

Escaping Tribulation by Accepting God's Word
Based on Jeremiah 15: 15-21, 9/3/17, David Jahnke

Jeremiah was a prophet whose words no one wanted to hear. God told him his people were worshipping other gods; they were not committed to justice or truth and they were exploiting the poor. And because of this, God's judgment was coming upon them in the form of the Babylonian invasion. Jeremiah made all of this clear, time and again, and, naturally, nobody wanted to hear this. Who wants to listen to bad news when you have other false prophets telling you that things are just fine?

You can imagine the toll this had on Jeremiah, year after year, even decade after decade. We see this writing. "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" It seemed even God who his only consolation and joy; even God was failing him. Jeremiah said, "Truly, to me, you, O God, are like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail."

Now I am not Jeremiah; and I am no more a prophet than any other well-read Christian who takes care to proclaim good and challenging news. But I have an office which demands that I do so. And sometimes, I am torn up about what I believe God calling me to say...; last week's message in which I talked about white privilege to a primarily white congregation, for example. Or talking about economic privilege in an area where the average household income is over \$100,000. And I am a bit like a broken record, saying that God is calling you all to this, that and the other when you have so many thises, thats and others of your own.

So to sum up this venting from the pulpit, it is not easy to be pastor! But it's not easy for you to be a Christian. It's not easy to follow Jesus. Doing so does not mean that life will become easy. And even letting others know that we are Christians is not easy and to bear good news in our world, especially for my generation and younger.

But all of this is a part of the cross Jesus says we have to bear. Here is another example of unjust cross-bearing by God's people. A woman from a very poor country came into the church Friday. She and her husband came to the States many years ago, with little children. She has attended deeply to their education and her twins are on their way to Montclair St. this weekend. Well her husband left her for another woman a while back. And in order to pay what needs to be paid for her children's education, she has not been able to fully pay her rent and last week her landlord told her she and her son would be evicted the same weekend her daughters were off to college.

Now I am not sure how much of a consolation it is that Jesus knew that his followers would be persecuted for righteousness' sake. But perhaps there is some. Because when you know that this happened to Jeremiah and many other prophets of God and finally Jesus, that means very good people have had to deal with this; it means that in the communion of saints, they understand our suffering and are with us in it. And we gain strength by remembering that they endured it and were saved by trusting in God.

This is all so important because it is spiritually confusing when we are, generally speaking, doing and saying a lot of things right; but instead of being rewarded for it, which is what should happen, the opposite happens-- nobody responds or people respond unfavorably or there are other negative consequences, that just plain hurts. And then on top of that, we tend to question and second-guess ourselves and our own goodness and wisdom and ability. What am I doing wrong? And we even wonder about God. Why is this happening? What are you doing? Are you even there?

But when we remember that the same thing happened to the prophets, apostles and so many other good people who came before us and that Jesus said this exact thing would happen, we do not have to add the the further suffering that comes with doubting ourselves and God. We can accept that this is what happens in a fallen world. And we can press forward and trust that we are planting seeds which will blossom in God's good time.

This was one way Jeremiah dealt with everything he went through. God told him he would eventually deliver him and all those who believed and obey His Word. And that word was this: “I am your fortress. Find your strength and salvation in me, not in yourself and not in self-defense.” If the King and others resisted Babylon, they would fall with Jerusalem. But if they walked away from the war, they would be safe in either Babylon or in Egypt which is where Jeremiah and many Jews ended up.

Jesus said and embodied the same thing in his day. He prophesied and lamented the destruction coming to Jerusalem because of his people’s faithlessness. And his mission and message were all about bearing love and salvation to the Romans instead of self-defense or violent resistance; we see this most poignantly on the cross.

So cross-bearing prophets are our examples. And if we want the pain to recede and salvation and health replace it, we need to let the Lord be our fortress and bear with others. God will enter in and bring new life. Sometimes, after an escape just as Jeremiah fled to Egypt; sometimes after staying and bearing with circumstances as they are.

Discerning which path is not always easy. But it is so important not only in this regard but also because a little self-doubt is appropriate. We sometimes suffer not because we are right and persecuted but because we are wrong or misguided in some way or another. So how do we discern the Word and will of God and whether we are messing up or not.

I remembered being at a retreat for young pastors about ten years ago and one young man confessed to not really knowing how to tell if he was really preaching God’s Word or not. This was a good and smart man and his confession speaks to how discerning the living Word and will of God is not simple.

My answer then remains my answer now: you can trust in the Word of God coming to you as you entrust yourself to the Word of God which comes to us in three primary forms: 1. the living spirit of Jesus coming to us through prayer, 2. regularly studying the Bible-- the written Word of God, and 3. communing with the body of Christ through reading the works of the saints and fellowship with others in the church and seeking their counsel. When we are committed in all these ways, we can trust that God is guiding our conscience, words and deeds.

So here are my final charges: 1. Do not expect and moreover, do not even desire an easy life. 2. Desire instead to follow in the footsteps of the great men and women who found God in the midst of the struggle for Life for all. 3. In that struggle, rely on the strength of the Lord that comes from faith and hope rather than relying on yourself. 4. Find that strength and guidance by way of praying for it, studying about it, and Spiritual friendships within the church. You have had to hear the broken record again...; may the Spirit bring deliverance as you apply it to your life.