

September 28, 2003  
Pentecost 16

*"When the Going Gets Tough"*

## **JEREMIAH 20:7-18**

**J**LORD, you deceived; me, and I was deceived you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. <sup>8</sup> Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. <sup>9</sup> But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. <sup>10</sup> I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him." <sup>11</sup> But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten. <sup>12</sup> O LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. <sup>13</sup> Sing to the LORD! Give praise to the LORD! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked. <sup>14</sup> Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! <sup>15</sup> Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you-- a son!" <sup>16</sup> May that man be like the towns the LORD overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. <sup>17</sup> For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever. <sup>18</sup> Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?

Are you surprised at the inconsistency and even conflict in the words of the prophet Jeremiah? One moment he confidently proclaims, "The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior." The next moment he sinks so low that he wishes he were never born. He even curses the day of his birth.

Some moms sitting here this morning can remember when their kids became so discouraged they blurted out in anger, "I wish I was never born," or even "I wish I was dead." We can understand immature and frustrated children making such statements but a prophet of God? That shocks us and takes us by complete surprise.

Some years a popular TV preacher wrote a book called, "When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get Going." He was the one who preached about "possibility thinking." If you set your mind on something, you can get it done. Shortly after this book became a best seller, bumper stickers started appearing with the slogan, "When the going gets tough... the tough go shopping."

Shopping and possibility thinking will not get us through the tough times, but Jesus will. In the midst of the darkest moments of life, prophets like Jeremiah were able to sing praises to the Lord, because it was the Lord who took them through the tough times. This morning we want to speak about, **"When the Going Gets Tough."**

## **1) The hole**

When the going gets tough it often means that we have dug ourselves into a hole. That was true also of Jeremiah. He dug such a deep hole for himself that he could not see God's plan for his life. Listen to his angry outbursts. "O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived. You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me."

Jeremiah has just come from spending time in the stocks at the entrance to the temple. See that man walk up to Jeremiah and spit on him. See that kid throw a rotten egg on him. Listen to the ridicule, the verbal abuse. No one comes up to him to thank him for his message that Jerusalem will be destroyed. No one says thank you for the message from Jeremiah that said, "Hand yourselves over to their enemies and you will be spared."

So empty and worthless, so despised and hated, is Jeremiah that he lashes out at God and accuses him of deceiving and tricking him. I have heard people lash out at God and accuse him of not being fair. Jeremiah is going a step further. He accuses the Lord of deception, literally seduction, and then overpowering him, the way an evil man might seduce a woman and then over power her. How could such terrible thoughts and words come from Jeremiah, the prophet of the Lord?

Jeremiah tried to keep his mouth shut, but then more messages came from the Lord about the destruction of Jerusalem. "But if I say that I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, his words are in my hearts like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in, indeed I cannot." When you love God's Word and believe every part of it is true, a fire begins to burn inside of you, and you long for opportunities to take what you have come to know and share it with others. If you hold it inside, it threatens to tear you apart and explode inside of you.

So deep did Jeremiah sink into the hole of depression and the pit of despair that he curses the day on which he was born. In verse 14 he says, "Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed. Cursed be the man that who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, 'A child is born to you a son.'" Think of the lowest time in your life, the absolute lowest moment, and maybe, just maybe you can recall thinking to yourself, "Why was I ever born into this world?"

The same thing happened to Job. He was strong at first, but then he sank so low he also cursed the day he was born. When the sad news came that he had lost all his wealth, and his ten children were killed in a storm, he sank to the ground in grief, but then rose up to say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Then he was afflicted with painful sores from the top of his head to the sole of his feet. This was too much for Job. He broke down and burst out in anger towards God, "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb."

An elderly gentleman and his wife decided to have the windows washed in their home since he was too uncertain on his legs to climb a ladder. After the window washer completed the job, the cranky old fellow told the young window washer to do the front windows again, because they were still dirty and smudged. Almost in a whiny voice he told his wife, look

the lousy job that guy is doing, he still can't get the windows clean. His wife looked up at him and said, "Honey, its not the window, its your glasses." Jeremiah had completely lost his perspective. All he could see was the terrible ridicule that was being heaped on him for speaking the word of the Lord. He lost sight of the important plan the Lord had for calling the people back to repentance through the words he would speak to them.

What if someone was able to record your lowest moment in life, when you lashed out in anger towards your God or lost sight of your purpose in life? What if those lowest moments were played on a screen in front of your friends, and family, and members of your church? Would you not want to run and hide? Thank God we are able to forget these low moments and know they are forgiven in Jesus. We can put them behind us, or they would drag us down and destroy us and keep us from ever wanting to serve the Lord with gladness as the psalmist tells us today. Psalm 103 reminds us this morning: "For as high as he heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Then David goes on to say, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." The Lord knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust. He knows how to step in and help us out of the hole.

## **2) The help**

See how the Lord reached down and helped Jeremiah in that dark hole that he had dug for himself. Look at verse 11: "But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior, so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten." What a confession of faith and confidence in the Lord. "The Lord is with me like a MIGHTY WARRIOR." The Hebrew word for mighty warrior is GIBBOR, that same word used to describe Jesus in Isaiah 9:6 as the child born to us who is the MIGHTY GOD. Jeremiah lets go and lets God take over the battles in his life. He knows the Lord will bring justice on those who were persecuting him and making his life miserable.

Remember the famous words of Job "I know that my Redeemer lives...." How many of you know the context in which Job spoke these words? These words were spoken in the midst of the deepest, darkest moment of depression he faced in his life. So deep in the hole was Job that he lashed out with these angry words, "He has stripped me of my honor and removed he crown from my head. He tears me down on every side till I am gone, he uproots my hope like tree." In that deep dark slough of despond, the Lord came and delivered Job from that despair and put his feet on high ground, high ground so firm and solid he was able to confess "I know that my Redeemer lives."

The Lord did the same for Jeremiah. He delivered him out of the hole of despair and put his feet on high ground. Jeremiah is confident the Lord will work things out for him. He prays, "O Lord almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them for to you I have committed my cause." He leaves his cause in the Lord's hands, knowing that the Lord can see all things and will administer justice accordingly. So convinced is he that the Lord is all powerful and will administer justice that he says, "Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked."

When we read these words, we think of how the Lord has literally snatched us from the jaws of eternal death and punishment that we deserve because of our sin. When Paul was in prison facing certain death, he did not feel sorry for himself or curse the day of his birth. Instead he also received strength from the Lord to say with confidence, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever." During another time in prison, after being severely beaten and facing the possibility of dying, it was Paul who raised his voice in songs of praise to the Lord at midnight, much to the surprise of other prisoners. Even in the lowest moments of life, the darkest prisons and the deepest holes the Lord can deliver mightily.

Joseph Scriven had it made. He was engaged to married to a beautiful young lady, life was going well for him. It could not have been better. All the marriage plans were in place. Then the tragic news came to him that his beloved future wife had tragically drowned in a mill pond. Waves of despair washed over his soul. Life did not seem worth living. In the darkness a light started to shine, a bright light that led to writing a piece of poetry that has been placed into a familiar song.

*What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
Ev'rything to God in prayer!  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,  
Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Ev'rything to God in prayer!*

What a friend we have in Jesus, the friend in the light and the friend in the darkness, the friend who is always there in good times and in the tough times. Amen.