



WHEN LIFE DOESN'T WORK

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 Jeremiah 12:1-17
 Tenth Message
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In one of my favorite Peanuts cartoons, Linus is talking to Charlie Brown. He says, "My grampa got into trouble at the golf course yesterday. When he drove up to the clubhouse he saw a sign that said, 'Handicap Parking.' He said, 'My handicap is fifteen,' so he parked there! In the game of life, grampa has a string of double bogeys."

What do we do when life presents us with a string of double bogeys, when things just don't seem to work out? We say that we follow all the rules. We try hard, we seek God's will, we obey his voice, we give of our time and money, we say no to the world, yet we suffer. We are treated unfairly. People reject us; our family ignores us. The good life is beyond our experience.

The other day my automobile mechanic was fuming with anger. He told me that he had an irregular heart-beat and was undergoing tests. Knowing that he had been an athlete who had competed at high levels, what he said next was very interesting to me. He said, "What good has it done for me to stay in shape, train my body and eat correctly? I might as well have partied like crazy like everyone else."

Whether we realize it or not, most of us have a cause-and-effect theology. Based on how we behave, we expect certain things from God. We think that if we do the right things that God will bless us. We will prosper and succeed; we will avoid pain and grief and despair; we won't get hurt or taken advantage of. We think that the people we interact with will act morally and ethically, according to God's standards, and life will be fair and just.

But our cause-and-effect theology goes right out the window in the face of real life experiences. Many Christians try to deny this. Some even go from one church to another seeking God's blessing. But there are too many holes and inconsistencies in this kind of theology. Some of the godliest people in this world undergo terrible suffering. What we need is a view of life and of God that is big enough to handle life when it doesn't work.

No one is better equipped to help us with this dilemma than the prophet Jeremiah. As God's spokesman in a hostile environment, Jeremiah had a very difficult life. He experienced great suffering, pain, grief, rage and loneliness. His book has seven confessions that reveal a window into his emotions and how he wrestled with troublesome issues before God. These confessions contain some of the most direct, candid and intimate prayers in the Old Testament. In our next two studies

our focus in Jeremiah is going to move from the people of Judah to the prophet himself. Some of the answers to the questions he posed to God may surprise us.

We begin with Jeremiah's complaint. Jeremiah 12:1-4,

**Righteous art Thou, O LORD,
 that I would plead my case with Thee;
 Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with
 Thee:**

**Why has the way of the wicked prospered?
 Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?
 Thou hast planted them, they have also taken root;
 They grow, they have even produced fruit.
 Thou art near to their lips
 But far from their mind.**

**But Thou knowest me, O LORD;
 Thou seest me;**

**And Thou dost examine my heart's attitude toward
 Thee.**

**Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter
 And set them apart for a day of carnage!
 How long is the land to mourn
 And the vegetation of the countryside to wither?
 For the wickedness of those who dwell in it,
 Animals and birds have been snatched away,
 Because men have said, "He will not see our latter
 ending." (Jer 12:1-4, NASB)**

The prophet enters God's courtroom, carrying a complaint against God. Desiring to plead his case and discuss matters of justice, he appeals to God's righteous and just character. Something is not right. Injustice abounds in the world and he wants to know what God is going to do about it.

Jeremiah states his complaint, saying, "Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?" "Prosper" means to succeed, to be able to accomplish what is intended. "At ease" means to be secure, unconcerned, undisturbed, carefree, at rest. It is really disturbing to Jeremiah that God has planted these wicked and yet successful people. And because God has withheld any sense of justice they have taken root. They have grown, and they have even produced fruit. This is no accident. Job asked a similar question: "Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?" (Job 21:7)

But there is also an implied corollary complaint. Not only is Jeremiah outraged that the wicked prosper, he cannot understand why righteous people like him have not. He says that God's name is on the lips of the

wicked but it is far from their minds. The wicked think that God is indifferent, that they can get away with their evil ways because he will not see their latter ending. Jeremiah reminds God that he is doing everything that is expected of him and that God knows and sees that this is true. He wonders why there are not more signs of blessing in his life. It seems the scales of justice are out of balance.

What is driving Jeremiah to make this complaint before God? His problem is not so much theological as it is personal. In chapter 11 we read that the men of Jeremiah's home town, Anathoth, were devising evil plots to eliminate the prophet: "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more" (Jer 11:19). And, "Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD, that you might not die at our hand" (Jer 11:21). Jeremiah was a hunted man. If he did not silence his mouth, his own community, his childhood friends, would silence it for him.

This was so beyond Jeremiah's capacity to imagine that he was not even aware of it until God revealed it to him. The prophet says, in 11:19, that he is like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. He is in desperate straits. That is why he pleads his case before God and asks for justice. His complaint is two-fold. He asks God why was this happening, and how long would it continue. How long would the land and the animals suffer before God did something? He asks God to drag these wicked men from Anathoth off like sheep to the slaughter — the very fate they had planned for him.

Jeremiah illuminates the age-old question of why life doesn't work for us when it seems to be working so well for so many who are so less deserving. The prophet is asking, as many of us ask at times, How long will I have to suffer and wait for justice? He also illuminates our misguided assumption that if we follow God with all our hearts, he will bless us in tangible ways. Have you ever pondered these questions? Why? How long? Have you had expectations for how God would reward your good behavior?

Some of the most powerful people in this world gained their wealth and power through dishonest means. Some of the most famous celebrities achieved stardom by unethical means. Some of the most successful people in our own communities have cheated and lied to make their fortunes. Yet they live a life of luxury and the world applauds them. We're tempted to ask, "What about me? I've tried so hard to do things right and what good has it done? My life is in turmoil. I feel like a sheep that is getting slaughtered by the world system. It's not fair."

How does God respond to Jeremiah's complaint? When we put questions to God, we are liable to get some surprising answers. This is not a theological seminar. God's answer is never philosophical. He doesn't owe us any explanations. His answer is always pastoral.

He rebukes us, reorientates us and reassures us. At the end of chapter 11, God reassures Jeremiah that the men of Anathoth who had sought his life would be punished.

In response to Jeremiah's complaint in chapter 12, God tells him three things. First, God admonishes, consider that things may get worse. Verses 5-6:

**"If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out,
Then how can you compete with horses?
If you fall down in a land of peace,
How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?
For even your brothers and the household of your father,
Even they have dealt treacherously with you,
Even they have cried aloud after you.
Do not believe them, although they may say nice things to you."** (Jer 12:5-6)

This is one of the more familiar sections in this prophecy, but it is not what we would expect to hear from God in answer to our complaint. We would expect a supportive answer: "Oh, Jeremiah, I know how you feel. You've had a hard time. I'm so sorry. Let me comfort you. From now on life is going to get better and everything is going to work out." But no. Jeremiah gets a hard-nosed reprimand. God answers his questions with questions of his own. Basically, God tells him that tougher days are yet to come, and he asks how he will deal with those times.

Notice the contrasts between the present and future. Footmen are contrasted with horses. A land of peace and safety where the terrain is easy is contrasted with jungles by the Jordan, places inhabited by wild beasts. The things that lie ahead will be more difficult. For Jeremiah, this would include rejection and hostility from his own family. He is instructed to not believe his family even if they say nice things to him. He will not be able to trust anyone. And finally, if he is exhausted now, how will he do when things get tougher?

When life doesn't work we get tired and worn out. We complain and try to comfort ourselves with self-pity. We want safety and security. We feel like throwing in the towel. We want to give up on God and the life of faith that pushes us beyond what we are able to do. When we begin to feel like that, that is when God reprimands us. Things may get worse. There may be no relief in sight. We may have to live with great uncertainty. If we are having trouble in the present, how will we run with the horses later?

In 1988, my father died at the age of 71. Two years later, my wife's mother passed away. Two years after that my mother died. Six years later, in 1998, my wife's father passed away. We lost all four of our parents in the space of ten years. The sicknesses, the grief and the visits completely wore us out. I thought we were done for at least awhile. Then, a year after my wife's father died, while she was still grieving, I got a call in the mid-

dle of the night to say that my brother had been killed in an automobile accident. Just when you think you can't take anything more, something else happens.

Life is like a steep climb on a mountain trail. After you have traveled up several tough and exhausting inclines you feel you have made it. The trail up ahead looks like it is going to level off. You think you can coast for awhile. Then you round a bend and what you see makes your heart sink: another hill, even steeper than the ones that have gone before. When life doesn't work, consider that God may have tougher things down the road.

Second, God says, "Consider my grief."

**"I have forsaken My house,
I have abandoned My inheritance;
I have given the beloved of My soul
Into the hand of her enemies.
My inheritance has become to Me
Like a lion in the forest;
She has roared against Me;
Therefore I have come to hate her.
Is My inheritance like a speckled bird of prey to Me?
Are the birds of prey against her on every side?
Go, gather all the beasts of the field,
Bring them to devour!
Many shepherds have ruined My vineyard,
They have trampled down My field;
They have made My pleasant field
A desolate wilderness.
It has been made a desolation,
Desolate, it mourns before Me;
The whole land has been made desolate,
Because no man lays it to heart.
On all the bare heights in the wilderness
Destroyers have come,
For a sword of the LORD is devouring
From one end of the land even to the other;
There is no peace for anyone.
They have sown wheat and have reaped thorns,
They have strained themselves to no profit.
But be ashamed of your harvest
Because of the fierce anger of the LORD." (Jer 12:7-13)**

God laments over his people, his inheritance. Judah has roared at God like a lion. She has become like a speckled bird of prey whose plumage has attracted the jealousy of other nations. The shepherds of Judah have ruined God's vineyard. God's gift of a land flowing with milk and honey has become a desolation. It has failed, and no one cares. So God has no choice. He has forsaken and abandoned Judah in the same way that she forsook him. God will now give over his people to her enemy. The beasts of the field are called to devour. The sword of the LORD is let loose to devour.

Perhaps the most striking phrase in these verses is "beloved of my soul." The word beloved is used 33 times in the Song of Solomon. God not only laments for

his inheritance and his land, he laments for his bride, too. God's people, his bride, mean everything to him. This is more than judgment prophecy. Here we get a glimpse of how God feels. In the midst of Jeremiah's confusion and anger, God is saying, "Have you ever thought about how I feel?" The words *My* and *Me* are repeated a dozen times. Jeremiah's tragedy is God's tragedy in miniature. Jeremiah's rejection by his family parallels the nation's rejection of God.

Have you ever wanted to respond to your children this way? At times when my children complain and whine, I want to cry out, "Have you ever thought about how I feel?" But more often than not children, at least when they are young and immature, think only about themselves.

When life doesn't work we are consumed with selfishness. We ask, what about my hurt, my pain, my anger, my needs, justice for me? What we need to consider is that we are not the only one hurting. God is in great pain and turmoil too. He grieves for the beloved of his soul, his bride, when his people forsake him to serve impotent and worthless idols.

When we find ourselves complaining because our lives are not being blessed in the way that we expect, consider God's perspective. God created the heavens and the earth, and he created man a little lower than the angels. He surrounded man with beauty and wonder, a paradise for his enjoyment. He supplied all the food and resources that man needs and gave him dominion to rule. But man worshipped the creation rather than the Creator. God responded by sending his Son to provide a way of salvation: the sinless Man died for sinful mankind. But people turned away. Even the church acknowledges God with her lips, holding to a form of religion, but gives the affection of her heart to the idols of the world. All of this causes God's heart to ache. Where is the justice in all of this? When life doesn't work, stop thinking about yourself and think about how God feels. Why should we expect anything else?

Third, God tells Jeremiah to consider the long view.

Thus says the LORD concerning all My wicked neighbors who strike at the inheritance with which I have endowed My people Israel, "Behold I am about to uproot them from their land and will uproot the house of Judah from among them. And it will come about that after I have uprooted them, I will again have compassion on them; and I will bring them back, each one to his inheritance and each one to his land. Then it will come about that if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the LORD lives,' even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they will be built up in the midst of My people. But if they will not listen, then I will uproot that nation, uproot and destroy it," declares the LORD. (Jer 12:14-17)

"Uproot" is the key word (used five times) in these verses. The word describes a plant being pulled out of

the ground. It takes us back to God's mission statement to Jeremiah:

**“See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant”** (Jer 1:10).

God is saying that he will take care of every nation in its turn. He will uproot Judah and all of her enemies – Syria, Ammon, Moab, even Babylon. Then God will show compassion and bring Judah back. Not only will he have compassion on Judah, he will have compassion on all the other nations and will bring back each to his inheritance and to his land. If these former enemies who led Judah into idolatry learn the ways of God, then God will build them up. But if they do not listen, they will be destroyed. Every nation will be treated just like Judah. God judges evil, but even then he offers his compassion and salvation, because his goal is redemption. This is what we find in the book of Revelation:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands. (Rev 7:9)

When life doesn't work, our world gets rather small. We want justice, and demand that our enemies get what they deserve. We need to understand that the world is a lot bigger than we imagine. God is doing a work that is worldwide, one that spans the course of history. We can't attach God to our life, our church, our country. We can't think in terms of "us" and "them." In the end there will be judgment, but for the present God still desires to save and redeem the very people who are

making our life miserable. His compassion is available to them, and so should ours. When God uproots, he desires to plant. What he is doing is so massive in scope that we cannot always see how we fit into the big picture. When life doesn't work we need a bigger view of life and salvation and redemption. It may not all make sense now, but one day it will. We may weep in the present, but one day, every tear will be wiped dry.

When life doesn't work we need to remember that it may get even tougher. We need to consider how God feels. We need a different perspective, one that has a longer view.

This might seem like a harsh word. I would respond to Jeremiah in a much different way. But then I am not God. I turned 50 last year, but I have learned that I have a lot fewer answers than I did 30 years ago. In my 20's and 30's I tried desperately to get my life to work. I tried to nail everything down. I had pat answers to difficult questions. I thought that at some point life would be explainable and logical. But I have found the opposite to be true. Life gets more complex, more challenging, more difficult. I hear myself saying, "I don't know," a lot more. I don't try to explain everything. The truth that I hold onto is less but more important. I realize that a cause-and-effect theology is a bogus one. There is no Christian formula that will guarantee an easy life.

So what should we do when life doesn't work? We need to remember that God is with us and that he too aches. Jesus, like Jeremiah, was a lamb led to the slaughter. That may be our journey as well. But, while we may have to suffer and face great uncertainty when life doesn't work, what we must ponder is whether our view of God and his plan for us and for the world is large enough.

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