

The Fiery Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

Text

Jeremiah 11:18-12:17

Topic

When a weary Jeremiah feels as if he is in a race against footmen
God tells him that he will soon have to run against horses

Title

*“A Horse is a Horse, Of Course Of Course,
Until You’re Empowered to Race the Horse”*

Introduction

My favorite scene from the movie *Jaws* has to be when Quint and Hooper are comparing their wounds and scars, each trying to outdo the other. At one point Sheriff Brodie lifts his shirt to reveal an appendectomy scar. It’s funny because he realizes that what he considers suffering is so much less than his companions have experienced.

(BTW: A bit of movie trivia for you. The scar was really Roy Scheider’s from his appendectomy).

All of us collect wounds and scars as we go through life. Some are physical; some are emotional. Some are worse than others. I would respectfully say that even the worst of my scars, or yours, or anyone’s for that matter, are like an appendectomy compared to the sufferings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

No one ever suffered as much as He did. When you consider what it cost Him to leave Heaven for earth it puts His experience of suffering into a whole new category. He knew isolation and loneliness more than anyone, ever. His human experiences were those of danger, poverty, loss,

obscurity, and being derided as an illegitimate son. Let's just summarize it by remembering Jesus was called "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief."

Of course His suffering was immense leading up to the Cross and then unfathomable upon the Cross.

We *are* going to suffer; it's the human condition in a fallen world. Jesus Christ's greater suffering provides us a context in which to experience our own suffering. We are told - no, we are promised - that through suffering we can experience a fellowship with Jesus that is impossible without pain.

Our tendency is to want to withdraw from suffering. All the while Jesus is seeking to draw us deeper into the fellowship of His sufferings.

Jeremiah had a moment like that in our text. He wanted to withdraw from his suffering; God told him He was drawing him deeper into it.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Tendency Is To Withdraw From Further Suffering, and #2 God's Tenderness Is To Draw You Into The Fellowship Of His Sufferings.

#1 Your Tendency Is To
Withdraw From Further Suffering
(11:18 - 12:4)

God made known to Jeremiah that a plot had been devised against him.

Jeremiah 11:18 Now the LORD gave me knowledge of it, and I know it; for You showed me their doings.

Jeremiah 11:19 But I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter; and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be remembered no more."

The plot against Jeremiah was to "destroy the tree," destroy him, and thereby destroy its "fruit," referring to anyone who might be affected by his message. It's clear that it was a plot to kill him.

Does anyone want to murder you for the sake of the Gospel? Probably not! But there have been, and always will be, believers who face death simply for confessing Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah did what we tend to do when faced with a threat. He called upon the Lord to deliver him from his enemies.

Jeremiah 11:20 But, O LORD of hosts, You who judge righteously, Testing the mind and the heart, Let me see Your vengeance on them, For to You I have revealed my cause.

Jeremiah appealed to God's righteousness as the One who can see the hearts of all men and therefore mete out proper justice. He may also have thought that by revealing the plot against him God was letting him know He would thwart it. Why tell Jeremiah about it unless God was going to do something about it?

In fact, God was going to intervene:

Jeremiah 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, lest you die by our hand' -

Jeremiah 11:22 therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Behold, I will punish them. The young men shall die by the sword, their sons and their daughters shall die by famine;

Jeremiah 11:23 and there shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring catastrophe on the men of Anathoth, even the year of their punishment.' "

Alright! Amen! You want to plot against God's servant, you're messin' with God! Thanks, Lord.

Jeremiah got up everyday and went right to the obituaries in the local paper, looking for God to bring His judgment upon the men of Anathoth. Day after day nothing changed. If anything, those who were plotting to kill him were prospering all the more. It began to concern the young prophet.

Jeremiah 12:1 Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead with You; Yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?

Jeremiah 12:2 You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; They grow, yes, they bear fruit. You are near in their mouth But far from their mind.

Jeremiah 12:3 But You, O LORD, know me; You have seen me, And You have tested my heart toward You. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, And prepare them for the day of slaughter.

Jeremiah 12:4 How long will the land mourn, And the herbs of every field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed, For the wickedness of those who dwell there, Because they said, "He will not see our final end."

Jeremiah expressed a common confusion that we all, at one time or another, will have. Since God is "righteous," why do the wicked seem to "prosper" and why are they so "happy" while, in the mean time, God's own servants suffer at their hands?

One theologian said, "the fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith."

A whole branch of theology, called *theodicy*, is dedicated to defending both God's love and His omnipotence in view of human suffering.

I may be naive when it comes to the subject but I don't think the answer is all that hard. It's captured in one small word: Sin. Because our first parents chose to sin, humanity fell and with it suffering of all sorts entered God's creation.

Jeremiah, however, wasn't looking for the big-picture answer. He wanted to comprehend how God could allow him to suffer, *right then*, and let the wicked who plotted against him prosper.

C.S. Lewis, who's attempt at theodicy is articulated in a book called *The Problem of Pain*, made this insightful statement: "You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it. You need not guess for I will tell you; **I am a great coward.**"

We are all "great cowards" with respect to the problem of our personal pain. I say that with compassion, not as a rebuke. Suffering hurts! It wounds; it scars. It is made so much worse when we look around and see the nonbeliever, even the wicked nonbeliever, prosper and experience happiness.

God told Jeremiah He would, in fact, deal with the men of Anathoth, who plotted against him. God just didn't tell Jeremiah **when** He was going to do it; nor did He promise to deliver Jeremiah from out of their hands.

Therein lies the real issue we struggle with. Why doesn't God deliver me when it's clear He loves me?

It's because getting delivered from our suffering is not as valuable in the long run as enduring it with the Lord. Corrie ten Boom, no stranger to intense suffering, once said, "you'll never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have." Thus in our fallen world God has chosen to use suffering to our advantage.

#2 God's Tenderness Is To
Draw You Into The Fellowship Of His Sufferings
(12:5-17)

God's answer to Jeremiah was to reveal to him that He, too, suffered along with His prophet. But before God told Jeremiah about it, He told him that things were about to get worse.

Jeremiah 12:5 "If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, Then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, In which you trusted, they wearied you, Then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?"

Jeremiah 12:6 For even your brothers, the house of your father, Even they have dealt treacherously with you; Yes, they have called a multitude after you. Do not believe them, Even though they speak smooth words to you.

It wasn't just the men of Anathoth who were plotting against the prophet. His own family wanted him dead. That's intense.

The Lord compared Jeremiah's present suffering to a race and to a journey.

- If he thought "run[ning] with the footmen" was difficult, wait until he shortly was called upon to "contend with horses."
- If Jeremiah thought walking through "the land of peace" was dangerous, just wait until it was more like "the floodplain of the Jordan."

In plain language God was telling His faithful servant that this was just the beginning of his suffering. Things were going to get much worse.

There is something to notice in the projected sufferings. There is a promise. It's easy to overlook because all you hear is, "there's more suffering coming."

Jeremiah would, in fact, be empowered to "contend with horses," and to journey through "the floodplain." There would become something rare, something supernatural, about him as he endured his sufferings.

In the Bible it's described as sharing in the fellowship of Jesus Christ's suffering. The apostle Paul, himself no stranger to suffering, said, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).

There is both empowering and intimacy in shared experiences. It's why people are attracted to, and helped by, joining groups where the other members have had similar experiences.

In walking with the Lord, if you want to experience empowering by Him and intimacy with Him, you must have shared experiences of suffering. As I indicated earlier, all of your suffering, in total, will never be much more than an appendectomy scar compared to what Jesus suffered for you; but it is nevertheless real suffering and He will be with you in it and through it.

Let me put it another way. No one is going to look at you and think something other-worldly, something supernatural, is going on if you only run against other footmen and if your journey is easy in a land of peace. The Lord, therefore, uses the fallen world in which we find ourselves until His return to highlight what a life can be like dedicated to sharing in the fellowship of His sufferings.

Here is another angle to consider. When you look back upon your Christian life, are you going to be content to say it was a race against footmen? That it was lived carefully and comfortably in your own strength?

That you were always trying to maintain a quiet peace rather than accept any challenges? Don't you want to look back and see God empowering you to live beyond your natural talents and abilities? Of course you do!

In the remaining verses God describes His own sufferings at the hands of His disobedient people. He reveals a tenderness, a vulnerability even, of being hurt by them.

Jeremiah 12:7 "I have forsaken My house, I have left My heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of My soul into the hand of her enemies.

Jeremiah 12:8 My heritage is to Me like a lion in the forest; It cries out against Me; Therefore I have hated it.

Jeremiah 12:9 My heritage is to Me like a speckled vulture; The vultures all around are against her. Come, assemble all the beasts of the field, Bring them to devour!

Jeremiah 12:10 "Many rulers have destroyed My vineyard, They have trodden My portion underfoot; They have made My pleasant portion a desolate wilderness.

God employed three figures to describe His hurt at the hands of His beloved nation:

1. They had become like a "lion" encountered in the "forest." They "cried out against" God. They provoked Him by their sin and, so, He must "hate" them - meaning He must treat them according to their sin.
2. Judah was like an odd-colored bird which other birds would therefore pick apart. This was a reference to the fact that because they did not represent God to the other nations but, instead, fell in to sin with them, God would use nations to discipline them.
3. Judah was a vineyard - God's vineyard - but they had allowed themselves to be breeched and trampled down and destroyed.

God was describing His grief, His suffering, brought about by Judah's sin. It would bring Him no pleasure to judge them.

God's discipline would eventually restore them to a relationship with Him.

Jeremiah 12:14 Thus says the LORD: "Against all My evil neighbors who touch the inheritance which I have caused My people Israel to inherit - behold, I will pluck them out of their land and pluck out the house of Judah from among them.

Jeremiah 12:15 Then it shall be, after I have plucked them out, that I will return and have compassion on them and bring them back, everyone to his heritage and everyone to his land.

Jeremiah 12:16 And it shall be, if they will learn carefully the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the LORD lives,' as they taught My people to swear by Baal, then they shall be established in the midst of My people.

Jeremiah 12:17 But if they do not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation," says the LORD.

God plans long-term. His unconditional promises to the nation of Israel through Abraham and David cannot ultimately be thwarted. Though the devil will keep trying to kill and destroy right until the moment he is cast alive into the Lake of Fire, God will prevail.

Mean time, lots of suffering is on tap for the world, including for you as God's beloved saint. At the beginning of his career as a Christian, Jesus said of the apostle Paul, "...he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:14-16).

James, in his letter, told us, "my brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure" (James 5:10-11).

Paul was clear and to the point when he told young Pastor Timothy, "... all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (Second Timothy 3:12).

Whatever your 'theodicy,' your argument for how an omnipotent God of love can nevertheless allow suffering, your suffering is that **you** may know Jesus and the fellowship of His sufferings and the power of His resurrection.

The shared experience of suffering with Him that causes intimacy and produces empowering.

Think of it like this. In some suffering you have experienced, were you not helped by sharing it with someone who could understand your pain, having

gone through it themselves? Or if you, sadly, could not find such a person, did you not desire one to share your experience?

That Person is Jesus - Who endured pain and suffering on an unfathomable level for you. Let Him bring you through your pain in a way that you see it no longer as the *problem* of pain but as the *promise* of pain that will empower you to contend with horses and journey through the flood plain to the glory of God.