

Jeremiah 20:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Because he slew me not from the womb; or that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb to be always great with me.

Analysis

Jeremiah now expresses his wish that death had occurred in the womb: 'Because he slew me not from the womb.' The verb 'slew' (mot, מוֹת) is stark—he wishes the messenger had announced his stillbirth rather than live birth. The parallel phrase 'or that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb to be always great with me' (perpetually pregnant) is anatomically impossible but poetically powerful—expressing the wish for death before birth. This echoes Job 3:11-16, where Job wishes he'd died at birth. The phrase 'my mother might have been my grave' (qivri, קִבְרִי, my grave) treats the womb as burial place. This is not anti-natalism or advocacy for abortion; it's poetic lament expressing 'I wish I'd never been born' through vivid imagery. Similar expressions appear in ancient Near Eastern lament literature. The key interpretive principle is recognizing genre: this is lament poetry, not theological treatise. Lament uses hyperbole, metaphor, and extreme language to voice suffering. God doesn't rebuke Jeremiah for this; He permits the expression. This teaches that honest emotional expression before God is appropriate, and that theological precision isn't required during crisis—relationship with God is primary.

Historical Context

Infant mortality was high in the ancient world, and stillbirths were common. Jeremiah's wish that he'd died in the womb would have been understood as extreme lament language, not literal preference. Similar wishes appear in Job

3:11-19, where Job envies the stillborn. In ancient Israel, life was precious and children were considered blessings (Psalm 127:3-5), making such statements deliberately shocking. They functioned as rhetorical emphasis—'my suffering is so great I wish I'd never existed.' Jeremiah wasn't denying life's value generally; he was expressing his specific anguish at being called to a ministry of persecution and apparent failure. Throughout Scripture, God's faithful servants faced similar struggles: Moses asking God to kill him (Numbers 11:15), Elijah requesting death (1 Kings 19:4), Jonah wanting to die (Jonah 4:3, 8). In each case, God responded with compassion, not condemnation, sustaining them through their crisis. This pastoral model instructs the church in caring for those experiencing profound suffering.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How does Jeremiah's wish for death in the womb illustrate the depth of suffering that prolonged persecution and rejection can produce?
2. What does God's non-response to this lament (no recorded rebuke) teach us about His compassion toward those struggling with dark thoughts during crisis?
3. In what ways does recognizing this as lament poetry rather than theological statement help us read Scripture's emotional passages appropriately?

Interlinear Text

אֶשׂר	לֹא	מוֹתַתְּ נִי	וְרֵחַמָּהּ	וַיִּהְיֶה	לִי	אִמִּי
H834	H3808	Because he slew	and her womb	H1961	H0	or that my mother
		H4191	H7358			H517
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קִבְרִי		וְרֵחַמָּהּ	הַבִּת	עוֹלָם:		
might have been my grave		and her womb	great	to be always		
H6913		H7358	H2030	H5769		

Additional Cross-References

Job 3:16 (Parallel theme): Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 (Parallel theme): If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.