

MAN IN THE MIRE

JEREMIAH 12, 15, 20, 38

The Prophet Jeremiah is one of my heroes.

Imagine, a pastor who ministered faithfully in the same field for over 40 years - yet never saw a single convert. His average Sunday attendance was zero!

Here's a man who was opposed by princes and priests - even the populace. He was under constant persecution from every corner of his community.

Jeremiah labored faithfully, preaching and pleading with the Southern Hebrew Kingdom of Judah - yet in the end he had very few positive, tangible, earthly results to show for his efforts... *He never built a building, got on the radio, developed a youth group, he hired only one staff person his whole ministry, and never had enough offering to even talk about a budget.*

Jeremiah did author a book. He gave it the not-so-catchy title... "[Lamentations.](#)" *Which doesn't make you want to rush out and buy a copy.* Well, what would you expect from a man known as "[the weeping prophet?](#)"

Actually, Lamentations is a great book. It never made the Jerusalem bestseller list because the only folks who bought it were the Babylonians - *the enemy.*

In the NT it was said of the Apostle Paul's ministry, "he turned the whole world upside down for Jesus."

I think the opposite was true of Jeremiah's ministry. *Serving Jesus turned Jeremiah's world upside down!*

Granted, Jeremiah had a tough message to preach.

God called him to warn the Southern Kingdom of impending judgment - *the Babylonians were coming!*

I heard of a church fellowship hall with framed Bible verses on the wall. Most of the passages extolled the mercies of God, but not the verse that caught the attention of the wedding party. The newlyweds were posing for pictures next to a plaque quoting Matthew 3:7. The plaque read, "Flee from the wrath to come..."

Well, this was the essence of Jeremiah's message. He preached "*repent.*" It was a tough pill to swallow...

And Jeremiah was called on to preach to a tough crowd. His audience was a religious people - steeped in tradition. They'd heard it all before. They felt sure of their salvation, and proud of their religious heritage.

They didn't want to be challenged with anything new.

The northern kingdom of Israel had been occupied by liberals, but this was the southern nation of Judah - **the south** - *the Bible belt* of the Promised Land.

Here's my point, no aspiring pastor would ever turn to Jeremiah to glean strategies for church growth. The prophet's memoirs were not about tangible results.

If you measure "ministry success" by nickels and noses, then Jeremiah was an abject failure. But if you measure "success" by faithfulness and integrity, then look no further than Jeremiah as the classic example.

The book of Jeremiah is a survival manual for pastors ministering in *tough places to tough people*. It holds some important keys to truly successful ministry.

But this book isn't just for pastors! Jeremiah is for anybody who's tried to serve God in a difficult situation.

It's for people who wanted to make a difference in their world only to end up disappointed and dejected.

The Jeremiahs of the church consider themselves more *a failure*, than *a success*. They started out with great expectations, but feel like God let them down.

This morning, I want to look at four episodes from the Prophet Jeremiah's life and ministry, and we'll note the lessons he learned from each situation...

If you're going to remain faithful in a hard place, you've got to do four things... First, **obtain some endurance**. Second, **maintain a repentance**. Third, **retain your importance**. And four, **regain a reliance**.

Let's look first in **Jeremiah 12...**

This chapter comes on the heels of a crushing betrayal in Jeremiah's life. His family and friends in his hometown of Anathoth, had thrown him under the bus.

A group of former friends plotted his assassination.

Once, a man asked me what he thought was a probing question, "Of all ministry's disappointments, which is the most difficult for you to overcome?"

Well, without the slightest *hesitation* - without a second's *meditation* - I answered, "the wounds inflicted by a supposed friend." I still ache over the times when I was led to believe a friend had my back - he'd be there when I needed him. He could be counted on. Only to discover he was first to run when times got tough.

I love how the poet puts it, "Against a foe I can defend, but Heaven protect me from a disloyal friend."

Jeremiah is still reeling, still bleeding from his own disappointment, when he writes out a prayer...

Verse 1, “Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper?”

Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; they grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth but far from their mind. But You, O LORD, know me...”

Jeremiah is struggling with an age-old problem - *why do the wicked prosper, and the righteous lack?* But understand he’s framed it in the context of ministry.

Jeremiah is talking about the evil men of Anathoth, but this was a Levitical city - its residents were priests.

Jeremiah is asking, “I’m a good man trying to do a good work, and I can’t catch a break. Yet the bad guys in priestly clothes, appear to prosper... *why is that?*”

Jeremiah continues his prayer in verse 3, “You have seen me, and You have tested my heart toward You.”

Here’s what’s taken me a long time to realize. Notice, Jeremiah speaks of God’s test in the past tense, “You *have* tested...” As if at some point God gives a final exam. Well, He doesn’t. There is no *final* exam. God prefers pop tests that keep popping up!

In CS Lewis' classic book, *"The Screwtape Letters,"* Screwtape, the senior demon, gives advice to his apprentice demon, Wormwood. He instructs him on how to defeat the Christian to whom he's assigned...

I quote, "Keep the subject thinking his trials will be over, so when they're not he'll be continually disappointed. It's okay if he learns a lesson or two through his trials, just as long as you keep him thinking that one day all his trials will be gone. Whatever you do never allow him to accept his trials as a permanent part of discipleship... something he must learn to endure."

Jeremiah is complaining, *"God, You have tested me, now its time to vindicate me and proof me righteous.*

"Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter. How long will the land mourn, and the herbs of every field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed, for the wickedness of those who dwell there, because they said, "He will not see our final end." God its time to settle the score!

But look at how God answers Jeremiah in verse 5, *"If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?"* This is not the response Jeremiah expected.

Jeremiah was looking for a little relief from his hardships. Instead God tells the sulking prophet, **“If you think it’s hard now, just wait, its going to get rougher!”**

God is telling Jeremiah, rather than whine because of a little difficulty - it’s time to buck up - hunker down - get a grip... Buckle your chinstrap buddy - the tests and challenges aren’t over, they’re just getting started!

Jeremiah, if you can’t hang with the foot soldiers, how in the world are you going to fight the cavalry?

When the Jordan River was at normal levels wild animals stayed close to its banks and a steady water supply. But when the Jordan flooded, and water was more plentiful, the wild animals were able to roam into the neighborhoods. They were a danger to residents.

And God is asking Jeremiah, if you’re afraid of a stray dog, how will you handle it when the lion and tiger suddenly appear prowling around in your backyard?

In other words, if you’re sulking and licking your wounds *now* - if you aren’t getting up and keeping on *now* - how will you make it when it really gets rough?

You’ve got to **obtain some endurance!**

Years ago, the Chicago Bears were playing on Monday Night football. Walter Payton cut off tackle for a nice pick-up, when one of the announcers made the comment, **“In his career Walter Payton has carried the football for over 9 miles.”**

His fellow broadcaster added, “Yes, and he’s been knocked down ever 4.6 yards.”

That puts it in perspective! We glamorize a man’s total yardage, but oh how we forget how many times he was knocked down accumulating those yards.

And it’s no different in life. You won’t gain a lot of yards, or score a lot of points, without a few sore ribs.

My son, Nick, was the star running back for his youth league football team. Nick was a threat to go all the way every time he touched the ball - *took after his dad*.

Yet on occasion Nick would take a hard lick, and get timid. He’d want to come out of the game (*again, he takes after his dad*). And I’d tell him, “Son, shake it off! If you don’t keep toting the ball you’ll never score!”

And the same is true with each of us.

I can’t cry and want to quit every time life gets a little rough - *when God says the closer we get to the end of time the tougher it’s going to get from time to time*.

Amy Carmichael wrote a poem. It’s one of my favorites. In it, Jesus speaks to you and me, “Have you no scar? No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?”

I hear you sung as mighty in the land. I hear them hail your bright ascendant star. Have you no scar?

Have you no wound? Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent, leaned me against the tree to die, and rent - by ravenous beasts that encompassed me I swooned. Have you no wound?

No wound? No scar? Yes, as the master shall the servant be, and pierced are the feet that follow Me, but your's are whole. Can he have followed far - who has no wound? No scar?" You know what they did to our Lord Jesus! And now He's called on us to follow Him... *Did we really think it was going to be easy?*

To be successful in God's eyes you need to **obtain some endurance**, but you also need to **maintain a repentance!** Turn with me to **Jeremiah 15...**

It's just a guess, but Jeremiah's words in chapter 15 may've come on the heels of a mid-life reflection.

I heard of a fellow who did a mid-life evaluation. He concluded he was as well off as the economy... "My hairline is in a recession - my waistline is suffering from inflation - and altogether, I'm in a depression."

And this is how Jeremiah felt about his life at its midpoint. The Prophet was pretty depressed.

Let's pick up Jeremiah's complaint in verse 15, "O LORD, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your sake I have suffered

rebuke.” Jeremiah is a victim for Jesus’ sake. He’s suffered unrighteous persecution.

He continues, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.” At the time the priests thought there were no more copies of the Law. But Jeremiah remembered when the High Priest Hilkiah found a lost manuscript.

He rejoiced that God’s Word had been rediscovered.

And Jeremiah made it His life’s pursuit to read the Word - study it, consume it, love it. It quenched a deep-down, spiritual thirst! It caused his heart to dance!

Jeremiah adds in verse 17, “I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers...” He didn’t just read God’s Word, but he applied it to his life. He separated himself from the evil around him to live a godly, holy life.

But here’s where his attitude sours, “nor did I rejoice; I sat alone because of Your hand, for You have filled me with indignation. Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream, as waters that fail?” Oooo, I read those words and I cringe!

...

And for two reasons... *One*, because they’re so arrogant. Who is Jeremiah to accuse the Almighty God of unfaithfulness? The prophet is way out-of-line...

But the second reason I cringe, is that Jeremiah's words sound so much like my own comments.

I too have walked some dark roads where I wanted to have it out with God. I thought I'd done everything right. I'd stood up for Jesus - taught His Word - tried to live a holy life - *so why wasn't my life being blessed?*

There've been times when I've come close to calling the God of all faithfulness *"an unreliable stream."*

And God spoke to me, in the same manner He spoke to the Prophet Jeremiah. Verse 19, *"Therefore thus says the LORD: "If you return, then I will bring you back; you shall stand before Me; if you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth."*

In August, 1994, a ship, the Columbus Iselin, was off the Florida Keys doing environmental research.

University of Miami scientists were collecting data to help manage oceanic oil spills. But while maneuvering near some coral the ship hit a reef, and gouged a hole in its side - 200 gallons of diesel fuel spilt into the deep blue sea. *A ship polluted what it was trying to preserve!*

And I've done the same. Here's an irony, you can do all the right stuff - serve God, provide for your family, make your spouse happy - *yet have a bad attitude.*

You do it begrudgingly, out of mere duty... Or proudly for you're own glory... Or you *give* with the expectation of *getting back*. *"Lord, I'm doing all this for You because I'm expecting you to do a little for me!"*

Either way, praise might be coming from our lips, but at the same time poison can be brewing in our heart.

I remember God telling me, just as He did Jeremiah, that He was not the unreliable stream... *I was.*

Again, serving God can be tricky business. You can wander from God, even while serving Him. Here, Jeremiah was embroiled in ministry, when God told him, *"If you return, then I will bring you back..."* He's a pastor no less, *yet God has to bring him back?*

The truth is, we can stray from God, even while supposedly serving and following Him. Again, it's possible to do the right things with a wrong attitude!

The Lord will still use Jeremiah. There's still a lot in his heart that God considers *precious*, but there's also a lot He calls *vile* - and it was time Jeremiah cleaned up the vile. He needed to **maintain a repentance!**

Realize, the polluting of a motivation is such a subtle occurrence... *When does righteous anger become vindictiveness?... When does legitimate concern turn into unhealthy control?... When does admiration of another person's gifts and ministry erode into jealousy?*

When does encouragement turn into manipulation?

Or a vision for the future turn into an ingratitude for what God has already done in the past? These are all fine lines, but we know when we've crossed them.

It's so easy to cop an attitude even while serving the Lord. There's only one safeguard - *maintain an attitude of repentance!* A constant sifting of the *precious* from the *vile* needs to be occurring in our hearts at all times.

Here's what happens to us all - we set expectations that are not from God. They're our own visions of grandeur, and when God doesn't cooperate, we get mad. We accuse the Almighty of breaking promises He never made. *Why am I not rich? Or successful? Or married by now? Or why can't we get pregnant?*

These are good plans, *but are we sure they're God's plan for us?* We need to stay humble, and open, and obedient. Don't make selfish demands of a holy God.

There's much in you that God considers precious. You are His workmanship! The Savior cherishes His Bride. But along with the *precious* there's also some

vile. We need to clean up the oil spill before it does permanent damage. Let's **maintain a repentance...**

And let's also **retain our importance**. Turn with me to **Jeremiah 20**... In this chapter the Prophet Jeremiah becomes so discouraged he turns in his resignation.

Which reminds me of the pastor who resigned before his congregation at the end of a Sunday service.

After he read his letter, he notice a lady sobbing. He was flattered she was so disappointed he was leaving.

He said, **"Sister, don't worry the Church Board will find a new pastor far better than your current pastor."** She snapped, *"Sure, that's what they said last time."*

In chapter 12 God told Jeremiah the horses were coming. Now in chapter 20 he runs into a stampede.

Persecution intensifies. Pashur, the captain of the Temple guard, scourges Jeremiah, and throws him into the stocks. In verse 2 of chapter 20, the Hebrew word translated **"stocks"** means literally, **"causing distortion."**

Stocks were not designed for simple restraint. They were intended for torture. Pashur put Jeremiah on the rack, and stretched the joints in his body like a lump of pizza dough! It was an extreme form of punishment.

This terrible ordeal stretched Jeremiah to what he thought was his limit. He was tired *of ministry - of persecution - of disappointment...* With his wounds still throbbing, Jeremiah writes God a letter of resignation.

He pens in verse 7, “O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed.” In other words, “*I didn’t sign up for this! What’s happened is not what I expected! God, you twisted my arm, and forced me to be a minister.*”

Jeremiah is called “the weeping prophet,” and I’m sure it’s here his tears stain the page. He cries out...

“I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, “Violence and plunder!” Because the words of the LORD was made to me a reproach and a derision daily. Then I said, “I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name.” “*That’s it! Tell the elders! Here’s my key to the church! This Sunday will be my last.*” Jeremiah is hanging up his pastoral cleats! The Prophet of God has tasted about all the disappointment He can handle.

I believe when Jeremiah went home that night he couldn’t sleep, so he opened his Bible. As he read he considered that maybe he’d made a rash decision.

He concluded in 20:9, “But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not.” Jeremiah wanted to quit - was determined to quit - *but he just couldn't quit!*

As He read the Scripture he rediscovered its wonders and warmth. The Holy Spirit became his own personal Hilkiah. God's Word rekindled his passion.

It burned a fresh fire in his heart! Jeremiah remembered the love of God - the people's need - and why he'd agreed to God's calling in the beginning...

He says, “For I heard many mocking: "Fear on every side!" "Report," they say, "and we will report it!" All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, "Perhaps he can be induced; then we will prevail against him, and we will take our revenge on him.” In short, “*If I tap out, the scoffers will think they're right.*”

It's funny, these were the same reasons Jeremiah gave for quitting - *resistance, ridicule, persecution, betrayal*. Yet, the very reasons for his quitting became the very reasons and motivations for him to press on.

As he analyzed his life's vexations he rediscovered the reasons he was needed in the first place!

I've also prayed prayers that went full circle, “Lord, I want to quit. People are so stubborn. People are so frustrating. It's so difficult to make a difference.

Lord, people need You. Please send somebody to teach them, love them, help them realize their need.”

And low and behold, I’ve signed up again for the same job I was trying to quit. Often, a Christian will get frustrated for the very same reasons we’re needed.

Hey, if the members of our church, and community, and family were perfect - if they had it all together, and were never irritating - then they wouldn’t need us!

People’s problems are the excuse for our existence.

If there was no one hurting for our help, God would take us home. But this church - *your church* - is very much needed. What we do from week to week is vital.

The role you play in your church - *or perhaps could play* - is far more significant than you might’ve thought.

The Church provides for people what no one else supplies. As Paul said to Timothy, we are **“the pillar and ground of the truth.”** We’re the world’s last hope!

The Christian community is the only distributor of the words of eternal life - and your involvement in it helps us be the only bridge that links certain people to God.

As Christians we need to realize the significance of our mission and calling. Let’s *retain our importance.*

Jeremiah adds another thought to his attitude turn around here in chapter 20. He says in verse 11, “But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One.”

As Jeremiah read *God’s Word* it restored to him an awareness of *God’s presence* - and the *presence of God* always ignites our hearts with the *fire of God*.

W. E. Sangster of London, once interviewed a man for ministry. He confessed he was a shy fellow - not the sort of person who would set the Thames River on fire.

That was a proverbial way of saying, “*stir up the city.*”

Sangster replied, “My dear brother, I’m not interested to know if you could set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is if I picked you up by the scruff of your neck and dropped you in the Thames, would it sizzle?”

What about you and me - *do we still sizzle?*

Or have the struggles of church life - have the rigors of ministry - have the challenges of being a witness cooled our passion for the mission God has given us?

This is why we need to see the big picture of the Church. Let’s **retain our importance**. God will use us!

And finally, we need to **regain our reliance**. Let's look at one more incident from Jeremiah's life, **Chapter 38**. *You think you've been mired down in your life...*

We're told in 38:6, "So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the king's son, which was in the court of the prison, and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire. So Jeremiah sank in the mire."

This was probably a cistern - a old water reservoir.

Jeremiah's message had again angered the false prophets, and with the king's permission, they tossed him into the deep, thick, crawling, suffocating sludge.

We once had a fellow who attended our church who owned a company that cleaned out water towers, and cooling tanks. One day, he described for me what we'd expect Jeremiah to find at the bottom of a cistern...

The slime would be puffy - very fine and light - which made it impossible to wipe off. There was no way for Jeremiah to get the mess out of his hair and eyes. It engulfed him. It would've created a claustrophobic feeling. The mire also stunk, and gave off toxic gases that would disorientate. My friend told me Jeremiah's ordeal would be like you or I diving into a septic tank.

And cold... long before he starved to death he'd died of hypothermia. The temperature in a subterranean cave is 57 degrees. You die in water 75 degrees.

Jeremiah's wrinkled body would be shaking and numb, buried in the cold slime. And remember, he's in his 60s at the time. *What a way to spend your retirement.* This was a hopeless, helpless situation.

But here's what happens... Out of nowhere - with no prior mention - a friend of Jeremiah comes on the scene. He understands the conditions Jeremiah faces.

He has access to intercede before the king. He brings resources to help lift Jeremiah from the pit. And his name, "Ebed-Melech," means "servant of the king."

And I love how this man helps Jeremiah...

Verses 11-13 describe how Ebed gathers soft rags and old clothes to place under Jeremiah's arms so the ropes don't cut into his tenderized flesh. He and the thirty men with him, lift Jeremiah out of the mire in the most gentle, and loving, and tender way possible.

Hey, there are times when God allows you and I to get *stuck in the muck*. We get mired in an impossible situation - *especially when we've been leaning on our own ingenuity and effort*. It's in the helplessness of the mire that we're reminded of how much we really need God's help - and it's there that we **regain a reliance**.

And when we do, Ebed-Melech can come out of nowhere. The Holy Spirit is also *a servant of the king*. He is the comforter Jesus promised to send to us.

And suddenly He can appear on the scene to lift us, and clean us, and give us hope. If you've been *mired down* and *letdown*, God's Spirit wants to tenderly, and gently, and mercifully pull you out of your miry pit.

The Spirit of God is faithful to *renew our calling*, and *rekindle fresh vision*, and *re-energize us for ministry*. We need to **regain the reliance** we once placed in Him.

It's interesting, Ebed-Melech pulled Jeremiah out of the mire with the help of thirty men. I haven't counted, but it looks like more than thirty of us here today.

And we need each other, just as much as Jeremiah needed those thirty men. It's lonely in the mire. You become disoriented from the toxic nature of your disappointments. *Like Elijah* you think you're all alone. *Like Moses* your arms grow weary and start to droop.

We forget there's a servant of the king and thirty men nearby who know our need and want to lift us out.

Today, if you need help, we'll have some folks ready to pray with you. *God's Spirit* still likes to use *God's people* when it comes to pulling us out of the mire.

Let me close with one final thought... In Christopher Columbus' log book, numerous days contained a same, simple, two-word entry. It read, "**Sailed On.**"

And likewise, if we keep sailing there's no telling what we'll end up discovering! I believe every day we hang on - every day we persevere - it gives God one more day to do something great in and through us!

Right now your situation looks grim. Discouragement has taken its toll. Yet, I believe if you **obtain some endurance**, and **maintain a repentance**, and **retain your importance**, and **regain your reliance** - in essence, if you stay usable - you'll give the God who loves you, and wants to bless you, an opportunity to do just that!

Sail on!