

A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise. Behold, they say to me, “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!” I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips; it was before your face. Be not a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but 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!

(Jeremiah 15:15–21)

## Introduction

One of the most popular children’s stories in the last one hundred years is *The Little Engine That Could*, which tells the story of a little engine who pulls a large train over a mountain when larger engines all make excuses as to why it cannot be done.

The story has been told in a number of settings, and the title has been borrowed to describe a great many other things that “could.”

Take, for example, the exploratory space probe *Pioneer 10*, which some have styled “The Little Satellite that Could.” *Pioneer 10* was launched by NASA on 2 March 1972. Its mission was to reach Jupiter, photograph the planet and its moons, and beam data back to Earth about the giant planet. Scientists regarded this as a bold plan, for at that time no Earth satellite had ever gone beyond Mars, and they feared the asteroid belt would destroy the probe before it could reach its target. But *Pioneer 10* accomplished its mission and much, much more.

The satellite was designed with an expected shelf life of three years. It swung past Jupiter in November 1973—a little over a year and a half after launch. Jupiter’s immense gravity hurled *Pioneer 10* at an incredible velocity toward the edge of the solar system. At 1.35 billion kilometres from Earth, *Pioneer 10* passed Saturn. At 2.65 billion kilometres from Earth, it hurtled past Uranus. It passed Neptune at 4.35 billion kilometres from Earth and Pluto at almost 5.85 billion kilometres from Earth. All this time, it continued to snap pictures and beam them back to Earth. The last signal that NASA received from the three-year satellite was on 23 January 2003—thirty years after its launch!—when it was twelve billion kilometres from Earth.

The Emmy award-winning images of Jupiter, and the various other pictures it snapped, were sent back to earth via an eight-watt transmitter, which transmits about as much power as a bedroom night light. Simply put, the Little Satellite that Could was not qualified to do what it did. It was designed with a shelf life of three years, but it just kept going despite the odds, hurtling through space and muttering, “I think I can! I think I can!”

I think it's fair to say that we all appreciate stories of perseverance. We are all inspired, in some way, by those who persevere through incredible odds. We are inspired by Bethany Hamilton, the American surfer who lost an arm in a shark attack and yet who continued to strive for (and eventually realise) her dream of surfing on the pro circuit. We are impressed by Jessica Cox, an American woman, born without arms, who became the world's first licensed pilot and first armless black-belt in the American Taekwondo Association. We are impressed by Ben Underwood, whose eyes were removed due to retinal cancer at age 2, but who taught himself to detect the location of surrounding objects by making clicking noises with his tongue and hearing as the noise bounced off his surroundings, eventually teaching himself to run, play basketball and football, cycle, rollerblade, and skateboard.

Jeremiah was one such perseverer. He faced incredible opposition, under which most of us would quickly and easily buckle, but he just kept going. Ask any inspiring individual where they get their strength and they will quickly have an answer for you. Ask Jeremiah and he would have answered, without batting an eyelid, "In prayer."

Previously, we looked at the second of Jeremiah's five "confessions," and in this study we will consider the third. As we saw previously, Jeremiah's confessions were really intimate prayers, times when he felt the pressures of his calling and poured out his soul to God. We see that once again in our present text.

We saw previously that Jeremiah was resolute in public, but in private he poured out his soul to God. We also saw that that is a good thing: It is good and wise to bear your soul before God in private. As Thomas Brooks notes,

No man that is in his right mind, will lay open to every one his bodily infirmities, weaknesses, diseases, ailments, griefs, etc., but to some near relation, or choice friend, or able physician. So no man that is in his right mind will lay open to every one his soul-infirmities, weaknesses, diseases, ailments, griefs, etc., but to the Lord.

Jeremiah knew where to "lay open" his "soul-infirmities." He took them to God in prayer. In our previous study, that that got him into trouble, when his complaint spiralled into irreverence. In the present text, Jeremiah once again went to God in prayer, but this time his attitude, and therefore the outcome, was very different. This confession is different because of the way that he began.

## Jeremiah's Praise

Jeremiah began this time with praise:

A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.

(Jeremiah 17:12–13)

Jeremiah seems to have learned that the place to begin prayer to God is with praise. We saw previously that Jeremiah began his prayer to God immediately with complaint. He was right to take his fear, loneliness and pain to the Lord in prayer, but he did so seemingly without giving much thought to the God to whom he was praying.

How often do we do the same? We immediately bring our complaints to God, immediately take our requests to him. God wants us to bring our complaints and requests to him, but he wants us to do so with a recognition of who he is. That is the pattern laid out in the Lord's prayer: begin with adoration before moving to petition.

Jeremiah's previous confession had spiralled into sinful accusation of God, and God had rebuked him and called him to repentance. The prophet appears to have learned an important lesson, for as he begins this confession, he looks first to God.

Looking to who God is and what he has done helps to set all our complaints and requests in the right light. Jeremiah acknowledged God in two capacities.

## Israel's King

First, the prophet recognised God as Israel's King: "A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary" (v. 12). Here, Jeremiah is recognising Yahweh as Israel's king, for who else might you find seated on a "throne"? Israel and Judah had had a series of kings, some good, most evil, but regardless of the *human* king on at any given moment, the actual throne in Israel belonged to God.

The location of God's throne was "our sanctuary"—that is, the Jerusalem temple. Jeremiah 7 offers some important background here.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'"

(Jeremiah 7:1–4)

The Jews in Jeremiah's day ignored his preaching of judgement because they believed that the very fact that the temple stood in Jerusalem guaranteed them God's favour. The Lord rebuked their superstitious idolatry through Jeremiah. Just as the ark did not save Israel in Samuel's day (1 Samuel 4), so the temple would not save Israel now.

At the same time, it was not to be denied that the temple was in fact God's "glorious throne set on high from the beginning." The Lord said as much: "I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time" (1 Kings 9:3). Rightly understood, the Jerusalem temple was a highly significant place. It was there that the Lord had chosen to place his name. The Jews had become superstitiously idolatrous in their view of the temple, and God was dishonoured by that. Still, the significance of the temple could not be minimised. For the faithful, like Jeremiah, the temple was God's very "throne."

A "throne" is the seat of a king. Jeremiah therefore began his prayer by acknowledging God's sovereignty.

## Israel's Hope

Second, Jeremiah acknowledged God as Israel's hope: "O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have

forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water” (v. 13). Not only was Yahweh Israel’s king, he was also Israel’s “hope.” He was Israel’s hope because he was “the fountain of living water.”

We see here, once again, a progression in Jeremiah’s prayers. Previously, God had identified himself as “the fountain of living waters,” while speaking of the idols that the people served as “broken cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13). Jeremiah had become so despondent by the constant opposition that he faced that he had accused God of being “like a deceitful brook, and like waters that fail” (15:18). God had rebuked him for that accusation and had called him to repentance. He had been restored, and he once again recognised God as “the fountain of living water.” “Living water” can be translated “life-giving water.” In other words, Yahweh was the source of Israel’s life, and to be cut off from Yahweh was to be cut off from life.

We’ve seen that Jeremiah’s preaching emphasised judgement because of Judah’s wickedness. Their wickedness had driven them to the point of hopelessness, because God would not hear prayers of intercession anymore (15:1–6ff; 17:1). Their devotion and their worship were characterised by sin. And yet Jeremiah was not entirely devoid of hope. He knew that Yahweh was “the hope of Israel.” There was always hope for those who would heed the truth and repent (as Jeremiah had done).

Those who forsook “the hope of Israel” would be “written in the earth.” There are two possible meanings.

First, “earth” or “dust” (NIV) does not conjure up the idea of permanence. Dust is easily blown or washed away. In this interpretation, “those who turn away” from “the hope of Israel” would find themselves unstable and easily washed away by God’s judgement.

Second, the term translated “earth” or “dust” was used sometimes used in Hebrew to speak of the underworld—Sheol. In this interpretation, “those who turn away” from “the hope of Israel” would be destined for destruction (v. 18).

The two possible interpretations really go hand in hand. Since the Lord is described as “the fountain of living water” (or life-giving water), those who had “forsaken the LORD” were destined for destruction as they were washed away by God’s judgement. Conversely those who had put their “hope” in the Lord were stable and destined for life.

Can I suggest to you that the same is true today: The LORD is the only hope for life; those who forsake that hope are destined for destruction. If you deprive yourself of life-giving water, you will eventually die of thirst.

## Jeremiah’s Prayer

Having, as it were, set his sights straight by looking to the glorious throne, and the one on the throne, Jeremiah now brought his petitions to God (vv. 14–18). Bear with me as I briefly make my way through these verses to explain them before I draw some principles from them at the end.

### His Request

First, notice his request: “Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise” (v. 14).

I think it is fair to say that Jeremiah was a bit of a sensitive soul. He seems to have taken things to heart quite easily. Of course, this is somewhat understandable given the nature of his calling: to minister God's truth to a people who were committed to ignoring it! We saw previously that Jeremiah prayed about his "incurable wound" (15:18).

Here, he was once again wounded, and once again he took it to the Lord in prayer. The source of his wound will be explored in v. 15, but for now notice that he asked God to "heal" him and "save" him. He recognised that God had the ability to do so, for if God did "heal" him, he would "be healed"; and if God did "save" him, he would "be saved." He trusted that God would deliver him because, unlike his contemporaries, he could say that Yahweh was his "praise."

Notice the confidence with which he prayed: "I shall be"! He prayed to a God whom he *knew* could answer his prayers.

## His Reason

Second, observe the reason for his prayer: "Behold, they say to me, 'Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!'" (v. 15). Here, the prophet reveals the reason that he was feeling wounded: because the people were mocking him and accusing him of false prophecy.

A true prophet was known by his word coming to pass (Deuteronomy 18:22), but the judgement that Jeremiah preached was yet to be fulfilled (chapter 7). Of course, part of the reason God's judgement had not yet fallen was because Jeremiah was in the habit of interceding for the people! His prayers had delayed the judgement that he preached, and now the people to whom he ministered were accusing him of false prophecy!

Jeremiah was not one to easily brush off his critics. We saw previously that his separation from them (due to his commitment to God's truth) deeply hurt him. The words that his critics flung at him hurt, and he went to God in prayer for healing and deliverance. "From time to time the unwelcome nature of Jeremiah's prophecies drove him to plead for divine help." (Feinberg)

Note that the foolish tactics and opinions of God's enemies have not changed. Long ago, as they do today, and as they have always done, those who rejected God's truth scoffed at the possibility of his judgement ever coming to pass (see 2 Peter 3:1–9). But delayed judgement is for the purpose of opportunity for repentance.

## His Resolve

Notice also Jeremiah resolve: "I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips; it was before your face" (v. 16)

Jeremiah reminded God of his faithful ministry—of his faithful resolve to serve God amidst a perverse generation. He appealed to God to hear him on the basis of his resolve for God. The text notes three things about his resolve, and therefore offers three reasons that God should answer his prayer.

First, he had not shirked his responsibility to shepherd God's people: "I have not run away from being your shepherd." God had previously pronounced judgement upon Israel's unfaithful shepherds (23:1–2), but Jeremiah was not guilty, and therefore he appealed to God for healing and deliverance rather than destruction.

Second, he had not delighted in God's judgement on the wicked: "Nor have I desired the day of sickness." Like God (cf. Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11), Jeremiah took no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. He was faithful to his commission, even though he did not enjoy the hard message he preached. Like any faithful shepherd, he was heartbroken over divine judgement.

Third, he had remained faithful to God's truth regardless of how unpopular it was: "You know what came out of my lips; it was before your face." Jeremiah's message was never popular, and he always faced the temptation to change his message to tickle the ears of his hearers. Remember the false prophets, who cried, "Peace! Peace!" (6:14)? Jeremiah's commitment was to God's truth above all else. God alone was his audience.

## His Refuge

Finally, we see that Yahweh was Jeremiah's refuge: "Be not a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but 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!" (vv. 17–18)

Jeremiah ultimately rested in Yahweh as his "refuge." When judgement—"the day of disaster"—eventually arrived, he knew that he would find "refuge" in Yahweh. He would not suffer the fate of his (and God's) enemies. His enemies would be "put to shame" and be "dismayed," but he would find "refuge."

Note that he spoke these words of those "who persecute me" and, in the context, those who persecuted him were those who dismissed the truth he is preaching. The scoffers were daring the Lord to fulfil the word he spoke through Jeremiah; Jeremiah was ultimately praying that he would not be "put to shame" or "dismayed" by God's word not coming true. Instead, he wanted those who rejected God's truth to be "put to shame" and be "dismayed" when God's word did come to pass. He did not take delight in the thought that judgement would befall them (cf. v. 16), but he realised that the only way that God could vindicate his truth was by actually bringing his warnings to pass. Therefore, he asked—in order that God's truth might be vindicated—for God to "bring upon them the day of disaster"—the day in which he would personally find "refuge" in the Lord, but in which God would "destroy" his enemies "with double destruction."

## Applications

There are several things that might be said by way of application.

First, while God is pleased when we pour out our hearts and bring our burdens to him, the right place to start is with praise. Previously, Jeremiah stepped over the line in his complaint to God. Faced with stiff opposition, he accused God of lying to him—of being "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail" (15:18). God called him to repentance: to stop speaking what is "worthless" and to speak instead what is "precious." God answered him in that prayer—with a call to repentance.

I find it significant that God does not answer Jeremiah this time. And I think the reason he does not do so is because, unlike previously, Jeremiah had prayed himself into a right frame of mind here. *There was no need for God to say anything to him!* He didn't need God to say anything to him because he already knew the answers.

What is the difference, then, between his prayer in chapter 15, where he crossed the line to irreverence, and this prayer? The major difference is that, while in chapter 15 he immediately began laying out his complaint, he here begins with praise! Verses 12–13 made all the difference in the world!

If you want to be put into a right frame of mind when you pray, begin with praise! To do this it is helpful to begin your prayer with a praise from the Bible. Pray through the psalms. Find a particular section of Scripture where God is highly praised and use that as a catalyst for your prayer. Begin with adoration before moving to petition.

Second, pray with confidence that God is able to answer the prayers you bring to him. Jeremiah knew that if God healed him, he would be healed; if God saved him, he would be saved (v. 14).

James urged this type of faith-filled prayer:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

(James 1:5–8)

David prayed in this way. Consider his words in Psalm 5:1–3: “Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.” Notice that: David prepared his prayer and then he watched expectantly (CSB) in anticipation for God’s answer.

The word in Psalm 5 translated “prepare” means to set in battle array. “Watch” speaks of a spy on a watchtower. Thomas Brooks hits the nail on the head:

When David had set his prayers, his petitions, in rank and file, in good array, then he was resolved he would look abroad, he would look about him, to see at what door God would send in an answer of prayer. He is either a fool or a madman, he is either very weak or very wicked, that prays and prays, but never looks after his prayers; that shoots many an arrow towards heaven, but never minds where his arrows alight.

As Brooks puts it:

Certainly there is little worth in that man’s heart, or in that man’s prayers, who keeps up a trade of prayer, but never looks what becomes of his prayers. When you are in your closets, marshal your prayers; see that every prayer keeps his place and ground; and when you come out of your closets, then look up for an answer.

How often do we go through the motions of praying, not really believing that God will answer us? We pray for persecuted Christians or unreached people but, if we are honest, do not really expect a change. Often, our unbelief is manifested in the non-specificity of our prayers. Instead of asking God specifically for what we want, we seem to hedge our bets with vague generalisations so that we are not too disappointed when our prayers are not answered.

Kim and Krickitt Carpenter were once involved in a horrendous accident that left Krickitt fighting for her life. Kim tells the story in their joint-memoir: *The Vow*.

The doctors spent a lot of time that day explaining Krickitt's situation to us. We learned that there were two major problems, one of which made the other more serious. The first and most dangerous issue was the swelling in her brain. This swelling constricted the flow of blood to her brain cells, and they were starved for the nutrients and oxygen that the blood normally brought in. The second concern was that her blood pressure was dangerously low. Even without any other complications, low pressure would have reduced the blood flow to the organs, especially the brain, eventually resulting in damage due to a lack of oxygen. The bottom line was that swelling plus low blood pressure was a double whammy. We didn't need anyone to explain that constricted blood vessels and weak blood flow are a deadly combination....

Due to all the stress and drama of the past twenty-four hours, it took us awhile to remember that we weren't really helpless at all. We had forgotten that God's miracles are a prayer away. We all knew that prayers aren't always answered the way we want, but we hadn't even made an effort to ask God for what we wanted in an organized way....

[We] found the hospital's chapel ... [and] began the impromptu prayer service.... We prayed specifically for the pressure on Krickitt's brain to go down. We prayed for a miracle, asking God to relieve the pressure in time to save her....

We prayed for about twenty minutes, and then we went back to the ICU. My eyes automatically went to the readouts on the monitors we had been watching for so long. The numbers were better. The pressure on Krickitt's brain was going down, and it just kept going. Nurses were in and out of the room every few minutes, and finally a nurse called for a doctor because she was afraid the monitor probe had slipped out of place. She didn't think the numbers she saw could be accurate. The doctor checked the probe, but it was fine. However, even though the pressure on Krickitt's brain continued to lessen, her blood pressure was still critically low....

Not long after we returned from the chapel our pastor, Fred Maldonado, arrived. We told him what had been happening, and he led all of us to the chapel again to pray that Krickitt's blood pressure would go up.

When we got back to Krickitt's room, we saw that her blood pressure was on a steady rise. When a nurse came in and saw the new blood pressure reading, her jaw dropped. She looked at me and pointed to the readout. She was speechless for a moment.

"Look at that pressure," she said finally. We *were* looking. It was impossible to take our eyes off of it. It was headed straight toward the normal range.

It is as if God was waiting for Kim to pray specifically for his wife before he answered. In that way, it was obvious that the credit could go to nobody but God alone, and it boosted the faith of those praying.

Do you believe that God is able and willing to answer your prayers? Then pray. And pray with great specificity.

Third, we should share Jeremiah's commitment to the truth, even when we know that people will not listen. In other words, we dare not compromise the truth because it is unpopular—or even because it invites open opposition.

We live in an age in which opposition to God's truth abounds. As I write these words, there is a bill before the South African parliament that seeks to criminalise "hate speech." The definition of "hate speech" includes a vocalised stand for the biblical definition of marriage. At the same time, there is another bill before parliament seeking to regulate religion and religious leaders. Christians cannot remain silent in the face of such opposition. We cannot shy from declaring God's truth.

How often do we shy away in the face of open mocking for our faith, when Jesus told us to count ourselves blessed? "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11–12). We must not allow ridicule to silence us! Harrison gets it right: "Jeremiah was not going to abandon his prophetic functions simply because he had been persecuted. Instead he prayed for grace to withstand opposition until the truth should be manifested, when all would see that it was God's word, not his own, that he had been proclaiming faithfully."

Fourth, God's warnings of judgement are sure, and the only hope of escape is "the fountain of living water." The people were mocking Jeremiah and daring God: "Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!" And it did come (see Jeremiah 39:1–10). Those who mocked soon found God's warnings of judgement to be true. They found that their names were written in the dust, and that only those who hoped in "the fountain of living water" were spared judgement.

God's warnings of judgement remain today. "Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the future of the wicked shall be cut off" (Psalm 37:37–38). "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement" (John 5:28–29). Unbelievers may mock God's warnings of judgement, as they did in Jeremiah's day, but, as they did in Jeremiah's day, they will find that those warnings are true.

But the warnings are not issued without hope, for "the fountain of living water" is still available to save from destruction. Jeremiah portrayed Israel's God as "the fountain of living water." The New Testament portrays Jesus Christ in the same way (John 7:37–38). If you reject Jesus Christ, your name will be written in the dust. If you embrace Jesus Christ, you will find refuge in the day of judgement. Every human being stands under God's wrath because of sin, but Jesus came as a substitute. He died on the cross to satisfy God's wrath and rose again from the dead to prove that God had accepted his sacrifice. Today, he issues a call to all who will hear: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." Will you believe on Jesus Christ today? He is your only hope of salvation.

AMEN