



LONELY BUT NOT ALONE

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 Jeremiah 26, 38, 45
 26th Message
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We have come to the end of our studies of Jeremiah. We have lingered much longer than I intended in the book of the weeping prophet. I never dreamed that this study would yield twenty-six sermons. This book has many words and images that touch my heart deeply. I find great challenge and encouragement in them. And in Jeremiah himself I recognize a soul-mate. The prophet vividly embodies the dichotomy of pain and joy in the Christian life. At one point he asks, "Why has my pain been perpetual, and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" (15:18). At another juncture he rejoices by saying,

**The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
 For His compassions never fail.
 They are new every morning;
 Great is Your faithfulness.** (Lam 3:22-23)

Jeremiah helps me live with the tensions of joy and sorrow, comfort and suffering, laughter and tears that come with being a Christian. The Christian life is never an either/or proposition; it is always both/and. The journey is a mystery that cannot be controlled; the goal is to experience the presence of God in the midst of it all.

Today I want to capture one more theme that is woven through the story of Jeremiah. But before I do that I want to play Paul Harvey and give you the rest of the story.

627 B.C.: Jeremiah called into ministry as a teenager.

Jeremiah spoke the word of God, calling the people of Judah to repentance; to depart from idolatry and turn to the Lord.

622 B.C.: The book of the law discovered.

King Josiah began a reform, but it yielded very little impact.

604 B.C.: King Jehoiakim burned the scroll dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch.

597 B.C.: The first main captivity.

All the skilled men and the temple treasure deported to Babylon. Zedekiah made king.

587 B.C.: The fall of Jerusalem and the second stage of captivity.

Despite Jeremiah's warnings to submit to the yoke of Babylon, Zedekiah refused to listen and the people of Judah paid the price.

587 B.C., after: Gedaliah appointed governor.

Gedaliah was a good man. Perhaps once again Jeremiah had hope that finally, after 40 years of ministry, the remnant that remained in Judah would turn to the Lord.

Gedaliah assassinated by Ishmael.

Refugees flee to Egypt for protection, taking Jeremiah with them.

When Gedaliah was killed, the fear-stricken people wanted to flee to Egypt for protection. Judah had always sought safety from the nations around them rather than the Lord. They asked Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord as what they should do. He told them that if they stayed in the land, the Lord would be with them to protect and provide for them; but if they went to Egypt, God would send Nebuchadnezzar to judge them. Once again, they refused to listen to Jeremiah. They called his word a lie, despite all they had seen in the fall of Judah and Jerusalem. So they headed south to Egypt, taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them. There they continued to worship their idols, believing that the gods of their imagination could provide for them. And now you know the rest of the story.

Jeremiah had a very difficult road to travel, a journey that would continue to the end of his days. He served the Lord with all his heart, but his preaching had very little effect on the people of Judah, and no effect in saving the nation from exile. All he got for his troubles was suffering, in the form of rejection, beatings, imprisonments, near-death experiences, perpetual pain and incurable wounds.

Jeremiah lived a very lonely life, too. By God's direction he was prohibited from taking a wife. His family abandoned him. They even became part of the lynch mob that was out to get him. Very few people wanted to be associated with this marked man.

Another thread woven throughout the book, however, highlights a very encouraging thing. Jeremiah may have been lonely, but he was not alone. At various times God gave him friends. One family and two men put their lives on the line for him, and that is the thread that I want to trace this morning.

First, let's look at the family of Shaphan, which played such a critical role in Jeremiah's safety and protection. Chapter 26 records that after Jeremiah gave his temple sermon in the year 609 B.C., the priests and prophets seized him, wanting to put him to death.

Then the priests and the prophets spoke to the officials and to all the people, saying, "A death sentence for this man! For he has prophesied against this city as you have heard in your hearing." (Jer 26:11, NASB)

But, Jeremiah had a friend who came to his defense.

But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah, so that he was not given into the hands of the people to put him to death. (Jer 26:24)

Ahikam means "my brother has arisen." At just the right time, God raised up a brother who stood by Jeremiah and saved him from death.

Later, in 604 B.C., when Jeremiah was instructed to take a scroll and write down the words of the Lord, the prophet was helped by Ahikam's brother, Gemariah, and his son Micaiah. We discussed this story from chapter 36 last week.

Now when Micaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, had heard all the words of the LORD from the book, he went down to the king's house, into the scribe's chamber. Micaiah declared to them all the words that he had heard when Baruch read from the book to the people. (Jer 36:11-13)

Gemariah and Micaiah were instrumental in protecting Jeremiah and Baruch when king Jehoiakim burned the scroll and sought to kill Jeremiah. Then, after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar himself gave word to the captain of the bodyguard to protect Jeremiah from harm. When the choice was given to Jeremiah to go to Babylon or stay in the land, he attached himself to Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam.

As Jeremiah was still not going back, he [the captain of the bodyguard] said, "Go on back then to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon has appointed over the cities of Judah, and stay with him among the people; or else go anywhere it seems right for you to go." So the captain of the bodyguard gave him a ration and a gift and let him go. Then Jeremiah went to Mizpah to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam and stayed with him among the people who were left in the land. (Jer 40:5-6)

What a wonderful family! A father, two sons and two grandsons remained faithful to God during some very dark days in the life of Judah. This family risked their lives to protect and befriend Jeremiah. I cannot recall another instance in the Bible where a family demonstrated such godly stability and consistency for three generations.

The impact that just one family can have in the kingdom of God, or in one person's life, is incalculable. Perhaps you have had the joy of knowing such a family. You have been influenced or protected or blessed in that way. They entered your life at various points to help you in your spiritual journey. If that is true for you, then you can relate to Jeremiah.

Another person who had a dramatic effect on Jeremiah's life was Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch. During Zedekiah's reign, Jeremiah was beaten and thrown into a dungeon. Later, some of Zedekiah's men threw him into a muddy cistern, where they left him to starve to death.

But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city." Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies." So Ebed-melech took the men under his authority and went into the king's palace to a place beneath the storeroom and took from

there worn-out clothes and worn-out rags and let them down by ropes into the cistern to Jeremiah. Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, "Now put these worn-out clothes and rags under your armpits under the ropes"; and Jeremiah did so. So they pulled Jeremiah up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guardhouse. (Jer 38:7-13)

Ebed-melech means "servant of a king." This man was a foreigner, a black man from Ethiopia, a government official, with no legal rights in Judah. This was not his fight, but that didn't matter. He went against popular opinion and asked the king for Jeremiah's life. When he was granted permission, he pulled Jeremiah out of the pit with ropes. He even used rags for padding so that the ropes wouldn't cut him.

Later, God has a reassuring word for Ebed-Melech:

"Go and speak to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Behold, I am about to bring My words on this city for disaster and not for prosperity; and they will take place before you on that day. But I will deliver you on that day," declares the LORD, "and you will not be given into the hand of the men whom you dread. For I will certainly rescue you, and you will not fall by the sword; but you will have your own life as booty, because you have trusted in Me," declares the LORD.' " (Jer 39:16-18)

An entire city goes up in flames but, just as in the case of Rahab when Jericho fell, God extends his mercy to one individual, a foreigner who did not belong to the people of Judah. Ebed-Melech is not applauded for his heroism, but for his trust in God. He was a servant of the King.

An interesting side-note to this story is the fact that after Philip the evangelist went up to Samaria to preach the gospel, God directed him to the Gaza road in the desert. There he met an Ethiopian eunuch who had come to Jerusalem to worship. This black man was the first Gentile to come to faith in the book of Acts.

Has someone you did not know, an angel in disguise, an unknown servant, came on the scene at just the right time to pull you out of the pit? If so, then you can relate to Jeremiah.

Finally, there is Baruch, Jeremiah's lifelong faithful companion, his Tonto. There is a great word about him in chapter 45.

This is the message which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written down these words in a book at Jeremiah's dictation, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying: "Thus says the LORD the God of Israel to you, O Baruch: 'You said, "Ah, woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning and have found no rest." ' " (Jer 45:1-3)

Baruch is asking, "Why me? Why did I get picked for this duty to help Jeremiah?" The timeframe here is the fourth year of Jehoiakim, i.e., chapter 36, almost twenty years before Baruch went to Egypt with Jeremiah.

"Thus you are to say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Behold, what I have built I am about to tear down, and

what I have planted I am about to uproot, that is, the whole land." But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I am going to bring disaster on all flesh,' declares the LORD, 'but I will give your life to you as booty in all the places where you may go.' " (Jer 45:4-5)

Baruch means "blessing," and this is what this man was to Jeremiah. He came from a distinguished family. He might have sought great things for himself, but he counted the cost and gave it all up in order to bless Jeremiah. The result was that Baruch was saved. He gained a treasure that neither moth nor rust can destroy. Notice that God makes the identical promise to Baruch that he made to Ebed-melech: "to give your life to you as booty." When I read of the relationship between Baruch and Jeremiah, I think of Barnabas, who was such an encouragement to the apostle Paul. We wouldn't have Jeremiah without Baruch, and we wouldn't have much of the New Testament without Barnabas.

I find this to be a beautiful thread in Jeremiah's life. Forty years of painful ministry, forty years of rejection, forty years of loneliness, yes, but Jeremiah was not alone. He had friends. Henry Adams said, "One friend in a lifetime is much, two are many, three are hardly possible." Jeremiah had at least three. Their names were "my brother has arisen," "servant of a king," and, "blessing."

Loneliness is a fact of life in society today. This is true for married people as well as singles. Even in our high-tech, high-energy world which provides so many activities and opportunities to fill our days, we can still feel the pain of loneliness. And when we experience struggle, rejection, persecution and mistreatment, those feelings of loneliness become intensified.

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools.
—Kipling

At times we feel we are in a pit, sinking into the mud. Our family turns away from us; it seems like everybody is against us and just wants us to die. In Kipling's words, you "hear the truth that you've spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools." Everything crumbles: "the things you gave your life to broken." Jeremiah experienced all of those things. He never knew success as we measure it. But the encouragement of his story is that at just the right time God gave him a friend. He does that for us, too. Someone will risk his life to save us. Someone will pull us out of the pit. Someone will be a brother, a servant, or a blessing. We may be lonely, but God doesn't leave us alone. If we have one loyal friend we are rich.

I can relate to Jeremiah, to his loneliness, his melancholy nature, his lack of visible success. When I was in the pit and completely overwhelmed, at just the right time someone came to be a servant and a blessing to me. One of the people I think of in this regard is Bob Pershe. Bob has been a Baruch to me for over twenty years. When he was single he helped raise my children. He helped me in ministry when I made the transition from engineer to pastor. He helped me with projects around the house and school assignments for the kids. We have enjoyed holidays and ministry experiences together. We were even born in the

same hospital in Lincoln, Nebraska. When my brother was killed in an automobile accident three years ago, Bob sat with me through all three services when I preached, just to be with me.

At another time, my wife Liz and I were in a situation that was unsatisfactory for both of us. We were in deep depression, completely lacking strength. Then a group of young men from my discipleship group came over and physically moved us. I would have never made it without their help.

A few years ago, after Liz's father died, we had to prepare his house for sale. The process was emotionally draining for her. She could not bear to be at the house for more than a couple of hours before the pain and the memories became too much for her, and she would have to leave. We collected a pile of stuff that had to be taken to the dump, and the day came when we had to turn over the house to the realtors. Completely overwhelmed, I called my friend Dave Willis and asked him if he would help. Dave arrived with his truck and provided the strength I didn't have.

When I think of Jeremiah's story, I think of the ministry of our deacons. Every month we hear a report of how many people in our body are encouraged and blessed by our deacons in small but tangible ways. We also hear over and over how blessed the deacons feel to serve in this way.

I also think of many of the things that have happened in the wake of 9/11. We read the stories and hear the testimonies of amazing love and kindness poured upon those who have suffered. In the midst of terrible tragedy people are coming together and they are being blessed.

Life is hard. At times we will be completely overwhelmed. We will be at the mercy of cutthroats and bandits. But God will show up in the face of a friend to love, help, and provide. Perhaps it's not always what we want, but it is what we need. God doesn't leave us alone.

**A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.** (Prov 17:17)

Let me give you two words of encouragement.

When God sends us a friend we need to be humble and willing to receive the help that he or she has to offer in the way that God intends. This can be difficult for some who find it hard to accept help. We feel like we don't deserve it. Our pride gets in the way. We are so intent on being strong and independent that we won't expose our needs. We refuse to open our hearts because of a deep fear that we will end up getting hurt. We insist on being a rock or an island because, to borrow a phrase from Simon and Garfunkel, "a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries." But if we insist on being self-sufficient, we will miss great blessings.

Listen to these encouraging words on friendship, from Eugene Peterson:

The simple fact that he had friends says something essential about Jeremiah: he needed friends. He was well-developed in his interior life. It was impossible to deter him from his course by enmity or by flattery. He was habituated to solitude. But he needed friends. No one who is whole is self-sufficient. The whole life, the complete life, cannot be lived with haughty independence. Our goal cannot be to not need anyone. One of the evi-

dences of Jeremiah's wholeness was his capacity to receive friendship, to let others help him, to be accessible to mercy. It is easier to extend friendship to others than to receive it ourselves. In giving friendship we share strength, but in receiving it we show weakness. But well-developed persons are never garrisoned behind dogmas or projects, but rather they are alive to a wide spectrum of relationships.¹

Second, instead of always seeking help we can look for opportunities to give help. For some, that too can be difficult. We think we don't have anything to offer or that no one needs us. We keep our distance because we are afraid to risk. We don't enter into someone's life because it is inconvenient. But God calls us to be brothers, servants, and blessings. Jeremiah would never have survived were it not for Shapan's family, for Ebed-melech, and Baruch.

These men blessed Jeremiah, and they bless us too. We have the text of Jeremiah and Lamentations because of them. Where would we be if we did not have the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31? Where would we be without the hope of Lamentations 3? We do not find our value in doing great things; we find it in being a Baruch, who put aside his own aspirations to bless another. We find it in being a Ebed-melech, who lay down his life to save another. We find our purpose in being a brother or a sister to someone who needs defending.

When we reach the end of our earthly journey it won't matter what we accomplished or how much we accumulated. What will count then are the people in our lives, the special times when someone came to our aid in the midst of struggle, or when we were used by God to be a blessing. At such times we forge special relationships. We can never protect ourselves from pain and struggle, but God won't leave us alone. Every now and then he takes on flesh in the form of a friend and tells us he loves us.

When a feller hasn't got a cent
And is feelin' kind of blue,
And the clouds hang thick and dark
And won't let the sunshine thro',
It's a great thing, oh my brethren,
For a feller just to lay
His hand upon your shoulder in a friendly sort o' way.

It makes a man feel queerish,
It makes the tear-drops start.
And you kind o' feel a flutter
In the region of your heart.
You can't look up and meet his eye,
You don't know what to say
When a hand is on your shoulder in a friendly sort o' way.

Oh this world's a curious compound
With its honey and its gall;
Its cares and bitter crosses,
But a good world after all.
And a good God must have made it,
Leastwise that is what I say,
When a hand is on your shoulder in a friendly sort o' way.

—Anonymous

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1. Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 166.