

Jeremiah: Hanging Tough in Tough Times

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When Clyde Hoey was governor of North Carolina the 1930s, he went to the western part of the state to visit some country people in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He asked a country preacher, "How many members are in your church?" The pastor answered, "Fifty." Knowing that the size of membership is not necessarily a true barometer of a church's spiritual condition, the governor asked, "How many are active?" The preacher replied, "Fifty." "Oh, you must be an unusual preacher." The pastor responded, "Not necessarily. Twenty-five are active for me, and 25 are active against me."

How should Christian workers react if they are in situations similar to that? When the going is tough, why is it that some conclude that God is calling them to some other ministry or to get out of the ministry altogether whereas others stick it out? Why do some people keep going in ministry in spite of the odds and others fall under the odds?

The answer depends on whether they have the characteristics of Jeremiah, to whom God gave an extremely difficult assignment. Several attributes kept him from being a dropout even when he wanted to resign, factors that enabled him to hang tough in tough times.

First, he was a man of compassion. Mixed with emotion, his messages combined the fire of conviction with the tears of love. While writing his prophecies he was writhing in pain. Though he was called a weeping prophet, he was not a weakling prophet. He wept, not out of fear, but out of concern.

He was choked with grief because the people of Israel had forgotten God. Thirty-four times in the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet lamented to the people, "You wouldn't listen."

Because of their spiritual hardness, Jeremiah prophesied that God would punish them by taking them into captivity. Though this was no easy message to deliver, he had a heart of compassion as he pleaded for his people to return to the Lord. Because they had forsaken God by worshiping Baal and burning incense to the goddess Ishtar and even sacrificing children to Baal-Molech. God said through Jeremiah that the people would go into captivity. This fact is 81 times in the first 26 chapters of the book of Jeremiah. The people were also guilty of stealing, murder, adultery, and perjury (Jer. 2:15).

Knowing the needs of his people, and being tuned to the times, Jeremiah had a heart of compassion. Similarly the Lord's servants today need to be sensitive to the heartaches of people in need. The call is for teaching that consoles, not clobbers, for a ministry that leads, not lambasts, for service that blesses the sheep without beating the sheep.

As I preach or teach, I like to think that each individual in the class or congregation has a sign hanging around his or her neck with three questions in large type: "Ho hum," "I hurt," "So what?" These three signs relate to their three requests: Make it interesting, Make it helpful, and Make it relevant.

Second, Jeremiah was a man with a commission. He did not want the assignment God gave him, and even later when he was involved in the task, he wanted to quit. He wrote, "Oh, that I had in the desert a lodging place for travelers, so that I might leave my people and go away from them" (Jer. 9:2). Vance Havner said that Jeremiah is not the only minister who has wanted to enter the motel business! Yet Jeremiah was committed to the mission because he knew God called him. He wrote that God said to him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (1:5). Jeremiah felt that the people would not listen to him because, as he said, "I am only a child (1:6), that is, a novice or an inexperienced person. God responded to that complaint by assuring Jeremiah that He would go with him and would tell him what to say.

Jeremiah had a realistic appraisal of his inadequacies, but at the same time he realized the power and presence of God. J. Hudson Taylor once



wrote, "All of God's great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them."

Like Jeremiah, some of the Lord's servants today may have a sense of inadequacy. Others, on the other hand, are noted for their pride. As one person put it, "Pride is the only disease that makes everyone sick except the person who has it." When a young man was highly honored by his company, the acclaim went to his head. Telling his mother about it, he asked, "How many great men do you think there are in the world?" His mother responded, "One less than you think!" Unfortunately some people who are willing to serve God claim they will do so only as His consultants!

Jeremiah had confidence in the Lord but not arrogance. His life demonstrates the difference between conviction and conceit, between spiritual compulsion and personal haughtiness.

Jeremiah faced tremendous difficulties in his ministry. The people of his hometown rejected him (Jer. 1:1); his relatives turned from him (Jer. 12); the priests had him beaten and put in stocks (Jer. 20); the people, priests, and false prophets wanted to put him to death (Jer. 26); he was excluded from the temple (Jer. 36); his prophecies were thrown in the fire by the king (Jer. 36); he was put in jail, released, and placed in protected custody (Jer. 57); and he was put in a cistern (Jer. 38).

He kept going in the face of these odds, not because of his own strength but because he knew he was commissioned by God. He was not like ministers of whom Goodwin Hudson spoke at the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966: "In many churches mild-mannered men are standing before a mild-mannered congregations, asking them to be more mild. Many today are "bland leaders of the bland." The King James rendering of 1 Corinthians 16:13 is "Quit you like men," that is, be on the alert. Someone, in jest, reversed those words to, "Men like you quit." But not Jeremiah! He kept going with spiritual stick-to-itiveness. More Christian workers today need his kind of persistence, persevering in tough times and difficult circumstances because they are commissioned by God.

Third, Jeremiah was a man of conviction. J. Sidlow Baxter wrote that Jeremiah "blends feminine tenderness with masculine strength." Certainly Jeremiah was fearless and courageous as he indicted kings, priests, prophets, princes, and people regarding their sins. He faced the hostility of the nobility without fumbling, stumbling, or mumbling. He pounced on their sin, clobbered their injustices, and hammered away at their evil. Jeremiah had a clear message. He had something to say and he had to say it. William Penn observed, "Right is always right even if everyone is against it, and wrong is always wrong even if everyone is for it."

Thirty-three times the Book of Jeremiah includes the words, "the Word of the LORD came to me saying. . . ." He was aware that God had put His words in his mouth (Jer. 1:9), and that the Lord's words were in his mouth like a fire (5:14; 20:9). Jeremiah spoke with conviction because of the Word of God. This suggests that Christian servants today should be sure to communicate to their people what God thinks, as stated in the Scriptures, and not merely what they think. Only the Word of God can change people's lives through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Without His Word, we have no message. Only this Book can help people face their sin, come to Christ, and grow in Christ-likeness. Only this Book can enable people to have a right outlook on life, and to live for the Lord in a tough world. Only this Book can help people face the problems of life and deal with them as God would have them do.

Therefore we should study the Scriptures diligently, believe them implicitly, obey them completely, and share them faithfully.

Will you keep going in your ministry for the Lord? Will you hang in there when the going is tough? Will you stay on top or go under? The answer to these questions depends on whether you, like Jeremiah, are a person with compassion, sensitive to God's people, with a commission, sure of God's call, and with conviction, sold out to God's Word. May we, like the weeping prophet, be compassionate, commissioned, and committed. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God" (2 Cor. 5:5).