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When God Says "Work Harder"

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When God Says "Work Harder"

Abstract

"God does promise to be with us and is there beside us, even in our despair."

Posting about God's presence in difficult times from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/when-god-says-work-harder/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

When God Says “Work Harder”

 [inallthings.org/when-god-says-work-harder/](https://allthings.org/when-god-says-work-harder/)

How should Christians respond when faced with trial and difficulty? The easy answer is that we should call out to the Lord for deliverance, and we often comfort ourselves with pseudo-Biblical assurances about the response: “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

But how does the Lord respond to just such an appeal from one of the most prominent prophets of the Old Testament?

“If you have raced with people on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?”

—Jeremiah 12:5 (NIV)

Ever since leading a study on it a few years back, I’ve only grown to love the book of Jeremiah more and more, not just because it sits at a crucial time of covenantal transition, but because the book is full of wisdom and imagery that challenges our typical religious assumptions: God speaks of sending Israel into exile as divorcing her (Jer. 3). What does it do to our understanding of God to think of God as a divorcee? When Babylon comes and defiles the temple and razes Jerusalem, God tells the people to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” where the people are carried into exile (Jer. 29). We tend to take comfort in the words of the same chapter, which promises that God has plans to “prosper and not to harm,” but how should we understand that promise in the context of the judgment and humiliation of exile? Finally, we have what has been the most enduringly-striking passage of the book for me. Jeremiah is calling out to God in lament in a time when he has faced constant harassment and persecution. In the previous chapter, the people of Jeremiah’s own hometown were plotting to murder him. Jeremiah had an unenviable job, even for a prophet, and his life had hardly been a bed of roses so far; what, then, are we to make of this response from God? What did it mean for him, and what can we learn from this?

An Irresistible Calling

I think it’s a mistake to read God’s response as a rebuke for some impious failing expressed by Jeremiah in the previous verses. Instead, this passage should be read in the context of God’s calling to Jeremiah. The Lord first calls Jeremiah with the wonderful announcement that God had known him since before his birth and appointed him as a prophet. However, Scripture then relays the awful content of the message Jeremiah would bring: “[T]oday I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1: 10). God charges Jeremiah to speak truth to power boldly, saying, “Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you” (Jer. 1:18-19).

Given this context, the Lord’s response in Jeremiah 12:5 makes some sense. Jeremiah was called to bring a message of destruction and judgment that condemned the whole power structure of Judah. This had won the prophet few friends so far, but soon, at a time when the people were trying to build up all of their patriotic pride to defend against Babylonian incursion, Jeremiah would preach inevitable defeat and indeed willing surrender. The Lord is not rebuking Jeremiah in this passage; God is being honest with the prophet. The Lord never promised Jeremiah that more wouldn’t be doled out than Jeremiah could handle; in fact, Jeremiah would come to lament the fact that he was ever born (Jer. 20). What the Lord *did* promise Jeremiah was that the Lord *would be* with Jeremiah and that Jeremiah would serve a mighty purpose.

Although Jeremiah would destroy and overthrow, he would also plant, and the prophet gives voice to one of the sweetest promises in the Old Testament: that God would make a new covenant with the people, one in which God would truly forgive their sins and in which they would truly be God's people (Jer. 31).

Hope and Challenge

So what should we take from this passage? First, this should move us past easy platitudes. God does not promise that our lives will be easy, and God does not promise that every time we cry out that our load is too heavy, God will come and take it off our backs. In fact, in a world which rejected and killed Jesus Christ, God actually promises quite the opposite. However, God does promise to be with us and is there beside us, even in our despair, and ultimately, we are promised to be restored. Of course, to be restored means we may well be fallen or broken first.

This passage has been on my heart for the past year as I've struggled to meet a heavy workload while also supporting first a pregnant wife and now a newborn son. There are times when I teeter into a "poor me" mindset, and there are times where I'm just genuinely overwhelmed and exhausted. At those times when I can feel myself burning out, there's scant comfort in the idea that God won't give me more than I can handle. We are called to give all of ourselves to the Lord, and it's incredibly common that the callings God places before us are bigger than we can imagine, things that may break us down and reshape us before we're through. We may get chewed up and burned out, but in these times, there is immense comfort in the knowledge that our efforts are not in vain, that the Lord is with us in those times, and that we *will* be restored.