

Racing Against Horses

A Sermon Based on Jeremiah Chapter 12

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Suggested Manuscript



I was taken aback when I heard about the fate of the Columbia Space shuttle and the loss of the seven heroes on board. What disturbed me was that I was not shocked. Apparently familiarity with disaster takes off the edge. Immediately I thought of January 28, 1986 when America was shocked by the destruction of the space shuttle Challenger, and the death of its seven crew members.



It seems that losses are accumulating at an unprecedented level. We have not even begun to recover from the tragedy of 911 when we're slammed again by another disaster. In fact if we were to grab all of the bad news floating around right now we would have enough to fill a newsmagazine. Corporate Scandals...Stuck Economy...War drums beating in Iraq.



To add to the load each of us have our own personal piles of bad news and unfulfilled expectations. Personal financial challenges...Family conflict...Unfulfilled spiritual hopes and dreams. If you've experienced some setbacks in your life you're not alone. Listen today as, Pat Arribito shares out of her heart one of the greatest setbacks of her life that started with a single phone call.



***A Timeless Time Part One** My husband was working on a documentary film at the time and wanted to take some footage up in Alaska. He had enough miles on his travel bank to take both of our boys with free tickets so they were pretty excited to get to go to Alaska.*

***(After Pat speaks)** In August of 1990 Pat's husband Jim and two of their four children, 13 year old Tony and 11 year old Joey flew from Los Angeles to Anchorage Alaska. While there, they called home with stories about Caribou sightings and new friends they'd met in outlying villages. They were scheduled to return in 10 days. *It was Monday afternoon and my husband and two sons were due to land in LAX from Anchorage. One of our workers had gone there to meet them, and they didn't get off the plane. And of course they don't disclose who's on the plane or whose not, you know usually. He called me and I hadn't heard anything. I had no reason to think that they wouldn't be there. So I had to call our friends in Alaska, and that's when I found out that their small plane had never landed in Anchorage the night before.**

***(After Pat speaks)** The night before, on Sunday night a storm blasted Anchorage. Caught in the storm the pilot of that flight carrying Pat's husband and her two children radioed Anchorage airport for help. The storm had actually blown the plane twenty miles off course. Minutes later it slammed into the rocky peaks of the Taltetna mountains. Back at their home in Northern California Pat and her other two children waited and prayed through Monday night.*

During the day Tuesday I was calling search and rescue every couple hours and in the afternoon they told me they had sighted the plane and they were sending helicopters in. So called my brother and told him to get more details. He found out that they were trying to find a sheriff to come up to my house and that way he got the news out of them and told them he wanted to come and tell me himself.

***(After Pat speaks)** Later that afternoon Pat's father and brother Tom arrived at the Arribito home where several other family members had already gathered. Taking Pat outside, her brother Tom relayed the message he heard from search and rescue in Alaska.*

My brother just said there are no survivors. I heard those words whirling around in my head, over and over, you know no survivors, nor survivors, and then I'm thinking yes there are survivors, cause there's me and my other two children, and I don't know how long we were out there. It was kind of a timeless time. I went back in the house and my kids had been sitting on people's laps they came over my daughter was almost nine and my son was seven and they just both came over and climbed on my lap and I hugged them and my son said my daddy's dead isn't he. And I just nodded. And my daughter said, "Tony and Joey?" I said "Yeah." And there was just such a sense a huge sense of how can this be true and how can somebody who was just there not be anymore. And you know its almost like you're in another world. I can't even describe the sense of floating in space and time. And it was just overwhelming

It was really hard to go to bed that night. It was really hard to go to bed and to know that I was going to go to bed alone from then on. It was hard for my kids to sleep. They both climbed in bed with me. In fact they climbed in bed with me for the next year.



What do we do when life treats us unfairly? What do we do when through no fault of our own our dreams are stolen from us? What do we do when it seems that there is no justice in the world—that things just don't make sense?

If you've ever dared ask those questions out loud or even whispered them in your dreams, you're not alone.



Today's message is entitled racing with horses and describes the life of one man who was caught in a tangle of injustice and the more he tried to wriggle out of it the more entwined he became.



The first part of this message is entitled Why do the Wicked Prosper?



I can't promise that when I mention his name you will immediately be struck with an insatiable interest. In fact his name may elicit a yawn. Yet I find him to be a most intriguing character. He always seemed to be the minority report. He was always on an uphill trek--paddling against the current--climbing up the down staircase--swimming against the flow of popular opinion and political correctness. He lived in the Middle East in a time of immanent war.

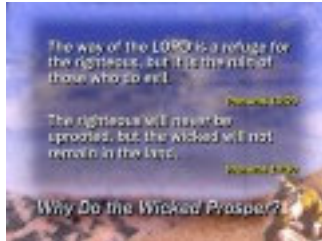


To the north was the desert kingdom in what is known today as Iraq. Back then it was Neo Babylon. To the south was Egypt. And dangling in the middle like a mouse pulled apart by two large cats was the tiny country of Judah. And there at ground zero we find our hero--Jeremiah. He became a prophet about 629 BC, and continued to prophesy for 41 years.



As he saw his country in the last gasps of life he couldn't take it anymore. He refused to complain to himself anymore so he raised his voice to the almighty God. Let's pick up the story In Jeremiah chapter 12:

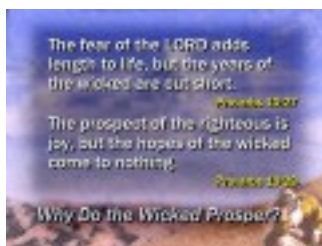
¹ You are always righteous, O LORD ,
when I bring a case before you.
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease?



Jeremiah had been taught that when you obey God you prosper and when you rebel you struggle. Maybe you've been taught that way as well. The Bible is full of those kinds of thoughts. For example in Proverbs 10 we read:

²⁷ The fear of the LORD adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short.

²⁸ The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.



²⁹ The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil.

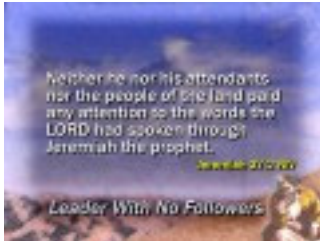
³⁰ The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land.



Can you relate to Jeremiah? Have you asked similar questions? How do seven families lose brilliant hard working loved ones? How can someone like Osama Bin Laden stretch out his evil hand and slay thousands and remain untouchable for years? How can corporate raiders walk away with billions of ill-gotten stock gain while we watch our retirement portfolios shrivel? Why do God's faithful people seem to be struggling when those who cut corners with God seem to thrive?



The next section is entitled: Leader With No Followers.



Can you taste Jeremiah's struggle? Let's do a little more investigation on this man Jeremiah and see if we can get into his head. Let's flip over to Jeremiah 37 to get a sense of some of his conflict.

² Neither he nor his attendants nor the people of the land paid any attention to the words the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah 37



Can you imagine that? When you speak, absolutely no one is paying attention? Politicians today worry if their popularity goes down below 50%. Here Jeremiah's credibility at the polls is 0%. No one is listening. Does that happen to you? When you lead no one follows?



Fill in your own personal illustration here. I remember some years back when I pastored a church in crises. I still remember the day I realized that while I had the support of the majority of the congregation I did not have support of the majority of the leadership. The implication was clear. My ministry was over! No matter what I said no one listened. For several months I felt like I had a knife in my gut. I had been hired to do a job that I couldn't do! I was impotent--A leader with no followers. And that was nothing compared to what Jeremiah experienced.



His setting goes from bad to worse. Suddenly they start paying attention to Jeremiah. We pick up the story in Jeremiah 37:15,16.

“They were angry with Jeremiah and had him beaten and imprisoned in the house of Jonathan the secretary, which they had made into a prison. Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time.”



In Jerusalem the substrate is a beige limestone known as Jerusalem stone. It is quite soft and carves easily. Here's video of a vaulted dungeon similar to the one that Jeremiah was thrown into. In Jeremiah's dungeon the only entrance and exit was the hole in the ceiling. There was no escape.



The next section is entitled Racing Against Horses.



God answers back to Jeremiah's question of justice with some questions of His own.

⁵ "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?"



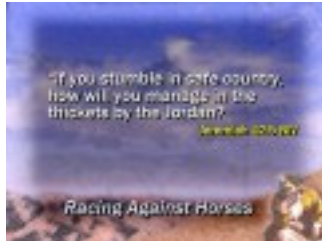
God plays with Jeremiah a little bit here. He says, "Jeremiah?" Are you a fast runner?

Jeremiah says, "well no, most people can outrun me."

God comes back and says "well Jeremiah, how can you expect to out run horses?"

God is saying to Jeremiah, "you are attempting the impossible to understand this whole issue of why the wicked prosper. You don't know the half of it. Why you don't know 1/10th of 1% of it!"

And then he uses another metaphor.



If you stumble in safe country, ^[2]
how will you manage in the thickets by ^[3] the Jordan?



Here's a video of the Jordan river. You can see how thick the surrounding brush is. What you can't see in this video is how stark the desert is. Again God speaks to Jeremiah and says:
"Jeremiah? Can you walk around the desert without stumbling into things?"

Jeremiah says "well, no Lord, You know I am kind of a klutz."

"Well then," God continues, "If you bump into stuff in the desert how are you going to move gracefully through the brambles next to the Jordan?"

The bottom line is Jeremiah is attempting the impossible. As a human being Jeremiah doesn't understand the economy of the universe. It is extremely complex. Sin and rebellion have reformatted the universe. No human being can understand more than the basics.



The next section is entitled Shaft of Heavenly Light.



Then God shares intimately with Jeremiah, from His heart:

⁷ "I will forsake my house,
abandon my inheritance;
I will give the one I love
into the hands of her enemies.



If we listen carefully we can hear the heaving of cosmic sobs of immeasurable pain. God says, “As much as you hurt, as much as you grieve, as much as you are in conflict, look what I have to do. I have to let go of my baby, the love of my heart, the people I cherish, and hand them over to Babylon to be conquered and enslaved.”

I pause here at the center of Jeremiah 12 in awe. There is no pain that we have ever felt that God hasn't felt before. In fact, whatever loss we are feeling, whatever shattered dreams we grieve over, God hurts with us, he grieves with us because it is also amplified infinitely as His loss, His hurt, His grief.

Where is God when suffering takes place? He is experiencing a mightier suffering. How does God feel when injustice takes place? Angrier than we could ever dream of.



The next section is entitled The Righteous Will Prosper



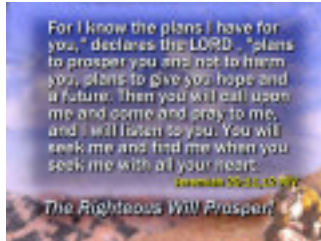
But the good news of Jeremiah is that God is also a God of action. He doesn't just sit there. He takes care of injustice. Notice what he says will happen soon:

This is what the LORD says: "As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands and I will uproot the house of Judah from among them. Jeremiah 12:14



Injustice will not last forever. Judah will not be in the grip of Babylon forever. In fact toward the end of the book of Jeremiah we find these assuring words:

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place

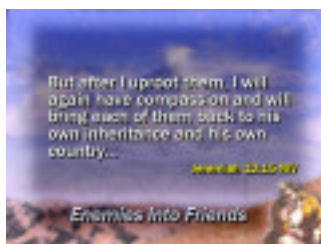


. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD , "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

God gave a timeline for the exile. It was temporary. Soon things were going to get better for the people of Judah.

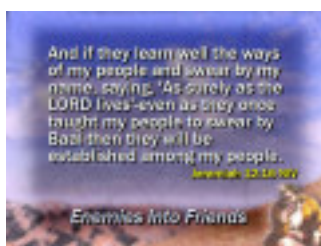


The next section is entitled Enemies Into Friends.



And then God gives Jeremiah a tiny peak of God's great plan of grace, grace extended to all, not just his favorites, but even to the enemy:

¹⁵ But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to his own inheritance and his own country.



¹⁶ And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, 'As surely as the LORD lives'-even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal-then they will be established among my people.

God even open's heaven's doors for Babylonians, if they dare accept His grace. Now that is grace! Enemies offered God's unconditional love. Imagine what would happen in this world if all of us could take a look at our enemies through God's eyes of unconditional love!



The final section is entitled Tragedy into Triumph.



Sometimes good things come out of our deepest loss. God can take tragedy and turn it into hope. Listen to the words of Pat Arribito.

***A Timeless Time Part Two** In the midst of it all there was a sense that God was still there. I had such a sense of God's presence. And it was an odd thing to me. I mean it was noteworthy that in the midst of the most agonizing experience that I could ever have I still felt this center of piece within me and a sense that God was right there. And that whatever agony I was enduring, God was too and he was right there with me enduring it and I wasn't alone.*

There's lot's of things I can't answer about God but I know that he's good and I know that He has been there, you know He carried me! And I told Him that You have to keep carrying me cause I cannot walk alone. And He's carried me ever since.

And as a footnote to Pat's story, she has continued the work of her late husband Jim in putting together a monumental film project about the history of the Sabbath. The first two volumes have already been released featuring Hal Holbrook as the narrator entitled The Seventh-day. God can take tragic situations and turn them into hope



Maybe we haven't suffered the tragic accidental loss of a loved one but perhaps we've suffered a loss of a dream. Sometimes those tragedies can also turn into triumphs. (*Insert your own personal illustration here*) I've seen this in my own life when I returned to that church was held hostage by two of its leaders. When I left the church was half empty and there was a spirit of despair, infighting and suspicion. When I returned ten years later the church was healthy and full of people. You could feel the warmth and grace of God there.

What happened? Personally I would like to take all the credit for the growth that happened upon my exit but the story is slightly more complicated. As I looked around the church The two obstinate people who had given me the most grief were no longer present. As I asked around the story came out. One had succumbed to liver cancer but before he died he had a heartfelt repentance and as much as possible tried to make right the wrongs that he had done over the years. The other Elder did not repent and instead started his own church up on the Mountain. The church experienced a back door revival. With those two obstacles out of the way God moved in a mighty way. God can take tragic situations and turn them into hope.



It happened with Jeremiah, Unfortunately He wasn't there to see it. Tradition says that the aged prophet was put to death in Egypt for preaching against idolatry. However I would like to be standing close to Jeremiah for the resurrection. After the dust from the cosmic homecoming has settled a little bit I picture God pulling Jeremiah aside for another conversation.

"Jeremiah? How's your running coming along?"

Jeremiah answers, "well, with this new body that you gave me I can run pretty fast."

"As fast as horses?"

"Well no." Jeremiah admits.

"How's your navigational skills. Are you still a klutz?" asks God.

Jeremiah replies, "Oh, my no. I'm able to get along quite nicely."

"Good." Says God. "Let's do a little navigation. Let's run with horses a little. Maybe its time that I tell you the whole story."

We watch over their shoulder as God sits down and shares

with him what happened after Jeremiah died. The Lord tells him about how by the end of the captivity many of the Jews had become humble and teachable. God looks him in the eye and says:

“They began to read your prophecies.”

“You’re kidding!” exclaims Jeremiah.

“They copied them, they circulated them and Jeremiah, your writings went from being an object of scorn to becoming part of the sacred scrolls.”

“Wow!” is all Jeremiah can muster.

God continues: “Your prediction came true and your countryman and the love of my life were able to return to Canaan. And Jeremiah, the impact of your life didn’t stop there.”

By now Jeremiah is quivering with unspeakable joy.

God continues: “Your writings continued to inspire humanity in the Christian era. Your writings, Jeremiah, are a part of the Christian canon of scripture. Look around you. There are untold millions of people enjoying eternity here in heaven because you were a conduit of grace.”



I want to be there in heaven to hear that conversation, don’t you? But meanwhile, not only did he have great plans for Judah but He has great plans for us. Let’s look at the words of Jeremiah one more time in Jeremiah 29... And this time we’re going to take it close to our hearts. As I read the passage, make it your passage. Go ahead and say your name out loud . This is your promise. This is my promise. Let’s read the passage out loud right now:

For I know the plans I have for your name," declares the LORD , "plans to prosper your name you and not to harm your name, plans to give your name hope and a future.

Prayer

Word’s cannot express my appreciation for You, Lord. I can’t run as fast as horses and I stumble in the bramble, but thank You Lord for allowing me to see a shaft of light from heaven. I know if we could see it all we would be blinded, but thank you for the shaft.

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