

WD September 4, 2023

“Hard Teachings”

In preparation for an upcoming Bible Class on Jeremiah I have been reading Dr. Lessing’s book on Jeremiah, *Overcoming Life’s Sorrows; Learning From Jeremiah*. In the chapter on surrender, Lessing brings up the inability of Israel to accept that Babylon was coming. Under the false hope that Egypt’s new Pharaoh in 597 BC, Pharaoh Psammetichus II would rally to push back on Babylon Israel’s leaders somehow convinced themselves that Babylon would retreat. They believed that those who were already deported would be returned. They wanted to believe that all the temple vessels would be returned. They wanted to hope. They wanted their deported King Jehoiachin to return to his throne (Jeremiah 28:4). But they were placing their hope in the wrong picture. Hope would come but after a long 70-year captivity in Babylon. A false prophet, Hananiah led an obstinate group of other false prophets, representing the highest offices and most of the people, in the idea that God would save the people from Babylon. But this was not Jeremiah’s message. Hananiah preached a false optimism. Jeremiah preached God’s message, which was a very hard teaching to the people of Israel.

In Jeremiah 28 Jeremiah puts on a wooden yoke bar across his shoulders to illustrate that all the lands would fall under the yoke of Babylon. Hananiah rips the yoke off Jeremiah’s shoulders and breaks it to symbolize what God is going to do with Babylon. This is wishful thinking. Just to make the point Jeremiah returns with yoke of iron (Jeremiah 28:13). Message: “No, this is a yoke you will not break. Babylon is coming to destroy everything, take everything, and no amount of wishful thinking will change the reality.” Again, a very hard teaching. Rather than come to terms with the reality of God’s Word and with the reality that Israel’s sin has brought this about, the leaders of Israel would choose to live in a manufactured fiction that keeps the status quo. “After all,” some may say today “is not our God a loving God. He would not do this to Israel.” Jeremiah is saying God would do this to Israel in order to save Israel from its pride and its idolatrous sin. Israel needed a reboot to clear out all the viral teachings of its day.

Lessing describes it this way: “Hananiah embodies what we all want—a return to the ‘good old days.’ None of us wants angst and brokenness to stay. We just want to forget the trauma and pretend it did not happen. That is why we try to create a more pleasant, comfortable world that conforms to our daydreams.... Hope involves telling the truth. Hope means letting go of the old. Hope surrenders to God’s plans and God’s timing” (page 191). I would add that we also try to refashion the Lord Himself to a comfortable and acceptable place.

Such is the case in John 6. Jesus teaches about Himself being the Bread of Life. He teaches things like, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no spiritual life in you” (v. 53) and “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in him” (v. 56). Quickly the crowds turn on Jesus. Vs 60 informs us of their reaction. “This is a hard teaching; who can understand it?” Some of them even “complained” about what he said (v. 61). Finally, many of them stopped following Jesus altogether.

Jesus eventually asks the twelve disciples in vs 67; “Do you want to leave as well?” Peter famously responds, “Lord to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

The twelve didn’t disagree that Jesus was sharing a hard teaching. In fact, there were many things that the disciples were slow to understand, especially about the cross and the resurrection. Peter would have to be straightened out on this very important teaching above all. “Get behind me Satan...” Peter did not like the idea of Jesus being crucified. It was a hard teaching that Peter struggled with. Yet, the disciples made up their minds to trust Jesus, to listen and learn His Word, to continue to follow Him, and eventually give their lives for Jesus.

Hard teaching become hard because sinful logic and emotions cannot or will not accept the Word of God. A simple example is how many Christians do not accept that Jesus turned water into wine at Cana or that Jesus would have used wine at the Last Supper, which was a Passover feast. John 2:1-12 provides not only several uses of the word wine but also gives a strong context for wine being used—a wedding celebration. Many Christians say that the water turned to wine was not fermented, was instead new wine, or simple grape juice. Wine makes many Christians uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. Yet a word that is plainly “wine” is wine. The Word of God says what it says. Would a loving God make wine? The answer from the text is yes.

Some of the hardest teachings today seem to circle around personhood, gender, and sexuality. Genesis 1:27 describes personhood in terms of being made distinct from all animals in the image of God. One is not evolved but created. Personhood is also not determined by Gender. Gender is not assigned at birth but in fact one is either created male or female. Yet in a world complicated by sinful reason and emotion have skewed what is a very basic picture presented in Genesis 1 and 2. Marriage also falls into this very emotionally charged arena. In Matthew 19 in a discussion about divorce Jesus quotes the definition of marriage. He states, “Have not you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, ‘A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate’” (Matt 19:4). In this one passage Jesus steps on a lot of toes regarding divorce, gender, the definition of marriage, and that we are created not evolved. Such things become very hard teachings when confronted by emotion and human agendas.

Perhaps the phrase heard the most is that “God is love.” True. Jesus has certainly shown his compassion in his death and resurrection. Yet, God is also just. Also reflected in the punishment place upon Jesus for our sin.

In John 8:1-11 a woman caught in adultery is dragged before the Lord. First, Jesus could see through the trap being set by the religious leaders who dragged this woman into the conversation as bait and the sinful jealousy behind it. These same sinful motives eventually condemn Jesus. Matthew 27:18 tells us that Pilate knew it was out of envy that the religious leaders handed over Jesus. This is the nature of those who do not accept Jesus. They will either walk away like they did in John 6 or try to ruin the messenger like they did with Jeremiah or in the case of Jesus, crucify them. Within this trap is a sinful refusal to accept the teachings of Jesus as truth. Secondly, Jesus acknowledges that the woman caught in adultery did in fact commit a sin. Jesus saves her life when all the rocks hit the ground but it is clear that she must change when He says, “Go, and sin no more.” This may have been a hard teaching for her depending on her lifestyle at that time.

Many hard teachings present themselves in scripture. Many challenge our comfort zones and shake our status quos. Some of the hardest are in the Sermon on the Mount. Hard teachings are hard because sin causes confusion and divides loyalties. The good we want to do we do not do but often surrender to the sin living within. We may care very much for a person in a lifestyle that conflicts with the Word. Good. But love is never separated from the truth of God’s Word. God is not only love but God is truth expressed in Jesus who refers to Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I do not deny that Jesus has many hard teachings. The disciples certainly would have agreed. Regardless of our ability, emotionally, or in our reasoning, I pray that our faith would respond as Peter did; “Lord, You have the words of eternal life.”

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John 3:30