

IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR GOD?

by Ray C. Stedman

Our study from Jeremiah today is on the greatness and the weakness of faith. True faith is both great and weak -- and we want to examine that paradox. Chapters 32 and 33 are the second part of the great song of hope that Jeremiah sang when he was shut up in the court of the guard at the order of King Zedekiah, because, in the eyes of the king, he was uttering treason, in that he was advocating surrender to the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar and his army were right outside the walls of Jerusalem. The city had been under siege for a considerable time and was very close to starvation and surrender. In the midst of this situation Jeremiah sang his great song of hope.

We looked at the first part of this song in our last study together: the prophecy of terror and disaster to come to Israel, not only at the fall of the city to Babylon but also to a greater degree at a time later in the future -- yet to come even today -- the time Jesus called "the great tribulation." {Matt 24:21}. The destruction, in both cases, would lead ultimately to restoration and to joy -- by means of a New Covenant brought about by the everlasting love of God. That New Covenant, we know, was made in the blood of Jesus. It was this Jesus referred to when he said, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," {cf, Matt 26:27}.

The second part of this song is introduced by another of the remarkable series of visual aids with which God instructed, taught, and toughened this prophet. God is always in the business of preparing us for trials yet to come. Somehow the idea has spread abroad that life ought to be delightful and free from trouble. And we feel short-changed if our experience is anything other than that. Yet the Scriptures tell us over and over that this is not the way it is going to be. It cannot be this way with the world in its present condition -- under the domination of the god of this world, Satan. There cannot be a trouble-free existence. But God will use that trouble in our lives, and he toughens us to meet it. This is what he is doing with Jeremiah. I do not think anything about this book has helped me more than to see how God worked with this prophet to strengthen his faith and to help him meet his trials. Let's begin reading with Verse 6, where we have the story of what the Lord asked Jeremiah to do:

Jeremiah said, "The word of the Lord came to me: Behold, Hanamel the son of Shallum your uncle will come to you and say, 'Buy my field which is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.' Then Hanamel my cousin came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, 'Buy my field which is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

"And I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel my cousin, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales." {Jer 32:6-10 RSV}

That is a remarkable act of faith, for this was the worst possible time to be buying property in Judah. Jerusalem was under immediate threat of capture by the Babylonian army and the entire land would be subjected to who knew how many years of desolation and darkness and despair. And yet God sent Jeremiah word to buy this field in his hometown of Anathoth. Though Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the guard, God told him his cousin would come to him. When he came and offered the field, Jeremiah was to buy it.

That was a wonderful act of faith. It belongs, in my judgment, with those acts of faith in the incomplete record of Hebrews 11. As we examine it, we will learn, in practical ways, what it means to walk by faith. Every one of us is called to walk by faith in these days, and there are certain essential and unmistakable qualities of faith revealed here.

First there is what we might call "the caution of faith." Notice how the account progressed. God said to

Jeremiah, in the loneliness of his prison, "Your cousin Hanamel is coming to you, offering to sell his field." A little later on the account says, "Then Hanamel my cousin came to me...in accordance with the word of the Lord." Later still, "Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord." The important thing to see is how Jeremiah tested this impression he received.

Many of us have wondered how these Old Testament prophets were given "words" from God. Many times you find this phrase in the Scriptures: "The word of the Lord came to me..." People have asked me, "How did it come? Did God thunder with a loud and audible voice?" Sometimes he did, but that was not the usual way. This account suggests that the usual way God spoke to these prophets was the same way he speaks to us, i.e., through a vivid impression made upon the soul, an inner voice we are conscious of -- saying something, directing us somewhere, informing us of something. We have all had this experience. We know what this inner voice is like.

But the great lesson to learn from this account is that this inner voice is not always the voice of God. Sometimes the god of this world can speak through that inner voice, sounding very much like the voice of God. Many a person has been tremendously injured in his faith, and has damaged the faith of others, by acting impulsively on what this inner voice has to say, without testing whether it is the voice of God or not.

You notice that faith here, though it acts in a remarkable way, does not act fanatically. Faith is never fanatical; it acts cautiously, expecting God to confirm his word. Jeremiah was no novice in the active life of faith. He knew that God would confirm his word, and he had learned to wait upon God. God confirmed the word by fulfilling the prediction he had made. Sometimes he confirms it in other ways. Scripture gives us a great principle we all ought to remember: "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." Look for those two or three witnesses before you act upon an inner voice, for God will confirm it to you. This inner voice told Jeremiah what would happen, but he did not act then; he waited until it was confirmed by the coming of Hanamel.

Just this last week I heard of a dear Christian girl who, with all the earnestness of her heart, and desiring to know and follow God, felt that God had placed an impression in her heart that she should marry a certain man whom she did not even know very well. She was not in love with him, but she felt certain that this was the voice of God -- so certain that she began to anticipate ways and means by which this might come to pass. But in the course of a few months, to her dismay and consternation, this young man announced his engagement to another girl. She was dismayed not because she was in love with him, because she wasn't, but because she was so certain she had heard the voice of God. It turned out that he did marry this other girl, and she was troubled: "How could I have been so misled?" she asked. Later on she felt that another word, this time concerning her parents, had been given to her, but this did not work out either. Gradually she learned the great fact that Jeremiah tells us here: it is necessary to act with caution about an inner voice, and to expect God to confirm his word to us, so that we may act with understanding.

Yet with all the caution of faith, you notice that another quality of faith is very apparent here. It is what we might call "the audacity of faith". This was a thoroughly unreasonable thing to do! It was ridiculous to buy property when the city was about to fall into enemy hands. This is always a quality of faith. Faith has an apparent ridiculousness about it. You are not acting by faith if you are doing what everyone around you is doing. Faith always appears to defy the circumstances. It constitutes a risk and a venture.

In Hebrews 11 we are told that Noah built an ark where there was no water, and where there had never been any rain. I am sure the people of his day called him Crazy Noah -- building an ark out on the dry land! Abraham went on a journey without a map. People asked him, "Where are you going?" He said, "We don't know; we're just going, that's all. God is leading us." They must have twirled their fingers alongside their heads and said, "Poor Abe -- he's lost his marbles!" Moses forsook the treasures and wisdom of Egypt, that he might go out and wander in the desert with a rabble who had nothing. People must have said, "He's crazy!" That is the quality of faith -- it acts in an apparently ridiculous way.

But it acts this way because it is based on a higher knowledge. It always has a certain basis on which to rest. Therefore faith does not demand that we run out and do foolish, impulsive acts, without any reason. The reason is higher than many people can see, but it is there.

I doubt if Hanamel was acting by faith. He simply was taking advantage of the situation. He saw a chance to unload his property before the city fell. You can take money with you into captivity, but you cannot take land. My mind goes back to the days shortly after the outbreak of World War II. Along with about two thousand other young men, I was on a troop transport on the way to Hawaii from San Francisco. We were convoyed by two American destroyers, guarding against attack by Japanese submarines. Sure enough, about three-quarters of the way across, the general alarm sounded one morning. All passengers aboard were put down in the hold. The destroyers dropped depth charges, and they did indeed sink a submarine. We heard the terrible clang as these depth charges exploded and the concussion banged against the side of our vessel. About a thousand men were gathered in the hold where I was, and we wondered what was going to happen. It was a very tense and quiet time, until suddenly the tension was broken by a voice that cried out, "Does anybody want to buy a good watch?" I thought of that when I read this account of Hanamel wanting to sell his property to Jeremiah. That is how ridiculous it was. But God was in it. And faith is willing to look ridiculous, because it is based upon a higher knowledge. That leads to the third element, which we can call "the commitment of faith". Verses 11 and following:

"Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of Hanamel my cousin, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Jews who were sitting in the court of the guard. I charged Baruch in their presence, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.'" {Jer 32:11-15 RSV}

What a ringing testimony to the power and greatness of God! This was not a hopeless condition. God had said the land ultimately would be restored, and this deed would be valid. Therefore, it was to be put in a safe place. But the remarkable thing here is that Jeremiah conformed to normal procedures. Again I stress, faith is not fanatical -- not really. It appears to be, to those who do not understand the full situation. But it really is not at all. Faith is based upon a higher knowledge, and it is therefore thorough and consistent in its obedience. It conforms to accepted procedures, and works through normal channels, and makes everything public and open to examination by anyone interested.

That is what Jeremiah did. He sent Baruch down to the title company and had him bring a deed to be signed. He acted before witnesses, and had the witnesses sign the deed and the copy -- one to be sealed in a safe deposit box, the other to be kept by Jeremiah himself and passed on to his heirs, so that eventually they might claim title to this land. He worked in this normal way, and then clearly announced the purpose of it all: "It is because God says there will be houses and fields and vineyards bought in this land again."

Faith takes no halfway measures. When it begins to act, it acts completely, consistently, and all the way. There is no hedging of Jeremiah's bets here, no saying to these people, "Well, I'm just buying this property on speculation, hoping it will all work out, but it's just a gamble, a shot in the dark." No, he assures them that God has spoken, and that everything he is doing is consistent with the word of God.

That brings us to the last quality of faith in this account. Faith is audacious, but faith is also cautious. It waits for the word of God before it acts. It never acts apart from that. And faith is consistent in what it does. But now another quality comes in. Beginning with Verse 16 and continuing through Verse 25, a remarkable prayer of Jeremiah is recorded. These are Jeremiah's private thoughts about this deed. Before men this prophet is bold and resolute and confident. But before God he admits that he is not quite so sure this is all going to work out. I am glad this account is here, because this is what we might call "the doubtings of faith."

Faith always has its doubts. As a young Christian, I had the impression that if you doubted, you could not have faith -- that faith and doubt were contrary to one another, and doubt was the opposite of faith. But I gradually began to understand that this is not true. Doubt is the proof of faith. Doubt is an attack upon faith. You cannot have doubts unless you have faith. Faith is the way God works, and so the enemy is bound to

attack your faith immediately as he sees you beginning to act and live and walk by faith. Therefore doubts will begin to arise -- as a result of Satan's attempt to overthrow your faith. I have learned that there is no faith without doubts.

We can establish the fact that Jesus himself, though he always lived by faith, and everything he did was by faith, nevertheless was subjected to times of severe doubt. Otherwise he was not "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning," {Heb 4:15 RSV}. Doubt is part of the life of faith. If you are trying to walk by faith in a promise God has given you, and you are troubled by doubts, I say to you that this is the proof you are really living by faith. Hang in there! Do not let your doubts overthrow you. Look at this prayer. Jeremiah begins by reminding himself of the character of God:

"After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, I prayed to the Lord, saying, 'Ah Lord God! It is thou who hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and by thy outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for thee, who showest steadfast love to thousands, but dost requite the guilt of fathers to their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed; whose eyes are open to all the ways of men, rewarding every man according to the fruit of his doings; who has shown signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and to this day in Israel and among all mankind, and hast made thee a name, as at this day.'" {Jer 32:16-20 RSV}

What is Jeremiah doing? He is following the pattern of prayer that Jesus himself taught us. Jesus said, "When you pray, this is the way to do it. Begin here: 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.' Remind yourself of the name of God, the greatness of his being, and the faithfulness of his character," {cf, Matt 6:9, Luke 11:2}. This is what Jeremiah is doing. He starts off by reminding himself of the God of power who made the heavens and the earth -- nothing is too hard for him; of the God of faithful love, who both saves and judges men; of the God of wisdom and truth, whom history reveals, who has done great wonders among mankind, and whose wonders stand embedded in history. No one can disprove them. That is the kind of God he is. Jeremiah is strengthening himself in the greatness of his God, because of the ferocity of the attack upon his faith. He goes on -- we will not read it all -- to recount the history of Israel, to remember how God has worked with his people, and to remark the accuracy of God's predictions. He brings it right down to his present hour, in Verse 24:

"Behold, the siege mounds have come up to the city to take it, and because of sword and famine and pestilence the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it. What thou didst speak has come to pass, and behold, thou seest it." {Jer 32:24 RSV}

"There it is, Lord. There's Nebuchadnezzar with his great armies, and their fearsome reputation for cruelty, right outside the walls. Here's the city about to fall. Lord, it has come to pass -- just as you said." But notice, Jeremiah is aware of God, and he is trying to strengthen his faith by these means. He has recounted the history of his people. This is the way he should pray. He began by affirming that nothing is too hard for God. And yet when he comes right down to his present experience, the very present hour, his faith trembles. He closes with these words:

**"Yet thou, O Lord God, hast said to me, 'Buy the field for money and get witnesses' --
" {Jer 32:25a RSV}**

The Revised Standard Version correctly places a dash there, as though he had to pause, hardly able to go on. Finally he continues,

"-- though the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans." {Jer 32:25b RSV}

And that is the end of his prayer. You see, his faith is trembling. The situation looks impossible. He began by affirming, "Nothing is too hard for thee"; he ends by suggesting, "Lord, this may be it! I don't see how you're going to do this one!"

Now, his problem is not the desolation of the city; it is the degradation of the people. I don't think Jeremiah worried a bit about God's ability to rebuild and restore this city. The thing that constituted a tremendous dilemma to him was that the city could not be restored unless the we were changed and cleansed and healed. That is where he stumbled because, remember, this man had been preaching to these people for forty years. For forty years he had poured out his heart to this people, declaring to them again and again the word of the Lord. And for forty years he had seen absolutely no sign of repentance -- nobody turned, nobody stopped, nobody changed. The kings all refused his testimony. And though God faithfully supported his prophet again and again by causing his words to come to pass, nevertheless this people stubbornly resisted. Jeremiah says, "I don't see how you can change them, God. They're too stubborn." Is that not our problem oftentimes? We say, "Oh, that person I expected to see changed is too stubborn. There's no way he can change."

Look at God's reply to this dilemma of faith. God answers Jeremiah, beginning with Verse 26 and continuing through the rest of this chapter and Chapter 33 -- a tremendously detailed answer. We won't spend a lot of time in it but will summarize it quickly, so that we might follow its flow. God begins by reaffirming his power and his intentions for Jerusalem:

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah [at this point in his prayer]: "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me? Therefore, thus says the Lord: Behold, I am giving this city into the hands of the Chaldeans and into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, and he shall take it." {Jer 32:26-28 RSV}

"Is anything too hard for me?" was Jeremiah's own phrase as he began this prayer! This is what God said to Sarah when she laughed in the tent of Abraham at God's promise that she would have a son. She knew her body was past childbearing, so she laughed. God said, "Why do you laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Though Scripture does not tell us this, I think Sarah had a little plaque made and put up right over the kitchen sink. And every time she did the dishes she looked at it: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Because the New Testament tells us that she was a woman of faith. And when Isaac was born she named him "Laughter", because it was so funny to think back to that day when she laughed at God, and he said, "Is anything too hard for me?"

This is what God says to Jeremiah. "Is anything too hard for me?" And he prefaces it with these words: "I am the Lord, the God of all flesh." I do not know about you, but my problem often is that, while I'm fairly confident God can work with Christians, non-believers seem to be so hard and stubborn and resistant that he cannot do much with them. That was Jeremiah's problem. But God reminds him, "Look, I am the God of all flesh. I specialize in people -- especially difficult people! Difficult people are my special stock in trade. Is anything too hard for me?"

Then at the close of this chapter he goes on and reviews the sin of Israel, and reaffirms, in a passage of infinite beauty -- which I hope you will read at your leisure -- his ultimate intention to heal the hurt of Jerusalem. He says again to Jeremiah, "Jeremiah, this is what I'm going to do. I'll heal this city, I'll restore it and bring it back." But Jeremiah, still is struggling, and so the opening words of Chapter 33 tell us that the word of the Lord came a second time. God comes back to his troubled prophet with further information, and at this point invites him to inquire further:

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah a second time, while he was still shut up in the court of the guard: "Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it [There is a record of achievement, if you like: he said he'd make it, and he did; he said he'd establish it, and he did.] -- the Lord is his name: Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things which you have not known." {Jer 33:1-3 RSV}

There is something wonderfully helpful about that to me. God is saying here, in effect, that the man who takes his unbelief to God is the one who will be invited by God to enter into the secrets of the Almighty. Our problem is that we take our unbelief to each other. We are always complaining that God does not fulfill his word. I know we are not that bald-faced about it, but that is what we are really saying. "Well, this doesn't work for me," means God is a respecter of persons; he only does it for a certain favored few -- even though he

says he is not that kind of a God. Or somebody will say, "Well, you may have faith enough to believe that, but I don't understand it that way at all. It's all in the way you interpret it." That is really a cop-out. You are saying, "I don't believe God is going to do it." We take our unbelief to each other, and that is why our faith does not grow.

But the man or woman of faith takes his or her unbelief to God, and lays the struggle before him. "God, I know you're this kind of a God, but I can't see how you're going to do this!" And God honors that. There is record after record in the Scripture of men and women who have struggled like this, who have taken their doubts and their unbelief and laid them before God. And never once is there a single suggestion that he ever rebuked them for that. There was that troubled father in the Gospels who asked Jesus to heal his demonically oppressed son. Jesus said, "According to your faith be it so." The man said, "I believe; help my unbelief," {Mark 9:24 RSV}. Jesus immediately spoke and delivered his son. And Jeremiah brought his unbelief to the Lord, and so the Lord said, "Call to me, ask me, and I will answer you, and will tell you the great and hidden things which you don't understand."

Beginning with Verse 4, God outlines the process he is going to follow in bringing his promises about, giving Jeremiah the details. Then he outlines the power by which it is going to happen. Then he guarantees it by the processes of nature. This is just a brief outline of what we will look at in closing. Notice the process that God now unfolds to him. First, it will be destruction that leads to cleansing:

"For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah which were torn down to make a defense against the siege mounds and before the sword: The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and fill them with the dead bodies of men whom I shall smite in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness." {Jer 33:4-5 RSV}

Destruction is often God's first step, because we have been building on a false foundation, and God knows he must destroy what we have thought was true before he finally can cleanse us. Many of us could testify of the hour when God broke down everything we were counting on, and shattered our expectations, and disappointed our dreams, and we were stricken. And in that hour we began to look at ourselves anew, and saw how much we had been contributing to the problem, rather than blaming it on everybody else. And that was the hour when God cleansed us. Cleansing is his first act of restoration, but destruction is necessary to cleansing.

The next revelation is that cleansing leads to joy, Verses 8-9:

"I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive them all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them;" {Jer 33:8-9a RSV}

The great thing to remember in all of God's process with us is that his purpose in our lives, in everything that happens to us, is to increase our joy. That is what God is after. You cannot read the Scriptures without seeing that his intention for men is that men should live in a continual sense of joy, of peace, of mirth and merriment and gladness of heart. That is what he has in mind. He knows the steps it takes to bring it about. And this is what he moves toward.

Finally, joy permits prosperity, Verses 12-13:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: In this place which is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. In the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the Shephelah, and in the cities of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the Lord." {Jer 33:12-13 RSV}

That is a picture of prosperous conditions -- the countryside filled with shepherds and their flocks -- a beautiful

picture. What God is saying is that this is the only time it is safe for us to be prosperous. When we have been cleansed and brought to joy, then prosperity will abide. We are always trying to short-circuit God and leap ahead, to forget the intervening steps and try to become prosperous. Prosperity never abides unless it is based upon joyful people who know how to live together in love. That is why God will withhold ultimate prosperity until that time.

Then he takes the prophet a step further still, and in a great passage of light and glory he reveals the power that will accomplish this:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it ["she" in the Hebrew -- it is a feminine pronoun, referring to the city] will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' [Literally, simply "The Lord, our righteousness".]

"For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn cereal offerings, and to make sacrifices for ever." {Jer 33:14-18 RSV}

God would always have a king after the line of David, and a priest after the order of Melchizedek. As we know, in the course of time that man came: Jesus, the King who is our righteousness, whose righteousness is imparted to us -- "The Lord, our righteousness". In Chapter 23, Verses 5-6, Jeremiah had referred to this very thing, had recorded that God said something very similar. But there the wording was, "...he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" Here God says of the city, "...she will be called: 'The Lord, our righteousness.'" By this he indicates that we, who become the city of God, the new Jerusalem, are made to partake of the very righteousness of Christ our Lord.

In fact, the entire restoration is going to be characterized by this one word: "righteousness". Do you know what troubles us about the Watergate affair? There is no righteousness in it. Righteousness consists, first of all, of truth. And the thing about Watergate which so thoroughly upsets and disturbs the American people is that it is so devoid of truth. It is such a maze of lies and deceptions and cover-ups. And people are uneasy in the presence of that. Righteousness is truth, first. But it is more than that. It is also love -- truth operating out of love. Man's righteousness, at best, can be only truth. But the righteousness of God is truth which operates lovingly, not severely, sharply, harshly, not judging and condemning, but forgiving and understanding -- and yet utterly consistent with truth. That is to be characteristic of the city, because it is characteristic of God.

The final words of the chapter, which we will not read, are simply a repetition of the guarantee we saw in our previous study: the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, shall not pass away until God fulfills this word. It is absolutely guaranteed. It is as true and sure as the sun's rising tomorrow morning that as you come to the Lord and trust in him and walk by faith, all the personal dilemmas of your life, and all those of the world in general, shall find their solution at the hand of the God of righteousness. He will establish what he has promised.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, thank you for reminding us of the kind of God you are, of the greatness of your being, of the truthfulness and faithfulness of your character, and of the fact that man, even in his unutterable rebellion, cannot thwart your will or change your purpose or turn you aside from that which you propose to do. We thank you for that, Lord. We rest upon this faithfulness. You have made us to want your Word and your truth and your love, and you have shown us how we may have it in our lives. We pray that we will be strengthened by faith to walk as the prophet walked in the midst of a declining nation, clinging in trust to the living God. We ask in the name of Jesus, the Branch of David, Amen.

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