

Theme: Who will be my champion?

1. On my own I am overwhelmed
2. With God I am delivered

You might have heard it said; every great cause needs its champion. The Macedonians would never have conquered the known world were it not for Alexander the Great. Who would have dared to sail into the unknown reaches of the sea if Ferdinand and Isabella hadn't paid for so many expeditions? The Civil Right Movement would have sputtered and died if Martin Luther King didn't rise up and unite them.

Without a strong, charismatic leader to light the way, these parts of history would have looked very different. How many other causes have failed because they never had a unifying figure to rally around? We may never know. But if you had to choose between the two, especially when it came to a cause you felt strongly about, which would you prefer: the one that succeeds, or the one that fades into obscurity?

I'm throwing you a bit of a softball here. I know you would much rather see everything you love and support succeed, and who wouldn't? But how often does it seem like that dream actually becomes a reality? Especially when it comes to our own lives, when it seems like not only is nothing going our way, but nobody is standing up for us at all? When the troubles of this life threaten us, when we face them alone we can be overwhelmed by them. But with God as our ally and friend, we are delivered.

The prophet Jeremiah knew exactly what it felt like to be alone and overwhelmed. When we meet him in our reading today, he is at the low point of his already difficult ministry. See, Jeremiah had been called to preach God's judgment on the people of Israel, and they weren't taking it well. In fact, when Jeremiah speaks today, he speaks from the stockade! The chief officer of the temple, a man named Pashur, locked Jeremiah in the stocks near one of Jerusalem's gates, to be mocked by the people passing by.

If you're not familiar with stocks, and this is not the stuff you trade on Wall Street, it's a harsh way to punish someone convicted of wrongdoing. Your head and hands are locked between two heavy pieces of wood, leaving you completely helpless. You can't stand, only kneel, and your hands are left close enough to your face to remind you they're there, but frustratingly far enough away that they can't protect your face from anything thrown at you. To sum it up, you are completely exposed, with no hope for defending yourself.

Jeremiah was in a tough position, but it went much further than being publicly restrained and mocked. Listen to his words and you can see the attacks of this sinful world spreading throughout his life like an infection. He has far more to deal with than the attacks from the chief officer of the temple. The people of Israel he was called to preach to were completely ignoring his words of warning - bad enough if you're speaking for yourself, but Jeremiah was speaking for *God!* On top of feeling rejected by his audience, Jeremiah felt like God wasn't keeping His end of the deal, either. Wasn't his message supposed to be more effective than this?

That same kind of mistrust that Jeremiah was feeling towards God and His message was being reflected in Jeremiah's personal life as well. Even his own friends were beginning to turn on him, whispering to each other and waiting for an opportunity to publicly denounce Jeremiah before the people of Israel for preaching about God's judgment to them. For Jeremiah, it seemed as though he was losing everything - friends, health, and his place in society - all for a message that wasn't working as advertised. We don't call Jeremiah "the suffering prophet" for nothing!

So, to sum it all up - Jeremiah was under pressure from the authorities, his friends, his countrymen, and (at least in his mind) his God, all at once. That's a lot for one person to handle by themselves! Can you relate? Even if you aren't under threat of being trapped in the stocks for a day, can you still put yourself in Jeremiah's position by considering your own situation?

Maybe you're one of the people in our country today who want justice for the wrongs they see, but feel betrayed or ignored by their leaders and authorities. Or, are your family and friends turning on you because they see your love for Jesus as hate or intolerance? When you start to add in all the other things that seem to be happening in our world today - a viral pandemic that never seems to end, racial tensions burning their way through our communities, an economic crisis breathing down the back of your neck, it feels overwhelming! What can a person like me do in the face of all that?

When a movement or a cause begins to fall apart, a leader can pull it back together. But when the cause in question is your life, who is going to stand up for you? Especially when we see the people around us becoming more divided, and it seems like even the people we know are turning against us - who is going to champion our cause when it seems as though there's no one left to do it? We can start to feel like Jeremiah, threatened on every side with nowhere else to turn. At least, that's how it appears. But Jeremiah, even in the lowest point of his life, knew where to turn, and he shows us how a person alone can be overwhelmed by the weight of the world, but with God they are delivered.

As Jeremiah struggled against the powers and pressures of the world that had literally brought him to his knees, who comes to his defense? A mighty warrior, inspiring awe! A lord of hosts, who can test the heart and the mind! A champion who can deliver the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers! When he needs someone to stand up for him, Jeremiah doesn't look inward to rely on himself, or around him for an earthly ally, but to heaven, to the God who called Jeremiah to be His prophet.

And what an ally to have! Just look at the three amazing titles Jeremiah gives to his champion. First, he calls God a mighty warrior. He sees God as an awe-inspiring fighter, perhaps inspiring in Jeremiah's enemies the same fear that Goliath once did to the people of Israel. So terrifying that his presence is enough to make Jeremiah's enemies stumble and fall! So overwhelming in his superior might that the resounding defeat he hands to Jeremiah's enemies humiliates them forever.

If that weren't enough, the next title is even more impressive! Jeremiah uses a special name for God, calling Him the "Lord of Hosts." Another way to say it is the "Lord of Armies." God is not only mighty Himself, He leads the angel armies of heaven to the defense of those He loves! But this God is more than just a conqueror, He shows His special love to His people. Jeremiah is well aware of God's special love, you can see it in the way he describes it here; God tests those He loves. The trials we face, the trials Jeremiah was facing, are opportunities sent by God for those He loves to show outwardly what God has already seen inwardly - what He has seen in our hearts and minds, which we'll get to in a moment.

That brings us to the last title Jeremiah gives God. "The one who delivers the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked." The word we translate as "life" here carries another meaning as well: "soul." And isn't that exactly what God does for needy sinners like us? He sent His Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins and rescue us from the hands of the devil. By offering himself on the cross in our place, Jesus delivered us from the greatest enemies we have ever had to face - sin, death, and even the devil himself.

Jeremiah has saved the best title for last! Take those three titles in reverse, and we see the whole picture. God's Son Jesus delivered us from the wickedness of sin, and made us right with God by covering us in His righteousness. So when God, who can see the heart and mind of a person, looks into our hearts and minds, He sees Jesus' sinlessness instead of our sinfulness. When God allows us to experience hardship and trials, it's to give us the opportunity to show that love of Jesus within us, not to punish us. And to make it all possible, God Himself stands at our side, a mighty warrior to champion our cause even when nobody else will.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" Paul wrote those words in his letter to the Romans, and how true they are! This world is full of powerful enemies that can overwhelm us if we stand against them alone; Jeremiah proved that in his ministry, and you have experienced it yourself in your

life, too. We have seen the causes we hoped to succeed crumble and fall. But we aren't alone in this fight! We have the greatest advocate and champion of all on our side, the God who never fails and who has promised to deliver us from the hands of our enemies, even enemies as powerful as sin, death, and the devil. With our awe-inspiring champion behind us, we stand firm against every enemy this world can bring, because we are confident that He will deliver us. Amen.