

## Coming Back from the Brink

### Jeremiah 20:7-13 (CSB)

<sup>7</sup> You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived. You seized me and prevailed. I am a laughingstock all the time; everyone ridicules me. <sup>8</sup> For whenever I speak, I cry out, I proclaim, "Violence and destruction!" so the word of the LORD has become my constant disgrace and derision. <sup>9</sup> I say, "I won't mention his name or speak any longer in his name." But his message becomes a fire burning in my heart, shut up in my bones. I become tired of holding it in, and I cannot prevail. <sup>10</sup> For I have heard the gossip of many people, "Terror is on every side! Report him; let's report him!" Everyone I trusted watches for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived so that we might prevail against him and take our vengeance on him." <sup>11</sup> But the LORD is with me like a violent warrior. Therefore, my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. Since they have not succeeded, they will be utterly shamed, an everlasting humiliation that will never be forgotten. <sup>12</sup> LORD of Armies, testing the righteous and seeing the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for I have presented my case to you. <sup>13</sup> Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD, for he rescues the life of the needy from evil people.

When is the breaking point for you, that moment that if you take one step closer to the edge then you're about to break? I'm sure that point is different for all of you and we all have different breaking points for different things on different days. What about when it comes to your faith? What is the breaking point, the point where you want to throw in the towel and walk away, the point where you can't take anymore and are going to give up on God and your faith in him? I don't know about you and what your breaking point for your faith is, but we heard very clearly today in our first Bible reading that the prophet Jeremiah had reached his.

Jeremiah was called to a hard ministry as God's prophet. God told him at his commissioning that Jeremiah would uproot and tear down, destroy and demolish, build and plant. After getting over his initial inexperience and uncertainty, it probably wasn't so bad or difficult at first being God's prophet because the first king that Jeremiah served under was King Josiah, a king who led a massive reformation of the people getting them back to worshiping God. But King Josiah died from a battle wound around 610 B.C. Jeremiah would serve another 25+ years under 4 other kings – all of them bad – until he himself would see the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

To get an idea of how bad it was for Jeremiah to be God's prophet during the reign of these other four kings, you need only look to the verses immediately preceding our Bible reading today. After King Josiah died, the Israelites went back to their faithless ways. Jeremiah was given the Word of God to pronounce judgment and destruction, that Jerusalem and all the people living in Judea would experience a tearing down and an uprooting because they had turned their backs on God. And for his faithful preaching of God's Word, Jeremiah, the prophet of God, was beaten publicly and put him in stocks at the temple courtyard, where people would be coming to offer their sacrifices and praise to the LORD. This beating and public display of humiliation was done by none other than Pashhur, a priest and chief official in the temple of the LORD, a person who was supposed to lead the Israelites in faithful worship to God! In the stocks, Jeremiah was mocked and ridiculed again and again for preaching his message of doom and destruction, that terror was on every side. They treated Jeremiah like a criminal, called him a traitor against God's people.

It's no wonder then that Jeremiah says after he is released from those stocks, "You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived. You seized me and prevailed. I am a laughingstock all the time; everyone ridicules me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I proclaim, "Violence and destruction!" so the word of the LORD has become my constant disgrace and derision. I say, "I won't mention his name or speak any longer in his name." (verses 7-9a) I am done, God. I've reached my breaking point. Even my once trusted friends are watching for my downfall, wanting to see me fail, your Word fail. They want to officially declare me a traitor and kill me. I won't do this anymore. I'm not going to speak your word. I'm not even going to mention your name.

What's your breaking point when it comes to speaking God's Word? Is it when you are faced with imprisonment for sharing your faith with others, when you are subjected to public humiliation for what you believe? Is it when the threat of being fired looms over your head because your employer will not tolerate religious talk at work? Is it when your son or daughter is living with their significant other outside of God's design of marriage and you had raised them to respect marriage and the marriage bed but now you don't want to say anything because you know it's going to cause a fight and probably drive them away? Is your breaking point at those family gatherings when you don't want to share what you believe because you know that it will raise the tension level, make people feel uncomfortable, and maybe make someone walk out? Is it anytime when you know that someone is doing something wrong but you fear having that person turn your words around and call you a hypocrite for judging them as if you are so much holier than they are that you can stand in judgment over them?

It didn't take a public beating in church combined with a day spent in the stocks being ridiculed to make me feel like I don't want to speak God's Word. I reached my breaking point for much less. I don't know if it surprises you or not, but I don't like preaching God's harsh law to people. I even wonder, "Could I do what Jeremiah did, preaching condemnation and destruction and terror on every side for over 20 years?" I don't enjoy calling people out with God's laws because I know people get emotional, I know they lash out at me, even though I am trying to bring them God's message and help them make their relationship right with him.

To have people lash out at us for telling them what God really says about their lives should not surprise us. Jesus said in our Gospel reading, "A disciple is not above his teacher." (Matthew 10:24a) Jesus was ridiculed for speaking God's Word, even called "Beelzebul," the devil, for doing so. If this is what people did to Jesus for speaking God's Word, we should not expect any different.

Persecution will come our way as it did for Jesus, as it did for Paul in our second reading from the book of Acts, and as it did for Jeremiah. That's a depressing thought. And that might be enough to make you want to quit this Christian faith right here and now because it's not easy; it comes with a price. Hang up your towel. Retreat to your home because you are done with being persecuted and humiliated for God. I won't speak his name or mention him anymore.

How do we come back from the brink of quitting God? How did Jeremiah come back? He recalled that the LORD prevailed. The LORD had called Jeremiah to become a prophet even though Jeremiah thought himself too young, too inexperienced, too ineloquent. But God prevailed and Jeremiah became his prophet. God promised to rescue Jeremiah from those who would fight against him. It was God who told him this, and God's Word had always prevailed over every other message that was ever preached. And so he was assured that the LORD would still prevail for him against his enemies. "But the LORD is with me like a violent warrior. Therefore, my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. Since they have not succeeded, they will be utterly shamed, an everlasting humiliation that will never be forgotten." (verse 11) This is why Jeremiah couldn't hold God's Word in and give up like he wanted to. This is how he came back from the brink of quitting as the LORD's prophet. He was strengthened because he knew God would prevail. "The LORD is with me like a violent warrior." (verse 11a)

Maybe you're uncomfortable picturing God as a "violent warrior." We tend to focus on pictures of kindness and gentleness and compassion for God. And these are great and wonderful pictures that God gives us for our comfort. But it is also for our comfort and strengthening that we hear that God is not a push over. People cannot run roughshod over him. When people try to hurt us for speaking God's Word, we know that the LORD is with us like a violent warrior. He is the enforcer. He is the muscle. No one gets past him. No one overtakes him. He is as his title says the LORD of Armies. The LORD our warrior will prevail against any and all of his enemies.

This is why we don't need to be afraid of speaking his Word. This is why we don't need his Word hold back. We can speak God's Word, and the LORD our warrior will rescue us. He rescued Jeremiah from these people. He would go on to live through the destruction of Jerusalem. He would be delivered from the hands of the Babylonians. Finally, in the end, the LORD rescued Jeremiah forever by taking him to the refuge of heaven, the place that he fought for and prepared for Jeremiah specifically.

The LORD rescued Jeremiah, and the LORD rescues us too. We have come here to revel in that fact, to be reminded that the LORD our warrior prevails. He never reaches a breaking point. He never gives up and quits. No one overpowers him. No one conquers him. Instead he conquers our enemies for us. He even conquers the greatest enemy. On Easter Sunday Jesus stood before his followers as a conquering warrior, the devil's head crushed under his foot. His Word, his promise, his strength, his might prevailed, and it rescued Jeremiah, it rescued Paul, and it rescued us from eternal death in hell and instead the LORD our warrior gave us the victory spoils of life everlasting in heaven.

With the LORD as a warrior for me, how can I now speak his name and share his message? Can I proclaim his name by wearing a cross or by putting a church postcard up at work for others to see what my God offers to them? Can I proclaim him by working hard and not complaining, living the life God has called me to? Can I have that hard heart to heart conversation with my child and their live-in significant other? Can I share with Uncle Dave why I believe what I believe even when I know he thinks organized religion is a joke?

Of course, we have to examine each situation and decide what is best. But in every situation, don't be afraid to be ridiculed and hurt for speaking God's Word. The LORD is with us like a violent warrior to fight for us and to rescue us. Our enemies will not succeed because the LORD our warrior prevails. He never quits. This message brings us back from the brink, just like it did for Jeremiah. "Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD, for he rescues the life of the needy from evil people." (verse 13) Amen.