



When was the last time you were suffering so much you thought you might die? In his book, *The Lone Survivor*, Marcus Luttrell describes the first morning of Navy SEAL BUD/S training, the most elite fighting force in the world.

It was 5:00 am. The men were standing in perfectly straight lines.

Instructor Reno said, "push em out" and recruits assumed the push up position and counted out 20 in unison. After the 1st set of 20, they held the position, waiting further instruction.

Instructor Reno said, "push em out" again. 20 more. Then the resting position.

After 80 push ups, the men were left in the resting position for 5 minutes. Shoulder muscles are on fire at this point. Abdominal muscles are screaming for relief. If you give into the pain and quit, you are immediately removed from the program.

The men are only able to make it through this grueling program by embracing a willingness to go way beyond their perceived limitations. In fact, the entire training regiment is designed to take the men past what their brain tells them they can handle.

For example, in the underwater swim, the men are required to go further and further underwater with only 1 breath. The distances get longer and longer. The body's natural urge to give up, rise to the surface and take 1 glorious gulp of air is always before them. And if they do, they are immediately removed from the program. No one becomes a Navy SEAL unless they have resisted that urge and lost consciousness during the underwater swim.

Why would the instructors do this to well-intentioned candidates? Are they doing this because they are cruel and wicked men? No. They are taking them through a well-designed process to teach them that pain is their friend. The candidates are learning that hardship and suffering are tools that teach them that they can go way beyond their self-perceived limitation. The process makes them strong. So strong, they are the most elite fighting force in the world.

Marcus writes that as they went through the process, they didn't really understand all of this. All they knew at the time was the SEAL instructors were putting them through the most grueling experience of their entire life.

When I read this, I thought about how this parallels life and the spiritual life. God tells us that the trials we face test our faith, build our perseverance, and build spiritual maturity. Both the SEAL instructors and God use trials and hardships to make people stronger.

In our passage of scripture today we're going to read the words of Jeremiah, the prophet, who lived through suffering and hardship. He's known as the weeping prophet because he cried so much about the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people of Judah. And through his painful experiences, God is sending a message through the ages that regardless of what we have to go through in life, we can depend on the character of God.

Before we get into the specifics of Jeremiah's story, I feel the need to set the stage, going all the way back to the beginning of God choosing them as his special nation.

**Abraham.** God chose Abraham, from the land of Ur, to bestow special blessings. He was from a spot along the Euphrates and Tigris River, just north of the Persian Gulf. God had him move from his homeland to the land of Canaan. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants as a special chosen people on the earth. This was a one-sided covenant.

**Moses.** Then God chose Moses to deliver his chosen people from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. God gave Commandments (or Laws) to his people to designate them as holy and separate from the surrounding pagan nations. By keeping these commands they showed the pagan countries the character of God, they maintained fellowship with God and ensured his blessing. By breaking them, they severed the fellowship and received punishments.

**David.** After God's people resettled the Promised Land and had a king, God made a covenant with King David. God gave a promise to David that his descendants should have an everlasting kingdom and always have an heir on the throne.

God's plan was to pour blessings on the Israelites and for them to pour blessings on the world. They were chosen without merit, so they should bless others regardless of merit. However, obedience to God's Laws was expected and required as a part of being in relationship with him. Obedience brought blessings while disobedience brought judgments.

After King David, Israel failed more than succeeded in following God's commands. God sent messengers to warn them of the coming judgment for their rebellion but they paid them no attention. Obedience to God has never been about the actions alone. True obedience involves the heart. And God wanted people whose hearts were devoted to him and he wanted them to reveal this through their obedience.

Last week we read about the end of the Northern Kingdom. King Hezekiah of the Southern Kingdom listened to the prophets and remained faithful to the Lord. He followed the commandments God gave to Moses. He led the people of Judah to live God-reliant lives. And God moved in supernatural ways. This opportunity is always available to God's people. I am so inspired to live God-reliant this year. I am so excited to see God move in supernatural ways in our church.

The action in our section of scripture today follows the Southern Kingdom after King Hezekiah's death. Will they remain God-reliant or turn to self-reliance? Probably not, right? I started this sermon talking about suffering.

When Hezekiah died his son, Manasseh, became king and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He was as wicked as the most wicked character you can imagine. He rebuilt the places of worship to idols. He built altars to Baal. He made Asherah poles. He worshipped the stars. He built altars in the temple in Jerusalem to false gods. He sacrificed his own son in the fire. He practiced witchcraft. He consulted mediums.

As you can speculate, this isn't going to end well. The Lord is so angry with Manasseh that he says, *"I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle"* (2 Kings 21:12). Their rebellion, their hard-heartedness, their desire to control, it was reaching a conclusion. God promised blessing but the people continued to choose defiance.

During this dark and sad time, the Lord sends two prophets—Ezekiel to Babylon and Jeremiah to Judah. Specifically, Jeremiah is in Jerusalem, the capital, to deliver an unpopular and unwelcome message: Jerusalem's destruction is coming because of your idolatry and pride. But God's mercy never fails.

**"Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it ... the city wall was broken through... The Babylonians set fire to the royal palace and the houses of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem" (Jer. 39:1, 8).**

Then the most educated, skilled and wealthy were taken captive back to Babylon and the poor were left to fend for themselves in the broken land. Jeremiah was left in Jerusalem, living through the agony and pain of the destruction of his home and seeing the

people around him say that Yahweh isn't powerful, isn't real, and certainly isn't good.

Since these people were living without the protection of a walled city the remaining Jews in Jerusalem decided to travel south to Egypt in search for protection. Jeremiah was forced to go with them. It was during this time that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. As we read chapter 3 of Lamentations, we're going to see Jeremiah's despair, Jeremiah's response to it, and the Lord's rescue.

### **A Cry of Despair**

**I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath.**

**He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light;**

**indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.**

**He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones.**

**He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.**

**He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.**

**He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.**

**Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.**

**He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked (verses 1–9).**

To add to the misery of this situation, he describes how he feels that the Lord wouldn't listen to him. This experience has had a deep and painful effect on Jeremiah. He is experiencing the deepest depth of despair; pain that is rocking him to the core of his being; a level of anxiety that leaves him curled up and moaning on the ground and he feels that God is not listening to him.

Let's continue reading and we'll see the result this has on Jeremiah.

**He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. ... He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink. ... I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. ... So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord" (verses 13, 15, 17, 18).**

In these words Jeremiah is giving us a gift. He's allowing us to see into his soul. There are no nice filters on these words. There are no politically sensitive filters on these words. Jeremiah is showing us his heart and it's raw and bleeding.

Before we read on to see what Jeremiah has to say next, let me ask you a question: Are you ever this honest with yourself? Do

you ever give full articulation to the raw and broken places of your heart?

Some people write this in a journal. That's been a safe place for me for years. Some people talk to God in prayer. Some people talk with a spouse or a close friend. If you aren't ever this honest with yourself, you're probably holding back in an attempt to protect yourself, protect yourself from sliding into despair; protect yourself from your fears that lurk in the corners; protect yourself from doubting the goodness of God.

During a deeply painful time in his life, C.S. Lewis wrote: "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"

Jeremiah and Lewis are a bold model for each of us. If Jeremiah were here today, he'd tell us, "get totally honest with yourself and with God. Quit holding back. Your attempts to protect yourself won't work anyway. You're stuffing more pain and doubt and fear into your heart and you're going to kill yourself."

So instead of ignoring and stuffing his despair, after Jeremiah gets totally honest with himself and God, he shifts gears. He starts preaching to himself.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones believes the practice of preaching truth to ourselves about God's future grace is vital in overcoming spiritual depression. "Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking . . . yourself is talking to you!"

Let's listen in to Jeremiah as he preaches to himself.

**Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:**

**Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.**

**They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.**

**I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."**

**The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;**

**it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.**

**It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.**

**For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.**

**Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.**

**For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone (verses 21-27; 31-33).**

What affect does this have on your soul? It puts a stop to the slide into the deepest and darkest places of our souls. Jeremiah goes over and over and over the truths he knows to be true about God because they are the only life preserver that keeps him afloat. John Piper wrote: "We must learn to fight despondency. The fight is a fight of faith in future grace. It is fought by preaching truth to ourselves about God and his promised future."

This action will test our faith because the hard and dark times are when people question the goodness of God. We might be like a Navy SEAL dying to take a breath of air. We think there's no way we can swim any further. If God were good, he'd let me breath.

When you preach to yourself you experience a renewed perspective: God's perspective. You have the ability to see your pain through God's lens. You see your hardship and suffering as God sees it. And you're reminded that, although your default perspective is an earthy one, God's is an eternal one. And there is always a bigger purpose to the hardships a Christian faces.

Take for example, mountain climbers. They could save time and energy if they reached the summit in helicopters. But their ultimate purpose is conquest, not efficiency. They choose to reach their goal by testing their character and resolve. It can be life-threatening to climb a mountain but the experience of doing it is worth the risk because of the development of their character.

Some of you aren't the biggest risk takers so I'll give another example. God could create scientists, mathematicians, athletes and musicians in a snap. But he doesn't. Instead, he creates babies who grow into these roles over a long and difficult process.

We only learn how to excel by handling failure. It's through hardship, pain, discipline, endurance and patience that we find satisfaction and reward many years later. Enduring through hardship and testing produces that. Jeremiah is going through horrible pain. He's seeing God's nation conquered; the glorious city of Jerusalem burned and the people of God broken. He's honest about all of this with himself and God. But he doesn't stop and leave himself in his despair. He preaches the truth to himself about who God is and doing so changes his perspective.

Let's look again at Lamentations 3 and read what happens after Jeremiah preaches to himself.

**I called on your name, Lord, from the depths of the pit.**

**You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears to my cry for relief."**

**You came near when I called you, and you said, "Do not fear."**

**You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life.  
Lord, you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold  
my cause!**

**You have seen the depth of their vengeance, all  
their plots against me (verses 55-60).**

In verse 58 “Took up” and “redeemed” mean it is a completed past tense action. Meaning, that the Lord was always “taking up” Jeremiah’s cause. God was always working on his behalf. The Lord has been “redeeming” Jeremiah. God has always been working in and around Jeremiah. It isn’t until after Jeremiah preaches to himself that his heart is able to simultaneously experience the pain of his life and the beautiful promises of God.

Randy Alcorn wrote: “We think to ‘love’ means to ‘do no harm,’ when it really means ‘to be willing to do short-term harm for a redemptive purpose.’ A physician who re-breaks an arm in order for it to heal properly, harms his patient, in order to heal him.”

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis gave this analogy. “Suppose you were going in for a vital surgery. Your doctor’s intentions are wholly good and he is very skilled. The kinder he is, the more he will keep on cutting you in order to perform your surgery. Now, during the surgery, you protest because the pain is too much to bear and you beg him to stop. If he stopped before the surgery was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. A good surgeon would always complete the surgery, despite your pleas.”

I grew up, maybe like some of you, being taught that if you did the right things, life would go well for you. God would bless you and life would be nice and cozy. For me, that looked like a big house in the suburbs, a perfect wife, obedient and loving children, a faithful and loyal Golden Retriever, a job that put me in the upper-middle class of America but wasn’t too stressful. There was no room for suffering or hardship in my understanding of walking with God.

I was unprepared to handle or understand the suffering and hardship that comes in life. Sometimes it comes as a result of our rebellion, like the people of Israel, and sometimes it comes as a result of the sin of other people who bump into our lives. Regardless, it will come. And in his lamentations, Jeremiah models a process for us to follow:

- » Get honest
- » Preach to yourself
- » Wait for the Lord to rescue

The Christian can take great confidence that the Lord will always bring rescue because Jesus Christ took the penalty of our sin when he died on the cross. He bore that suffering so that we might experience his rescue.

The first rescue a Christian experiences is the rescue from the curse of death that comes through salvation.

The second rescue a Christian experiences is the rescue from pointless suffering and hardships. God is always working on our behalf and using the trials, testings and hardships to develop our perseverance and grow our spiritual maturity.

The third rescue a Christian experiences is the entrance into heaven at the end of our life. A place where there will be no more testing or suffering.

These rescues can fill your hearts with hope even as you endure suffering.

There are three take-aways for us today:

- » Get honest and preach to ourselves, like Jeremiah.
- » We shouldn’t be so afraid of suffering, for ourselves or for our loved ones: spouse, kids, grandkids, parents, friends and co-workers. Instead of letting fear grip your heart when hardship comes into their lives, pray that they will be strengthened through their hardships.
- » We should live with a heightened sense of awareness that we are never closer to Christ than when we are suffering. It’s during our difficult times that we see our frailty and our limitations. So instead of being self-reliant—a tendency all of us can relate to, a practice that led to the destruction of the nation of Israel—instead of living this way, we realize that it’s only God who can rescue us and we live in a God-reliant way. And it’s the suffering that can bring us closer to him.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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