

"By faith . . ."

20. Jeremiah

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BY FAITH the prophet Jeremiah endured more than one of the trials listed in Hebrews 11:33-38. He experienced "cruel mockings", "scourgings", "bonds and imprisonment". He knew what it was like to be "destitute", "afflicted" and "tormented". Yet who was it that inflicted such derision and pain? His own people, those he wished to save. The nation of Judah was "not worthy" of this man.

When we consider the root cause of Jeremiah's suffering, then his endurance appears even greater. Hardships came upon him as a direct result of speaking forth God's words: "the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily" (Jer. 20:8). Had he so wished he could have escaped the troubles and enjoyed the privileges that would have been his as a (probable) son of the high priest. All he needed to do was to stop speaking out.

This temptation did come upon him: "Then I said, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name" (v. 9). A hardship endured is one thing; a hardship endured when a way of escape lies open is another. By faith Jeremiah *chose* to suffer affliction. By faith he chose to walk along the narrow way, even though the broad way was in easy reach.

True believers today can take strength and comfort from the example of Jeremiah. He too lived at a time when most people did not want to accept his message about God's coming judgments. Yet for the forty years and more of his ministry his faith gave him the courage, conviction and confidence to speak God's Word in the midst of indifference and open opposition.

An equally great exhortation for believers today comes when we realise that Jeremiah's faith did not give him the answer to every question that arose within him about the suffering he was enduring. At times he questioned God about the difficulties in his life:

"Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (20:18, RSV; cf. 15:10);

"Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (12:1, RSV);

"Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed?" (15:18).

Jeremiah's great faith did not mean that he always understood what was happening to him. Faith did not give Jeremiah the power to answer every question, but it did give him the strength to trust that God was in control.

God's answer to one of these 'why' questions (15:18) shows us that it was trust that He wanted from Jeremiah, for in response God said: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve Me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be My spokesman . . . they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you" (15:19,20, NIV).

God's answer was an exhortation to trust Him. He urged Jeremiah to keep on the narrow way and to keep on speaking the truth because, despite the troubles, God was watching over him. Jeremiah listened to these words from his God and as a result was not disillusioned by a lack of specific answers to his questions. In the face of apparent evidence to the contrary he trusted that God was with him and would ultimately save him, as He had promised from the start (1:19).

Like Jeremiah, a promise of God's eternal care has been made to us, for we are told: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5); and: "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28). Like Jeremiah, we may struggle to reconcile these promises with the things that happen in our lives, or the lives of our brothers and sisters. Like Jeremiah, we may ask, 'Why?'. However, we need to remember that faith does not necessarily give us the *answer* to every question or doubt that arises, it enables us *trust* that God knows best.

As Hebrews 11 shows us, faith is all about having vision. With faith we can have the vision to see that time when all our questions and doubts will be answered. We must strive to have the faith of Jeremiah and trust in God's promised care, even when it is difficult: "'For I know the plans I have for you', declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jer. 29:11, NIV).