

MY STRUGGLE WITH GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

We turn this morning to the second message in Jeremiah's ministry to Judah, just before their final exile into the land of Babylon at the hand of king Nebuchadnezzar. In our last study we saw that the prophet's first message to Judah had to do with God's revelation of the tragic condition of the nation, and the way of return yet open to them.

The tragedy of Judah is the tragedy of people today. That is why this book of Jeremiah, though written thousands of years ago, is still as relevant and up-to-date and pertinent to our day as it was when first written. The tragedy is that when people forsake God they lose the sense of their own worth. This is what always happens. When someone starts turning from God he also loses himself. That is the inevitable tragedy which occurs in any life. When these people turned from the living fountain of God they became like animals, Jeremiah said. They began to act like animals and to think of themselves in that way. They began to act brutishly. They began to dislike and hate themselves. This is always the consequence of a heart which rejects or turns from the living God. When you lose God, you no longer can love yourself. And if you cannot love yourself, you cannot love your neighbor. That reflects the wisdom of the great commandment Jesus gave us: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you have no sense of who you are as a person, then you will not look at any one else as a person, either. So the tragedy of this nation was that it had begun to lose its sense of God, and thus had begun to lose its sense of self.

Now we want to focus on the second message of the prophet to the nation. It was delivered about five years after the first, in the eighteenth year of King Josiah. The message has different content, as we will see in a moment. But the really startling thing about this passage is the effect it has upon the prophet himself.

I have discovered that the most baffling times in my experience as a Christian have been when God begins to act completely contrary to the way I expect. When God gets difficult to handle, then things really toughen up in the Christian experience! I do not know if you have had that experience. I have. There have been times when God seemingly has ignored his promises, even changed his character, and has not acted the way I predicted he would.

We all like to put God in a box, to program him. And we do it quite honestly. We have studied the Scriptures -- his own revelation. We have picked out certain promises he has given. We say that he is bound to act by these, and so we expected him to act on those terms. But to our utter dismay and chagrin he ignores this and acts entirely differently.

Of course the problem is that we have picked just a part of what he has to say. None of us is big enough to see God in balance. And this was Jeremiah's problem in this message, for God told this young man to do two astonishing things. The first is given to us in Verse 16 of Chapter 7. God says to the prophet,

As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you. {Jer 7:16 RSV}

Imagine that! God commanded that the prophet should cease praying for the people of Judah, that he was not to ask God for their deliverance any longer, nor to cry out to God for them, to fast, pray, nor in any way to intercede on behalf of these people. God says, "Don't pray." Most of us think of prayer as something to do when everything else fails. And surely the last thing God would ever command is that we stop praying!

If you are given to picking out favorite texts from Scripture, as so many are, and saying, "This is the way God is going to act," you are going to have trouble with verses like this. There is a passage in First Samuel in which Samuel is sent by God to tell the nation Israel that they have turned from Him and rejected Him as king, and they want a king like all the other nations around. And Samuel says that God will accede to their request

and give them a king, but that they will not like it. When Samuel says these words which we often quote (1 Samuel 12:23) "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you..." Many times we quote that as the teaching of the Bible about prayer. But then what do you do with a verse like this, where God says to Jeremiah, "As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you."

As if that were not bad enough, in Verse 27 God says to the prophet,

"So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you." {Jer 7:27 RSV}

In other words, "Stop praying, Jeremiah, but keep on preaching." Now, that is hard to do! I know you do not think of yourselves as preachers, but anyone who speaks the word of God to another person is, in a sense, preaching to them. What God is saying to Jeremiah is, "Don't pray, but I want you to keep preaching. And I tell you this -- they will not listen to you at all. They won't pay any attention to you. They are just going to go right on their way. But I want you still to stand up and say what you have to say to them." That is one of the roughest assignments ever given anybody in the Word of God. I find there are times when people will not listen to my preaching; and it is a great comfort to me to go home and pray for you when that happens! But Jeremiah could not even do that. There are times when if God said to me, "Stop praying," I would utterly fall apart. Prayer has been a refuge and a strength to me.

I do not think we will understand what this is all about unless we look at the historical setting. So let's go back the beginning of chapter 7:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord.' Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien [the stranger], the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever." {Jer 7:1-7 RSV}

We will not even grasp that unless we understand what had happened at this time. If you turn to Second Chronicles, Chapters 34 and 35, you will read what is the historical background of this moment in Judah. Young king Josiah was conducting an attempt to turn this nation back to God. At this precise moment he had given orders to clean up the temple. For the temple had been turned into a warehouse, a storage place, and had begun to accumulate a lot of junk, as do our attics and garages today.

In the midst of cleaning up the temple, in preparation for the garage sale they were going to have, the high priest, Hilkiah, who very likely was the father of Jeremiah, found an old scroll of the Law, probably of Moses' book of Deuteronomy. Imagine! The Law had actually been lost sight of! The king read it with consternation, for he began to see how far the nation had drifted from God. And God had announced what he would do when the nation had come to that condition. So the king called his counselors and they tried to turn the nation around.

They read about the Passover, and discovered that no one in that nation had celebrated the Passover since the days of Hezekiah, a hundred years earlier. So orders were given for a great celebration of the Passover. Scripture tells us that there never before had been a Passover in Israel like this one. This king went all out! He offered sacrifices according to the Levitical commandments, and had the priests prepare themselves to conduct the ceremony.

The great day arrived when the sacrifices were to be offered in the temple. The companies of singers and

chanters were prepared, and the great procession, headed by the king himself, was on its way to the temple to worship there and to obey the command of God to perform the Passover supper. The priests were swinging their incense pots, chanting as they went, and the choir was singing a hymn which included these words: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." People were heaving a sigh of relief and thinking, "Now God is satisfied. Now he will save us. Now the nations around will not take us over, because at last we are settling our religious accounts with God." And on the way, as they were chanting this chorus, suddenly to everyone's astonishment a young man climbed up to a prominent place on the steps of the temple and yelled out, "HOLD IT!" And everybody stopped. He began to speak:

"Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'"

The gist of his message was, "Whom do you think you're kidding? Do you really think God is like this, that all he is interested in is religious games, rituals that you go through? Do you really think that if you merely get all this religion going, God will be fooled and will spare this land? Don't you know that God knows what is going on?" And he went on to describe it in Verses 8-11:

"Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely [commit perjury], burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' -- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" {Jer 7:8-11a RSV}

That sounds very much like what happened some centuries later when a young man stood up in the temple and, fashioning a whip of cords, began to drive the money changers out of the temple, saying, "You have turned my Father's house into a den of robbers," {John 2:16}. In the midst of that dramatic interruption, Jeremiah delivers the message which God has for this people. They were counting on two things: the fact that the temple was now clean, and the discovery of the law. Look at Chapter 8, Verses 8-9:

**"How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'?
But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.
The wise men shall be put to shame,
they shall be dismayed and taken;
lo, they have rejected the word of the Lord,
and what wisdom is in them?" {Jer 8:8-9 RSV}**

Here is a people who were trusting in performance, in outward ritual, and they did not realize that God knows the heart, and that he knew what was going on. Therefore the only thing left to this people was that they be judged. When people get so blind that they cannot see what they are doing, and they really think that God is like them, that he cannot see any further than the outward appearance of a life, then the only thing left which will open their eyes is judgment. So the prophet said these words to them, Verses 12-15 of Chapter 7:

"Go now to my place that was in Shiloh [in the Northern kingdom, Israel], where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. [They had been led into captivity.] And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house which is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim." {Jer 7:12-15 RSV}

It was at this point that Jeremiah was told not to pray for this people any longer, for God had decided to visit them with judgment.

Now, if you read that as though what God is really saying is, "Look I've had it! I can't stand this any longer.

I'm going to get rid of these people. I'm going to smash them and destroy them. I'm through with them!" then you have missed what this is all about. Evidently that is the way Jeremiah read it, and as a result he was deeply grieved. He did not understand what God was doing. Chapter 8 goes on to tell us how he reacted. In verses 18-19 you can see the prophet's personal reaction:

**My grief is beyond healing,
my heart is sick within me.
Hark, the cry of the daughter of my people
from the length and breadth of the land:
"Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?" {Jer 8:18-19a RSV}**

He was looking forward to what was coming, visualizing it, feeling heartsick and anguished, in agony over what was about to happen -- especially to the women and the beautiful girls of Judah. It is interesting that in chapter 16 God told this prophet, "I don't want you ever to get married. I don't want you to have a wife and children." So Jeremiah was unmarried, and it was of concern to him that these beautiful maidens of Judah would suffer this way. He is crying out on their behalf. And God answers, in Verse 19:

**"Why have they provoked me to anger with their graven images,
and with their foreign idols?" {Jer 8:19b RSV}**

But Jeremiah continues his questioning:

**"The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved." [This is the cry of the people.]
For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored? {Jer 8:20-22 RSV}**

Do you see what he is saying? Jeremiah feels so intensely what is going to happen that he cries out, "God, where are you? Where is the healer? Where is the one who can restore this people? Where is the balm in Gilead, the physician who can make a sick person well?" Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever suffered over some loved one, and cried out, "God, where is the Great Physician?" So Jeremiah cries out, "Why don't you heal this people?" He simply doesn't understand what God is doing.

In order to get all this together, we ought to look back in Chapter 7 and see the list of actions God says he takes when a nation or an individual begins to turn away from him. Verse 13:

**And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to
you persistently you did not listen, {Jer 7:13a RSV}**

The first thing God does when you begin to drift is to warn you what the consequences are going to be. He is faithful to tell you that if you "sow to the flesh you will of the flesh reap corruption". There is no way to escape it. Even forgiveness for it does not remove that. If you sow to the flesh, you will of the flesh reap corruption. Sin will leave its scars even though the wound is healed. God warns that there is going to be hurt in your life, hurt in your heart, hurt for the loved ones around you. There is no way to escape it. But then he says,

"... and when I called you, you did not answer," {Jer 7:13b RSV}

The call of God is a picture of love seeking a response, reminding you of who he is, and how much he loves you, trying in various ways to awaken a response of love and gratitude, to call you back. He is like the father in the story of the prodigal son, watching the horizon for that son to return, longing for him to come back. This is the picture of God, looking after men and women, boys and girls, being faithful to them, longing to

have them back, calling them again and again. This is a picture of the patience of God. This may go on for years in the case of an individual. And all this time he asks us to pray for those like this, to hold them up, to reach out to them by the power of prayer.

But when that does not work, he has one step left in the program: judgment. You see, judgment is not God's way of saying, "I'm through with you." It is not a mark of the abandonment of God; it is the last loving act of God to bring you back. It is the last resort of love. C. S. Lewis put it very beautifully when he said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures; he speaks to us in our work; he shouts at us in our pain." Every one of us knows that there have been times when we would not listen to God, would not pay any attention to what his Word was saying until one day God put us flat on our backs or allowed us to be hurt badly. Then we began to listen. That is what Jeremiah had to learn. He did not understand that this nation had reached the place where the only thing that would heal it, the only chance it had left, was the judgment of God -- the hurt and the pain of invasion, and the loss of its national place. God's love was insisting that that happen.

Now you can see why he commanded that prayer cease, but that preaching continue. If you read through the Scriptures you see that prayer delays judgment, but preaching hastens it. And what this nation needed to restore it and heal it was judgment. So God said, "Don't delay it; don't hold me back. This is what will do the work. Radical surgery is all that is left, so stop praying." You can see that prayer holds off judgment in the case of Abraham with Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham held off the hand of God, steadily reducing the minimum number of righteous men by which that region could be saved, and almost saved the area from the destruction of God. But preaching hastens judgment, because the Word is true. And when truth is revealed before us, and God calls things what they really are, as he does here -- adultery, stealing, murdering, perjury -- instead of the polite names the people themselves were applying to them, then judgment is hastened. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin," {John 15:22 RSV}. So preaching hastens judgment.

It was at this point that Jeremiah broke down and wept before God. I do not think you can read these passages expressing the anguish of the prophet's heart without seeing the echo of the sobs of God. For God was still working through this man, and weeping over this people himself, as expressed in the sobs of Jeremiah. In the midst of Jeremiah's despair, God, in tenderness and beautiful concern, speaks to the prophet and says something to help him. Chapter 9, Verses 23-24:

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord." {Jer 9:23-24 RSV}

What a revelation of the greatness of God! Far beyond the greatness of men, a God of wisdom and knowledge and power is at work. And the prophet's heart was directed to think of that. Man's wisdom is not enough. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom..." Why not? Well, because man's wisdom is always partial wisdom. It never sees the whole story, never is wide enough to take in all the factors involved. It is tunnel vision, narrow and limited. And that is why we are always thinking we have arrived at solutions to problems only to find in a few years that the "solution" has only made the problem worse. Pollution is a case in point, is it not? And warfare, and all the other great problems that confront us today. Man's wisdom is not enough. It is limited, partial wisdom. T.S. Eliot put it so beautifully when he said,

All our knowledge only brings us closer to our ignorance,
And all our ignorance, closer to death.
But closer to death, no closer to God --

Then he asks the question which hangs over this whole generation.

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the life we have lost in living? No, you cannot trust in the wisdom of man, can you? Nor in the might of man -- "... let not the mighty man glory in his might..." Why not? Here is a man with great power and

authority, a great force at his command to do what he wants -- a dictator, a tyrant. Why does he not have the right to glory? Because his force is directed only at material things. It has no power to oppose an idea or a moral value.

That is what we learned in these last few bitter years in Viet Nam, is it not? We thought, at the end of World War II, that in the atom bomb we had the most powerful force history had ever known, and we could be the leading nation in all the world. Who could oppose us? But atom bombs are no good against ideas. They can only obliterate people, and smash and destroy. And when they are all through, the ideas remain.

No, "... let not the mighty man glory in his might, and let not the rich man glory in his riches..." Why not? Because riches can buy only a very limited number of things. Jesus spoke of the deceitfulness of riches. Riches give a man a feeling of power that he does not really have. They give him a feeling of being loved when he really is not, and of being respected when he is not respected at all. Riches cannot buy love and joy and peace and harmony. Many a rich man would give all he possesses for just a few moments of peace or joy.

Then what should you glory in? "Ah, glory in this, Jeremiah, that you know me, and you have available to you the wisdom of God. True wisdom is the wisdom of God, and you can correct your own faulty, frail human wisdom with my wisdom. And you have the might of God at your disposal, greater than anything the world knows anything about, a mighty moral force which is irresistible. And you have riches beyond all compare, the simple riches of love and peace and joy and grace and mercy and truth, which no money can buy. Glory in this, Jeremiah."

And so, as the prophet comes to the end of this discourse you find him reflecting what God has taught him. Chapter 10, Verse 23:

**I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself,
that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. {Jer 10:23 RSV}**

Have you found that out? What a fantastic lesson that is! The way of man is not in himself. It is not in man to direct his steps. You do not have what it takes to live life by yourself.

As I was in Minneapolis this past week, in the midst of a blizzard, I remembered how, thirty-five years ago to the very day, I had come through that city for the first time -- a young man twenty-one years of age, riding a bus on my way to Chicago and a job I had obtained by correspondence. I had never been to Chicago either, and had just come out of the plains of Montana, a country boy on the way to the big city -- inwardly scared to death, uncertain, not knowing where to go or how to react to people, but trying to bluff it through. All the feeling of that came flooding back as I was there. And I remembered that all through the years since I have felt the hand of God at the critical moments in my life -- guiding me, correcting me, rebuking me, setting me straight, changing me, gradually leading me on, opening doors here, closing doors there. I bowed my head in my hotel room and gave thanks that "the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps," but God will direct them.

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and lean not to your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will direct your steps. {cf, Prov 3:5-6}**

That is the way to handle life, and there is no other.

But this prophet was a young man, and he learned the hard way. Look at what he says in Verse 24:

**"Correct me, O Lord, [Now if I'm wrong, Lord, you set me straight] but in just
measure;
not in thy anger, lest thou bring me to nothing." {Jer 10:24 RSV}**

"Now, I'm going to say something, Lord, and it may not be right; but don't get mad, because you're bigger

than I am, and what you can do to me is more than I want to see happen! But Lord, listen, I know you have to judge, I know judgment is coming, but, Lord,

**Pour out thy wrath upon the nations that know thee not,
and upon the peoples that call not on thy name;
for they have devoured Jacob;
they have devoured him and consumed him,
and have laid waste his habitation. {Jer 10:25 RSV}**

"Yes, Lord, I know you have to judge the world. But would you mind letting it be those people over there, and not us?" And that is where the message ends. Well, God has some more to teach Jeremiah! But he has opened his eyes to some great truth in this passage, truth which abides today:

**I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself,
that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. {Jer 10:23 RSV}**

... "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, ..." {Jer 9:23b-24a RSV}

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that you will help us in our day, for we stand where Jeremiah stood. We recognize that what is happening today is way beyond us, beyond any man we know of. No one has the wisdom to cope with the situation we live in today. No one has the might or the riches to handle it. So, Lord, we pray that more than ever before in our lives we will recognize the essential necessity of you in our lives, and will stop trying to hide behind facades, false images of ourselves, and become real in heart, genuine in our worship and trust. Help us to set aside the things you see going on in us which are wrong, things we try to kid ourselves about, and judge them, Lord, that this nation may yet be spared, and this area of the world may be spared your judging hand. Yet if judgment comes, Lord, we know that we have but deserved it, and it is the way by which you have called this erring people back to you. So we repent, and pray before you, and ask you to heal us, O Living God, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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