

Under Duress

The Life and Times of Jeremiah

Run with the Horses — Jeremiah 12:5; 15:18-21 (and all)

Amid unrelenting hostility, Jeremiah was scared, lonely, hurt, and angry. In intense, intimate, vulnerable prayers the prophet discovered the patient, persistent, purpose of God to develop a life that is thoroughly authentic.

Sister Sarah

One of my mother's heroes was "Sister Sarah," as she was called.

At 32, Sarah was a small, frail, reserved woman on a farm in rural Kansas. One evening, while walking, she heard a voice say: "Go to Chicago." She thought this meant she was to visit her sister who lived in Chicago. With fear and trembling, she ventured into the city for a visit . . . which just "happened" to be at the time the Brethren in Christ were starting a city mission there. The team leader invited her to join the team and she apprehensively decided to stay—for awhile. Before long, she was fully involved in the mission and community.

Because of a rapid turnover in superintendents, much of the day-to-day work fell to Sarah. She overworked her frail body, and experienced what we would call burn-out. This mental and spiritual disturbance lasted for three months. It was so severe, she returned to Kansas to rest and recuperate.

After prayer and counseling, Sarah recovered, and at that point had to decide whether or not to return to the city. She was in poor health; she knew this emotional tailspin could occur again—and, in fact, it did, repeatedly though less seriously, in the ensuing years. If she had known all that was ahead, she wrote later, she would have said, "No, this I cannot do." She knew the work would be hard and, still . . . *she went back to Chicago.*

Jeremiah

As we have seen, Jeremiah had it extremely hard. The prophet's bold preaching was immensely unpopular. In reaction to the "Temple Sermon," an irate mob almost killed him. After the "Smashed Pottery" message, he was beaten and put in stocks. For a time, he was forbidden to enter the temple. At God's command, he was not permitted to marry

or attend funerals or weddings or parties, so he endured deep loneliness. His own relatives plotted his assassination. His enemies used every legal maneuver at their disposal in repeated attempts to get rid of him. He was ridiculed, mocked, taunted, cursed, harassed, and ostracized. Through his lifetime, few, if any, responded positively to his preaching; Jeremiah's ministry seemed to be a complete failure.

In recurring moments of deep darkness, Jeremiah agonized before God. With full disclosure of his private emotional life, Jeremiah recorded these intense conversations with God in his book. They are scattered through chapters 12 to 20. You can read all of them in this coming week's *Dive Deeper* readings. Here are some of them:
Jeremiah 15:10

Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me.

And right after his confrontation with Pashhur, Jeremiah 20.7-9:

O Lord, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart *as it were* a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

Like Sister Sarah, Jeremiah was compelled to fulfill his calling, yet it only brought him trouble—and despair, Jeremiah 20:14-15, 18

Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!

Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,
 "A son is born to you,"
 making him very glad.

Why did I come out from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?

The sensitive prophet nearly broke under the strain of his ministry.
 In repeated bouts with *depression*,
 he sagged into *self-pity*, erupted in *bitterness*,
 cried out for *vindication* and *vengeance*, and slipped into *despair*.

Like Jeremiah, we also have hard times.
 Hopefully, not as terrible as the rejection and abuse that he endured,
 but the setbacks, disappointments, hardships, and failures we *do* experience
 sometimes make our life difficult.
 And like Jeremiah, in our emotional responses,
 we can experience moments of deep inner turmoil.

At such times, what can we do? We can do what Jeremiah did.

1. We can complain to God in prayer. We can pour out our frustration and pain, our self-pity and anger, to our Heavenly Father, knowing he will listen and respond.

In chapter 12:1-2, Jeremiah prays:

Righteous are you, O Lord,
 when I *complain* to you;
 yet I would plead my case before you.
 Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
 Why do all who are treacherous thrive?
 You plant them, and they take root;
 they grow and produce fruit;
 you are near in their mouth
 and far from their heart.

In Jeremiah 18:19-23, the beleaguered prophet cries out for *vengeance!*

Hear me, O Lord,
and listen to the voice of my adversaries.

Should good be repaid with evil?
Yet they have dug a pit for my life.
Remember how I stood before you
to speak good for them,
to turn away your wrath from them.

Therefore deliver up their children to famine;
give them over to the power of the sword;
let their wives become childless and widowed.
May their men meet death by pestilence,
their youths be struck down by the sword in battle.

May a cry be heard from their houses,
when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them!
For they have dug a pit to take me
and laid snares for my feet.

Yet you, O Lord, *know*
all their plotting to kill me.
Forgive not their iniquity,
nor blot out their sin from your sight.
Let them be overthrown before you;
deal with them in the time of your anger.

In Jeremiah 15:18, he *moans*:

Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?

In these intense prayers,
Jeremiah brought his complaints, questions, doubts, anger,
even his desire for vindication and vengeance—*all to God*.

The apostle Peter urges us in 1 Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

A couple of weeks ago,
 Connie was reading and studying this 1 Peter passage
 with the help of a commentary.
 As she thought about the word “cast,”
 she pictured someone walking and tossing something off to the side.
 When she told me about this,
 I pictured a fisherman casting a line 30 feet away.
 In the commentary, though, Connie learned that this word
 can be interpreted even more strongly as “throw.”
 She pictured a quarterback throwing a football 50 yards for a touchdown.
 Her response that morning was to list her immediate burdens.
 Then she prayed, naming them aloud,
 and threw them, one by one, with the motion of her arm,
 into the outstretched arms of God, the One who Cares,
 the Catcher and Carrier of our Burdens.

Whatever our trouble,
 we can throw that burden, far from us, into the arms of God.

All of this, we know.
 We know that life is hard at times.
 We know that our internal responses *can* be dark and difficult.
 We know that, at these times, we can pray.
 We know that God will listen.
 We know that he cares,
 We know, as the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1, that . . .

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [will comfort] us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

Knowing all that, the most surprising—and at first *disconcerting*—thing to me is God's *stiff response* to Jeremiah's agonized prayers.

Jeremiah cries out to God in deep despair,
 and God replies in Jeremiah 12:6

“If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you,
 how will you compete with horses?
 And if in a safe land you are so trusting,
 what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan? (12:5)

In other words, God said to Jeremiah:
 If you have become weary racing against men on level ground,
 how will you race with horses on the hilly thickets along the Jordan River?

Jeremiah was expecting comfort, and God rebuked him.
 Basically, God said: yes, life *is* difficult—and serving me *is* hard.
 Are you going to quit at the first wave of opposition?
 Are you going to turn away from the risks?
 Are you going to mope because the results are not what you expected?
 Are you going to stumble in your faith?

In a phrase, God said to Jeremiah: Get over it!

Another time, God replied, chapter 15:19-20:

Therefore thus says the Lord:
 “If you *return*, I will restore you,
 and you shall stand before me.
 If you *utter what is precious, and not what is worthless*,
 you shall be as my mouth.
 They shall turn to you,
 but you shall not turn to them.

And I will make you to this people
 a fortified wall of bronze;
 they will fight against you,
 but they shall not prevail over you,
 for I am with you
 to save you and deliver you,
 declares the Lord.

2. Yes, God does want to *comfort* us in our troubles, and he will;
 but he will also challenge us to compete with horses—and win!

God wants us to live courageously!
 He wants us to have a life of purpose *beyond* our present abilities!
 And he promises to be with us to save and deliver—
 to give us the “staying power” to fulfill our destiny!

As we know from the rest of the story,
Jeremiah weighed the options, counted the cost,
and then chose to run with the horses.

His enemies kept fighting against him, but they never prevailed over him,
because God made Jeremiah a fortified wall of bronze!

And God will do that for us.

Here are just a sampling of his promises—to you and me:

James 1:2-4 *ESV*

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Romans 5:3-5 *ESV*

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 12:12 *ESV*

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

James 1:12 *ESV*

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Sister Sarah

After her first prolonged bout with despondency,
Sister Sarah went back to Chicago and took up the demanding work again.
In time, because, no man could be found to lead the mission,
Sister Sarah was appointed superintendent at age 45.
She was efficient administrator, with both business sense *and* faith.
She was hardworking.
She was kind and warm.
She worked intentionally to preserve unity.
She had an intense prayer life, with a tendency to have dreams and visions.
She served as superintendent until she was *80 years old*
and came to be revered as the Brethren in Christ version of a saint.

It was in this city mission,
in the context of Sister Sarah's deep faith and compassionate service,
that my mother's grandparents grew strong in faith,
and where their eleven children were nurtured in the faith.

One of these children was my grandmother.
Another was Dwight's grandmother.
Some of you know this about Dwight and me, but not all of you.
Our grandmothers were *sisters*.
Our mothers were *cousins*.
Dwight and I are *second cousins*.

Dwight and I are here, and have been with you for this past year, in part,
because of the impact of Sister Sarah on our family, and, in particular,
because Sister Sarah, after that first debilitating bout with burnout,
knowing in advance how hard it would be, **decided to go back to Chicago.**

Yes, God does want to comfort us; and he will.
But he also wants to counsel and correct us.
He wants to purify and refine and motivate us to become
all he has created and ordained for us to be.

That means that when our dark moments come, as they will, . . .
we can "*throw*" our troubles into God's outstretched arms;
we can expect that God will *comfort* and sometimes *challenge us*.

And in his strength, **we can go back to Chicago,**
wherever that place of struggle may be for us.