

Introduction

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Lord, Why Is It So Hard?

Lord, why is it so hard to receive a call to be a prophet when I'm young, insecure, and introverted? Lord, why is it so hard to witness the last godly king of Judah, my beloved Josiah, our last hope of turning things around, slumping over dead in his chariot, killed by Pharaoh Neco in battle? Lord, why is it so hard to hear about my own king, Jehoiakim, tracking down my fellow prophet Uriah all the way down to Egypt to kill him? Lord, why is it so hard to confront my own people who have become so hardened to sin and unbelief they don't care anymore? Lord, why is it so hard to go to the temple and see people bringing their own personal idols and shrines into church, only for them to retort, "Well, the Lord won't notice."? Lord, why is it so hard to have you tell me that I can't marry or have children because what I'm about to witness would be too horrific for them? Lord, why is it so hard to watch the news reports about this new ruthless empire in Babylon that's sweeping across the horizon, ready to lick up tiny, helpless kingdoms in its wake? Lord, why is it so hard to sit in a prison with barely enough bread to survive because my own vacillating King Zedekiah can't give me a straight answer about what wrong I've done? Lord, why is it so hard to envision how Solomon's beautiful temple, once covered in cedar and gold, once the beacon of light on Mt. Zion, will be incinerated to the ground? Lord, why is it so hard to have nightmares of Babylon breaking down our walls, storming through our doors, and exiling our women and children? Lord, why is it so hard to look

my own people in the eye and say, “All this will happen to you because you have sinned and rejected the Lord.”? Of all the Old Testament prophets, the book of Jeremiah reveals the most anguish for a man called to share God’s Word.

The book of Jeremiah contains six autobiographical laments, and this last one is the most pointed and the most personal. Pashhur, a priest and chief officer of the Jerusalem Temple, had Jeremiah publicly beaten and put in stocks at the temple gate—all for proclaiming the message God had given him to speak. Overnight, as the temperatures drop in the mountains around Jerusalem, there Jeremiah sits, with his arms pulled apart, with his body barely getting a wink of sleep, with the first worshippers in the morning passing through the gate and giving him dirty looks and insults. You could sum up this lament like this, “Lord, why is it so hard?” Why is it so hard to tell my people over and over not to listen to the lies of the false prophets, who are insisting that everything’s going to be just fine, when that’s all their itching ears want to hear? Why is it so hard to be persecuted from the people who are supposed to be the worship leaders of our church? Why is it so hard to speak your Word, only to be publicly beaten and humiliated?

Now whose fault is it? The pain is so personal that Jeremiah points the finger at God. ***You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.*** Lord, if you hadn’t forced me to be a prophet, if you hadn’t given me such a harsh message of violence and destruction and exile to proclaim, if you hadn’t sent me to such a hardened nation that freely launches insults like they’re jokes, none of this would’ve happened! I’ve faithfully proclaimed your Word, and all I’ve gotten is agony and anguish, pain and persecution, misery and madness! Now if that’s what you get, wouldn’t you just hold the message in? ***But if I say, “I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.*** The logic is simple, “Jeremiah, if God’s Word is going to result in being beaten and locked up in the temple, why speak it in the first place? Why not just shut your mouth? What’s the point of being a prophet anymore?” But he just couldn’t do that! God’s Word is too important a message to hide, too powerful a message to bottle up, too passionate a message to squelch. He’s just got to speak it. So Jeremiah continues to speak God’s Word, even when it results in even more persecution. ***I hear many whispering, “Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let’s denounce him!” All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, “Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him.”*** “Terror on Every Side” was the name Jeremiah gave to Pashhur after Pashhur released him from the stocks. Now Jeremiah’s enemies are returning the favor! They’re using that very name against him! It’s one thing to be rejected and persecuted by Judah’s kings and priests, the ones who live in fancy houses you never visit. It’s quite another to be rejected and persecuted by your close friends, the ones who eat with you, who hang out with you, who share fun times with you. It’s these people who are now lurking around, plotting Jeremiah’s downfall. So how can Jeremiah ever have this boldness to speak God’s Word, even when it results in more persecution from his very own friends? He knows four things. First, Jeremiah knows who fights for him. ***But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior.*** Jeremiah knows he does not enter into this battle alone; he has his powerful Lord fighting for him. Second, Jeremiah knows what the end result will be. ***So my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.*** Right now it seems the persecutors will win out, but at the end of the day, they won’t! Those who were heaping disgrace and judgment on Jeremiah will themselves be disgraced and judged. Third,

Jeremiah knows who's in control. ***Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause.*** Vengeance is a difficult concept to understand today, largely because many Americans live in comfort and convenience and have no idea what it's like to endure the things Jeremiah endured. If someone gets publicly beaten and put in locks simply for speaking God's Word, we can't just say, "Oh, that's ok. Let's be tolerant to everyone." No! You can't sit idly by! The key to understanding vengeance in its proper biblical perspective is to know that it belongs to the Lord. It's *not* for us to exercise vindictively whenever we get frustrated. It's *only* for God to exercise when he sees fit. Fourth, Jeremiah knows what he will receive. ***Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.*** Jeremiah can actually burst out into song and praise because he knows he won't remain in the hands of the wicked forever. Either in this life or the next, the Lord will rescue him and bring him out of his pain.

By now, I'm sure you can empathize with Jeremiah's laments. You may not have written down it on paper, but you sure have thought it. Lord, why is it so hard? It's one thing to get rejected by strangers—like when we waste hundreds of dollars prompting an Easter service on Facebook, only for no one to come; like when we pass out postcards around our community, only for us to find an angry voicemail the next morning; like when we follow up on the few visitors we get, only for them to never come back. It's quite another thing to get rejected by your close friends—like when we waste our time pleading with our young people to come back to church, only for them to say they don't believe in God anymore; like when we try to start new initiatives at church, only to receive angry comments from people who don't like change; like when we follow up on the members who are drifting away from the church, only to get the door slammed in our face. I've been there. You have too. It's easy to just say, "If that's what we're going to get for speaking up in our day and age, why speak God's Word in the first place? Why not just shut our mouths? What's the point of being Christians anymore?" But let's think this one through. If we stay quiet, what will happen to us? We'll be left alone. If we stay quiet, what will happen to them? They might spend eternity in hell. If we don't say anything because we fear the insults we might get, we're admitting we value our earthly comfort more than their eternal plight.

By now, I'm sure you can empathize with Jeremiah's loneliness. When you ask, "Lord, why is it so hard?" it sure seems you need to find a solution yourself. But you don't! The Lord does not give you a trite answer or a quick solution, which, to be honest, wouldn't be of much help anyways. The Lord comes alongside of you to empathize with you. He just shuts his mouth and lets you vent to him. And then his silent actions speak volumes. He fights for you as your mighty warrior. He walks alongside of you to feel your pain, to endure your persecutions, and to stare down your opponents. He is the most powerful person in the whole universe, and he wields his unlimited power on your behalf. He will vindicate you from those who publicly ridicule his message when he says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Either in this life or the next, he will rescue you and bring you out of your pain. If you knew that your opponents will not ultimately succeed, what would you do? Would you give up as if their fleeting victory is the last word? No! Wouldn't you power through the pain and keep going? Of course you would! So don't let the negative self-talk hold you back, "We're going to try a new outreach event, Art in the Park, and it will be a total flop. We're going to do our annual food drive canvass, and our neighbors will be mad that we're leaving tote bags on their doors. We're going to invite our friends and neighbors to Welcome Weekend, and they will stop talking to us." Maybe that will happen; maybe that won't happen. But we're going to keep doing it no matter what! We're going to keep doing outreach events. We're going to keep having a presence in our neighborhood.

We're going to keep inviting our friends and neighbors to church. You and I need to be bold and fearless. And we can! The question, "Lord, why is it so hard?" may never go away, but the Lord empowers us to overcome our fear of opposition and continue to speak his Word.

Conclusion

I still remember what one pastor, whom I looked up to as a rock-star pastor and who is now well-respected in our synod, once shared with me. In the early days of his ministry, he was a struggling mission pastor trying to restart a church. He thought if he brought his little cute kid out into the neighborhoods with him, it would help break the ice and make people more amendable to receiving an invitation to church. It only made it worse. One man, in particular, used some choice language, right in front of his little kid, and told him to get off his front doorstep. That event sunk him into the depths. So his mission counselor took him out golfing to try to lift him up. He told him, "That man is without excuse. When he gives God excuses on the Last Day, God will point at you and say, 'But I sent him to your front door, and you just kicked him out!'" Even on the days when we ask, "Lord, why is it so hard?" God is still glorified. He still has your back. He still gives you a message to speak. So keep speaking it! Amen.

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my own people in the eye and say, “All this will happen to you because you have sinned and rejected the Lord.”? Of all the Old Testament prophets, the book of Jeremiah reveals the most anguish for a man called to share God’s Word.

The book of Jeremiah contains six autobiographical laments, and this last one is the most pointed and the most personal. Pashhur, a priest and chief officer of the Jerusalem Temple, had Jeremiah publicly beaten and put in stocks at the temple gate—all for proclaiming the message God had given him to speak. Overnight, as the temperatures drop in the mountains around Jerusalem, there Jeremiah sits, with his arms pulled apart, with his body barely getting a wink of sleep, with the first worshippers in the morning passing through the gate and giving him dirty looks and insults. You could sum up this lament like this, “Lord, why is it so hard?” Why is it so hard to tell my people over and over not to listen to the lies of the false prophets, who are insisting that everything’s going to be just fine, when that’s all their itching ears want to hear? Why is it so hard to be persecuted from the people who are supposed to be the worship leaders of our church? Why is it so hard to speak your Word, only to be publicly beaten and humiliated? Now whose fault is it? The pain is so personal that Jeremiah points the finger at God. ***You persuaded me, LORD, and I agreed to it. You are stronger than I am, and you won out. I have become a laughingstock all day long, and everyone is mocking me. Whenever I speak, I cry out. I cry out, “Violence and destruction!” But the word of the LORD has brought scorn on me. I am mocked all day long.*** Lord, if you hadn’t forced me to be a prophet, if you hadn’t given me such a harsh message of violence and destruction and exile to proclaim, if you hadn’t sent me to such a hardened nation that freely launches insults like they’re jokes, none of this would’ve happened! I’ve faithfully proclaimed your Word, and all I’ve gotten is agony and anguish, pain and persecution, misery and madness! Now if that’s what you get, wouldn’t you just hold the message in? ***If I say, “I will not mention him or speak in his name anymore,” then there is a burning fire in my heart, shut up in my bones, and I am weary of holding it in. I cannot!*** The logic is simple, “Jeremiah, if God’s Word is going to result in being beaten and locked up in the temple, why speak it in the first place? Why not just shut your mouth? What’s the point of being a prophet anymore?” But he just couldn’t do that! God’s Word is too important a message to hide, too powerful a message to bottle up, too passionate a message to squelch. He’s just got to speak it. So Jeremiah continues to speak God’s Word, even when it results in even more persecution. ***I hear many whispering, “Terror on every side!” All my close friends, those who are watching for my fall, say, “Denounce him! Let’s denounce him. Perhaps he can be pressured into making a mistake. Then we will have the upper hand against him, and we will take our revenge on him.”*** “Terror on Every Side” was the name Jeremiah gave to Pashhur after Pashhur released him from the stocks. Now Jeremiah’s enemies are returning the favor! They’re using that very name against him! It’s one thing to be rejected and persecuted by Judah’s kings and priests, the ones who live in fancy houses you never visit. It’s quite another to be rejected and persecuted by your close friends, the ones who eat with you, who hang out with you, who share fun times with you. It’s these people who are now lurking around, plotting Jeremiah’s downfall. So how can Jeremiah ever have this boldness to speak God’s Word, even when it results in more persecution from his very own friends? He knows four things. First, Jeremiah knows who fights for him. ***But the LORD is with me like a terrifying warrior.*** Jeremiah knows he does not enter into this battle alone; he has his powerful Lord fighting for him. Second, Jeremiah knows what the end result will be. ***So my persecutors will stumble, and they will not gain the upper hand. They will be put to shame completely, because they have not been successful. Their eternal disgrace will never be forgotten.*** Right now it seems the persecutors

will win out, but at the end of the day, they won't! Those who were heaping disgrace and judgment on Jeremiah will themselves be disgraced and judged. Third, Jeremiah knows who's in control. **LORD of Armies, you test the righteous. You see the heart and the mind. Let me see your vengeance on them, for I have laid out my case before you.** Vengeance is a difficult concept to understand today, largely because many Americans live in comfort and convenience and have no idea what it's like to endure the things Jeremiah endured. If someone gets publicly beaten and put in locks simply for speaking God's Word, we can't just say, "Oh, that's ok. Let's be tolerant to everyone." No! You can't sit idly by! The key to understanding vengeance in its proper biblical perspective is to know that it belongs to the Lord. It's *not* for us to exercise vindictively whenever we get frustrated. It's *only* for God to exercise when he sees fit. Fourth, Jeremiah knows what he will receive. **Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD, for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of the wicked.** Jeremiah can actually burst out into song and praise because he knows he won't remain in the hands of the wicked forever. Either in this life or the next, the Lord will rescue him and bring him out of his pain.

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doing it no matter what! We're going to keep doing outreach events. We're going to keep having a presence in our community. We're going to keep inviting our friends and neighbors to church. You and I need to be bold and fearless. And we can! The question, "Lord, why is it so hard?" may never go away, but the Lord empowers us to overcome our fear of opposition and continue to speak his Word.

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