

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

PERSECUTION

(Selected passages from Jeremiah)

Study #7

Sermon series: Faithful

(Stories from Jeremiah)

Introduction: Great - and not so great - expectations...

These days, current interest rates for a fixed 30-year mortgage are hovering around 3%. For those of you who are unfamiliar with or are new to home-buying, that is a REALLY low interest rate.

So, you would be shocked if you went to a loan officer today and were told that the interest rate on the home you are buying will be, not 2%, but 12%.

That would be an unreasonable amount today, but that's what Kathy and I gladly settled for when we bought our first home in Leon Valley in 1983.

We were glad for that 12% mortgage because the year before, interest rates had rocked back and forth between 16-20%.

If interest rates rocket back up to 8% over the next twelve months, you'll be very disgruntled because you could have had 2% today.

It turns out that when it comes to home-buying, satisfaction or disgruntlement depends on realistic expectations.

Actually, having realistic expectations is crucial in all arenas of life, whether we're talking about friendships, marriage or parenting, school or work.

If we expect smooth-sailing and a bed of roses, unhappiness will probably follow. If we expect challenges, we're likely to be much more content when the inevitable potholes and bumps in the road arrive.

Today, we are again probing the life and times of Jeremiah. As we learn more about him, we'll also learn a lot about the realistic expectations we should bring to the life of faith.

Jeremiah's life wasn't a walk in the park. Far from it. God gave him a very challenging life assignment and that assignment is spelled out in the sixth chapter of his book.

Jeremiah's role as prophet to Israel...

[6:27] "I have made you an assayer and a tester among My people, That you may know and assay their way."

When someone is testing a chunk of precious metal to see how much of that chunk is solid gold and how much is dross, we say that they are "assaying" it.¹

Jeremiah's God-given task was to assay the Jewish people's hearts. How much was love for God? How much was worthless dross?

As you might expect, filling this role made him about as popular as an IRS tax auditor, or a Supreme Court Justice whose rulings will always displease a bunch of people, or a baseball umpire who just calls 'em like he sees 'em.

God gave Jeremiah this very tough job, knowing full well that it would be tough. And, fortunately, Jeremiah knew to Whom he should turn when it got tough.

¹ Gold was refined in those days by melting down lead with the rest of the metal. Then, a stream of air was directed at the molten mass. This oxidized the lead, causing it to act as a flux to carry off the baser elements.

[Jeremiah 15:15] You who know, O Lord, Remember me, take notice of me...

Jeremiah consistently turned to the Lord when he faced trouble. And did he ever face trouble...

For the next few minutes, we'll catalogue some of the tough stuff that this man faced. I believe that seeing what came into his life and seeing how he handled it will equip us to handle tough stuff that comes into our own lives.

The first hardship we'll see has to do with his domestic life.

The Sufferings of Jeremiah

Denied the Joys of Family Life

[Jeremiah 16:1] The word of the Lord also came to me saying, [2] "You shall not take a wife for yourself nor have sons or daughters in this place."²

Prophets and their families

If it seems a bit intrusive that God would prohibit Jeremiah from having a normal family life, you should at least know that God was very often very directive and very involved in the intimate details of His prophets' families.

He commanded Hosea to take a wife who was a harlot and who continually strayed after he married her. The Lord evidently had something to do with the death of Ezekiel's wife.

The message of these prophets' home lives was to be a message to the nation.

The adulteries of Hosea's wife were a living parable of Israel's spiritual straying into idolatry. God commanded Ezekiel to not mourn the passing of his wife to illustrate that God was not going to mourn when His people, the Jews, were taken away into captivity.

² A very emphatic command. Same kind of negative as found in the Ten Commandments. "*Thou shalt not...*"

The message of Jeremiah's family-less status

As had been with the case with Ezekiel and Hosea, so there was a *point* to Jeremiah's celibacy.

God did not allow him to have a family of his own because of the catastrophe that was coming to Jerusalem and Judah. Mothers and fathers would die gruesome deaths from war and famine. Disease would be rampant. (See verses 3-4)

A season of carnage is not a time to marry or to bring children into the world. His family-less-ness was a proclamation that the end of the nation was at hand.

So, yes, Jeremiah was spared having to watch a wife and children suffer. But he will also never enjoy the delights of a family. No wife with whom he can share life. No children to love, train, and launch.

He would have also been marked with a social stigma attached to a single man in that day.

In our culture today, of course, an unmarried man or woman is not unusual. However, in ancient Israel and throughout the Ancient Near East the unmarried state was VERY unusual for an adult.³

People would have been asking, "*Why isn't that Jeremiah marrying? What an odd young man!*" Answer, "*Oh, he thinks the world is going to end...*" followed by raucous laughter.

First, we see a denial of the joys of family life for Jeremiah. There is more to come.

He also endured plots by enemies to either end his life or to impugn his ministry. We'll call the first one, *The Anathoth Conspiracy*.

Plots Against Him

³ An ancient Sumerian proverb held celibacy to be a curse. Referenced in Thompson's commentary.

The Anathoth conspiracy (11:18-23)

[11:21] Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anathoth, who seek your life, saying, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, so that you will not die at our hand"

The people he grew up with, his hometown friends, even his family, plotted together to do away with him.

And why did they plot to do away with him? Simply because he was being faithful to proclaim the word of the Lord.

Can you imagine how this would have hurt? He must have felt deep abandonment when, as a young man, he was targeted by the people who should have been his strongest supporters?

Let's call the next one, *The Potters' House Conspiracy*.

The potters house conspiracy (18:18)

[18:18] Then they said, "Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah. Surely the law is not going to be lost to the priest, nor counsel to the sage, nor the divine word to the prophet! Come on and let us strike at him with our tongue, and let us give no heed to any of his words."

From a priest, you would expect a ruling on the Mosaic Law; from a sage, something wise about how to live well; from a prophet, a word of the Lord for the day.

Jeremiah had been relentless in his condemnation of all three of these classes of people because none of them were doing what they were supposed to do.

Men from these three groups launched this conspiracy against Jeremiah. They tell the people of Jerusalem to pay no attention to him.

We'll call the third plot against him *The Priests' Conspiracy*.

The priest's conspiracy (26:1-24)

He had just brought the by now familiar message about Judah's soon-to-come destruction. Listen to what happened next.

[26:8] When Jeremiah finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, saying, "You must die! [9] "Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord saying, "This house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate, without inhabitant?" And all the people gathered about Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.⁴

Put yourself in Jeremiah's shoes and imagine how terrifying this would be. He is surrounded by an angry mob intent on killing him. And all he has done has been to say exactly what God told him to say.

These were the people who should have been most interested to hear what he had to say. Instead, they are the people who want him dead - and they wanted to kill him in God's temple.

And much more suffering came Jeremiah's way as he lived for his God.

Can you imagine the pain of giving your life to proclaim God's message, and then having your life's work go up in smoke? Well, that happened to Jeremiah.

His Life's Message, Rejected (chapter 36)

In the fourth year of the reign of the Jewish king, Jehoiakim, when Jeremiah was well into his late adult life, the Lord spoke to him. God told him to take a scroll and write on it all the words that He had spoken to Jeremiah from the very beginning.

⁴ Jeremiah confirmed to those who wanted to put him to death that he had been sent by the Lord to prophecy and that they could do with him as they wished BUT that they would bring innocent blood on themselves by doing so. (26:10-15) At that point, the death sentence was lifted and Micah of Moresheth prophesied similarly to the words of Jeremiah about Judah's destruction. (26:16-19) Another man, Uriah, also prophesied the same things Jeremiah had prophesied about Judah's destruction. Fearing King Jehoiakim, Uriah fled to Egypt, but Jehoiakim brought him back and killed him. (26:20-23) Jeremiah was protected by Ahikam. (26:24)

The plan was to read all these prophecies out loud, first to the king, and then to the people. And the hope was that the Jews would hear about the calamity that God had planned and would turn to Him.

So, Jeremiah dictated to his friend, Baruch, all the words that God had spoken to him. Baruch then took the scroll and read it out loud in the house of the Lord.⁵

One of the priests, Micaiah, was so stirred by these messages that he called for a command performance before the king. Baruch was taken to the palace where he read Jeremiah's prophecies out loud to Jehoiakim.

At the end of the reading, rather than repent in sackcloth and ashes,⁶ Jehoiakim - the king of Judah - cut the scroll in pieces and threw it into a fire (despite the protests of his officials).⁷

The work of a lifetime in service to God turned to ashes.

That's painful. But God's prophet experienced another kind of pain. The physical kind.

The first time we are told of physical suffering, it was directly because of his role as a prophet and came directly by the hand of a respected priest.

Physical Suffering

Beaten

[20:1] When Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, [2] Pashhur had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put

him in the stocks that were at the upper Benjamin Gate, which was by the house of the Lord.⁸

The message this priest, Pashhur, heard was one in which Jeremiah said that God would "shatter" Judah just as thoroughly as he was "shattering" the clay pot he held in his hands.⁹

Pashhur was offended by the message that calamity would come against Jerusalem and decided to punish Jeremiah with a beating.

Jewish Law said that a beating could consist of no more than forty lashes (lest, as Moses said, ***[Deuteronomy 25:3]...your brother is not degraded in your eyes.***)

I assume that Jeremiah was beaten, at Pashhur's command, with as many as the Law would allow.

But the beating didn't end Jeremiah's physical suffering. After the beating, Jeremiah was placed in "stocks."

When we hear "stocks", we think chiefly of humiliation. But public humiliation wasn't primarily the effect of being placed in stocks.

The Hebrew word for "stocks" is formed from the verb "to twist" implying that a twist-frame clamped the prisoner in an uncomfortable position that would get more painful over time. Jeremiah was kept, twisted, in stocks, all night long.¹⁰

Then, he suffered physical pain when he was placed in prison.

Imprisoned

[32:1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, which was the eighteenth year

⁵ Jeremiah was at this point, "restricted" from going to the temple.

⁶ Even the wicked people of Nineveh responded better to the preaching of Jonah than the Jewish king did to the messages of Jeremiah.

⁷ When Jeremiah was told what Jehoiakim had done, the Lord told him to write all the words down again, with an addendum consisting of a decree that no descendant of Jehoiakim would ever sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. (36:27-31)

⁸ Pashhur was well within his rights to punish someone he thought to be a false prophet. BUT Jeremiah's prophesying was true, so the story condemns Pashhur.

⁹ Jeremiah was really big on object lessons.

¹⁰ Some have suggested that Jeremiah was confined to a small room used for short detentions. Maybe even a room so small a man couldn't stand up, producing cramped muscles.

of Nebuchadnezzar.¹¹ [2] Now at that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard, which was in the house of the king of Judah...

So, why did Zedekiah throw Jeremiah in jail?

Because Jeremiah had been saying that Jerusalem would be destroyed, that Zedekiah would be taken to Babylon to stand trial before King Nebuchadnezzar, and that the Jews would not be able to succeed in rebelling against Babylon.¹²

Zedekiah's question of verse 3 is chilling: ***"Why do you prophesy [as you do]...?"***¹³

Of course, the reason he prophesied what he did was because God told him to speak these things. And King Zedekiah's response to Jeremiah's truthful prophecy was to have him arrested and placed in prison.

Don't miss this. It would be one thing if Jeremiah had been a thief, was caught, and was sentenced to prison time. Or if he had been caught giving false testimony and was fined for that.

But he wasn't punished for doing anything wrong. He was suffering exactly because he had done everything God told him to do.

The physical pain would have been magnified by being unjustified, undeserved.

Finally, at least as far as major physical sufferings are concerned, there was that time when Jeremiah was dumped into a cistern.

¹¹ Zedekiah's tenth year was 588/587 and synchs up with Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year.

¹² See 2 Kings 25:4-7 for this face to face meeting. Tragically, Zedekiah was brought before Nebuchadnezzar with his sons. Zedekiah's sons were killed before his eyes and then Zedekiah was blinded, ensuring that the last thing he saw was the death of his sons and the guarantee of the end of his line as king.

¹³ Some thought that, because he prophesied destruction for Israel, he was deserting to the Babylonians. Some may have even thought that he was in league with the Babylonians.

Thrown into a cistern (38:4-6)

This happened late in Jeremiah's life. He was, by this time, an older man, well into his 560-s or 60's. And the state officials have had it "up to here" with his decades of gloom and doom prophesying.¹⁴

They approached the king (again, Zedekiah) and asked for the death penalty against God's prophet.

When Zedekiah responded, ***"Behold, he is in your hands"*** they were given the freedom to deal with Jeremiah however they wished.¹⁵

They wanted Jeremiah dead, but they didn't want innocent blood on their hands. So, rather than murder him outright, they used a cistern to do their dirty work.

[38:6a] Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes.

In ancient Israel, cisterns were pits carved out of the limestone for water storage. These pits were dug with a bulbous shape (wider at the bottom than at the top), so it was hard to get in and out of a cistern.

So, I guess out of consideration for Jeremiah's age, they used ropes to lower him down into the cistern.

Normally, Jeremiah would live only as long as he could tread water. But, as the text tells us, ***[16b] Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud,¹⁶ and Jeremiah sank into the mud.***

¹⁴ His words were certainly weakening the hands of the soldiers. Imagine how disheartening it would be to have Jeremiah predicting total defeat by the enemy army if you were about to go out and fight. But his words were intended to prompt the king to surrender. If he would do that, the soldiers and the citizens would have been spared.

¹⁵ The king's capitulation to his princes (v. 5) reminds us of Pilate's hand-washing deliverance of Jesus to be crucified.

¹⁶ Does a muddy cistern indicate that the city was running low on water? Probably, as Ebed-melech reported to the king that there was no more bread in the city, either (Jeremiah 38:9)

What a horrible way to die! The pit would have been the site of a long, lingering, revolting death.¹⁷

In the end, Jeremiah was rescued by a loyal friend. His life was spared, and he continued to speak the word of God with all boldness.

But, again, think about what he has suffered and why.

God's man, faithfully doing exactly what God told him to do, suffered terrifically for that faithfulness.

In all that we have seen, Jeremiah endured ridicule, loneliness, family-less-ness, and rejection. He was ostracized, imprisoned, beaten, tortured and was the victim of a death-by-cistern attempt.

If that somehow doesn't seem quite right that God's prophet should be so mistreated, we should at least know that it is consistent with what God told Jeremiah to expect.

It is also consistent with what God's people have experienced through the ages. And it is consistent with what the Bible tells us who follow Jesus to expect.

Please listen as I read from our New Testament verses aimed at arming us with realistic expectations.

The Sufferings of the Jesus-Follower

New Testament Forecasts

At the beginning of Jesus' beloved Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), we find the Beatitudes. Have you ever noticed how much these beautiful beatitudes have to say about persecution and suffering?

¹⁷ The rest of the story is that a loyal friend, Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch, rescued Jeremiah from the pit. He begged the king - no doubt at some risk to his own life - for permission to rescue Jeremiah. He even thought to put soft rags under Jeremiah's arms to keep him from getting badly cut.

[5:10] "Blessed are those who have been PERSECUTED for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[5:11] "Blessed are you when people insult you and PERSECUTE you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

[12] "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they PERSECUTED the prophets who were before you.

In that same message, Jesus had something to say about our response whenever people might treat us harshly for His sake.

[5:44] "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who PERSECUTE you.¹⁸

After Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, the apostles were teaching the first converts about what to expect when they followed Jesus.

This is what they told them: ***[Acts 14:22]... "Through many TRIBULATIONS we must enter the kingdom of God."***

The Apostle Paul had lots to say about suffering for Jesus' sake. Consider just a few of his comments.¹⁹

[Romans 12:14] Bless those who PERSECUTE you; bless and do not curse.

[1 Corinthians 4:12] and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are REVILED, we bless; when we are PERSECUTED, we endure

[2 Corinthians 12:10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with INSULTS, with distresses, with PERSECUTIONS, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

[2 Timothy 1:8] Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God

[2 Timothy 3:12] Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be PERSECUTED.²⁰

¹⁸ See also Mark 10:29-30, Luke 21:12, John 15:20.

¹⁹ The Apostle Peter had this to say about persecution: ***[1 Peter 5:9] But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world.***

If this life presents us with hardships, we shouldn't be surprised. Everyone experiences rainy days.

And if following Jesus lands us in trouble, we shouldn't be surprised, either. We're fore-armed because we've been fore-warned.

The fact is that as we meet this morning, millions and millions of our fellow Christians are experiencing the same things that Jeremiah did, the same things that the Apostle Paul did, and the same things that Jesus told them would come.

They are facing persecution.

2020 Realities...

Today, we are observing the annual *International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*.

There are many countries - and a good percentage of the world's population - where Christians are not free to worship the Lord, to serve Him, or to speak out for Him as we are free here.

The fact that they are not free to do so, however, does not keep many of them from worshiping, serving, or speaking out.

Instead, they join Jeremiah and countless others who have chosen to faithfully follow wherever God leads, believing that His pleasure is worth enduring people's displeasure and that loss in this world for His sake is worth it to gain in the next.

Conclusion: How to apply today's message?

I am suggesting two main action points from our time together this morning, as we have seen Jeremiah's sufferings and have heard the New Testament's message about suffering.

First, let's each ask ourselves if we should adjust *expectations* (there's that word again) for what life with Jesus may look like.

What are your expectations for how life will turn out, living as you do for Jesus? Your expectations may include:

- an ever-improving standard of living. (As compared to whom and to what other setting? On what basis?)
- conflict-free relationships that all "work". (Really?)
- safety. (In what realms? Health? Financial? When traveling?)

Yes, of course Jesus offers an abundant life (John 10:10) and He does invite us to a life of transcendent meaning and purpose. But that life isn't necessarily safe, conflict-free, or upwardly mobile.

Our expectations are unrealistic if we don't listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote to his young friend, Timothy - **[2 Timothy 3:12] *Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*** And remember what he wrote to his friends in Philippi. **[Philippians 1:29] *For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.***

Second, Jesus calls us to affirm our solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters.

Listen to what the author of the book of Hebrews tells us.

[Hebrews 13:3] *REMEMBER the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.*

When Jeremiah was stuck in the mud at the bottom of that muddy cistern in Jerusalem, a friend named Ebed-melech (the name means "servant of the king") came to his aid. He "**remembered**" Jeremiah.

You and I are called to "**remember**" those who are suffering for Jesus today and to become 2020 Ebed-melechs.

²⁰ Paul himself experienced a tremendous amount of persecution for his faithful proclamation of God's truth. One catalogue of these sufferings is found in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

We **“remember”** by praying for those who are in trouble simply because of their *no matter what* commitment to obey Jesus. and, we **“remember”** them by seeking out ways to support them - often materially - in their hour of need.²¹

Will you pray for them? Will you look for ways to support your Christian family at their time of need?

For the mourning, for the grieving
For the sacrifice of love
That redeems the works of hate.
There's a dancing, there's a praising
There's a celebration raised
As a saint completes the race

Draw back the curtain, tear away the veil
There's a crown of glory waiting for the Witness that prevails
When the days have all been counted, when we face the final hour
We'll hear, "Welcome home my Child,
It's your time to wear the crown".

Let the mantle pass to those who're left behind
Let the runners grasp the batons of their lives
Let us follow Christ no matter cost or price
We'll hear "Well done faithful servant!"
As we cross the finish line

Draw back the curtain, tear away the veil
There's a crown of glory waiting for the Witness that prevails
When the days have all been counted, when we face the final hour
We'll hear, "Welcome home my Child,
It's your time to wear the crown".

WEAR THE CROWN

Bill Drake, 2006

For the martyrs, for the heroes
For the ones who gave their lives
On the altar of the lost.
There's a sowing, there's a reaping
There's a death that comes alive
Through the power of the cross.

Draw back the curtain, tear away the veil
There's a crown of glory waiting for the Witness that prevails
When the days have all been counted, when we face the final hour
We'll hear, "Welcome home my Child,
It's your time to wear the crown".

²¹ I highly recommend an organization called, The Voice of the Martyrs. Go to www.persecution.com to find out about this wonderful ministry and how to partner with them.