

## **Opposition**

### Jeremiah 37-38

If you walk with God, sooner or later you will experience opposition. If you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus and seek to please Him no matter what the cost, you will experience opposition. If you are serious about the mission of the church (“going and making disciples of all the nations”), you will experience opposition. In some parts of the world, our brothers and sisters are imprisoned, tortured, and killed because of their loyalty to Jesus. But here in this country the opposition tends to be much more subtle and much more relational. Even if you’re humble and non-judgmental, if you mention the name of Jesus in some contexts people might take offense and accuse of having all sorts of ulterior motives.

Even within the church and within the body of Christ, if you seek to live out your calling as a follower of Christ, you will experience opposition. Sometimes you will encounter mean people in the church. But quite often (most often in my experience) the person opposing you is good-hearted and simply has different convictions than you. Sincere followers of Jesus have honest differences when it comes to worship styles, money and budgets, building and facilities, philosophy of ministry, and outreach. If you are involved in leadership in any way in the body of Christ, you will experience opposition simply because you are dealing with complex issues that really, really matter.

I used to think that being a pastor would eventually become easier (not easy, but easier). I sort of assumed that as I got more mature and the church got more established (ministry structures, staffing, etc.) that we wouldn’t have to spend time dealing with conflict and just working through differences. It turns out that that’s not the case. The issues are quite different than they were 25 years ago, but there are still conflict and differences to resolve. If I were sinless, that would help. If all of you were sinless, that would help too. But this side of heaven, leading and serving in the body of Christ is hard at times.

The simple point I’d like to make is that ***If you walk with God, sooner or later you will experience opposition.*** The strong temptation at times will be to give up and conclude, “This isn’t worth it! I want peace and comfort and joy. I didn’t sign up for opposition.” The temptation is to “grow weary” and “lose heart” and give up. Some of you may be ready to give up; you’ve experienced opposition and/or conflict in your family, in the church, in the workplace, or among friends because of your faith.

This is where the example of Jeremiah is so incredibly instructive. We might think that since Jeremiah was a prophet in Jerusalem that his life and experience might not be very relevant to the opposition we face. But what we find is that over and over the New Testament points us back to the prophets as an example of how we should persevere when we face opposition. And so today we wrap up our study in the book of Jeremiah by considering an incident that typifies the opposition Jeremiah faced as a prophet. After we consider this incident we’ll draw out some of the implications for us.

Allow me to set the context for Jeremiah 37 and 38, our passage for today. The incidents recorded in these chapters took place around 588 b.c. A few years earlier the Babylonian army had laid siege to Jerusalem, but they had withdrawn back to the east because the Egyptians were approaching Jerusalem from the west. Basically they didn't want a major war with Egypt. Consequently the King of Judah (Zedekiah) was again forced to consider, "Should I heed Jeremiah's prophecy or not?" Remember that Jeremiah had consistently told the kings of Judah that they should surrender to the Babylonians when they showed up at the gates of Jerusalem; they could either submit to the Babylonians and live in exile, or they could resist the Babylonians and die in Jerusalem. (The irony was that they would seek and find God only in exile.)

***Jeremiah's example: enduring opposition and persecution.*** (Jeremiah 37-38) The first few verses of chapter 37 describe how neither King Zedekiah nor his officials nor the people would listen to the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. Nevertheless Jeremiah faithfully communicated God's word. Specifically, Jeremiah warned that when the Babylonians retreated from Jerusalem that they shouldn't trust in Egypt. That would be foolish; nothing could keep them from going into exile.

Beginning in verse 11 we read how Zedekiah's guard (Irijah) took advantage of an opportunity to entrap Jeremiah.

11 Now it happened when the army of the Chaldeans had lifted *the siege* from Jerusalem because of Pharaoh's army, 12 that Jeremiah went out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin in order to take possession of *some* property there among the people.

This was a very innocent trip for Jeremiah. We learned in chapter 32 that Jeremiah decided to buy a piece of property owned by his cousin. Buying this land was an expression of faith and hope that one day the political situation would stabilize and he could cultivate and enjoy that piece of land. And so Jeremiah went out from Jerusalem to take possession of this property.

13 While he was at the Gate of Benjamin, a captain of the guard whose name was Irijah, the son of Shelemiah the son of Hananiah was there; and he arrested Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "You are going over to the Chaldeans!"

The accusation was the Jeremiah was leaving Jerusalem in order to join forces with the Chaldeans (Babylonians). Irijah falsely accused him of defecting to the Babylonians, and he arrested Jeremiah.

14 But Jeremiah said, "A lie! I am not going over to the Chaldeans"; yet he would not listen to him. So Irijah arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials.

We read next that these officials took the opportunity to vent their anger at Jeremiah:

15 Then the officials were angry at Jeremiah and beat him, and they put him in jail in the house of Jonathan the scribe, which they had made into the prison. 16 For

Jeremiah had come into the dungeon, that is, the vaulted cell; and Jeremiah stayed there many days.

Jeremiah was beaten and then confined in a makeshift prison - an underground dungeon. Last week we saw that years earlier when King Jehoiakim wanted to punish Jeremiah and the scribe Baruch that “the Lord hid them” (36:26). But on this occasion God allowed Jeremiah to be falsely accused, arrested, beaten, and imprisoned (which reminds us of what would later happen to Jesus, Peter, and Paul).

This simple account challenges many assumptions that we might make about walking with God. For example, we might assume that, “If I’m in the center of God’s will, He will never allow me to be humiliated or mistreated.” We may not be completely triumphalistic, but we do tend to assume that God won’t allow anything really horrible to happen to us. Jeremiah’s experience illustrates that you can be at the very center of God’s will **and** experience great personal opposition.

The rest of chapter 37 describes how King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah and wanted to know if there was another “word from the Lord” (v. 17). Jeremiah basically said, “Since you asked . . . You will be delivered into the hand of the Babylonians.” When Jeremiah appealed to Zedekiah not send him back to the dungeon in Jonathan’s house (lest he die), the king commanded that he be kept in the court of the guardhouse and be given a loaf of bread a day. Zedekiah was a very wishy-washy person, easily influenced by whoever was talking with him at the time. At the end of chapter 37 Jeremiah is imprisoned but safe.

The first three verses of chapter 38 describe how Jeremiah continued to deliver the same message he’d given throughout his career. Jeremiah announced that Jerusalem would certainly be delivered into the hands of the Babylonians. Those who stay in the city will die by “the sword and by famine and by pestilence” and “those who surrender to the Babylonians will live.” Here’s the predictable reaction of the king’s officials:

4 Then the officials said to the king, “Now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather their harm.”

Things have escalated to the point where the officials wanted permission to put Jeremiah to death. In verse 5 Zedekiah gives in to their demand, admitting that he didn’t have the power to oppose what they wanted to do.

5 So King Zedekiah said, “Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can *do* nothing against you.”

Zedekiah had been made king over Judah by Nebuchadnezzar; the officials didn’t see him as the legitimate ruler. So they basically dictated to him what should happen to Jeremiah: they would put him down in a well where he would eventually die.

6 Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern *of* Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud.

In that day cisterns were dug to hold water that would run off of the land. But in this cistern "there was no water but only mud." In this cistern Jeremiah wouldn't drown; he would die from exposure or suffocation (if the mud was deep enough) or starvation. And so here we have Jeremiah, appointed by God before birth as a prophet "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, and to build and to plant" (1:10). And God allowed Jeremiah to be thrown into a cistern and to sink down into the mud. You may have wondered why God has allowed certain things to enter your life - different types of suffering and opposition and strife. I don't have a great answer for you, but Jeremiah's experience gives us some perspective. You can be at the center of God's will and still experience great opposition.

When God called Jeremiah He didn't promise to protect him from suffering, but He had told Jeremiah, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (1:8). Beginning in verse 7 we see that in this instance Jeremiah's deliverance came through a man from Ethiopia who was moved to intervene on his behalf.

7 But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; 8 and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, 9 "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city."

Just as Zedekiah was persuaded by evil men earlier, he was now persuaded by a good man. Zedekiah gave Ebed-melech permission to rescue Jeremiah:

10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies." 11 So Ebed-melech took the men under his authority and went into the king's palace to *a place* beneath the storeroom and took from there worn-out clothes and worn-out rags and let them down by ropes into the cistern to Jeremiah.

I love the details given here; Ebed-melech anticipated that it would hurt Jeremiah to be lifted up by the ropes. And so he directed Jeremiah in this way:

12 Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, "Now put these worn-out clothes and rags under your armpits under the ropes"; and Jeremiah did so. 13 So they pulled Jeremiah up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guardhouse.

After the rescue Jeremiah was still under arrest (in the guard house), but at least he wouldn't die alone in the mud in the cistern.

Other portions of Jeremiah describe what happened next. The influential, important people were indeed taken into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah was given the option of going into exile or staying in the Land. He chose to stay among the people who were left in the Land (40:1-6). You might think that Jeremiah would be able to retire - or at least experience a bit of peace and tranquility. But the people who remained in the Land were no more inclined to hear the word of the Lord than those who'd gone into exile. Against Jeremiah's strong warnings, they decided to seek refuge in Egypt. Just like the children of Israel in the wilderness almost 1,000 years earlier, they reasoned, "At least we have food and protection there" (chapter 42). And so Jeremiah was forced to go to Egypt - where he apparently died. Jeremiah had a hard life.

But here we are 2,500 years later talking about him! We learn from his life and we learn from his prophecies. Twenty-five hundred years later his life is still bearing fruit. And I have no doubt that Jeremiah would now agree with Paul's statement in Romans 8 that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory" he now experiences in the presence of God (Romans 8:18).

***What are the implications of Jeremiah's example for us?*** You may be thinking, "I'm glad I'm not a prophet. And I'm really glad I live after the death and resurrection of Jesus. . . Surely God wouldn't call me to experience anything like Jeremiah had to endure." Well, listen to how the New Testament looks back at Jeremiah and the other prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah, etc.). Jesus, for example, made this statement to His disciples in Matthew 5:

11 "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Jesus basically put His followers in the same category as the prophets when it comes to being mistreated. In Hebrews 11 the author of Hebrews wrote about the faith of those who came before. We read this at the end of that chapter:

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed *acts of* righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received *back* their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; 36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

That last verse describes what happened to Jeremiah: mockings, beatings, and imprisonment. When we come to the next chapter, Hebrews 12, the author draws out the implication for us. We not only emulate the suffering and endurance of the prophets; we also consider the way Jesus endured opposition, injustice, and even shame.

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Notice the specific application in verse 3:

3 For consider Him [Jesus] who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

As I mentioned earlier, the great temptation when we're mistreated is to "grow weary and lose heart" - basically to quit trusting God when opposition comes. This is what Jeremiah refused to do; when he was beaten and imprisoned and when he sank down into the mud, he refused to say, "I quit. . . God, find somebody else to be a prophet to the nations." This is what Jesus refused to do; when he endured hostility - mocking, floggings, and crucifixion - He refused to say, "God, I quit. . . find somebody else to be the Suffering Servant who will bear the sins of the world." The author of Hebrews tells us that as we face opposition that we should not only consider the prophet Jeremiah, but also Jesus as an example of suffering well.

When you face opposition because of your calling as a follower of Christ, it's completely fine to try to avoid suffering. If you're being discriminated against because you're a Christian, there might be legal recourse; we have laws to protect religious freedom. In the church we are supposed to work hard at reconciliation when there are offenses and conflicts. Biblically we aren't required to be passive. We are required to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit when we are mistreated, but we aren't required to be passive.

But we still need to wrestle with whether or not we accept the possibility that **God** has given us a difficult assignment that inherently involves enduring opposition and hostility. That was the case for Abraham, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary and Joseph, Stephen, Peter, Paul, and certainly Jesus. In other words, do we think that we are exempt from the common experience of pretty much everybody whose life is described in the Bible?

Honestly, many Christians reject this basic, foundational calling of enduring opposition and hostility. We can do this in two different ways. Some reject it through **withdrawal**. The common sentiment here is, "I'm fine with Jesus. . . but I hate conflict and the messiness of relationships. . . I simply won't do the hard work of leading other people." Of course not everybody is called to leadership. But many people are. I thank God for the many men and women at Faith who have been willing to do the hard work of leading

others and working through issues when there are disagreements and opposition. But there is a huge temptation to withdraw when it's tough.

Others reject this calling to endure opposition by becoming angry. They basically say, "Nobody is going to insult or disrespect me. If they do, watch out." They become the proverbial bull in a china shop. And in an unhealthy church everybody walks on egg shells around them to avoid getting them upset. In a healthy church, such people are lovingly confronted and helped to put away their anger so that they can be truly useful to God again - which is the real issue. There is such a thing as "righteous indignation" but James pointed out that "the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God." Being angry because of opposition does not accomplish God's purposes.

I'm not advocating a "balance" between passive withdrawal and angry involvement. I'd urge us all to have the same type of **radical humility** we find in Jeremiah and in Jesus. In response to opposition and hostility, they entrusted themselves to God. They did not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but through their words and their lives they "gave a blessing instead" (see 1 Peter 2:21-25 and 3:9). I think you'd agree that if Jesus weren't willing to endure opposition and hostility the purposes of God would have come to a screeching halt. What we don't always realize is that the purposes of God often move forward in our day when we as Jesus' followers endure hostility/opposition the way He did. How else will people - either inside the church or outside the church - see Jesus if we don't suffer as He did?