

Jeremiah 20:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?

Analysis

The lament concludes with the question 'Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?' The Hebrew 'Wherefore' (lamah, לָמָּה) is a why-question directed at God—'Why did You allow my birth?' The phrase 'to see labour and sorrow' (amal veyagon, עָמַל וַיָּגוֹן) describes a life of toil and grief. 'That my days should be consumed with shame' (boshet, בֹּשֶׁת) reveals Jeremiah's experience of public humiliation, rejection, and perceived failure. This verse articulates what many sufferers feel: 'Why was I born if this is what life holds?' Yet remarkably, Jeremiah continued his ministry for decades after this lament. Chapter 20 ends here, but the book continues through chapter 52. This teaches that articulating despair doesn't negate calling, that questions without immediate answers don't disqualify us from service, and that God sustains us through valleys we thought we couldn't survive. The church's liturgical tradition of lament (Good Friday, prayers for the suffering) draws from texts like this, providing language for grief and permission to bring our hardest questions to God. Jeremiah's faithfulness through this darkness models perseverance.

Historical Context

Jeremiah wrote these words after 20+ years of ministry characterized by rejection, persecution, and watching his warnings ignored. He would continue prophesying for another 20+ years, through Jerusalem's fall, into exile. This demonstrates that moments of despair don't define a life or ministry. The early church recognized

this, celebrating Jeremiah as faithful prophet despite his struggles. Church tradition identifies him as a 'type' of Christ—suffering servant rejected by his own people, weeping over Jerusalem's coming destruction (Matthew 23:37), experiencing isolation and betrayal. Later Christian martyrs and reformers drew strength from Jeremiah's example: persecuted but faithful, despairing but persevering, questioning but obedient. The Puritan tradition particularly valued Jeremiah, seeing in him the cost of faithful preaching in hostile culture. Modern believers facing opposition, isolation, and apparent failure find companionship in Jeremiah's honest laments. His example teaches that faithfulness isn't absence of struggle but perseverance through it, not constant joy but continued obedience, not answered questions but sustained trust.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does Jeremiah's continued ministry for decades after this lament demonstrate that moments of despair don't disqualify us from serving God?
2. What does the absence of recorded divine rebuke for these laments teach us about God's patience with our questions and struggles?
3. In what ways does Jeremiah's transparency about "labour and sorrow" and "shame" provide permission for believers to be honest about their suffering rather than maintaining false appearances of constant victory?

Interlinear Text

לָמָּה	זֶה	מִן הַבֶּטֶן	יָצָא אֵתִי	לִרְאֹת	עָמַל ל
H4100	H2088	out of the womb	Wherefore came I forth	to see	labour
		H7358	H3318	H7200	H5999
וְיָגוֹן	וַיִּכָּל וְ	בְּבֹשֶׁת	יָמַי:		
and sorrow	should be consumed	with shame	that my days		
H3015	H3615	H1322	H3117		

Additional Cross-References

Job 3:20 (Parallel theme): Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul;

Job 14:1 (Parallel theme): Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.

Lamentations 3:1 (Parallel theme): I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.

Psalms 69:19 (Parallel theme): Thou hast known my reproach, and my shame, and my dishonour: mine adversaries are all before thee.