

## **A MESSAGE ON YOUR GOD-GIVEN WORTH**

# **ALWAYS ON HIS MIND ALWAYS IN HIS HANDS**

***God asks us to put our trust in Him.***

***Amazingly, He also puts His trust in us.***



***By George Foster***

GOOD, PLEASING, PERFECT!—these words in Romans 12:2 describe God’s will for us. I agree. Amen! Hallelujah! But what does that mean? Has anyone told you, “If you prayed before you acted, things would go better for you?” Have you heard prayers like this one?—“Oh Lord, be with Bill on this trip and make everything go smoothly.”

### **God’s will isn’t always easy.**

If God’s will were always smooth sailing, Jesus would never have taken his disciples into the storm that threatened their lives. He would have rebuked the winds before they ever left shore. Many of God’s faithful servants would agree that God’s will may be demanding—designed to test us and strengthen us as well as bless us.

Jeremiah certainly didn’t have it easy when God assigned to him the task of denouncing the sins of Israel and Judah and warning them of impending judgment. He was required to tell them that if they continued rebelling against God and turning to heathen idols they would be defeated, and the people would be taken away captive to Babylon.

Jeremiah was a true anointed prophet. We know that because his words came to pass. That, however, did not exempt him from paying a high price for what he said. Jeremiah must have felt at times as though he suffered more than the backslidden nation that was under God’s judgment. He endured continuous acts of persecution and punishment from his own people. On one of those occasions Pashhur, the unfaithful chief priest, “...had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord’s temple” (vs. 2).

Did Jeremiah enjoy prophesying against the high priest and against his own nation? I don’t think so! Nor did he get some masochistic pleasure from the punishment he received. Nevertheless, something inside of him would not let him keep silent. Again and again he spoke out, fearlessly bringing God’s warnings to the people. More than once, he used the same fearlessness to bring his personal complaints back to God. Listen to the bold, angry language he used as he complained to God!

### **You called me? No, you deceived me!**

Do you remember how God first called Jeremiah to the prophetic ministry and how Jeremiah responded to the call? Let’s listen in on the dialog that took place:

God said, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations*” (1:5).

Jeremiah objected: “*I do not know how to speak; I am only a child*” (1:6).

God answered: *“Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you”* (1:7-8).

Is it possible, that when Jeremiah was beaten and placed in stocks, his mind took him back to that moment when God first called him? Maybe that’s why he complained: *“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long”* (20:8).

No, Jeremiah didn’t like prophesying judgment or suffering the consequences of his words. Perhaps his biggest complaint was that he couldn’t quit—even if he wanted to! Look how he puts it: *“If I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot”* (Jeremiah 20:9).

### **If only... Glimpses of a compassionate God**

So Jeremiah assumed the role of the prophet of doom, faithfully warning Judah of impending judgment and constantly paying a price for what he said. Yet, upon occasion, God allowed Jeremiah to back off from the negative prophecies that warned of what God *had to do* because of the nation’s sin, and permitted him to proclaim the good things that God *truly desired to do*—if only His people would repent!

In chapter 18, Jeremiah shares an experience that shows us God’s tenderness toward His people and His desire to reconstruct their lives rather than throw them away.

*“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.’ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned”* (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

In the midst of the prophecies of judgment for backslidden Judah, God gave the people a view of what He really wanted for them. It was as if God were saying, “Won’t you let me forgive you and bless you rather than judge you? Then, shortly after this message, God spoke through His prophet again, revealing His tender heart and His desire to redeem rather than condemn His people. These are precious words that Christians across the ages have taken personally, words that show us what God wants to do for us:

*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”* (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

## **Clay in the potter's hands**

In the first passage, God compares His working in us to the work of a potter who takes a lump of clay in his hands to form a vessel. To start the process the potter moistens the clay, kneads it, and rids it of impurities. When it is ready, he places it on a flat surface that revolves at his command. He uses both hands—one inside the vessel, the other outside—and from the lump of clay a vessel emerges.

The vessel gets pressure from within and without. Sound familiar? Do you ever find yourself saying, “Why do I feel so stretched? Why so empty? Why so much stress? Why do these things happen to me? Where is the peace I once knew?” Many of us have been there. Dry, hard times, a sense of failure and bewilderment, a sense that God has forgotten us or is judging us.

It's all part of the molding process. Firmly but lovingly the potter is applying pressure where He knows we need it. Isaiah once reminded Israel, “Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘He has no hands’”? (Isaiah 45:9). “Later comes the admission to God: “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. Yet, o Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isaiah 64:7-8).

## **Give me a break! I'm breaking.**

Then, unexpectedly the unthinkable happens: The vessel caves in! We've seen it before—a servant of God has a collapse, a moral failure, an injury, an illness, a burnout, a personal tragedy... Maybe it has happened to us. What is it—an error of the potter? A lack of care or attention on his part?

No! More likely it was that the potter's hands touched a small unyielding dry spot or maybe a stone that was undetectable until the sides of the vessel became thinner as they grew upward. Then, with pressure from both sides, the potter's fingers struck the foreign object and the vessel fell apart.

Do we have some dry, hard spots in us? Are there pockets of resistance to the master's touch? How many times have we felt something akin to that? Broken! Rejected! Unappreciated! Misunderstood! Of little useful value!

One thing sure in the midst of the breaking is that the clay never leaves the potter's hands. Never! Even when it breaks, the potter does not throw it away. He values us too much to abandon us. He picks up the shapeless earth, moistens it again, kneads it, and places it back on the wheel. His loving hands surround it and He begins His work again. A lesson learned, a wound healed, a more malleable clay—we place ourselves in God's hands, surrender to his touch and He resumes His work in us. He has a goal in mind and He does not give up.

When I look back at trials I have faced—whether those of my own making or those inflicted upon me by others or simply those that exist because I live in a fallen, confused world—I would not like to go through them again. Yet, I also know that God used those experiences to shape my life and I can't imagine what it would be like without the lessons I have learned from them.

I can't stand the thought that everything could go exactly the way I wanted it to, but I would be left without the sense of God's presence that was so real in the midst of the

trials. If I must choose between pleasure without God and pressure with God—I'll take the pressure. I'll take the growth. I'll take the intimacy with God. I'll take the certainty that He is working in me. It's good. It's pleasing. It's perfect.

### **Our trust in God and God's trust in us**

When we speak about faith, it is usually regarding our trust in God, and rightly so. Let me point out, however, that there is another less mentioned side to it: God's trust in us! God believes in the work He is doing in us. He also believes in and anticipates our response to His touch. He expects that we will yield and allow ourselves to be formed as He desires. (You will probably agree that He knows how to apply the pressure!)

I look at clay and that's all I see—dirty, messy, sticky clay. When the potter looks at clay, he sees an emerging vessel of great value. He knows just what to do and sets out to do it. He is always at work in our lives. He never gives up.

It's always amazing to me to consider the common, unlearned men from various walks of life whom Jesus chose to be his disciples. He spent precious time in fellowship and teaching with them, but He also put them through strenuous training and difficult experiences. The most difficult of all was just before his death and resurrection.

He knew they would be scattered and warned them about it. Each one must have felt his own personal disappointment and failure. *Die on the cross? I just don't understand it! We had hoped for so much more.* When it was all over—death, burial, empty tomb, first appearance, attempts on their part to process it all, re-gathering—the Lord Jesus appeared to His disciples in a room where they were cloistered for fear of the Jews. To everyone's surprise and without bothering to open the door, He was there!

*“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

*Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ (John 20:19-23)*

Jesus was obviously walking in on a very discouraged group of disciples. Everything had changed. They were accustomed to having the Lord with them every day. Now, after rising from the dead, He showed up only once in a while. They probably wondered what those three years of training had been for. Had they believed in vain? What should they do next? What could they believe in now? What about their failures?

Despite their weaknesses, the Lord was perfectly comfortable with sending them out to continue the work He had done. There was just a finishing touch that He would perform to complete their preparation—fill the broken and restored vessels with the Holy Spirit.

Despite their fears and failures... Despite the fact that they had scattered, as He said they would... Despite their lack of courage, motivation and direction... Jesus believed in them! He knew that with the coming of the Holy Spirit to guide them and empower them, their faith would be rekindled and their issues would be resolved. Therefore He was not afraid to entrust to them the continuation of His work.

## **Trust is a must.**

In 1967, when Dolly and I were twenty-five years old, we joined Bethany Fellowship Missions and went to Brazil to help establish a Christian publishing house called *Editora Betânia*. We were part of a team whose average age was twenty-six. This mission, now called Bethany International Ministries, believed in our inexperienced team sufficiently to invest thousands of dollars in building a print shop, a mission headquarters, staff housing, and buying a small church building. We imported printing equipment from America and Germany.

When everything was in place, we asked the pastors and spiritual leaders of the city to join with us and Bethany's founding Director, Pastor T. A. Hegre, to dedicate the facilities and equipment to the Lord and to His service. As the meeting was called to order, the pastors formed a group to one side and the young missionaries formed another group across from them. We must have looked nervous. Most of us were just beginning to learn the Portuguese language.

One of the pastors looked across at us and asked Pastor Hegre, "Who is going to run this publishing house?"

Pastor Hegre pointed to us and said, "These young people will run it."

The pastor replied, "They are very young. Do you trust them to make it successful?"

Pastor Hegre spoke out in his firm voice, "Yes, I trust them and I trust in the Holy Spirit." His confidence in us and in the Holy Spirit was evident and very reassuring. He encouraged us and allowed us to build the business. He advised us, but didn't interfere when we made mistakes. He supported us and allowed us to learn from our errors.

Another example of his trust occurred during that same visit and it was directed specifically at me. I'm sorry to say that after I had been in Brazil for just a few weeks, I began to see things that I didn't like about the mission organization and I complained to my colleagues and leaders. This went on for a couple of months until someone told me, "I wrote to Pastor Hegre and told him you are complaining about everything. He's coming for a visit soon and you can be sure he will have words of correction for you."

## **Correction or confidence?**

It was during that visit that the dedication of the facilities took place. So in the midst of all the festivities, I waited for the correction that I knew I deserved. Several days went by and the pastor said nothing about my complaints. We travelled together, stayed in the same house, and spoke to each other many times, but not a word about my complaints.

Finally after several days, Dolly came to me and said, "Pastor Hegre spoke with me today."

"Really?" I asked. "I thought he would speak to me personally."

"What did he say?" I questioned.

Dolly's answer surprised me: "He said that he really likes you!"

"He did? What else did he say?"

"He said he is expecting great things from you?"

That was all he said and it was all I needed. What I took away from those two sentences was that he believed in me, and I decided that I wanted to live up to that belief.

About twenty-five years later, God asked Dolly and me to believe in some young people as Pastor Hegre had done. By then I was the leader of our mission in Brazil and I

began to see that the Brazilians we had trained were prepared to take over the direction of the press and the mission—and do it successfully! We realized that the time had come for us to step out and let them take over.

We American missionaries moved back to our country and, I'm happy to say that today, after several years under the Brazilians' direction, the work goes on. It has adapted and expanded and thrived and we are all thankful for and proud of the work our Brazilian colleagues have done. Forty-two years later I am pastor to missionaries, seeking to encourage them as Ted Hegre encouraged me.

I have often admired Pastor Hegre's many qualities as a man and as a leader. He was willing and able not only to see us as we were; he saw what we could become and He believed that with God working in us, it was safe to entrust to us the important work of expanding His kingdom. That quality was given to him by God. He was literally following Christ's example. He and his staff trained us, sent us out and released us to be what God had called and gifted us to be. We, in turn, did the same.

### **Trusting as God does**

I have often found that the act of expressing trust in someone (like a son or daughter or student) inspires in them the desire to live up to that trust. And I'm always amazed that God is willing to trust us to the point that He works through us to accomplish His purposes. If God puts His confidence in us, shouldn't we put a little more confidence in ourselves?

I pray that you and I will seek to live up to the trust that God has deposited in us. I pray that we will never forget—even in our most difficult moments—that God is working in us and will finish His work in us. Based on that, let us determine, "And I will finish the work that He has entrusted to me." You may feel unsuited for the work He has given you to do. You may feel unqualified or even disqualified because of a failure in your life. But God sees values in you that you may not see in yourself.

Let's make this our prayer. Let's make this our goal. Let's make this our determination. Let's be true servants of Jesus Christ, faithful until the end! Let's not lose the vision. Let's not ever give up.