

To Lose Your Life
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Jeremiah 20:7-13

⁷ O Lord, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.

I have become a laughing-stock all day long;
everyone mocks me.

⁸ For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'

For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

⁹ If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name',

then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;

I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

¹⁰ For I hear many whispering:
'Terror is all around!

Denounce him! Let us denounce him!'

All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.

'Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him.'

¹¹ But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.

They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor
will never be forgotten.

¹² O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³ Sing to the Lord;
praise the Lord!

For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.

Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ ‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

²⁶ ‘So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² ‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

³⁶ and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The story of Jeremiah, our prophet *du jour*, began as so many prophets’ stories do. “Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.’”¹ When we meet up with Jeremiah today, he has been speaking what the Lord has commanded him and, simply put, it has not been received well.

Jeremiah has tried to back out but there is no escaping what he has been consecrated, set aside, to do. Jeremiah says, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name’, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” He has given himself over to God and the life that followed is not easy. Of course, God never promised that it would be. God simply says, “Do not be afraid.” I’ve seen on the Internet that that phrase is in the Bible 365 times, as some will point out, once for every day of the year. Whether the count is precise or

¹ Jeremiah 1:4-10.

not (it's not), "Do not be afraid," or language like it – fear not, take heart, etc., so often accompanies a word from God that we could be firmly convinced of two things: 1) there is much difficult and fearful stuff in the world, which God acknowledges, and 2) God doesn't leave us alone to deal with the difficult and fearful stuff. "For I am with you." "I am with you always." "I am with you until the end of the age." We hear that over and over. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

After Jeremiah's lamenting to God, which continues through the end of the twentieth chapter, Jeremiah goes back to prophesying. His complaints we read assure us and acknowledge that it can be difficult to behave faithfully, live steadfastly to God's will, relinquishing our own will. His story affirms and assures us that, even though we might complain, might wish for something else, we can still be faithful in the midst of our lamenting. I lift that up because it can feel like "either/or" sometimes when it's really "both/and." This is good news and a good model, for what we read in Matthew at first seems to simply affirm Jeremiah's cause for lament.

"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Again, we have acknowledgment that to follow Jesus, to live faithfully, will not be easy. There is some measure of comfort in the acknowledgement, but not enough to...not be afraid. What I really prefer is to live according to my will and say that I believe, because I really do. Professor Lance Pape points out the incongruity in this, though, saying, "True discipleship is the art of seeking the kingdom with single-minded determination and letting the chips fall where they may."²

Living faithfully to God's will, losing the life we want for the better life in Christ, means, as Pastor William Goettler writes, "there will be times when allegiance to Jesus causes a crisis of loyalty and forces a decision. The gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, and reorients goals."³ "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" or, as the Easy-to-Read Version of the Bible puts it, "Those who try to keep the life they have will lose it. But those who give up their life for me will find true life."⁴ Like Jeremiah, sometimes we say "but I don't wanna." Goettler urges, though, "The individual – and even the family, for that matter – must be of less concern than the overarching importance of proclaiming God's word. For individual lives, family structures, and

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 167.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 168.

⁴ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+10%3A39&version=ERV>

the whole of society will thrive when the gospel's good news is heard and embraced...while family disruption will surely take place, Jesus is not against the family."⁵

To lose our lives looks as varied as we are. To lose your life for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus, means what? Once you've identified what it would look like to do so, if you want to complain about it, go ahead with Jeremiah's model. Of course, there is a caveat to the permission given. While Jeremiah did indeed rail against God and God's plan, he did so in a very specifically faithful way. Professor James T. Butler breaks it down like this: "the structure of verses 7-13 is fully characteristic of the lament genre [of the psalms]: (i) a brief *opening address*, directed to God; followed by (ii) the *complaint*, in which the lamenter's affliction and isolation are vividly described and the enemies are portrayed and quoted; followed by the most characteristic feature...in which the lamenter gives (iii) a strong *confession of trust* in God and directly (iv) *petitions* God. Finally, laments usually conclude with an element of praise, present or in prospect, directed to the larger community, to whom testimony of God's deliverance is directed."⁶ Still prophesying! So the caveat is not small but remember again that Jeremiah's story affirms and assures us that, even though we might complain, might wish for something else, we can still be faithful in the midst of our lamenting. Lamenting with trust in God is how we are faithful, faith-filled, in the midst of those things which are not easy, those things which we might want differently. So what will it mean to lose your life as you've planned it to gain life us God has given it? This challenge, should you choose to accept it, is grounded with these words from God: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

Let us pray: Holy God, we are afraid and sometimes even angry that we cannot do things our own way. Make your presence clear to us so that we might face the living of your will, for your sake, without fear, we pray. Amen.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, pp. 166 and 168.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 148.