

I've noticed that I often want God to make things easier. For example, last week my kids were acting crazy, so I asked God, "Please help them not act so crazy." I asked God to make things easier.

If I'm facing a problem or a challenge I want God to take that problem away. In my prayers, I'll ask God, "Please take this problem away." I almost never think to follow that up by saying, "God, if it's not your will to take not this problem away, please help me to serve you well in the midst of it." You see in my mind, the obvious solution to the problem (or maybe the only solution that I want!) is for God to take the problem away.

Now it's certainly not wrong to ask God to take a problem away. We should ask God to deliver us from our problems. But he's the problem: What if God doesn't deliver us in the way we want? What if he doesn't take the problem away? What if he lets the problem stick around or even get worse? How do we react then?

Have you ever experienced this before? Have you ever asked God to take a problem away but the problem stuck around? Maybe you asked God to take a sickness away but the sickness lingered or got worse. Maybe you asked God to take a financial problem away, but the problem stuck around or gets worse. How should we react when we ask God to take a problem away, but it doesn't go away?

It's important that we answer this question because if we don't then we could become angry with God and start to doubt him. And that's exactly what happened to the prophet Jeremiah in our passage for today. Jeremiah had a problem and the problem didn't go away and he accused God of not being dependable. But when we see how God helped Jeremiah, I think it can also help us when our problems just don't go away.

What was Jeremiah's problem? Well, Jeremiah had layers of difficulties and challenges. First, Jeremiah had a very, very hard job to do. His job was to tell the people that if they didn't repent and reform their ways, a nation was going to come from the north and was going to destroy Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and carry the people into exile. That message did not go over well. Jeremiah was the most unpopular man in Jerusalem. He says, "**I sat alone because your hand was on me**" (Jeremiah 15:17). And not only was he unpopular, back in chapter 11 we hear about a plot to take Jeremiah's life (11:18-20).

But Jeremiah's problem was complex because even though he was the most unpopular man in Jerusalem, he still loved Jerusalem. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because he weeps over the fact that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. Jeremiah says, "**Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?**" (15:18) Part of the reason his "**pain was unending**" and his "**wound grievous and incurable**" (15:18) is that he knew that he was going to see Jerusalem destroyed. The people of Jerusalem's wound was Jeremiah's wound. If they were wounded, he was wounded too.

When I think about the love that Jeremiah had for Jerusalem, I can't help but think about the love of Christ. He too wept over Jerusalem. Remember he said, "**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How I longed to gather you together, like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.**" That's the love of Christ. He loves unwilling people. People like you and people like me. He loved Jeremiah too.

So Jeremiah has all these compounding problems. He has a tough message to preach. He has persecutors. He has agony over what's going to happen to Jerusalem. None of his problems are getting any better and so he says to God, "**You are to me like a deceptive brook or a spring that fails**" (Jeremiah 15:18). In the middle east they have these things called wadis. A wadi is a brook of water that is only there for part of the year. In the dry season it dries up. So when you need water the most, it's not there.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah is saying, "That's what you are

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<sup>1</sup> See John L. Gillman, "Wadi" in the "Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible" ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1363.

God. You're not there for me when I need you the most. I think I'm going to get water from you. I think I'm going to get help from you and then I don't." **"You are to me like a deceptive brook or a spring that fails" (Jeremiah 15:18).** Jeremiah crossed the line here. God tells Jeremiah to repent. It says, **"Therefore this is what the LORD says, 'If you repent, I will restore you'" (Jeremiah 15:19).** God tells Jeremiah that he needs to repent. Sometimes even prophets need to repent. We can read this passage and say, "Jeremiah had the same struggles that I have. Jeremiah was a sinner just like me. He was saved by grace just like me. God helped him and he can help me."

How did God help Jeremiah? Notice that God didn't help Jeremiah by taking the problem away. Things didn't get easier for Jeremiah. He had to keep preaching the same message. And he had to keep suffering persecution. God didn't help Jeremiah by making things easier. Instead, he helped Jeremiah by giving him a job.<sup>2</sup> It says, **"If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman" (Jeremiah 15:19).** Literally in Hebrew it says, "You will be like *my mouth*." God wanted Jeremiah in Jerusalem in the midst of all those problems because Jeremiah was God's voice in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> So Jeremiah asked God, "Take these problems away" And God said, "I won't take the problems away, but I have a job for you, I want you to serve me and be my voice in the midst of all those problems."

When we ask God to take a problem away and he doesn't take the problem away, maybe he has a job for us to do in the midst of the problem. When you ask God to take a problem away and the problem doesn't go away, keep asking him to take it away but also ask yourself, "How can I serve God and be his voice in the midst of this challenge or problem?" Ask yourself, "How does this challenge or problem give me an opportunity to serve God and to be his voice?" When I say be his voice I mean to speak and share his word.

How can we see lingering problems as opportunities to serve God and to be his voice? Well, God hasn't taken the pandemic away, but maybe you can call someone who might be lonely. Or maybe you have a lingering financial difficulty. Maybe that's your opportunity to show your family that life is not about material possessions but about God and his word. Or maybe you see a fellow believer who is caught in a sin. Instead of avoiding it, you have a difficult conversation with that person. That's your opportunity to be God's voice.

That's not going to be easy to do but God promises to strengthen you for that task. That's what he did for Jeremiah, **"I will make you like a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze" (Jeremiah 15:20).** Sometimes instead of making things easier, God's makes us stronger. God makes us stronger by giving us his presence and his promises. He said to Jeremiah, **"I am with you to rescue and save you." (15:20)** Jesus also said, "Behold I am with you always even until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19) Jesus chose the difficult road. He chose the way of the cross. He did ask God to take the problem away. Remember, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Father, let this cup be taken from me, yet not what I will, but what you will." God didn't take the problem away. God didn't take the problem away because he had a job for Jesus to do. Jesus served God and all of us by taking away the sins of the world. That's how Jesus saved us and now he is with us to help us serve God and be his voice even the in midst of difficulties. **"I will save you from the hands of the wicked and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel" (Jeremiah 15:20-21).** God is not a deceptive brook. He's the fountain of life so that even when problems linger we can serve him and be his voice even when he doesn't take the problem away. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> God did something similar for Elijah in 1 Kings 19:15-17. I believe I heard this insight at the Summer Hebrew Institute through Martin Luther College.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this concept of God's voice to Professor Paul Wendland, "Martin Luther – God's Voice," an essay given at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium 2017.