

+ Jeremiah 38:1-13 + How Far Would You Follow Jesus? +
+ 17th Sunday after Pentecost + 23 September 2012 +

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35) Haunting words from the Son of God heading to Jerusalem to take up his own very real cross, and lose his own life for a world filled with hostile sinners. Haunting because they strike at our comfortable, ease-loving, 21st-century hearts as they remind us that following Christ was never meant to be easy.

Jesus’ words to his disciples still haunt us even 2000 years later because for many of us, we haven’t faced the white heat of persecution. Yes, anti-Christian sentiments in the workplace, the classroom, in society, in government are heating up, but they’re still largely verbal in their attacks. Jesus’ words make us wonder how we would fare in the face of persecution for our Christian faith. Perhaps we’re not ready for it yet. How do you fare even now when a conversation at work or the lecture at school or downtime with friends turns either against Christ or against something that he says in his Word? Do you stand up for what’s unpopular with the crowds yet taught by God, or do you hold back to save your skin and remain popular?

Cross-bearing isn’t just enduring the heat of persecution or ridicule or an uncomfortable conversation with others, however. It also involves heated attacks from your sinful nature—that devious traitor within that wants to ruin your Christian faith, that murderous liar that wants you to reject the true God or at the very least ignore his Word. Yet what does Jesus say? ***“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*** (Mark 8:35) There is a golden lining to cross-bearing. At the end of this long and difficult journey, a glorious life awaits purely by the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus, but first you have to finish the journey. Sadly so many believers over the years gave up before they had finished following Jesus because the heat and the hurt and the heaviness of their crosses were too much. The path to heaven is littered with countless casualties of those who stopped following Jesus. So **HOW FAR WOULD YOU FOLLOW JESUS?**

Crosses are heavy and cross-bearing is hard. No believer knew the heaviness and the hurt of the cross better than the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. By all accounts, it would seem the Lord gave him a thankless ministry. God gave him the task of sounding God’s final warnings to the people of the ancient kingdom of Judah. The Lord appointed Jeremiah ***“to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”*** (1:10) He was to be ***“a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land...”*** (1:18) Jeremiah was to stand before the last kings of Judah, before their officials and priests and false prophets, and warn them one last time of God’s coming judgment. They had rejected the true God for far too long, and the Lord had had enough. Naturally, this didn’t make Jeremiah popular among the rulers or the people still living in and around Jerusalem. One king even took the scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecy, cut it into strips, and threw it into a fire. Soon Babylonian armies were besieging Jerusalem. The people hoped God would miraculously wipe out the Babylonians as he had done to the Assyrians 200 years before, but not this time. Judgment had come and eventually Jerusalem would fall.

In the meantime, the Lord had given Jeremiah an unenviable task, a task that might cause another person to stop following Jesus, a task considered treason. The Lord had Jeremiah proclaim, ***“This is what the LORD says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.’ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’”*** Nothing quite like proclaiming a message of surrender in the midst of a city under siege, yet Jeremiah never stopped following his Lord. Even when Jeremiah was placed under house arrest, many still heard his message. Those involved in the desperate fight on Jerusalem’s walls pondered these words of the Lord, and some surely followed them.

On the other hand, there was a large group of officials who hated what Jeremiah had to say. They had gladly opposed him in the past, and they knew that his message was weakening Jerusalem’s defenses. Now as leaders of God’s people, they should’ve known better the importance of listening to the Word of God. Still they approached King Zedekiah. ***“This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.”***

If they could convince the king, they could silence Jeremiah forever. Spineless and indecisive, King Zedekiah conceded, ***“He is in your hands...The king can do nothing to oppose you.”*** With no warning, Jeremiah’s cross was about to get much, much heavier.

The officials went to the courtyard where Jeremiah was under house arrest. They had plans to get rid of the Lord’s prophet, but they didn’t have the guts to kill him on the spot. Perhaps they feared how others might react. Perhaps they wanted him to die a slow death of hunger and thirst. Perhaps they wanted to relieve their own consciences as they took Jeremiah ***“and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son...”*** Down into the cistern, they

lowered the poor prophet by rope. During the rainy season, the cistern would've been filled with water, but it wasn't the rainy season and a siege was on, so **"it had no water in it, only mud..."** Vermin crawled around the bottom, and **"Jeremiah sank down into the mud"**. There God's enemies left his prophet to die an agonizing, drawn-out death.

So that's where following Jesus got him—left to die without food, without water in a muddy, vermin-infested hole while the Babylonians besieged his city? How easy it would have been for Jeremiah to forsake his Lord! "Look at where your message got me! How could I so foolishly follow you and be crushed into the mud by this heavy cross?!" Even if doubts started creeping into his mind, however, deliverance from the Lord was still coming in an unexpected way.

How far would you follow Jesus? Thankfully, any anti-Christian sentiment in our country hasn't reached the point of physical attacks, but nevertheless, you and I hold to a message that's considered unpopular, old-fashioned, and out-of-touch with the world today. There are going to be times when a disgusted look or a sarcastic response will express the real hostility people have for the truth of God's Word. You hold to a teaching that marriage is exclusively for a man and a woman united in the eyes of God and the state? How old-fashioned! You don't think abortion is a woman's choice? How out-of-touch! You actually believe that the universe was created in six normal days? How quaint! You hold to absolute truth? How unpopular! Work and school get awkward. Relationships cool and ridicule follows. You may not be down in the cistern, but you may feel that way when you end up suffering for what you believe.

Do you still follow Jesus or make life easier for yourself? Do you remain silent when a confident expression of God's truth is necessary? Your sinful nature certainly wants you to dump that cross off your shoulders and keep quiet so life won't get so difficult, but where does that lead? An eternity separated from the God who loves you. So what's the alternative? More suffering beneath the cross with your nose pushed in the mud? How about deliverance from the God who loves you? See what he did for Jeremiah.

An Ethiopian official in the king's service named Ebed-Melech heard what had happened to the Lord's prophet and he was outraged. He immediately went to work to save Jeremiah. To do that, Ebed-Melech put himself and his livelihood at great risk. He risked the embarrassment of the king. He risked the revenge of the nobles who hated Jeremiah and tried to take his life, but nevertheless he approached the king. **"My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city."** Recognizing the truth of his words, the king changed his mind once more and sent Ebed-Melech with thirty armed men to rescue the Lord's prophet from the cistern.

By this time, Jeremiah was severely weakened and malnourished. How was he going to get out? Ebed-Melech tied some old rags to a rope and lowered it down to Jeremiah. **"Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes."** When Jeremiah did so, **"they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern."** Even under the burden of such a heavy cross for following Jesus, the Lord delivered his faithful servant and provided the relief he so desperately needed.

So how far would you follow Jesus? The Lord calls each of us to faithfully follow him, even when what his Word has to say is unpopular and even brings on hostility. Following him will likely mean bearing a heavy cross in this life, one that may push your nose in the mud, but the Lord still delivers you and me in a way that is undeserved, and therefore should be unexpected.

Where was Jesus headed when he first spoke those haunting words we heard at the beginning of the sermon? He was headed to his own cross—the cross he was to bear for you and me first. If you have faced hostility and ridicule and death, he faced them first and faced them when they were at their worst. He endured the cross, scorning its shame, to deliver you from the crushing burden of the cross you bear. In fact, he himself doesn't just cheer you on with the promise of his deliverance. He puts his own almighty shoulders under the heaviest part of your cross and delivers you to give you rest for your soul—heavenly rest that will last for eternity.

Even as he does that, Jesus reminds you and me through his Word that he was there with Jeremiah in the cistern and brought about his deliverance. He's there when you find yourself in a difficult situation caused by those who hate him or by your sinful nature that hates him. He's there beneath the cross with you when it's particularly heavy and will be when the time comes for you to finally lay that cross down as you enter the eternal rest of heaven. Because he's always there for you, you can give up your life for him and his Word—the only source of truth and life.

Yes, Jesus' call to take up your cross and follow him may haunt you when life is particularly comfortable, but with Christ by your side and beneath your cross, even when it pushes you into the mud, you can be confident about your answer to that question—how far would you follow Jesus? By faith and with his help, you'll follow him to the end, to the blessed rest that awaits all his faithful followers. May God grant that for Jesus' sake. Amen