



December 29th, 2024  
“Losing or Loving the Gospel”  
Jeremiah 42:1-12  
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## PROLOGUE

Well, here we are – the end of 2024! Are there any out there that wondered if they’d make it this far? No hands necessary, but what a reason to **rejoice**, right?! But it is also a time to **reflect**, and I hope you do; there’s no advantage just to roll on over into the next year without a moment’s thought about where your life has been this past year, and where it is headed this coming year. How will you live differently next year to deepen the most important relationship you could ever have?

Regardless of how people respond to Jesus, our calling remains the same: *“Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”*<sup>(2 Tim.4:2)</sup> Many will reject the Gospel but the Lord will call people out of death into life eternal. Remember, as Paul said, ***“We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved, and among those who are perishing. To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance of life to life.”*** (2 Cor.2:15-16)

## PRAYER

## INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah 42, at first glance seems simply a narrative describing the plight of a remnant of God’s people in Jerusalem that have not been carried off as exiles to Babylon – just the history of some despairing people in a desperate time where hope and trust in God has fallen way, and survival is full of temptations to make it anyway you can. I’ll read Jeremiah 42:1-12:

***<sup>1</sup>Then ... all the people from the least to the greatest, came near <sup>2</sup>and said to Jeremiah the prophet, “Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the LORD your God for us, for all this remnant—because we are left with but a few, as your eyes see us—<sup>3</sup> that the LORD your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do.” <sup>4</sup>Jeremiah the prophet said to them, “I have heard you. Behold, I will pray to the LORD your God according to your request, and whatever the LORD answers you I will tell you. I will keep nothing back from you.” <sup>5</sup> Then they said to Jeremiah, “May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word with which the LORD your God sends you to us. <sup>6</sup> Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the LORD our God.”***

***7 Ten days later the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. 8 Then he summoned... all the people from the least to the greatest, 9 and said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him: 10 If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. 11 Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the LORD, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. 12 I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land."***

So obviously they heeded the word of the LORD, stayed in the land, and everyone lived happily ever ...*right?! NO!!* They didn't like what God had to say – his promises of care and mercy were not trusted as truth, but seen as lies of Jeremiah, spoken against their plans to flee. Certain they could look after themselves better than God could, they took everyone to Egypt. The historical record of the doom that followed them reminds us of the **exclusivity** of truly following God, something Jesus characterized of His gospel when he jarringly stated, ***"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."*** (Matt.12:30) We might well put it this way:

## **FOLLOWING GOD DEMANDS OF US FOUR 'EITHER/OR DECISIONS'**

*This passage in Jeremiah demonstrates the first decision:*

### **1. Either Fear God, or Fear Life**

Failure to fear God, which we'll define as **awe** at his holiness and sovereignty, and **trust** in his grace and love – births fear of life's circumstances, which we'll define as **terror** of our inability to control life events, and **anxiety** over how they will play out. Here's the context of the verses I've just read:

In Jeremiah 39, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon sacks Jerusalem, capturing King Zedekiah, destroying the city walls, and carrying off the population to Babylon, though leaving behind *"some of the poor people who owned nothing"* (39:10). He then appointed Gedaliah to be governor over the cities of Judah, promising the people left behind that if they would continue to dwell there, and serve the king of Babylon, it would go well with them. But shortly after, Gedaliah was murdered. The remaining people were **in terror** that when Nebuchadnezzar found out about Gedaliah's murder, he would pursue them for destruction. So, **in fear**, they planned to escape to Egypt. But first they came to Jeremiah with the request we read earlier.

Now we might well ask, "Was their request genuine, sincere?" What makes us suspicious, even if we didn't know the end of the story? Reflect again on vv.2-3 of ch. 42: *"1Then ... (they) said to Jeremiah the prophet, "Let our plea for mercy come before you, and pray to the LORD your God for us, for all this remnant 3 that the LORD your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do."*

Imagine, finding yourself in a difficult, perplexing situation you cannot see a clear way through, and you come to Ken, saying, “Pastor Ken, let my plea for mercy come to YOU! Would you please pray to the Lord YOUR God for me?” Wouldn’t Ken, with a look of utter shock on his face, say to you, “Wait a minute!! Have you not always affirmed, that the Lord is YOUR God?!” Wouldn’t these questions suggest an hypocrisy that exposed the falsehood of your original claim to be one of God’s own, suggesting instead that you’ve never had a genuine relationship with God? If a person doesn’t fear God, they will fear life itself, letting panic rob them of all reason. Eugene Peterson entitled this chapter, “What you fear will catch up to you.” Underlying this is a second simple ultimatum:

## 2. Either Fear God, or Disbelieve Him

R. K. Harrison in his commentary, observes that “The survivors had still not learned the lesson of implicit trust in God for all areas of life. Self-interest has predominated once again, and now their real concern is merely to know if God will approve their plan to migrate to Egypt. Thus, they are not seeking spiritual guidance in the usual sense of that term. (*which would be coming before God open-handed, holding to no preconceived plan, eager and expectant to both hear God’s will and obey it fully*) While promising obedience (*whether or not God’s answer may seem good or bad to them*), they apparently felt that God would readily honor their plans, and thus their obedience would involve little effort or sacrifice.”

This is really a window into the prevalence within Evangelical Christianity to reposition human pride as a desirable trait emphasizing human willpower as a sign of positive self-esteem. In reality, it’s actually a failure and refusal to love God as He truly is. Instead, it is worshipping a god of one’s own imagination, who waits on you as a servant, to grant whatever you need to live a satisfying life on your terms.

In Matthew 7, Jesus summarized the attitude of this apparent “religious” crowd, which paralleled crowds he was speaking to, who gave the appearance of genuinely seeking after God. **“<sup>24</sup> Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”(24-27)**

But awkward as their request was to Jeremiah, he made it, and 10 days later God answered him. Ten days to a crowd that had already made up its mind must have seemed like an eternity. What were they thinking? *“Time is ticking here, God! Likely Nebuchadnezzar knows the treachery that has taken place, and has troops are already on the run after us. Why are we waiting?! Haven’t we already made the best decision on our own? Perhaps God’s delay*

*reflects his impotence against the Babylonians? Or maybe he doesn't care about us after all, and our self-reliance is actually our best bet?"*

How does this mind set develop, this trajectory of heart away from a confidence in God to utter reliance upon anything else but God? Listen to these lyrics from Brothers Landreth's Grammy winning song, Made Up Mind: *"It starts out slow, With go ahead and go, And pretty soon the melody is like a Rainstorm Tin Roof Symphony, it starts out slow. It goes on and on, For way too long. It always ends on a bad note; it goes on and on. The quiet behind the slamming door, The break of all hearts that won't break no more, Get away wheels in a straight line. Serenade of a made-up mind."*

Now obviously they are singing of a relationship slowly suffocating towards a despairing end, little by little, until there's nothing left. But don't these lyrics also describe what can happen, to what once appeared on the surface at least, to be a relationship of trust in God, that over time, reality showed to be false?... a gradual disintegration that picked up speed in its determination to go its own way, confident that sheer willpower will eventually save the day? Finally slamming the door, never to return. And all along the way, the promises of rest, hope and fulfillment dwindled away into anxiety, despair, and emptiness. Does this sound familiar to anyone here today?

Where did they lose their fear of God, their **awe** at his power and holiness, and **confidence** in his love and merciful care that their obedience to Him would bring? How did they choose instead to **fear** life itself, somehow confident that they could still manage the inevitable failures of self-determination as a consequential trade-off to gain independence from God? Was God's answer SO BAD?!

In a modern vernacular, God was assuring them in vv. 10-12: *"I know you're afraid, but you don't need to be. Stay here – I'm going to build you up, not tear you down; plant you for an abundant harvest here, not destroy you – the just punishment you have endured? It's over. You needn't fear even the king of Babylon, for I am with you as your Savior and Deliverer, and the mercy I'll give you will be so grand, that the king of Babylon himself will be the one who showers you with my mercy!"*

Who could say no to that?! This was a continuous promise God made to his people from the Book of Deuteronomy onward. In Deut. 11 God declares: ***"You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep His charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always, to love the LORD your God and serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, then you may live long in the land, a land that the LORD your God cares for; His eyes are always upon it, that you shall eat and be full. NO one shall be able to stand against you."***

They knew this...they'd seen the evidence of this throughout the history of the nation of Israel. But they didn't believe it. They also knew the warnings God gave, in Deuteronomy 12:8, that if

they abandoned the LORD, chasing after other gods, “everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes”, that God would legitimately unleash curses upon them. So in 28:28-29, “The LORD will strike you with madness, and blindness, and confusion of mind – you shall not prosper in your ways, and be only oppressed and robbed continually, and there shall be no one to help you.” They knew this too...but they didn’t believe this either! *But, everyone believes something – and so you face a third decision:*

### 3. Either Commit to God, or Anything Else but God

In a powerful indictment of idolatry and idol makers and worshippers, Jeremiah records God’s warning to his people: “Learn not the way of the nations – their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field...do not be in awe of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good. But the Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes...and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance. Yet, they are stupid and do not inquire of the Lord; therefore they have not prospered and all their flock is scattered.” (Jer. 10:2,5,10,16,21) Recognizing the belligerence of God’s people long before their rebellious attitude in ch. 44, Jeremiah laments before God, “I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in a man who walks to direct his steps.” (23)

So, in Egypt, when Jeremiah confronted them with the judgment of obliteration they would face because of their flight there in defiance of God’s direction, this was their response:

*<sup>15</sup> Then all the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: <sup>16</sup> “As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, WE WILL NOT LISTEN TO YOU. <sup>17</sup> But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. <sup>18</sup> But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.” (Jer. 44:15-18)*

So, this was not something new they picked up in Egypt – this was generations in the making, even while they were living in Judah, before the exile had happened. Let’s agree on what these offerings to the “queen of heaven” really mean – a defiant, belligerent, determination to deny God as the rightful ruler of one’s life – even mocking Him by attributing the blessings one experiences in life to a source other than God. So, in essence, one could similarly say, “Whatever I have in life right now, that’s satisfying, meaningful, and lasting, I have of my own doing – God is not responsible – after all, I’ve always ignored him to my benefit – why would I trust and obey him – I’m not obligated to him at all! But if it does get bad, I’ve still got enough goodness within me to choose him if I need to.”

In Acts 8:23, Peter warns Simon the magician, of the root of bitterness within him, like those in Deuteronomy 29:18, who pretend to believe but whose heart does not evidence their claim. In that passage, the rebellious person actually *“blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart’”*, oblivious to the destruction ahead of them. On this last Sunday of 2024, that as you reflect back over the past year, is it possible there is evidence that this attitude might describe your life?

In his commentary, R. E. Clements concludes, *“All was now effectively lost for these divided Jewish people in Egypt. Having lost their foothold on the land, they abandoned the last bonds of loyalty and faith in the God who had given that land to their ancestors. They had inwardly lost the power to reason aright concerning their fate and their hopes for the future. Jeremiah accuses them of complete abandonment of their ancestral faith and now they lacked the inner motivation and spiritual insight which could have given them new hope. Hope is seen as a value of religious loyalty and faith; despair as its opposite. They had chosen despair rather than hope.”*

Many people, apparently professing Christians included, will bristle at the inherently and irreducibly, confrontational demands of the Gospel – admitting one’s helplessness in sin, the cost of repentance, the cross of discipleship, the narrowness of the Way. But this Jewish remnant was past this – they knew that a life trying to serve more than one ideology or belief is impossible to live. Remember Jesus words? **“No one can serve two masters. For he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”** (Matt 6:24) The divergence of this remnant away from a living faith and trust in God, to a devotion instead to an ideology that would utterly fail them, is paralleled within the church today, by what one believes about the Gospel. *And so, the fourth decision challenging us today is whether we rest in:*

#### **4. Either Old Gospel, or New Gospel**

What could I possibly mean by this?! In J. I. Packer’s essay, “Saved by His Precious Blood”, he examines the appalling departure of many evangelical churches from beliefs and practices that are centuries old. He declares, *“Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered the ‘old gospel’ for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole, a decidedly different thing...this ‘new gospel’ fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts, because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. It is too exclusively concerned to be “helpful” to man – to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction – and too little concerned to glorify God.”*

The ‘old gospel’ has always and essentially been a proclamation of divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. That this ‘old gospel’ proclaims our helplessness, bound by sin until the Holy Spirit, awakens us from death to life to see both our desperate

separation from God, and the redemptive atonement won for us by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, is seen as 'not helpful' by the 'new gospel'. Packer summarizes: *"The result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth."*

Albert Mohler details the recent history of scholars within the Evangelical camp who have labeled the doctrines of the inerrancy of Scripture and substitutionary atonement as "a bad news theology". A "good news theology", they countered would be *"to realize that Jesus did not die in order to change God's attitude towards us, but to change our attitude towards God."* He goes on to show how this downward slope required an abandonment of the authority of Scripture, and with that, Scripture's holy and just God, and finally that sin has any eternal consequences. Little by little such a slope makes it easier and easier to embrace the latest socio-cultural ideologies, however far removed they are from Scriptural doctrines, including the centrality of the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

We've looked at 4 'either/or' decisions critical to truly following Jesus. Perhaps not so remarkably, the Apostle John expresses this in two of his epistles:

***"Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God." (2 John 9)***

***"We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him." (1 John 5:18)***

In these two verses, John affirms the authority of the Word of God, and of both the seriousness of sin and how being born again into Christ grants an abiding compulsion to whole-heartedly trust and obey him and turn from sin.

So, the question I believe that each of us must confirm as we look back on this past year and towards however much time God's grace will allow us in the year to come, is: "What Gospel have you placed all your hope upon?" Compare your gospel to Packer's passionate plea for the biblical gospel; he says:

*"To the question, 'what must I do to be saved?', the 'old gospel' replies: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural enmity and rebellion against God, for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Spirit.*

Look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on his mercy; ask him to give you a new heart,

working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write his law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from him.

Turn to him and trust him as best you can and pray for grace, to turn and trust more thoroughly; use your means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to him; watch, pray, and read and hear God's Word; worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt, that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart that you desired has been put within you."

In your personal audience before God right now, can you declare with confidence and gratefulness that this is the initiative Jesus has taken within you, and the response to his grace that you have made by the faith he's given you – that you continue to pursue him passionately, and he continues to transform you more and more into his image, assuring you of the eternal home he has gone ahead to prepare for you? If that is true, how loud can your Hallelujah possibly be to express the wonder and majesty of the Sovereign, holy, Creator God drawing you, calling you – a condemned, determined sinner, to be his adopted child?

But... if this does not describe the true state of your life, then you are still among the straggling remnant determinately going their own way to destruction – not good now, nor for the days and months ahead. May it be that even now the Holy Spirit is awakening you – to cast yourself on his mercy and find reconciliation with the Father through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. May it be that you as well will lift up a Hallelujah that rings heaven's gates! Amen.