

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

LWMS. Lutheran Women's Missionary Society. I love attending the LWMS rallies each spring and each autumn. Women, young and old, some from our church, and sometimes men too—they gather at these rallies because they burn with an eagerness from the Holy Spirit for everyone in the world to hear the good news that Jesus is Savior of all. Why take the time for LWMS? Because the organization gives them extra opportunities to support our mission churches here in the United States and all around the world. Financial support, yes, but even more important is the emotional support LWMS participants give to our missionary families at birthday times or just because. And, as if that weren't enough, they give prayer support regularly. The prayers of Christians are effective because of the One who listens to our prayers.

At one rally a while back, we heard about a ministry in a country where Christians can be killed just for following Jesus as Savior. We heard about a pastor who regularly braves all kinds of hardships just so people in nearby locations can have contact with God's Word. He wants their knowledge and their faith in Jesus to grow through Bible study.

Guess what. Shortly after that LWMS rally, I got to meet that pastor. I hope you won't mind that I was a little star-struck. I consider this man, his family, and all the people with whom he works to be heroes, heroes of faith. All they want is for people to repent of their sins, turn to Jesus for

forgiveness, have blessing upon blessing from our gracious God in this life, and have eternal life in heaven after that. Because of their love for God and for people, hatred for them began to grow. They could have killed without any fear of prosecution. But the Lord showed them special mercy. That pastor and his family were still alive last time I heard an update about him. People were listening to the message about Jesus. The congregations he served were growing. God was blessing that nation through him.

Because of the persecution, that pastor had a ministry very much like the prophet Jeremiah had during the reign of the last five kings of Judah. But in one way, Jeremiah had it tougher. Right from the start the Lord revealed that most of Jeremiah's listeners among God's specially chosen people would not listen to Jeremiah's preaching (1:17-19). Do you know how hard it is to get anything done when people won't listen? By the time we get to chapter six of his book, Jeremiah wonders out loud: *¹⁰To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it.* Wait. Is Jeremiah talking about the people of Judah in his day, or about the people of America in our day? Who will listen to the Word of the Lord? Anyone? Anyone? Will no one listen?

I love reading the prophecies of Jeremiah. Yeah, they're a little depressing because almost nobody wanted to listen to what he had to say about the one true God, turn from their evil ways, and have God's full

forgiveness through the coming Messiah. But I love reading the prophecies of Jeremiah anyway because here is a man after God's own heart. He refuses to give up on people as long as the Lord himself keeps trying to reach them. Well, if Jeremiah wouldn't give up, we can keep trying to reach people for Jesus with God's Word in our day, even if only a few will listen.

And so we come to Jeremiah 19. The Lord told Jeremiah to buy a clay jar from a potter, something like our terra cotta flower pots. Then Jeremiah was to gather the respected leaders of the people and to take them out to where the city of Jerusalem regularly burned their garbage, especially where the potters dumped their potsherds, their broken pieces of pottery. That place had a nickname: Topheth. We think "Topheth" meant something like the "shameful ovens." (The word is apparently a joining of the consonants for "oven" and the vowels for "shameful"). Even though Jeremiah had already preached one sermon theme five times, the Lord wanted him to speak it a sixth time: "I'm going to bring disaster on this place because you all refuse to repent and turn away from everything that is evil." (Jeremiah would preach this sermon theme at least fourteen times.) Then Jeremiah was to break the clay jar as an object lesson, and say, "This is how God will treat this nation." The broken pieces of the pot would clatter onto thousands of other potsherds on the ground. Repairing the pot would take an act of God.

Wouldn't it be better to repent and turn away from sinful weaknesses than to be destroyed by God?

This is where our text picks up the story. ¹⁴*Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the LORD's temple and said to all the people... so everyone could hear this sermon,* ¹⁵*"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.'"*

What are you stiff-necked about, America? Which sin do you cling to stubbornly, people of God? I hope none. When we confess our sins here in church together and elsewhere privately, we bend our necks, don't we? We humble ourselves before the Lord, don't we? The Holy Spirit helps us do this. He has convinced us that we have done much evil, that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). We can be saved only if God saves us. This is why we rejoice so deeply when we hear that the Lord has put away all our sins. Not one sin sticks to us. God counts us righteous for Jesus' sake.

And yet it's so easy to develop a blindness toward sins we happen to be weak at. I know Christians who get bent out of shape over gossip but have no problem when it comes to taking something that isn't theirs. I know Christians who get angry

when money is wasted or when people engage in sexual sins, but they have no problem using unloving words on others or holding on to their dislike for certain people. I know Christians who would never commit adultery or gossip but they won't set aside time to be in God's Word daily, won't come to Sunday morning Bible class. We all still need Jeremiah's message. Listen. Listen to all of God's Word, not just the parts we find easy to believe and follow. Listen because God loves you. Listen because you love God.

Pashhur didn't want to listen to Jeremiah's message. ^{20:1}*When the priest Pashhur son of Immer, the chief officer in the temple of the LORD, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, ²he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the LORD's temple.* Since few of us have ever been beaten and none of us has been put in the stocks, we have to use our imagination to slip on Jeremiah's shoes. These stocks were a restraining device of some sort, perhaps the same as what you've seen in movies where a person's head and hands are held in small openings between two wooden boards. Jeremiah was in great pain, physical and emotional—a prophet of the Lord humiliated because he wanted his people to turn away from their sins. Are you still ready to suffer all things, even death and ridicule, rather than let yourself fall away from the Triune God? This is the commitment you made when you were confirmed. Jesus promises, *“Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life”* (Revelation 2:10).

Jesus gives other promises which help us answer, “Yes, Lord, I will suffer all things in order to share your truths with others.” For instance in today's Gospel Jesus promises: (Matthew 10). ²⁸*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* “Pastor, that doesn't sound like a comforting promise.” No, but my sinful flesh usually needs a good kick in the gut when it comes to speaking up for Jesus. Otherwise my flesh will whisper in my ear, “You don't want what happened to Jeremiah to happen to you, right? Ouch. How humiliating. Quiet mouths don't get beaten.” But that's a lie! Quiet mouths displease our Savior. Here's the promise Jesus gave: ³²*Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.* I want Jesus to claim me as one of his own, now because of his grace and mercy, and then because the Holy Spirit also gave me courage to testify in the face of opposition. And if trouble comes because I opened my mouth for Jesus, I plan to remember another of his promises: ²⁹*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

I suspect Jeremiah thought about these kinds of things all that night, because ³*the next day, when Pashhur released him from*

*the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, “The LORD’s name for you is not Pashhur, but Magor-Missabib.” The Lord loves to play around with language to display his message in vivid color. We’re pretty sure Pashhur’s name means something like “deliverance is all around.” The Lord wanted Pashhur to know that disaster was swirling all around him. So he gave him a new name: Magor-Missabib, which means “terror on every side.” Jeremiah explained the new name to Pashhur. ⁴*For this is what the LORD says: ‘I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. ⁵I will hand over to their enemies all the wealth of this city—all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. ⁶And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies.’”**

Lots of people would say, “Jeremiah, are you crazy? Pashhur just had you in the stocks overnight for delivering a general message of doom. Now you direct a personal message of doom his way?” But Jeremiah could have answered, “The worst he can do is hurt and kill my body. I won’t let my fear of Pashhur keep me quiet. My life is firmly in the hands of God.” May the Lord give each of us the courage to

testify lovingly, since this country in which we live guarantees us the right to free speech, and we don’t face death or bodily harm for repeating any of the messages that God revealed in the Bible.

Thank God for this country we live in. There’s a big difference between what Jeremiah could say to Pashhur compared to what we can say if anyone were to oppress us for our beliefs. What are we permitted to say? How should we respond to opposition? How about, “God bless you”? Yes, because the Bible teaches: *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse* (Romans 12:14). How about, “May God himself call you to account”? Yes, because the Lord says through Moses, “*If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call that person to account*” (Deuteronomy 18:19). How about, “God sees what you’re doing”? Yes, because the Psalms teach, “*From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind*” (Psalm 33:13). How about, “May the Lord lead you to repent of this and everything else you have ever done wrong so that you may escape the punishment that is hanging over all who reject the Lord Jesus as Savior from sin”?

So many good things to say! But I’m not worried about what to say when I testify in the face of opposition. Jesus also taught, “*Do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit*” (Mark 13:11). Be like Jeremiah. **TESTIFY IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION.**