

# Under Duress

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## The Life and Times of Jeremiah

### Confronting Pashhur

Jeremiah 20:1-6

For ten years, our daughters grew up in a new church in Oklahoma. The church was about the size of ours, with many people young in the faith. Most of the children and youth were following Jesus, but not all them; at least one kid in the youth group could have been described as *pre-delinquent*.

When we moved to Elizabethtown, we got involved in a church of around 500, with a large youth group. Connie and I assumed this would be better for our daughters. . . until one of them said:

"It was *easier* to follow Jesus in our Oklahoma City church *than it is here*. In Oklahoma, we knew who was serious about following Jesus and who was not. Here, *some* kids are serious about their faith, some are half-hearted, and some are just going through the motions, with no intention of following Jesus.

For our daughters, the way to follow Jesus in Oklahoma was *clear*. It was a matter of **black and white**. In Elizabethtown, for the first time, our daughters encountered **shades of gray**; and it was *disconcerting* and *confusing*.

If only things *were* black and white, always clear! Sadly, in our efforts to understand the truth about God, we must contend with *compromise, misplaced emphases,* and unholy mixtures of *biblical truth* and *cultural accommodations*.

The overarching idea for this sermon series is that we are "under duress" and that studying the life and times of Jeremiah can help us at this time.

We have talked about the pressures of living through a pandemic, the excessive rhetoric and polarization of an election year, and the national reaction to racial violence and injustice. Hopefully, these distresses will subside in time. But there is one point of duress that will persist: we will *always* contend with **shades of gray** in Christian faith and life.

In the first *two* of Jeremiah's messages in this series, "I Will Contend" and "Amend Your Ways" the prophet Jeremiah was preaching to the common people.

As his ministry enlarged, he prophesied to kings and national leaders. In chapters 20 and 23, Jeremiah was contending with *priests* and *prophets*, and this was the question: **Who has the true word from the Lord?**

Just before this, in chapter 19, Jeremiah had preached another one of his illustrated messages. The Lord told him to purchase a clay pitcher—not an everyday pot, but the most artistic, delicate, and expensive pitcher available, with a neck so narrow that, if it ever broke, it could not be mended. Jeremiah was to take this pitcher, invite some civic and temple leaders, and go to the Valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, the place where children were sacrificed to the idol, Baal. At the Lord’s instruction, Jeremiah threw the pitcher down, shattering it, and give this prophecy, verse 11:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and his city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended.

For us, smashing pottery would seem to be only a startling illustration. In Jeremiah’s time, people were terrified by symbolic actions like this. They believed that such actions, in themselves, released power to fulfill the prediction, in this case the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah went back to the city, to the temple, and repeated the prophecy to all the people, chapter 19, verse 15:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words.

This is what occurred next, in the passage for today, chapter 20, verses 1-6.

Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord.

Until this time, Jeremiah had endured scorn and ridicule and verbal abuse, but this is the first time he suffered outright physical persecution. Pashhur, a priest, the head of the temple guard, the equivalent to a chief of police, arrested Jeremiah, beat him, and put him in stocks until the next day.

This abuse did not deter Jeremiah.  
As soon as he was released, he denounced Pashhur, verse 3.

The next day, when Pashhur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The Lord does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. For thus says the Lord: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall strike them down with the sword. Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them and seize them and carry them to Babylon. And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely."

Jeremiah took Pashhur's name,  
which in the local language sounded like, "Fruitful on every side."  
and changed it to "Terror on Every side."  
The time will come, Jeremiah prophesied to Pashhur,  
when your dominant emotions will be fear and dread  
because Jerusalem *will* be destroyed  
and you, with your family and friends, will be taken into captivity—  
because you have **prophesied falsely**.  
You claimed to speak for the Lord.  
You said that no disaster will come (Jeremiah 23:17).  
You have caused people to trust in a lie.

In chapter 23, verse 16, Jeremiah elaborates on the danger of false prophets:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.'"

For who among [these prophets] has stood in the council of the Lord  
to see and to hear his word,  
or who has paid attention to his word and listened? . . .

"I did not send [these] prophets, yet they ran;

I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.

But if they had stood in my council,  
 then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
 and they would have turned [my people] from their evil way,  
 and from the evil of their deeds.

The false prophets spoke from their own minds,  
 most often what people wanted to hear.  
 They did not stand in the council of the Lord to see and hear his word  
 which has the power to turn people away from sin and back to God.

The duress of false teaching was not limited to Jeremiah's life and times.  
 In the sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:15-16, Jesus said:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly  
 are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.

The apostle Paul gave similar warnings, such as this one in Acts 20:29-30:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not  
 sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will rise men speaking  
 twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

The apostle Peter also wrote in 2 Peter 2:1-3:

. . . there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in  
 destructive heresies, even denying the Master [that is, the Lord] who  
 brought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will  
 follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be  
 blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. . .

False teaching is a perennial challenge, in every age.  
 The preachers are different. The alluring promises vary.  
 There is often an element of enduring truth, twisted in some new way.  
 Typically, sensuality and greed show up *somewhere*.  
 The shades of gray, and the resulting confusion, are the always same.

All this is clear and obvious.

The tough question is:

*How do we distinguish between the true word of the Lord*  
 and *twisted, skewed, and false words that someone claims to be from God?*

## 1 **First** of all,

we measure their words by the beliefs *held in common* by Christians *through the centuries*, beliefs that have come to be called “orthodox,” which means “right thinking.”

When Connie and I accepted our first ministry assignment in Oregon leading a team of young adults in support of a small church in a tumble-down community on the outskirts of Salem, we moved 1,000 miles away from Connie’s home church in Southern California.

Our pastor in Oregon believed that he needed to yell and jump to preach well. His worship services were so different from what we were accustomed to that we felt more at home at a Catholic Charismatic Prayer Meeting in downtown Salem, led by a young Catholic lay couple—with whom we are still Christmas card and Facebook friends—and a Benedictine Monk, Father Bruno, who was born again and Spirit-filled. Father Bruno’s teaching was gentle, winsome, and thoroughly evangelical.

We learned in that experience that there is an *orthodox core* of Christian truth shared by Christians in all faith traditions, the central truths that C.S. Lewis calls “mere Christianity,” by which he meant “beliefs held in common by nearly all Christians at all times.”

Lewis went on to say, yes, there are disputed points at the borders of all the faith traditions, but . . .

It is at her center, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine.”

Here is my sports illustration—for Gail Yoder’s sake. We are now into the major league baseball playoffs, with teams playing in empty stadiums, which makes this illustration even better.

Picture the ball field:  
home plate, first base, second base, third base—the infield—and the outfield. Let’s say home plate, the key place in the field, is where one understands the faith really well, getting nearly *everything* right.

There are also players in the infield who may not see everything quite the same way, but they’re close.

Then there are the outfielders.  
further away in their understanding, with more disputed points,  
but who embrace the same orthodoxy; they are still on the team.

The next increment are the tailgaters.  
these are people not on the team, not even in the stands;  
they are outside the stadium . . . in the parking lot.

Because we have Christian thinking and writing through the ages to guide us—  
we can usually differentiate between orthodox and unorthodox teaching.  
We can normally tell who is on the team—in the ball field—  
and who is outside the stadium in the parking lot.

But how do we distinguish shades of gray  
that *may seem* to be within the bounds of orthodox Christian teaching—  
*borderline, misleading* teaching that skews the truth by some *excessive emphasis*  
or *mishmash* of biblical faith and *cultural blindspots*?

**2** A **second** measure of biblical truth is this:  
does this teaching point to Jesus, above all else?

Jesus said in John 14:6

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father  
except through me.”

The Bible is the authoritative and reliable Word of God.  
The Old Testament is the record of God’s saving acts for Israel.  
The New Testament clearly reveals God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.  
The best way to understand the written revelation of God  
in both the Old and New Testaments  
is the *person, teaching, and work* of Jesus Christ.

Just like a compass always points north,  
every true teaching will *always point to Jesus*.

Anything that does *not* point to Jesus, *above all else, is suspect*.

If I did not offend you by Jeremiah’s message last week,  
I may well succeed this week, depending on your political views.

In this speech for the Republican National Convention Vice President Mike Pence quoted parts of two verses, Hebrews 12:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17, and totally misconstrued them for political purposes.

Looking up to a flag, the vice president said:

Let's run the race marked out for us. Let's fix our eyes on Old Glory and all she represents. Let's fix our eyes on this land of heroes and let their courage inspire. And let's fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith and freedom and never forget that where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom – and that means freedom always wins.

Mike Pence may be on the playing field himself, but in this instance his rhetoric was way out in the parking lot. He substituted flag and national heroes for Jesus. He used Jesus and the Holy Spirit to endorse *political* freedom. And he claimed that God will guarantee our nation's freedom—which was the same false promise that Pashhur was making. In his speech that night, Mike Pence stepped over the line of biblical truth. To a national audience, he promoted an *unholy mishmash* of faith and country.

*Here again* is the rule:  
anything that does *not* point to Jesus *alone, above all else, is suspect*.

**3** **Third**, *false teaching* tends to be a *twisted* version of the truth which often *accommodates* cultural biases instead of *confronting* them.

Listen again to Paul's words:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will rise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

We are all powerfully influenced by our culture. We grow up, in many ways, unconsciously absorbing its values and biases. In America, we are accustomed to affluence, at least in relation to the rest of the world. We have come to believe that God favors our nation above others, despite the fact that God will judge us by the same standard that he judged the nation of Judah, and will judge every nation. As a culture, we have increasingly relaxed views of sexual morality.

When a preacher—or anyone—combines faith with our cultural propensities for prosperity, patriotism, and immorality, they are luring us into dangerous compromise.

Pope John Paul II was one of the great Christian leaders of the 20th century. John Paul traveled to 129 countries often speaking to huge crowds, sometimes in the millions. Everywhere he went, to the dismay of some Catholics, he insisted on the traditional moral teaching of the Church. He customized his greetings and homilies to fit each country. He affirmed values and practices in accord with a Christian worldview; and he boldly confronted sin and evil in the nation's beliefs and practices.

One biographer said John Paul II demonstrated the warmth and charm of a son of Poland and the "steel" of papal authority. (David Aikman, *Great Souls*, p. 297)

In his Polish homeland, John Paul challenged totalitarian government. In Latin America, he confronted liberation theology, a mix of faith and violence. In the West, while he favored a free market economy, he criticized a "defect" in capitalism that allows some to prosper while others starve. Here in the United States, he decried divorce, abortion, euthanasia, selfish affluence, and the Desert Storm invasion of Iraq. Whether or not Pope John Paul was always right, he courageously confronted the false values and practices of our time.

In his book on Jeremiah, *Run with the Horses*, Gene Peterson wrote:

The task of a prophet is not to smooth things over but to make things right. The function of religion is not to make people feel good but to make them good. (p. 89)

Understandably, we want to be happy and successful and prosperous. We are looking for ways to make life better. And if there's an easier way to get there, that is appealing!

But when some "shortcut" comes in the guise of biblical truth, we need to ask: Are we using our faith to attain what we want, or are we committed to become what God wants.



## Conclusion

It would be so much easier if the truth about God were always black and white. But the fact is: we will always contend confusing shades of gray— with compromise, misplaced emphases, and unholy mixtures of biblical truth and cultural accommodation.

Like Jeremiah, we must **confront Pashhur!**

The yardstick that Jeremiah used to measure truth was the OT law and the earlier prophets.

We have so much more.

We have both the Old and New Testaments— ancient words that are always true, the enduring Word of God— as understood through the centuries by orthodox Christians in all faith traditions.

We have the person, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ as the ultimate measure of biblical truth.

And we have the Holy Spirit to help and strengthen us when we encounter *twisted* versions of truth.

It is not easy, not without effort on our part to immerse ourselves in biblical truth, but we *can* know the truth, and the truth, Jesus promises, will make us free. (John 8:32)

He said it this way:

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

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