

JEREMIAH: Faith Under Opposition – week 3 8/22/21

From the beginning in the Garden, there has been a back-and-forth communication pattern where God tells us what to do, and then it's up to us to choose obedience or rebellion. God tells Adam and Eve that they can have anything in the Garden except one thing. It was now in their court whether they followed God's instructions or not. We know how that story ends.

Within the Old Testament prophetic writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others, we see a penitential pattern emerge in how God and man relate to one another through the communication of the prophet.

(SLIDE 2) The penitential pattern is this: Man/community sins, God warns of consequences through the prophet, man/community responds to God's words, God acts based on what man/community chooses.

There can be a positive response, like the community chooses to repent and turn back towards God and what He's instructed. Then God reacts with salvation, redemption, and restoration. There can also be a negative response, where the community chooses rebellion and disobedience. God reacts with judgement.

This back and forth reminds me of the time I was hooked on watching the TV show "Super Nanny."

(SLIDE 3) You know, where the children are running amok with no discipline, terrorizing the house, doing everything possible to bring chaos and destruction with no respect for parents or self. Super Nanny spends the length of the episode teaching the parent to communicate effectively to the children about what behavior was desired/expected, what the consequences would result if the behavior was not appropriate, and then keeping parents accountable to follow through on the punishment. Because we all know that lack of follow through is the worse thing you can do if you want credibility and authority in your household. Often, I would watch the parents in the beginning of the show and think "no wonder those kids are out of control!" It always seems so obvious to the observer, right?

(SLIDE 4) We have all witnessed bad parenting, and we can't blame parents entirely. Parents are imperfect and imperfect parents parent imperfectly. No expert comes home with you from the hospital to give you game time advice on how to handle every situation. Even though earthly parents don't always get it right, they do love their kids, even when sometimes it doesn't look like it.

(SLIDE 5) You may have heard that your parents are the most important influencer in how you envision God. For instance, if your parent was extremely emotional in their parenting, lashing out right away in a very dramatic way, you may think God is like that – ready to lash out in anger or disappointment at the slightest provocation. Or you may have had an aloof and distant parent who never engaged in your life in the way you craved. Maybe you think that God is like that too, not that interested in who you are or what's going on in your life.

What stood out to me during my time in Jeremiah, is that God is like Super Nanny, or Super Nanny is like God. Our Heavenly Father communicates over and over exactly what He requires of His children. He says what behaviors are good that bring peace and what behaviors are bad that bring chaos. He talks about how His people have breached the covenant and what they need to do to get back into alignment with the covenant. He is patient and kind. His heart is for obedience and restoration. But eventually, when His kids don't respond in a healthy way, He follows through with action. God isn't a bad parent who's reactive and at the slightest mistake unleashes His wrath. He's also not a parent who is all talk

and no action. God is very engaged in what is going on and wants only our good. That is how we can sing a long like “Good, Good Father.” *Chorus* If you can worship in that song, it’s because you know it to be true.

We have this penitential pattern in Jeremiah, in which God tells the people what their sin is and how to fix it. After Israel’s sin was publicized for all to hear, and ample warnings given, there came the time for judgement, when consequences were actualized. God, who had protected Israel from her enemies within the covenant for generations, allowed the nations of the world to ravage His people. It reminds me again of the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus tells. The Father never wanted his son to leave, but the son, with a rebellious heart, abandoned his family to seek wealth and wild living. The father honors his son by allowing him to follow his own desires, even if to his demise. It was only in the mire of the pigpen that the son realized his foolishness and sought to make amends. God will not force you to follow Him. He will keep encouraging you to come into His embrace and stay within His protection. But you have a choice. Isn’t this the great mystery of the Gospel? Jesus paid it all so we can have a choice whether to follow or rebel.

(SLIDE 6) God applied the communal and ultimate Super Nanny time-out. Israel finds a large part of her people are now in Babylon as servants to a foreign people. And then God gives instructions:

(SLIDE 7) Jeremiah 29:4-9 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters – that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, not listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord.”

Let’s look at this in three chunks.

(SLIDE 8) 1) Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters – that you may be increased there, and not diminished.

If God is telling you to settle in the land by building houses, planting gardens, marrying, and having kids, you can gather that this exile is not a short-term predicament. This time-out is going to be lengthy.

The Hebrews were to remember who they were and return to their roots of following God while living in a strange place. Have you found yourself in a strange place? How did you stick out? Were you forced to examine who you are? I have travelled to seventeen different countries, and it is always evident to me when I’m not in America. There are the basic human similarities, but I sound different, look different, may act differently, and sometimes think differently. What better way to understand who I am as an American when I’m not in America. Friends, what better way to learn who you are as a Christian, when you are not surrounded by Christians? How do you stick out? Who are you in a secular environment? If anything has been evident to me in the last two years, it’s the question of who I am when my life looks very different from the day before. What do I really stand for? What do I really believe when everything is stripped away? I re-learned that I am not of this world. I stand out.

Scripture says to be in the world, but not of it. Exile to Babylon shook up everything for Israel. Long gone were the comforts of home. Israel had to band together in fellowship to remember who they were and find meaning again. They were called to increase.

Do you think there is wisdom for us here? Some of you may still feel scattered and lost. Some of you may have found yourself digging in stubbornly. I think we can agree that the place we were before is no longer an option. And it doesn't look like it's going to return to exactly the way it was. If you think about it, life is always changing. It's just that it usually happens more slowly and people have more time to respond and reflect. How have you responded? Are you stuck in an on-going temper tantrum, unable to let go? If you feel like God's children stuck in Babylon, a place foreign and uncomfortable, what would God say to you? I think He would say "Remember who you are. Engage in life. Build and invest." In other words, it's time to increase.

Reflecting for a moment, are you emerging from a time of growth, stronger now than ever? Do you feel that you've just stagnated for the last two years? Are you emerging from a time of regression, weaker than ever? Prophet Graham Cooke says that for believers, every problem is a possibility for upgrade. If Jesus is in you, then so is Jesus in all your circumstances. Jesus is here. He is in us. Therefore, He is in our circumstances. Where is He telling you to plant? To build? To increase? How are you allowing Him to strengthen you for what's happening now and what's to come? I believe that He is using this current time, when everything's changed, to train and equip us to know who we are and how to rule and reign with Him in the Kingdom.

(SLIDE 9) 2) Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

Such an interesting verse. The surrounding nations of Israel and Judah are considered enemies. Why would God tell His people to pray for peace and prosperity for an enemy nation that has captured them and dragged them off to Babylon? God is telling His people that instead of praying for the demise of their captors, they are to pray for peace. I see many in our society who gleefully criticize our leaders and hope for the day when that leadership will fall. They may throw up their hands and say, "I'll be glad when so-and-so is out" and therefore have gladness for sorrow until that thing happens. And even when their choice leader comes to power, it isn't long before they are discontented again, moaning again towards a new day when change will come.

Have you heard the phrase, "It rains equally on the just and the unjust"? When it rains, anyone standing outside gets wet. We know that there is no peace for both believer and unbeliever alike when a government lacks peace. You do not need to look far to see what it looks like to have a government full of chaos. Those are places of fear, violence, and darkness. If you know about what's going on in Afghanistan, or Haiti, or Myanmar, you may be like me praying for God to intervene for the sake of the people there. Even if you might be tempted to think that's only the case in a faraway country, you know from recent experience that riots and shootings and all kinds of nonsense are happening even here in Philadelphia. No one wins when there is no peace. God tells us to pray for peace to our own welfare, not to focus on the downfall of the nation we are under, lest we be crushed when it falls.

(SLIDE 10) This is why Paul tells us in 1 Timothy:

¹ Timothy 2:1-4 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come of the knowledge of the truth.

Do you regularly pray for our leaders and the peace of our nation? Do you think that it matters? Author Derek Prince states: “That is why Paul said first of all – before you pray for the sick, the missionaries, the evangelists, even your family – to pray for the government. As we have seen, anyone who criticizes the government is telling the world that he has failed in his prayers. He has not done his job. He has allowed these dark angels to crowd in over the buildings where vital decisions are made that affect not only us but also the whole Kingdom of God. We must not tolerate that invasion of Satan.”

God, our good and heavenly Father, told the exiles to seek peace and pray for their city. Intercession for our city, region, state, country, world is critical so that it may go well for us. Not because we have the power, but because we have an *all-powerful God* Who loves to respond in answered prayer to His children. So we use our right and privilege as children of God to pray for the peace of our city and nation.

(SLIDE 11) 3) Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, do not listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord.

The exiles had just experienced a communal trauma. Some of them fell to murder, pestilence, and starvation. The remainder were uprooted and shipped off as servants to Babylon. Life was full of uncertainty and discomfort. It makes logical sense that the people would be whining, complaining, eager to return home and “get back to normal.” None of us would find that strange.

Yet God says to watch and discern. Do you notice that the caution is against deception and “dreams that you cause to be dreamed.” During the exile, prophets were proclaiming to the people that the captivity would soon be over and they would return to Jerusalem and the life they knew. Jeremiah, however, told them to be careful of people claiming to have messages from God but who would only tell them what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah immediately proceeds to explain in verse 10 that they would be in exile seventy years.

I think you wouldn’t be surprised when I say that I have a Facebook feed full of people who only want to hear affirmations about what they want to hear and attract others who only think the same way as them. We all want the good news that we want. We want God to tell us what we want to hear. We think that our dreams are what will make us happy.

Six:Eight, we have experienced a communal trauma. We have been thrown into a time of upheaval, leaving behind the familiar and figuring out the new. We have lost loved ones on the way. If we heed Jeremiah, there is guidance for us today. **(SLIDE 12)** 1) God tells us to plant, build, start new relationships, and increase. Participate in life. 2) God tells us to seek peace and pray for our community so that it goes well for us. 3) God tells us to watch out that we are not deceived by every message that is spoken and those who tell us what we want to hear.

(SLIDE 13) ^{Jeremiah 29:10-14} “For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you and cause you to return to this place. For I know the

thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.”

(SLIDE 14) Prayer: Lord, you are faithful. You are a good parent who looks out for our welfare, even when it requires discipline. Thank you for loving us in the midst of our brokenness. You never leave us nor abandon us. You are always working for our restoration and benefit. Lord, minister to the hearts here today who need to rid their mind and heart of the toxins of fear and anguish. Holy Spirit come and fall on us afresh we pray.