

BaptistWay: When serving God is hard

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• *The BaptistWay lesson for March 23 focuses on Jeremiah 11:18-12:6; 17:14-18; Jeremiah 20:7-18.*

Serving God can be hard. We don't advertise that at ministry fairs or during altar calls, but it is the truth. I wish I could tell you life as a pastor has proven service to God always will result in good and enjoyable things, but that has not been my observation. Things do not always go like I want at church. People do not always get along. Goals are not always achieved. Ministry does not always happen.

Still, if anyone should have their life together, it should be ministers, correct? Unfortunately, that is not the case either. You likely can recall a minister who "burned out," had a crisis of faith or experienced some moral failure. At only 30 years of age, I already have more colleagues who have gone through these things than I would like to admit.

However, serving God is not difficult for ministers simply because they are ministers. It is hard because serving God is hard. It doesn't matter who you are or what you are doing. Service is difficult, and several passages in Jeremiah provide us with varying examples of this difficulty.

The difficulty of knowing (Jeremiah 11:18-12:6)

Jeremiah's whole ministry was based on the knowledge that even though God would pronounce judgment, the people would not repent. He knew it because God told him. That information was a huge mental burden to bear. Jeremiah's load increased when he discovered his message not only angered his hearers but also caused them to plot against his life (v. 18).

Doctors, teachers and social workers all can identify with facing a task they know likely will fail. Soldiers can relate with being sent into a job that could result in physical harm. Why should it surprise us serving God can as well?

In the end, Jeremiah knew whatever harm he risked, God ultimately would be faithful and vindicate him from his enemies (v. 22). You'd think this would lighten the load for Jeremiah, but it likely caused even more stress and discomfort for him. If you've ever felt helpless, you can understand why.

Serving God is not always pretty. One of my closest relatives is an atheist. As part of my service to God, I regularly pray for him and engage him in conversation about spiritual things. We've talked in circles several times over, and I've yet to see my prayer to have his heart softened answered. Knowing what happens to people who refuse to believe, watching him continue in unbelief is difficult, but I don't quit serving. And neither should you.

The difficulty of asking (Jeremiah 17:14-18)

"A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary" (v. 12). Jeremiah took comfort in this statement. It was a reminder in the midst of his service that God's promise would come to fulfillment.

It also is a promise to us as we look forward to Christ's ultimate return, when the Alpha and the Omega will make all things right and there will be no need for sanctuary. However, until then, we ask for it in various ways. Jeremiah asked for sanctuary in the form of healing and salvation (v. 14), refuge (v. 17) and justice (v. 18). Since he already had been promised he eventually would receive these things, it is safe to assume these requests were time-sensitive.

That's what makes asking God for things so difficult. It is not that we do not

believe God ultimately will overcome. It is that there are specific things we want him to overcome, and we want him to do it now. One of the phrases we often murmur in prayer as we ask for these time-and situation-specific requests is “if it be your will.” If done in the right spirit, this phrase embodies the way we are commanded to pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Unfortunately, I fear it is often a “cop-out” intended to soften the difficulty of asking for something we may not receive. This, however, also is part of serving God.

The difficulty of disappointment (Jeremiah 20:7-18)

Perhaps the greatest risk of service is disappointment. Chapter 20 records some of Jeremiah’s lowest moments. Apparently, God waited to fulfill what he told Jeremiah he was going to do. It did not unfold in the way Jeremiah thought it would, and it did not look like he hoped it would look. In the midst of his depression, he expressed sorrow and regret.

However, in verse 9, Jeremiah admitted that in spite of the difficulty of serving God “his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones” (v. 9). In other words, in spite of the difficulty of serving God and the disappointment it brings, something inside would not allow him to quit.

That something described as fire by Jeremiah is identified as the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Serving God is hard. But through God’s Spirit, it is indeed possible and worthwhile. Hang in there.