tomorrow, today!! That's the first thing; and I can't force you or press you. I just tremble for those who've come along to Millmead and been interested and listened, but have presumed on God's patience; and who will---like the five foolish virgins---knock at the door one day and say, *"Let me in, let me in."* And God will say, *"No, the door is shut, the Bridegroom came."*

The ***OTHER THING*** I want to say is to Christians. And that is: make sure that ***YOUR SYMPATHIES ARE WITH GOD***...when you pray. It's the most difficult thing in the world. When you're praying for someone who's desperately sick, your instinctive sympathies are to pray that they may be made well. But just try and get on God's side and say, "God, what are ***YOU*** doing in this situation? What do ***YOU*** want to achieve in this situation?" Your sympathies change. You look at the whole situation from a different point of view. The prayer that is going to be most effective and will not lead us into the questions of "Why, why, why??" The prayer that will keep us firm and strong, even when we sit alone, are the prayers that are ***IN SYMPATHY WITH GOD***. Look at the situation from His point of view, and therefore, pray that HIS will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. This was a crisis for Jeremiah: his sympathies for ***HUMAN SUFFERING*** had run away with him in his prayer life. And he was finding himself praying ***AGAINST*** God instead of praying ***WITH*** God and asking God, "Why?" But I'm very happy to tell you that he came through this crisis. He ***RETURNED*** to God's side, and he became ***STRONG***.

 And from then on, though the battle became ***MORE FIERCE***, (he was to be thrown in prison, he was to be threatened with his life), Jeremiah ***STOOD***.... because he was now back on ***GOD'S SIDE,*** and he could ***PREACH***---and ***PRAY***---from the same side. And how desperately he needed to get through this crisis, because in the very next verse, (which is the first verse we'll read next Sunday), God is going to say, *"Jeremiah, you must not* ***MARRY****. You must not have* ***CHILDREN****. You must go on* ***ALONE****...****WITH ME****."* But he came through it! And he heard again the call that he'd heard at 17; and he responded to it and he was restored/fortified, and he went on ***PREACHING*** and faced a whole nation ***ALONE***! And God kept his word, for when the whole nation was ***DESTROYED***, Jeremiah was still around. He was ***DELIVERED*** from the hands of all the ruthless men. He was ***PROTECTED***. And he and God made a ***MAJORITY***.

Let's pray. "Oh God, while we praise You for Your patience with us, we ask You to prevent us from presuming on that patience; of thinking that You will always go on forgiving; of thinking that the door into heaven will always be open. Lord, you’ve told us, so clearly, that, ***"Today is the day of salvation; that we must not harden our hearts today."*** And oh God, if You see any of us in this building at the moment hardening our hearts (resisting the tender touch of Your Spirit), Lord, have mercy on us.... before it is too late. We thank You that Jesus came to bring the day of grace. That this is 1975, the year of grace. But Lord, we know that there won't be years of grace forever---that one day we must all stand before Your great white throne. Lord, lay Your word on our heart this morning; and Lord, when we try and sympathize with You, we realize.... that the sooner that day comes, the better. The sooner You can make the new heaven and the new earth, the better! Lord, it's our sympathy with our fellow human beings that makes us want to say, "Postpone that day." But our sympathy with You leads us to cry, "Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus." Amen