



There is a scene in the movie, *As Good As It Gets* where Jack Nicholson is walking through the waiting room of a psychiatrist's office. The people sitting in the room are looking miserable, feeling the weight of the world on their shoulders, suffering from all kinds of mental problems that are often a part of our reality on earth. As he sits there, Nicholson with his glaring look asks, "What if this is as good as it gets?"

Thankfully, the good news is that as followers of Christ, we have the hope and are given promises that assure us this isn't as good as it gets. Even in the worst of times we believe God is at work and there is hope. But it's difficult to believe that when everything around you tells you something different. Many of you are facing circumstances in your life that feel overwhelmingly difficult. It's hard to see beyond them. It's hard to believe God is in control. It's hard to believe he has your best interest in mind. It's hard to believe there will be better days ahead.

For several weeks we've been talking about prayer. We've not been talking about prayer in theory. We've actually been eavesdropping on some of the great prayers of people in the Bible. Last week we listened to Jabez as he prayed for God to expand his border. We learned he was praying for something God had already revealed he wanted his people to have. He wasn't asking for personal wealth. God had promised this land to his people and he wanted them to take possession of it; he wanted their borders to expand. So Jabez' prayer was fully in keeping with what God had promised his people.

That's a great lesson about prayer. But here's the problem: sometimes the reality of our circumstances and the promises of God seem miles apart. You look at one and then you look at the other and you wonder how is this going to work? For example, we have a promise like the one in Romans 8:28 that says "*God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God...*" That's an amazing promise but then we look at our circumstances (the loss of a job, the death of a spouse) and we have no idea how this can possibly work for good in our lives. How do you pray when your life circumstances and the promises of God are miles apart?

This was a problem the prophet Jeremiah faced head on. Turn with me to Jeremiah 32. Let me summarize verses 1-15 for you.

Jeremiah is imprisoned by Zedekiah because he prophesied Judah's doom at the hands of the besieging Babylonians.

The events of Jeremiah 32 took place in about 587 BC. At this point, all that was left of Israel was the southern kingdom of

Judah, which included the city of Jerusalem. But then Judah got into trouble when the Babylonians came against them. This was an ever expanding empire, led by a crazy tyrant named Nebuchanezzar. He started by coming into Judah and taking a group of exiles he considered to be Judah's best and brightest back with him into Babylon. Remember Daniel? Daniel and his friends were part of that first group taken into exile. But there were still a lot of people left in Judah and Jerusalem. Nebuchanezzar even let Judah have their own king, a guy named Zedekiah. And for a period of time life went on pretty much as normal in Jerusalem. But then Zedekiah got a dose of confidence and rebelled against Nebuchanezzar. Nebuchanezzar didn't like that so he sent his troops down to Jerusalem and laid siege to the city. They cut the city off from any food or water supply. It wouldn't be long before the people of Jerusalem would either surrender or die.

One of the people left in Jerusalem was an old prophet named Jeremiah. The counsel he gave during all of this might surprise you. He told Judah to surrender. He said, "Listen, all of this is happening to us because God is judging us. We've been disobedient to him and he's doing exactly what he said he would if we rebelled against him. So we may as well just take our lumps." You can imagine that wasn't a very popular message. Zedekiah and his cronies viewed Jeremiah as a traitor and even a collaborator with the Babylonians. So Zedekiah shut him up by throwing Jeremiah into the palace prison.

Jeremiah buys a field at Anathoth according to the word of the Lord.

But while Jeremiah was in prison something strange happened. God spoke to him and told him his cousin would soon visit him in prison. His cousin would come to him with a real estate deal. It's no surprise he needed money. Everything was scarce in Jerusalem; food prices soared. To stay alive, this guy needed some shekels. God said, "Your cousin will come and offer to sell you a field that's in the city of Anathoth." This was land that was in Jeremiah's family and back then land stayed within the family. The implication was that Jeremiah was to buy it.

Now you have to understand this didn't make any sense at all. This little village of Anathoth was in the land of Benjamin and that land was already occupied by the invading Babylonians. We talk about real estate prices plummeting! Talk about depreciation! This land would have been worthless! It's like if the residents of

Foster City found out beyond a shadow of a doubt that a massive earthquake would hit the city in a week and the whole city would crumble into the bay. A lot of people would want to sell. You could buy a house on the water for a hundred dollars. But nobody in their right mind would buy it. The land would be worthless.

Then everything happened just as God said it would. His cousin came and Jeremiah bought the field from him for 17 shekels of silver. Under normal circumstances, that's not very much for a piece of land, but again it was worthless. Jeremiah made sure the transaction was handled in a very businesslike manner. Right there in jail, the money was weighed out; a deed was written with terms and conditions; a copy was made. He signed his name and sealed it in the presence of witnesses. Everyone who watched must have thought, "What a nut! This old prophet has finally gone off his rocker." But Jeremiah gave both copies to a friend named Baruch and told him to seal them up in a jar so they could be preserved for a long time.

Why would he do this? Why would God have him do this? It made no sense at all. The answer comes in v.15. *'For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."* What's God saying? He's saying, "Though the present value of land is in the tank, in the future I'll restore this land to my people. I'm not finished with them yet. This judgment may be from my hand, but it won't have the last word. The day will come when this land is worth something again. This is not as good as it gets. Houses and vineyards will be bought and sold here." That's why the deeds had to be preserved for a long time. The fulfillment of the promise might not come for a long time. By the way, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found thousands of years later in jars just like the ones Jeremiah would have used. He was making an investment for the future. Call it "speculation." He was speculating on God's promise.

It strikes me that sometimes we're called to do things that seem totally senseless in the world's eyes; things that only really make sense in light of the promises of God. Why should any of us invest time in ministry? We have people in this church who teach Sunday School to third graders week after week; people who take vacation time to serve needy people in the Dominican Republic; people who give a significant portion of their income month after month so we make an impact on the Peninsula for Christ. In certain ways, none of that makes any sense unless God's promise about the future is true. It reminds me of what the Apostle Paul once said, *"If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied."* And then later he said, *"If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"* (1 Cor. 15: 19, 32). You get the idea: making an investment in the kingdom of God makes no sense at all if this is all there is. But if God's promises are true, if there's more to life than just what we know and can see here on earth, it's the wisest investment a person can possibly make.

So this was a tremendous act of obedient faith on Jeremiah's part. And it would have been nice if the story ended there. We could just wrap this up in a tidy little package and say what a wonderful example of faith and obedience Jeremiah was. But the story doesn't end there. In the next breath Jeremiah says, *"After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch the son of Neriah, then I prayed to the LORD, saying..."* (v.16).

In prayer, Jeremiah affirms that "nothing is too difficult for God" in spite of current circumstances.

I imagine this took place after everyone left the prison cell. Jeremiah is alone with his own thoughts and he turns to pray. We might wonder at this point why he prays. Why would you pray in this kind of situation? What would you say to God? Listen to what Jeremiah says.

'Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You, who shows lovingkindness to thousands, but repays the iniquity of fathers into the bosom of their children after them, O great and mighty God The LORD of hosts is His name; great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds; who has set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, and even to this day both in Israel and among mankind; and You have made a name for Yourself, as at this day. You brought Your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and with wonders, and with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terror; and gave them this land, which You swore to their forefathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey. They came in and took possession of it, but they did not obey Your voice or walk in Your law; they have done nothing of all that You commanded them to do; therefore You have made all this calamity come upon them. Behold, the siege ramps have reached the city to take it; and the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans who fight against it, because of the sword, the famine and the pestilence; and what You have spoken has come to pass; and behold, You see it. You have said to me, O Lord GOD, "Buy for yourself the field with money and call in witnesses"--although the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans" (verses 17–25).

There are several things I want you notice about this prayer I think help us understand Jeremiah's state of mind.

Prayer follows obedience. The first observation has to do with the circumstances of the prayer rather than its content. Notice Jeremiah's prayer came **after** his act of obedience, not before. I could see Jeremiah praying beforehand, "Lord, do you really want me to do this? Do you really want me to buy this field?" Or I could see him praying, "Lord, give me the strength to do this. Give me the faith to obey you and buy this field in front of all these people who think I'm a nut." Now he might have prayed beforehand but he doesn't tell us about it if he did. Instead he tells us about his prayer **after** he bought the field; **after** his step of obedience. Why is that? I think part of the reason was he was feeling vulnerable. Jeremiah needed to pray in order to nurture and sustain his faith that God really would fulfill his promises. I

think he had a few moments when he felt, "Oh my goodness! What did I just do?"

There are times in our lives when we know what to do. God's word is very clear about some things. We don't have to pray, "God, I have this friend who is in dire straits and he needs my help and I have the means to help him. Do you want me to use some of my resources to help him?" No, you just do it because God's word says to do it. But sometimes it's after the fact that we need to pray; after we obey God we may wonder, "What have I just done? I could have used that money!" From a human standpoint it doesn't make any sense. You may have some doubts or fears or even questions about what you just did and so you need to pray.

No request is made. The leads me to the second observation I'll make about this prayer: he doesn't ask God for anything. We normally think of prayer as coming to God and asking God for things and we've seen that's okay. But no such request is made here. I dare you to find a request in this prayer. He doesn't even ask for strength to continue to trust him.

There are times when we come to God and it's about more than just asking for stuff. Sometimes it's about unburdening ourselves. Sometimes we need to work something through in the presence of God. We have these drains that run along the sidewalk in front of our house. Once in a while they get plugged up by leaves and when it rains water will build up as far out as the middle of the street. I have to go out there and unplug the drain by removing the leaves. Prayer is like that. Prayer is like unplugging the drain and relieving the pressure that bears down on our soul. I think that's part of why Jeremiah prayed and that's part of why we pray as well.

He starts with God. This leads to my third observation. More than anything else, this prayer is all about God. Did you notice that? All but the very last verse of the prayer is about God and what he's done. That's eight parts "God" and one part something else.

He affirms God's power in v.17. "*Lord, by your great power you made the heavens and the earth. Nothing is too difficult for you!*" Then he affirms God's loyal love as One "*who shows lovingkindness to thousands*" (v.18). He details how God has shown that love to Israel by using signs and wonders to deliver them from slavery to Egypt and bringing them into a land flowing with milk and honey (verses 20-22). He affirms God's wisdom and knowledge as One who is "*great in counsel*" and whose "*eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men*" (v.19).

He even affirms God is totally right and just in judging his people. God holds his people accountable. He doesn't take sin lightly. He expects his people to live differently. He says God "*gives everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds*" (v.19). And he describes how "*they did not obey your voice or walk in your law*" and "*they have done nothing that you have*

commanded them to do; therefore you have made all this calamity come upon them." He even says of all these terrible things happening right now: "*What you have spoken has come to pass; and behold, you see it*" (v. 24).

This prayer is all about God; all about his love, wisdom and justice. It reminds me of when the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them to pray. Do you remember what Jesus said? He said, "When you pray do it like this. *"Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* Now that's just the first part of the prayer, but what's that all about? It's all about God: In essence, Jesus says, "When you pray, start by talking to God about God." Don't start with you or even with your needs. Start with God. That's what Jeremiah does.

This is so helpful for us. Remember Jeremiah is doing this to bolster and nurture his own wavering faith. So he reminds himself who God is and what he's done in the past. This is exactly what we need to do in those times we're struggling to see the connection between what's happening in our life and the promises of God. Sit in his presence and remind yourself who he is and what he's done. When we do this we can add something monumental to the list of things God has done. We can talk to God about how God sent his only Son to die for us and rescue us from the grip of sin and death. We talk to God about how he gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit and the hope of eternal life. We can recall the verse that says, "*He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*" (Rom 8:32).

He ends with confusion. Here is the last observation I want to make: He ends with confusion. Does that surprise you? I'd love to say Jeremiah ends on a bold and victorious note of faith. But instead he ends by laying the perplexing situation out before God: "Oh Lord God, you told me to go buy this field in front of all those people, but the city still belongs to the Babylonians!" It's like he's saying, "God, you do see that, right? I know you do, but how are you going to pull this off? I really don't see how this is going to work. How is my investment going to ever make sense?"

One of the reasons why I know this is what Jeremiah was thinking is because of what God said in response to him. Look at verses 26-27. "*Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, 'Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?'*" God takes something Jeremiah had said early in his prayer and he puts it right back to him. "Jeremiah, I'm the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is anything too difficult for me?"

We can voice prayers of hope because in spite of circumstances nothing is too difficult for God.

You know, in so many of our prayers that's the real issue we're wrestling with. Is this too hard for God? There are times in our lives we face impossible and hopeless circumstances; times when

the reality of our lives and the promises of God are miles apart. There are times we're called to do something that's nothing short of foolish unless God's promises are true. In those times Jeremiah's prayer shows us we can be absolutely real with God. We can pray through the contradictions. There's no denial of them in his prayer. There's no sugar coating of the situation. He's real. We can be, too. But as we do that we also need to take into account who God is and what he has done because he doesn't change and it's still true that nothing is too hard for God.

This has always been true. God promised Abraham and Sarah a child, but Sarah passed the age of childbearing. God says, "I'm still going to do it." Sarah laughed. She thought that was funny. God says, "***Is anything too difficult for the Lord?***" (Gen. 18:14).

It was true of Mary, too. The angel says to this young girl, a virgin, "You're going to have a child who will be the Messiah." Mary says, "How can this be?" The angel says, "***nothing will be impossible with God***" (Lk 1:37).

It was true for Peter. Peter watches as a rich young man comes to Jesus and learns he must give away all his possessions if he wants to be his disciple. The young man walks away and Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Peter says, "***Then who can be saved?***" Jesus answered, "***With people it is impossible. But not with God; for all things are possible with God***" (Mk 10:27).

Even Jesus, praying in the garden of Gethsemene, sweating drops of blood and dreading what lay before him at the cross said to God, "***Abba, Father. All things are possible for you; remove this cup from me.***" And even though God could have done that, he didn't because Jesus said, "***yet not what I will, but what you will***" (Mk 14:36).

When you come to those times when the reality of your life and the promises of God seem miles apart you should do two things. First of all, make sure you know what the promises of God really are. God promises he'll meet all of your needs but not all of your wants. He hasn't promised to make you rich or successful in the eyes of the world. He hasn't promised you perfect health. He hasn't promised you children that will never go astray. He hasn't promised you'll get the job you want or get into the school of your dreams or make the team all your friends made. Don't get me wrong, God delights to give us good gifts, but he also sees us through times of great disappointment. In the midst of all of life's ups and downs, he promises to forgive your sins when you confess them to him. He promises to never leave you nor forsake you. He promises to provide for you. He promises to use you and to bear fruit through you as you abide in him. We have what Peter

called "***his precious and magnificent promises***" and they're found in his word and we should all be certain about what they are.

And there are times in our life when we face things like Jeremiah did that are impossible and we have no idea how God's promises will be fulfilled. There are three "impossibles" we face. We face impossible demands. Did you know God's demands in Scripture are impossible for you to keep? God's word sets such a high standard. Jesus said, "Love one another just as I have loved you." Oh, no problem Jesus. I can do that." Guess what? I can't do that. If I'm going to do that I'm going to need help. I'm going to need more than help. I'm going to need a new heart. But, guess what? God promises that to us. He says, "I'll put my Spirit in you and I'll change you from the inside out. I'll take your heart of stone and make it into a heart of flesh."

We also face impossible people. Do you have any impossible people in your life? Maybe you have a spouse or a child or a boss or a parent who is impossible. Maybe you long for that impossible person to come to know Christ in a personal way. Now we don't know who will come to Christ and who won't, but one thing we do know—God loves to demonstrate his grace and his power by bringing "impossible" people into a relationship with him. He does it all the time. That's what he did with the Apostle Paul. That's what he did with me. That's what he did with many of you. He doesn't look for the best and the brightest. He looks for the "projects." There is no one who is so far gone that God can't reach them. I would go so far as to say God loves to reach the real hard ones because it just demonstrates his grace and power even more.

Finally, we face impossible circumstances. That's what Jeremiah faced. The Babylonians were bigger than life. Israel was like a little twig about to confront a tornado. How would they survive? How would they ever be restored to the land? God says, "I'll do it." What impossible circumstances do you face? A job market that's in the tank? A marriage that's broken? A health problem that no one can seem to figure out? A disability that holds you back? Nothing is too hard for God!

So when you confront the "impossibles," turn to God in prayer. You don't even have to ask for anything. Start with God. Talk to God about God. Sit in his presence and rehearse what you know about him to be true. Remember all that he's done for you in the past and all he promises for the future. Then just lay your problem before him. Say to him, "God, everything I can see says one thing while your promise says something else. God, I'm not sure I understand how you're going to pull this off, but I believe you can and I believe you will because nothing is too hard for you."

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