

Devotion 27:

Our Father Doesn't Enjoy Disciplining Us

Jeremiah 1—52

I think the average person on the street, unfamiliar with God and His ways, sees our Father in one of two extreme ways. Either He is an overly kind grandfather, or He is an overly cruel tyrant. And if that person has some brief experiences with reading something from the Old Testament, then the harsh, cruel tyrant appears to be more likely. This practice of reading through the Bible from cover to cover, one book at a time, is opening my eyes to a few things. One of my biggest observations is this: beware of taking passages out of context.

For example, if only bits and pieces of Jeremiah are read, someone could easily assume that our Father almost enjoys punishing people. But if the entire book is read in just a few sittings, the repetition of pleas, of warnings, of second chances offered is unmistakable:

“While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.” 7:13

“From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention.” 7:25-26a

“I warned them again and again, saying ‘Obey me.’ But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts.” 11:7b-8a

“They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline.” 32:33

In fact, Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible, containing more words than any other book. And most of those words are vivid descriptions of the discipline our Father is going to do to unfaithful, idolatrous Judah: *“By the sword, famine and plague it will be handed over to the king of Babylon.”* (32:36) Jeremiah receives more words from God to say to the people of God than any other prophet. But the reader does not get the feeling that this is one big, long, drawn out lecture to disobedient children. Over 25 times we read something like this:

“Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.” 7:3

“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted,

torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” 18:7-8

“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ 18:11

“Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done.” 26:2b-3

The evil done by this generation is greater than that done by their forefathers. (16:12) Other gods are being worshipped. Incense is burned to them and even young children are being sacrificed to them, a thought that our Father points out several times, *“Did not enter (His) mind.”* (19:5) Yet, even then, our Father is basically pleading and imploring with His children through Jeremiah, *“Repent and return to Me and I will not send you into captivity for 70 years in Babylon.”*

The book reminds me of when my daughter was a senior in high school. Wanting to teach her responsibility for her future, I asked her to complete two applications for college scholarships within the week or there would be no gas for her car. During that week I gave her websites and flyers on various scholarships, some of which meant merely completing a form. But her procrastination and stubbornness dragged the week toward an empty gas tank. I recall wanting in the worst way for her to obey and my being able to avoid applying the consequence. Sadly, obedience never came.

I believe that is somewhat how our Father must have felt toward His children in Jeremiah. Like my daughter they, too, sadly never listened or obeyed. And so the Babylonians came and carried them off. I don't believe our Father enjoyed that punishment. Ezekiel 33:11 tells us:

“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!”

Much of the end of Jeremiah is centered on the hopeful restoration of Judah. A small remnant trickles back after 70 years. And even then, one gets the feeling that our Father wishes to move forward and to forget the past:

“I will punish the king of Babylon and his land as I punished the king of Assyria. But I will bring Israel back to his own pasture... In those days, at that time, search will be made for Israel's guilt,

but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare.” 50:19-20

Do you feel that our Father is disciplining you today? If He is, know that He doesn't enjoy what you are going through. The ultimate punishment that His only Son took for us in our place on the cross must have been excruciating for our Father. But if a foreign nation's chastisement preceded restoration for our Old Testament brothers, just imagine the restoration that is ours and that is coming on the heels of Jesus' being punished for us.