

## WEEPING AND REJOICING THROUGH JEREMIAH

The following four devotionals are inspired by the book of Jeremiah. The Old Testament prophet best known for his weeping, Jeremiah can help us do two important things, for ourselves and for our society. Jeremiah helps us weep and rejoice. That's what good prophets do. Until we truly cry out in despair, we are in denial about how bad the situation is. If we aren't in despair over the shape of the world, we are probably trusting in flimsy gods instead of the real God. Until we get desperate, we won't get off dead center—we won't do anything.

On the other hand, people fueled only by despair can't move too far either. If the task is so impossible, where does one turn? The prophet, in the midst of despair, helps us get energized by the only one who can energize us—God. Because God specializes in the impossible, we gain hope. Hope turns into doxology, that is, declaring God as true ruler and king. And when we declare God King, we are in essence saying that no one else is. False gods are dethroned. True change happens.

This month, let Jeremiah take you to the depths of anguish—and the heights of hope. Let Jeremiah help you see the joy mixed up in the sorrow. Let him help you see that suffering opens the door to hope. Let Jeremiah help you weep ... and rejoice.

### **REST STOP #1: The Labor Pains of New Birth**

Jeremiah 30:1-8

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel:

Write in a book all the words

That I have spoken to you.

For the days are surely coming,

Says the LORD,

When I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah,

Says the LORD,

And I will bring them back to the land

That I gave to their ancestors

And they shall take possession of it.

These are the words

That the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah:

Thus says the LORD:

We have heard a cry of panic,

Of terror, and no peace.

Ask now, and see,  
 Can a man bear a child?  
 Why then do I see every man  
 With his hands on his loins like a woman in labor?  
 Why has every face turned pale?  
 Alas! That day is so great  
 There is none like it;  
**It is a time of distress for Jacob;**  
**Yet he shall be rescued from it.**

On that day,  
 Says the LORD of hosts,  
 I will break the yoke from off his neck,  
 And I will burst his bonds,  
 And strangers shall no more make a servant of him.  
 But they shall serve the LORD their God  
 And David their king,  
 Whom I will raise up for them.

In Jeremiah's time, a foreign country called Babylonia was threatening the Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had already been captured and dismantled by the Assyrians over a hundred years earlier. So the people in Judah felt threatened. But many of them believed that, unlike Israel, the people of Judah would never fall to a foreign ruler because they were God's favorites, the faithful remnant (see Jeremiah chapter 3). Jeremiah, throughout his life, tried to pound a basic message into the hearts of the people of Judah. You're not God's favorites. Trouble is coming. It'll seem like the worst thing, and in some ways, it will be. But it's also the only thing that will bring new life. Jeremiah 30 gives a vivid picture of the terrible times that are coming. But it also gives a word of hope.

So ... what feels like labor pains to you right now? Are the labor pains just painful and scary, or is something beautiful and new trying to be "born?" What chaos do you need to surrender to in order to let new life come? And how can God help you let go ... and weep?

## **REST STOP #2: Reshaping the Clay**

Take a ball of clay. Start to pray as your fingers work the clay. Try to pray and work the clay for 5–10 minutes.

Stop and look at what your hands have begun to shape. What might the shape represent? Finish the shape you have started, making it into a symbol of your life right now.

Now read Jeremiah 18:1-6.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 'Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?' says the LORD. 'Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'"

Look again at the clay shape in your hands. Does God need to reshape your clay? Can God really rework it and turn it into a beautiful, useful thing? Or is your clay too hard at this point?

Hold the clay shape in silence. Will you let God reshape your clay?

Your clay is not too hard.

God can and wants to rework you.

Let your fingers pray as they reform the clay. What is taking shape? Is it the shape of God's desire for you?

### **REST STOP #3: But what if my clay is too hard?**

In Jeremiah 18, God used the metaphor of clay to show how a person or a whole society can be "reworked." But what happens when a society or an individual becomes so hardened that re-shaping is impossible? Are we just destined to stay in our ill-formed design?

Sometimes the "clay" of our lives does seem too hard to re-mold. We made decisions in the past that had consequences. We did stupid things, or neglected to carry out important tasks and well ... we can't rewind the old tapes. Things can't be changed. But even if our past mistakes could be overcome, we may believe that our inner attitudes can't. "I'm too cynical. I'm too old. I'm too stuck in my ways. God can do miracles sure, but on me?"

Can God change ... even me?

The answer, in Jeremiah 19, seems to be no and ... yes.

Immediately following the oracle where God tells the people that they can be "reworked," the LORD sends Jeremiah out to buy an earthenware jug. Then, taking with him the elders and senior priests, Jeremiah is sent to the Valley of Hinnon to make a public demonstration, a releasing of God's powerful word through prophetic action.

In a word, Jeremiah is to break the pot. Destroy it. Smash it into a thousand pieces so that it would, in essence, be no more.

Why? Because the people have become so "hardened," there is nothing else to do. They, both as individuals and as a whole society, have committed great sins. Jeremiah ticks off the list: you have forsaken God, you have worshipped other gods, you have spilled the blood of the innocent, even so far as to sacrifice your children in a religious fire as an offering to the gods.

Sound familiar? Well ... maybe not the part about sacrificing your children by burning them alive. Most of us don't do that kind of sacrifice, but how many of us sacrifice the people we love, whether it is our children, our parents or our best friends, to our work or our drive for success? Like the people of Judah, we also forsake God, trust in lesser gods, close our eyes to the bloodshed of innocents and other atrocities. Or, like the poor and marginalized in Judah, we get sinned upon. We get stomped on, hurt, brutalized. We are the victims of greed and

wrongful desire.

And like the people of Judah, we may get slammed. Busted. Ruined beyond repair. The power of sin is awful. The consequences for Judah were almost unspeakable—the people would fall by the sword of their enemies and those who didn't die would get so hungry they would eat the flesh of their own children. We think it could never get that bad for us. But what if it could? The destruction of sin can seem as un-repairable as broken pottery.

“Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, and shall say to them: thus says the LORD of hosts: So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.”

So is there no hope for those of us hardened by sin?

Jeremiah 19 is not the end of the story. The people of Judah did suffer capture and exile and in one sense, it was the worst of all possible situations. Thousands died, if not in battle, then on the road to Babylonia. Everything that represented their status with God—land, king and Temple—was gone. It could not have been more horrible.

And yet, in a foreign land, with nothing to trust in, they rediscovered—God. In their brokenness, they turned back to the stories of the Exodus and the wilderness. They rediscovered story. With no Temple, they moved from a yearly sacrifice to a weekly gathering to tell the story and to begin to write it down. The God they thought of as geographically bound, surprised them by showing up in Babylon. The God they thought could only be worshipped in the Temple, under the supervision of a Davidic king, surprised them by honoring their worship in humble homes, under a foreign ruler.

The pot could not be mended. But something even better was taking shape. Even God's judgment was really grace in disguise. The worst possible thing—exile—was a gift after all.

Out of the death came new life. Out of the broken shards of an earthen pot came the beginnings of a whole new vessel, a vessel from which would come the new Davidic king, the Messiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

#### **REST STOP #4: Red dragons, broken pottery and finding God**

I need to be honest. I'm not reflecting on Jeremiah in a vacuum. Not this month. This has been a month of exile for me, a month of hardened clay that God's been reshaping. At times it has felt like a month of broken pottery scattered on the ground of a city dump.

For me, it wasn't so much a specific sin, although I do sin, or even societal upheaval, although our society is in a mess in many ways. I had a health crisis. And it shook me. I'm young, I eat right, I exercise, I take care of my stress. I do all the right things. This wasn't supposed to happen to people like me. And yet it was happening.

Like Jeremiah and his people—I was facing despair like a woman in labor pains.

A friend of mine gave me another analogy—not labor pains or lumpy clay or broken shards—but red dragons. Red dragons who sat in black convertibles in your driveway. That's what the chaos, the despair, the unknowing looked like to my friend. I could see those red dragons this month and they were sitting on my driveway—waiting for me to come out. The question was, would I?

On one hand, I could pretend the red dragons weren't there. I could keep busy and just not

think about it. I could pray in such a way that I was trying to manipulate God into getting me out of this mess. "God, if I pray two hours every day, will you promise to keep me from (fill in the blank)?" I could choose not let myself cry and even entertain the thought that I might get truly sick. I could pretend to everyone, even myself, that everything was okay.

On the other hand, I could walk outside and sidle up to the dragon's car, and talk for awhile. I could choose to look at, or at least glance at, worst case scenario. I could pray, believing God could heal me, believing that God could do anything, but at the same time, not demanding that healing. Not blaming myself for not praying just right. I could choose to stop and embrace the chaos I was feeling inside. I could cry.

I chose to cry. I chose to talk to the red dragons outside my door, and I think I did the right thing. They weren't as scary as I thought they were. Sitting in the depths didn't kill me after all. I survived the chaos, even though I didn't enjoy one minute of it.

So the red dragons weren't so bad after all. But am I only thinking this because the medical report brought good news? Turns out I'm healthy and there really is no threat. Do the red dragons seem so tame because they went away so fast?

Good question.

I would never choose to go through what I've been through this month. And I can't say that the spiritual growth I gained this month could only have come in this chaotic way. I just don't know. But I do know that I found God in a new way, and that God was in the weeping, and that I feel full of joy right now. Real joy that didn't bypass the red dragons.

There are still red dragons outside my door—there always have been—and now I think I'm more ready to admit they're there. I don't have to pretend as much as I did before. Something happened to me that I'm still reflecting on.

I've been weeping. Now I'm rejoicing.