

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

November 9, 2025

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**

#### **The Suffering Believer**

(Selected passage from Jeremiah and the New Testament)

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

Last Sunday, the Apostle Matthew guided us through a reflection on the sufferings of Jesus. We saw how thoroughly opposed and rejected Jesus was, especially over the course of His ministry.

His disciples saw all of that suffering, too. They lived it.

But, near the end, when Jesus started talking about being betrayed and arrested and condemned, and about His being scourged and crucified, killed and buried, those disciples couldn't quite accept it.

They heard, but they didn't really HEAR what He was saying.

And the obstacle to their accepting His message of more severe suffering to come was their overly rosy expectation of who the Messiah was and what the life of the Messiah would look like.

Even up to the very end, they clearly expected that after Jesus' three years of suffering rejection and opposition from both the Jews and Gentiles, He would emerge as a conquering King.

They were unable to take Jesus' words about His coming death seriously because they were expecting something different.

They dismissed, ignored, rejected, or forgot clues scattered all over the Old Testament that told of a Suffering Messiah. (See Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53; Psalm 22)

If they had remembered these clues, they would have been equipped to accept what Jesus said when He predicted His death. They would have been expecting it. They would have been fore-armed...and I suspect we would have a very different last few chapters of the gospels.

I sure do wish they had done better - but I don't judge them. I am confident that I would not have done better if I had been in their shoes.

I do hope, though, that all of us here today can learn from the disciples.

Specifically, that we would grasp the critical importance of having realistic expectations in life; having expectations that are based on all the available evidence of what might happen.

Having realistic expectations is crucial in all arenas of life, whether we're talking about friendships, marriage, parenting, school, work - or a life of following Jesus.

If we expect smooth-sailing and a bed of roses in any of these arenas, we're in for a rude awakening. We'll be sorely disappointed.

But if we realistically understand that challenges are ahead, we'll be much better prepared for them when they come, and will be much more content when we hit the inevitable potholes and bumps in the road.

*From Jesus' suffering to ours...*

This morning, our theme is, again, suffering. Only this time, we aren't dwelling on the suffering of Jesus. We're considering the suffering of those who are faithful to God.

Our case study of a suffering believer is the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah. As we hear about his story, we'll learn a lot about the expectations we should bring to the life of faith.

Jeremiah's life and ministry weren't walks in the park. Far from it. And God let Jeremiah know early on that He was giving him a very challenging life assignment.

*Jeremiah's role as God's prophet...*

The LORD said to Jeremiah,  
**[6:27] "I have made you an assayer and an examiner among My people,  
 So that you may know and put their way to the test."**

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

Jeremiah's God-given task was to assay the Jewish people's hearts. He was to examine them, test them, to see how much of their hearts were given to love for God? How much was worthless, self-indulgent, rebellious dross?

A baseball umpire doesn't get a lot of love for calling balls and strikes "as he sees 'em." Not surprisingly, Jeremiah didn't get a lot of love from the Jews of his day for calling them out, as he saw them.

Jeremiah's call from God to be an "assayer" was a hard calling. Thankfully, he lets us in on just how hard it was to suffer persecution.

**[Jeremiah 20: 7] LORD, You persuaded me and I let myself be persuaded;  
 You overcome me and prevailed.  
 I have become a laughingstock all day long;  
 Everyone mocks me.  
 [8] For each time I speak, I cry aloud;  
 I proclaim violence and destruction,  
 Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted  
 In taunting and derision all day long.**

That's pretty dark. And as that lament continued, Jeremiah said that his friends were eager for his downfall. (v. 10) He sounds like Job, wising that he had never been born. His life was a wreck. (vv. 14-19)

Jeremiah's sufferings were deep and real, and he didn't wear a smiley face to cover up how much it hurt. We don't call him "the weeping prophet" for nothing.

But despite his sufferings, Jeremiah never turned from faithfulness to God. His heart's desire was to follow God, so he did. And he knew where to turn when the going got tough. He turned to God:  
**[Jeremiah 15:15] You know, Lord,  
 Remember me, take notice of me...**

When troubles hit, Jeremiah turned to the Lord. And trouble sure did hit. He suffered tremendously for his faithfulness to God.

We'll look now at a few select sufferings that Jeremiah endured. Let's call the first one *The Anathoth Conspiracy*.

### **The Sufferings of Jeremiah**

#### **Plots Against Him**

##### *The Anathoth Conspiracy (11:18-23)*

As background, the city of Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown. He grew up there. The people there knew him. They were his family, friends, and neighbors.

**[11:21] Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the people of Anathoth, who are seeking your life, saying: "Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD, so that you do not die by our hand."**

These are the ones telling him to be silent. These are the one threatening to kill him.

And why did they plot to do away with him? Simply because he spoke what the LORD told him to say.

We can only imagine how much 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.

Not long after that, we read about what we'll call, *The Potters' House Conspiracy*.

*The potters house conspiracy (18:18)*

The LORD told Jeremiah to go to the home of a potter where he had a shop. Jeremiah was to watch as the potter worked the clay on his wheel to make pots.

He watched long enough to see the potter make and remake pottery as suited his purposes.

There was a lesson here. God told Jeremiah that just as the potter could do what he wanted to do with the clay, He, God, could raise up nations and set down nations to suit His own purposes.

He was going to do exactly that to His chosen nation - Israel.

Jeremiah took the lesson from the potter and passed it on to the Jews of his day. He told them that the LORD was going to tear Israel down for their apostasy against Him.

In this message, Jeremiah had been relentless in his rebukes of the priests, the wise men, and the prophets of his day because none of them were carrying out their stewardship from God.

In response, they struck back at Jeremiah.

***[18:18] Then they said, "Come and let's devise plans against Jeremiah...Come, and let's strike at him with our tongue, and let's pay no attention to any of his words."***

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah confirmed to those who wanted to put him to death that he had been sent by the Lord to prophecy. They could do with him as they wished BUT that they would bring innocent blood on themselves by killing him. (26:10-15) At that point, the death sentence was lifted and Micah of Moresheth prophesied similarly

The ungodly priests, wise men, and prophets conspired against God's prophet, Jeremiah and told the people to pay no attention to him.

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

*The priest's and the prophets' conspiracy (26:1-24)*

We next turn to a scene at the beginning of the reign of one of good King Josiah, the wicked king, Jehoiakim. Jeremiah brought another blistering rebuke to the Jews with the threat of making the nation "***a curse***" (26:6)

That was when the official leaders of the nation attacked Jeremiah.

***[26:8] Yet when Jeremiah finished speaking everything that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then 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 in ruins, without inhabitant?" And all the people gathered to Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.***<sup>1</sup>

Imagine how terrifying this would have been. Jeremiah was surrounded and physically seized by an angry mob intent on killing him. And, again, all he did was say exactly what God told him to say.

These who were attacking him were exactly those who should have been most interested to hear what he had to say. Instead, they wanted him dead.

Then, another terrible thing that happened to Jeremiah.

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)

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? That happened to Jeremiah.

### **His Life's Message, Rejected (chapter 36)**

In the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim (Jeremiah was probably in his fifties), the Lord spoke to him, again.

God told him to take a scroll and write on it all the words that He had spoken to him from the very beginning.

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

Jeremiah dictated all the prophetic messages God had given him to his friend, Baruch. Baruch then took the scroll and read it out loud in the house of the Lord.

One of the priests who was listening, Micaiah, was so stirred by these messages that he called for Baruch to read Jeremiah's words to the king. Which he did.

At the end of the reading, though, the king didn't repent. King Jehoiakim took a knife, cut the scroll in pieces, and threw it into a fire.

Jeremiah's work of a lifetime in service to God turned to ashes.<sup>2</sup>

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 came because he was a faithful prophet and came by the hand of a respected priest.

---

<sup>2</sup> 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)

<sup>3</sup> 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.

### **Physical Suffering**

*Beaten (20:1-2)*

Once, near the middle of Jeremiah's prophetic career, and right after he had told the Jews - again - that disaster was coming to them because they had **[19:15] stiffened their necks** against God, Pashhur the priest responded with violence.

***[20: 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.<sup>3</sup>***

Jewish Law said that a beating could consist of no more than forty lashes (lest, as Moses said, **[Deuteronomy 25:4]...your brother does not become contemptable in your eyes.**)

So, I assume that Jeremiah was beaten, at Pashhur's command, with as many strokes as the Law allowed.

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

When I hear that someone is put in "stocks," I think mainly of public humiliation. But humiliation wasn't the main effect of these stocks.

The Hebrew word for "stocks" is formed from the verb "to twist," meaning that he was put in some sort of a twist-frame into a painful position that would get more painful over time. Jeremiah was kept, twisted, in stocks, all night long.<sup>4</sup>

Then, he suffered physical pain when he was placed in prison. (See Jeremiah 32:1ff...) And again, it wasn't for having done anything wrong.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

It would have been one thing if Jeremiah had been a thief, had been caught, and had been sentenced to time in prison.

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 and emotional pain of imprisonment would have been magnified by being undeserved. He should have been applauded, not jailed.

But I want us to end our look at Jeremiah by seeing his final physical suffering. It was that time when he was put into a cistern.

*Thrown into a cistern (38:4-6)*

This happened later in Jeremiah's life. If I understand the chronology of Jeremiah's life, he was probably in his sixties. And the state officials had had it "up to here" with his decades of gloom and doom prophesying.<sup>5</sup>

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

When Zedekiah responded, **[5] "Behold, he is in your hands,"** he was giving them freedom to do to Jeremiah whatever they wished.

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

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

---

<sup>5</sup> 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.

In ancient Israel, cisterns were pits carved out of the limestone for water storage. These pits were often 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, for whatever reason, (out of consideration for his comfort in an attempt to put him to death?) rather than just dump Jeremiah into the cistern, they used ropes to lower him down.

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,<sup>6</sup> and Jeremiah sank into the mud.***

What a horrible, lingering, stinking, revolting way to die.

Now, in the end, Jeremiah did not die in that cistern. He was rescued by a loyal friend (Ebed-melech),<sup>7</sup> and he continued to speak the word of God, faithfully. Boldly. For the rest of his life.

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

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

In all that we have seen, Jeremiah endured ridicule, loneliness, and rejection. He was ostracized, imprisoned, beaten, tortured and was the victim of a murder-by-cistern plot.

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

<sup>6</sup> Does a muddy cistern indicate that the city was running low on water? Probably, as Ebed-melech reported to the king that there was also no more bread in the city. (Jeremiah 38:9)

<sup>7</sup> Ebed-melech was an Ethiopian eunuch. He begged the king for permission to rescue Jeremiah. He even thought to put soft rags under Jeremiah's arms to keep him from getting badly cut.

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 can expect.

Listen to some New Testament verses aimed at arming us with realistic expectations.

### **The Sufferings of the Jesus-Follower**

#### **From Jesus (Matthew 5; 20:23)**

At the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), we find the beautiful Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are descriptors of those who follow Jesus.

And given what we have just seen of Jeremiah, we aren't surprised that Jesus spoke about persecution and suffering.

***[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 this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

In that same Sermon, Jesus told His followers how to respond when people treat they are harshly for His sake.

***[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' [44] But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.***

---

<sup>8</sup> After Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, the apostles were teaching their first converts about what to expect when they followed Jesus. They told them: *[Acts 14:22]... "Through many TRIBULATIONS we must enter the kingdom of God."*

***[46] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors, do they not do the same?"<sup>8</sup>***

Later, when the mother of the apostles, James and John, asked Jesus to place her two sons next to Him in His kingdom, He told them that it wasn't His choice as to who would sit next to Him.

But He did assure them, ***[Matthew 23]... "My cup you shall drink."***

James and John could expect that they would drink the cup of suffering and persecution. Just like Jesus did. And they did.

The Apostle Paul, too, had lots to say about suffering for Jesus' sake, including these.<sup>9</sup>

#### **From the Apostle Paul**

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

***[1 Corinthians 4:12] and we labor, working with our own hands; when we are verbally abused, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it.***

***[2 Corinthians 12:10] Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; 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.<sup>10</sup>***

If this life presents us with hardships, we aren't surprised. Everyone experiences rainy days. Sicknesses and financial reversals and broken relationships are parts of life in a broken world.

<sup>9</sup> 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.***

<sup>10</sup> Paul endured much persecution for his faithful ministry. See at least a partial list at 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

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 reality is that right now, as we are meeting, many 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 His followers would come.

They are facing persecution.

### 2025 Realities...

As we have already seen and prayed today, there are many places where Christians are not free to worship the Lord, to serve Him, or to speak out for Him as we are free to do here.

But that they are not free to do so *without severe consequences* does not keep many of them from worshipping, serving, or speaking out.

They know that living courageously for Jesus is what they are called to do. And, truth be told, that's what they want to do.

Earlier, we heard Jeremiah's lament (chapter 20) about how much he suffered for speaking out for God.

But he still spoke. Speaking God's words was exactly what he wanted to do, what he was passionate about doing, what he lived to do.

***[Jeremiah 20:9] But if I say, "I will not remember Him Nor speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am tired of holding it in, And I cannot endure it.***

He had to speak. He wanted to speak. He lived to speak.

Our brothers and sisters around the world who courageously face persecution join Jeremiah and so many others who have chosen to faithfully follow wherever God leads.

They believe that it is worth it to endure people's displeasure to honor God. They believe that loss in this world is worth it to gain reward and a "*Well done!*" from Him in the next.

After all we've seen from the life of Jeremiah and what we've heard about following Jesus, here are two point of application we can all take home with us today.

### **Conclusion: Applying what we have seen today...**

*Readjust expectations...*

First, let's each ask ourselves if we should adjust *expectations* for what life AND life with Jesus may look like.

Do we expect a comfortable standard of living, relationships that work, and a reasonable level of health and safety?

Those are all wonderful gifts to enjoy. But we all know that none of them are guaranteed. The Bible and our observations lead us to expect that life could throw us a health or a relational or a financial curve.

Unrealistic expectations can bleed over into our life with Jesus, too. Yes, Jesus offers a life of abundance. (John 10:10)

But that abundance consists of purpose and meaning and deep joy and peace in times of tranquility AND in times of great disruption. He doesn't promise that we'll avoid times of great disruption.

Our expectations are unrealistic if we don't listen to what Paul wrote to his younger friend, Timothy: ***[2 Timothy 3:12] Indeed, all who want to live in a godly way in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.***

Or 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 on His behalf.***

Second, let's affirm our solidarity with our suffering family.

*Affirm our solidarity with our suffering brothers and sisters...*

***[Hebrews 13:3] Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are badly-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, his friend, Ebed-melech, came to his aid. He **“remembered”** Jeremiah.

Scripture invites us to **“remember”** those who are suffering for Jesus today and to become 2025 Ebed-melechs.

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 - emotionally; materially - in their hour of need.

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