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*New Year, New You*

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“Father in Heaven, o God of all comfort; we pray that you will be with Tom, be with his family, and all the friends. And we ask that they would realize at this time in their life, Your presents, more completely and more wonderfully than they ever have before. We pray too Lord that You will bless us. We’re about to open Your word, and we want a message from You. We pray that You will teach us and that You will lead us in our study today. We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

This Sabbath has been set aside by our denomination to be a Sabbath of prayer; where the message would be about prayer, and we would begin the year with prayer. Now it seems like a good thing to me, so I decided, yes, I am in on that. And then when I committed to it, I realized what a difficult thing I had done for myself. Because for eight and a half years, I have talked a lot about prayer -- I have taught you how to pray, and I’ve taught you probably everything I know about prayer. So what do I come up with? And I was a little bit concerned about it. Actually, a lot ‘a bit’ concerned about it. But in my devotions, I am reading through the Book of Jeremiah right now, and I came to a passage. And it was one of those experiences that HMS Richards Senior talked about. When he was alive, he encouraged pastors to “Read the Bible, read the Bible. And read it with a piece of paper next to you and a pencil or a pen, and when you come to a text or an idea, write it down.” And he said, as he would read the Bible cover to cover, each year; he would come across texts that would stand up and wave their arms and say, “Preach me, preach me!”

Well I was reading through Jeremiah, and I had that experience. A text was waiving at me, and saying “Preach me!” And I thought, well, how does it tie in to prayer? What lessons will there be about prayer? And I’d love to demonstrate a genius to what I do, but the reality is I believe I am responding to the Spirit of God. And that is, we are not going to study prayer today as much as we will study a prayer that was offered by a prophet of God. And in so doing, I believe, we will learn about prayer, and we will learn something about God as well. We find the prayer being offered in Jeremiah chapter 12. If you are not familiar with the Bible, Jeremiah is in the Old Testament. And if you just open the Bible, try to find the Psalms. There are a lot of them, 150 of them. If you find the Psalms keep turning to the right, you’ll come to Jeremiah. If you are somewhat familiar with the Bible, go to the Book of Mathew in the New Testament. When you get there, turn to the left and keep going left. You will come to Jeremiah. We’ll be in Jeremiah chapter 12.

Now I need to give you a little background of what’s happening. Jeremiah is a timid person. He is called by God to be a prophet. In fact, God says, “When you were in your mother’s womb I called you.” And when God speaks to Him as a young man, Jeremiah says, “I can’t do this. It’s too much for You to ask me to do this. I can’t speak well, and I am...” basically, “I’m afraid.” He wasn’t like Isaiah. Isaiah who predates him by seventy years or so; when God spoke to him and got a hold of Isaiah, Isaiah said: “Here am I, send me.” And so you have a spectrum and God uses people where ever they are on the spectrum. So Jeremiah is kind of a timid type of a person. And he was the last prophet in the city of Jerusalem before Jerusalem was taken captive by the Babylonians. And his message was a powerful

message of love and redemption from God. But that message was rejected by the people. They rejected him. They rejected the message, and ultimately, they rejected God.

Jeremiah suffered much in his service for the Lord. He was a heart broken prophet with a heart breaking message. He was despised and persecuted by his own countrymen. He remained faithful and shared God's compassion and love for them. But as I stated, they ultimately rejected the message, rejected him, and rejected God. Now prior to this prayer, Jeremiah has gone home to the city of Anathoth. That's where he's from. It's a priestly city. It doesn't mean that everybody that lives there is a priest, but a lot of priest do live there. He is from a priestly family. And he goes to preach to his own crowd. And he goes to tell them that "Look, God loves us, but we must repent. We must turn away from false worship. We cannot worship idols and God at the same time. It will not work." And he is calling them back to the true worship of God.

He met some type of abuse there. The Bible doesn't say what it was, but he was beat down and he was feeling bad about it. And he was feeling sorry. And he prays this prayer. The prayer begins in verse 1, let's read it. "Righteous are You, o Lord, when I plead with You. Yet, let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?" He begins his prayer by stating a known fact to anybody that has the slightest amount of faith. And that is, "God You are always right, and You always do what is right. But, I plead with You." Now, in NIV it says, "...I bring a case before You." It's a legal term. The Amplified Version says, "...I complain and contend with You." The actual Hebrew word means, "to grapple, wrangle, hold a controversy, debate, rebuke, strife, argue a case or a cause in a court of law."

This prayer is an argument. This prayer is a debate. This prayer is a controversy. This prayer is couched in a language of legal wrangling and issues. Jeremiah goes to God and he says, "Look! You always do what is right, but I don't understand Your justice. I don't understand why the wicked prosper? I don't understand why the ungodly, the faithless and the treacherous people are happy? They are at ease and they are thriving. I am trying to serve You God, and I am being abused. And other people are trying to serve You, they are being abused. Wow! What a question, and how relevant to all us! For without me making a single application, you've already applied it to situations in your life where there are injustices and the wicked are prospering. And the righteous are seemingly being defeated.

He goes on in verse 2: "You've planted them, yes, they've taken root. They grow, they bear fruit. You are near their mouth, but far from their mind." These are not godless humanist; these are religious people who call upon God all the time. God is under lips, but He is not in their heart. And this is what is a struggle for Jeremiah because this is exactly what Isaiah had said some seventy years prior to this. Go to the left, and we'll come to Isaiah, but keep your hand here in Jeremiah because we'll come back. Isaiah chapter 29, some seventy years before Jeremiah prays this prayer; Isaiah said this, in the same community, to many of the same people or at least their fathers and mothers. Verse 13, "Therefore the Lord said, 'In as much as these people draw near to Me with their mouths, and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of

men..." in another words, made up ways to worship God, "...therefore behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder!"

Notice what God is going to do. "For the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent man shall be hidden." And He goes on, "Woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the Lord, and their works are in the dark. They say, 'who sees us and who knows?'" God says woe to the person who thinks they are getting away with this stuff. "Surely you have things turned around. Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay? For shall the thing made say of Him who made it, 'he did not make me?' Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'he has no understanding?'" Isaiah, quoting God says: "Look, He is the Creator, are you going to say you weren't created? Are you going to say the One who has created you has no understanding?" "This people," God says, "draw near to Me with their mouths, they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me."

This is part of Jeremiah's complaint. "God, seventy years ago it was the same problem! You said, You were going to do something about it, You've done nothing! I don't understand Your justice. Why do the wicked prosper? Why are they happy, at ease, and thriving? Why do the treacherous people have their way, and those Godly people suffer? Why is this happening?" Well go back to Jeremiah 12 and we'll go to verse 3 because he continues his prayer. "But You o Lord know me, and have seen me. You have tested my heart toward You..." he's talking about the heart here. Some talk about God, but He is not in their heart. He says, "...but You know my heart." Now this means more than "You know my heart." Because everybody here would say, "Sure, God knows our heart. God knows what we think, He knows all about that." But Jeremiah is acknowledging, "I know You know my heart because You've talked to me about it. You've told me what goes on in here. I've recognized it. I recognize it by Your Spirit and the presence of Yourself within me."

So Jeremiah, by personal relationship with God knows that God knows him. "I'm not pulling one over on You Lord. I know You know my heart. Then, he's going to make his petition. Verse 3, I'll read the first part again. "But You o Lord know me. You have seen me. You have tested my heart toward You. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter and prepare them for the day of slaughter." NIV says, "...drag them off like sheep to be butchered." "Come on God, let's get with the program. These people are destroying the nation and they are destroying many people's understanding of You. Why do You allow the wicked to prosper? Why do you allow the treacherous to go on and have a life of ease? Why? Why? Why? And why do the just suffer? You ought to stop it God!" He goes on to describe, "They are ruining everything," verse 4. "How long will the land mourn and the herbs of every field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed for the wickedness of those who dwell there because they said, 'He will not see our final end.'"

"God, who cares -- He is not going to see our final end!" Jeremiah is saying, "The land suffers, the whole country suffers. Everybody is suffering because of the wickedness of these people and You do nothing God." This is an amazing prayer. That's what it is, it's a prayer. It's an amazing prayer! And what's even more amazing it's God's response. You think God would say, "All right son, I'll get on with it as soon as I can." Or, "Just hold on; I've got a schedule." You know this problem of God on the lips but on the heart,

six hundred years later Jesus is saying the same thing to the people in His day. You read it in Matthew 15, religious people, don't know God. And yet, God does nothing seemingly. I want to say one thing about that. If you know anybody who has accepted Christ as their Savior as an adult, then you will praise God that He seemingly does nothing about it. Because many, many people who are wicked now are going to be holy tomorrow; and God knows that. And what we would do with our short sidedness, God doesn't do because of His far sidedness.

But His response to Jeremiah is amazing. I wouldn't have expected this. But here is what He says, verse 5: "If you have run with a footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?" What? What is going on here? "Jeremiah," God says, "Look, you ran with men and it wearied you! Soon you will have to run with horses! What are you going to do then? And what are you going to do with the swelling of the Jordan?" That's what it says in the King James Version and it's very poetic to say that. Here is what it means. It's not talking about having to cross the river when it's flooded. It's talking about the region along the banks that was nurtured from the water when it did overflow its banks. And it's very thick, wooded area, and that's where lions lived. There was danger there. And God is saying, "You are in a town. What are you going to do when you have to dwell with lions?"

One thing, level one let's call it. Level one faith – running with men, it's weary due (?). Hold on because level two is coming. You are going to have run with horses. And then, there is going to be level three; You are going to have to dwell with lions. And you know what? When it's all over, Jeremiah is good with that. "Okay, that's great!" Prayer ends, he goes on, and he is strengthened. What is happening here? God is communicating to Jeremiah simple, yet profound message. "Jeremiah, it's going to get worse. It's going to get verse! And you think level one is tuff, wait 'till you get to two. And you think two is tuff, wait 'till you get to three." But in saying that, God is saying, "But I will provide grace and faith for every level. You are tired from level one, but you got to go to level two. But I am going to be with you." And Jeremiah saw on it the promise of God. God called him! God told him to serve Him. He was serving God. And God was not saying, "I'm going to forsake you and let you get trampled by horses." And He didn't say, "I'm going to forsake you and let you get eaten by lions. No, it's going to get harder. But as it gets more difficult, My grace will get grater. My presence will be stronger, and your faith will grow accordingly."

Apparently in God's system, we have grace and faith to meet today. You do not yet have tomorrow's faith. You don't need it! You get it when you need it. And so, at level one, we have level one faith. Level two, we get level two; level three, however you want to apply this; you get level three for that situation. When Dwight El Moody was asked one day, he was asked this question: "Pastor Moody, do you have dying faith?" That question meant, "Do you have faith to die?" And D.L. Moody said, "I don't know, I'm living." And what he was saying is, "God will provide what I need, when I need it." I used to preach the Book of Revelation. In 1982 I had a Revelation seminar. I used to preach it pretty much black and white. "You either believe me and do what I say the Bible is teaching or you are damned. You are lost. And tonight you must decide! It's a matter of life and death," and everything was black and white.

“Here is the message; here is the truth, get on board, what’s wrong with you?” And I would preach very enthusiastically about that.

The very first Revelation Seminar I conducted back in 1982, we had about 12 people get baptized and join the church. And was a hero in my own mind. I thought I was wonderful. And back in those days the whole thing about church growth was just picking up, and I was cutting edge. And so we gave these people spiritual gifts test. We’re going to build the whole church around spiritual gifts and I’ve been preaching about all these people who were willing to die for their faith. And how this, so black and white, and so cut and dry, and everything; I had all these people – those twelve and then about twenty church members take the spiritual gifts test. And of the twelve new members, ten of them tested for the gift of martyrdom. It’s pretty hard to build the church around people who would think their spiritual gift is dying. Why? O I had them so pumped up; they were filled with ecclesiastical adrenalin. And they thought, “Man, I’m ready to die for God.”

Listen, in reality, it may be harder to live for Him. When it comes time to die He’ll give us what we need. Last Saturday in the afternoon I went over to Tom and Susan’s and spoke with Susan. And I told her, “Susan, it looks like you are going to die. How do you feel about that?” Man, she was so peaceful! She looked at me and she said, “I am at peace with it.” And she has sought to comfort her comforters. Tom, her husband, some months ago – holding her hand, sobbing; she said, “Tom, it will be all right!” Level three: You get it when you need it. Jeremiah left this prayer strong in the Lord. Now, there are some life lessons for us in this prayer. I’m going to share six things with you. I only want you remember one of them. But I am not going to tell you which one it is. So you’ll have to decide. Ultimately I will tell you which one it is as we go through them.

Number one: prayer is not limited to request or worship. It’s true that prayer foundationally is an act of worship to God, but it’s not limited to that. And it’s not limited to requests. You know, “God, I have this need; I have this concern. Can you do something here; can you do something there?” Prayer is not limited to that. That’s not how Jeremiah was praying here. Prayer, number two, can be bringing our hard questions, situations and cases to God. Prayer can be a complaint to God and He accepts it. Jeremiah is complaining. You know that’s a kind of prayer I can pray. I can do that, and God doesn’t blow them off. God answers them. In fact, that’s number three. Prayer is a means of communication from God to us.

In prayer, as Jeremiah is talking to God, God talks to Jeremiah. Friends, God still talks to people. But I believe it’s primarily in this atmosphere and this attitude of prayer. Number four: Jeremiah’s prayer was offered from a heart known by God. They have prayed before. They know each other. And he is honest and open with God. Five: prayer resulted in Jeremiah’s experience being strengthened by God. Prayer gives us strength. It’s fascinating; God gave him no time line as to when the wicked would be destroyed. All God said was, “You think this is hard? Wait...” and it still strengthened Jeremiah.

Number six: Prayer did not change the situation. It changed Jeremiah. Remember that one! It may be when we get to heaven that we'll discover the actual, not entirely but in many situations, the actual purpose of our prayers was so God could change us and not the circumstances or the situation.

It's a New Year. And I heard on the radio that 40% of us have made resolutions. I've made one this year. Mine was that would have no resolutions. And you know; I've already broken it! (He's fighting tears...) I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't want to do this. I hate death. I hate it. I hate the hell that Tom is going to go through and his family. Here is one thing I'm resolved though. If I can say it – I want to comfort people in their walk with God. That I have resolved. And even though I am torn up inside, I along with you, do not grieve without hope because there will be a resurrection. There will be a heaven. There will be an eternity. And God wants us all to be there. And at every level of our experience He will provide grace and He will provide faith. I invite you to stand as the musicians lead us in our closing song.