

**September 16, 2012**  
**Pentecost 16**

*“When the Going Gets Tough”*

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**JEREMIAH 20:7-18**

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**L****O****R****D**, 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?

“I wish I was never born!” The little drama queen angrily yells these words as she slams shut the door of bedroom and begins to cry. Softly she says it again as she cries in her pillow. “I wish I was never born.” You might hear these words from a despondent child but you do not expect to hear these words from our good friend Jeremiah the prophet. His life reaches such a low point that he cries out in pain, “Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!”

Have you ever reached such a low point in your life that you wished you were never born? Or have you ever been so discouraged that you lose sight of how valuable your life is to the Lord and how he has an important purpose for you even in the midst of your pain and suffering?

There used to be a preacher in California who wrote a book on possibility thinking with the title, “Tough Times Don’t Last But Tough People DO.” He was the preacher who also coined the phrase, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Imagine saying that to Jeremiah when he is going through the lowest time in his life. “Jeremiah, tough times don’t last but tough people do.”

Where am I going to turn for help when the going gets tough? Please don’t tell me to look to myself and my human potential when I am struggling. Just show me Jesus and

his love for me. Help me sing the hymn we just sang: "What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear." Tell me that there is no pit so deep that Christ Jesus my Friend and his unchanging love is always deeper.

### **The hole may be deep**

It shocks us that a great man of God such as Jeremiah could reach such a low point in his life that he wishes he was never born. But then we need to understand just how tough things were for him as he proclaimed the Word of God to turn people away from idolatry and bring them back to the Lord.

Jeremiah sinks down into a deep hole as he says, "Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed." Jeremiah is not just accusing the Lord of letting him down. He is accusing the Lord of actually deceiving him. I know that the Nigerians who send me emails asking me for money are trying to deceive me. How could anyone ever say this about the Lord? The Lord warned Jeremiah it would be tough to speak the truth of his Word. The Lord even told him, "I will be with you and rescue you." Jeremiah never realized it would be as hard as it was. "Lord, you never told me it would be this bad. You deceived me."

How bad was it? Jeremiah says, "I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the Word of God has brought me reproach and insult." Read the first part of this chapter and weep for Jeremiah. The high priest Passhur puts him in stocks right in front of the Lord's temple at the Upper Gate of Benjamin. See the people shake their fists at him, yell at him, perhaps even spit on him. They cannot stand the prophet of God who is calling them to account for their sins of idolatry and calling them to come back to the Lord before destruction comes to the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah says even his friends have turned against him and looked for an opportunity to get revenge on him. As we heard in an earlier sermon, the people of his own hometown of Anathoth were plotting to put him to death when he came back into their town.

Those of you who deal with chronic pain know that it can get you down and put you into a deep hole where it may be hard to even see the light of God's love. Even more difficult and more depressing is the constant reproach and hatred that comes from people because you have dared to bring the Word of God into their lives and call them to give up the false idols they have created for themselves.

Jeremiah tried to make it easier on himself by not passing on the messages the Lord gave him, but it did not work. "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." In the Revelation John says "I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour." When you love God's word and believe every part of it is true, you have a burning desire, a fire in the belly that wants to let everyone know how much God loves them and cares about them. Jesus knew what it was like to be rejected and hated for the words he taught people. He told his beloved disciples the last days would not be easy for us just as it was not easy for Jeremiah, "Then you will be handed over to

be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”

Did you ever think that it would be so hard? I know Jesus said, “If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” But did you ever think it would be so hard? A dear Christian woman said that the day after her baptism was the hardest day in her life. That was the day her agnostic, hedonistic, atheistic father belittled her and ridiculed her for believing in Jesus her Savior.

Did you ever think it would be so hard? You cannot sleep at night. You wake up praying for members of your family who have wandered away from the Lord. You ask the Holy Spirit to help you reach them with God’s Word so that they do not put their faith in false gods they have made for themselves as the people did at the time of Jeremiah. For awhile you join the crowd that says, “There are two things I never talk about, religion and politics.” For a little while you find peace in not saying anything. But then the Word of God burns inside of you and you find yourself saying with Jeremiah, “But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like fire, a fire shut up in my bones.” The violinist tightens the strings to play beautiful music. The Lord Jesus creates tension in your life to boldly and fiercely confess your love for him. Facing ridicule and hatred you dare to sing, “Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me.”

### **Christ is always deeper**

As deep as the hole was for Jeremiah, the love that Jesus had for him was always deeper. In the darkest hours grace shines brightly. Jeremiah confesses, “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior, so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.” Don’t you love these words? “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior.” The Hebrew word for mighty warrior is “GIBBOR.” It is used in Isaiah 9:6 to describe the Savior who will be born to us, “His name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” The Lord told Jeremiah, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and I will rescue you.”

In the darkest hours of life Jeremiah receives the strength to hand over thoughts of getting revenge into the hands of the Lord. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer we say, “Deliver us from evil.” We put our deliverance in the hands of the Lord. We leave it up to the Lord to deal with those who may be turning against us for what we believe.

What’s that sound I hear? Do you hear it? I think I hear it? It is the sound of someone singing. It is Jeremiah in the darkest night of the soul singing praises to his Lord. “Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the need from the hands of the wicked!” What is that sound I hear going through the walls of the prison in the middle of the night? It is the sound of Paul and Silas singing praises to the Lord after being badly beaten and thrown into the inner prison. What is that sound I hear? It is the sound of a young man singing a song he has written after losing his fiancé to a tragic drowning. It is a song we know and love. “What a Friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear.” What’s that sound I hear? It is the sound of a father holding his little daughter as she dies of leukemia and singing the hymn, “Abide with me fast falls the eventide...” What is that sound I hear? It is Job bursting out in a song of praise during the darkest time of his life, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.

And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God."

The Lord delivers from the darkness, but then the darkness comes back and the Lord has to deliver again. We wish we would not have to read Jeremiah's angry words that pop up again after he was so confident of God's mercy and grace. But this, dear Christian, is the reality of life. Satan will not leave us alone. Jeremiah curses the day of his birth as Job once did. He cries out in pain, "Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?" Here is further evidence of the words of Jeremiah about the weakness of the human heart, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

The Lord God does not reject his servant Jeremiah for his unfaithfulness and sinful outburst of anger. He stood by his side and rescued him. Listen to how Jeremiah sings the praises of the Lord in the book of Lamentations with these well known words, "Because of the Lord's great love (or mercy) we are not consumed, for his compassions are never fail. They are new to us every morning; great is your faithfulness." Jeremiah was unfaithful with to the Lord with his angry outbursts, but the Lord was not unfaithful to Jeremiah. He stood by his side. Jeremiah passed on a message from the Lord that meant so much to him personally. "For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more." When the going gets tough, we have Jesus. Jesus is faithful. He holds out his hands and says, "Look at my hands and side. See the wounds I still carry as evidence that your sin was all forgiven, even those times when you sunk so low you lost sight of my love for you." When the going gets tough "Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life." That was true for Jeremiah and that is true for us. Amen.