

## Ask Yourself: What Does God Say?

Jeremiah 26:8-15

*by Michael G. Lilienthal*

Thus says the Lord.

You know what that means, right? It means what is spoken is not just a mere man's word. It is God's Word. And you know what that means, right? God's Word is the very speech that comes out of God's mouth. When God's Word is spoken, you ought to tremble as though God himself were standing before you and speaking. The question has been brought up in the media on numerous occasions: what would you do if Jesus himself came and spoke to you? Well, blessed congregation of the Lord, he *is* speaking to you, every time you crack open the family Bible, every time you hear the lessons read each Sunday, every time you sing a hymn or go through the liturgy: it is *all* God's Word spoken to you. We are warned in that same Word, however, that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim. 3:3-4).

Those words were written to St. Timothy from his mentor St. Paul. But the prophet Jeremiah would probably have appreciated that warning in his day. Just look what happened: "And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die!'" Rather than really listen and accept what Jeremiah said when he uttered, "Thus says the LORD," (and he said that very

clause in the speech that caused the people to want to kill him), it wasn't what they wanted to hear, so they rejected it, and decided to kill the messenger. Here's the moral of the story: don't be like those hard-hearted people or like the people St. Paul warns about. Instead, whenever confronted with a situation, whenever you hear a message, rather than going with your preference, **ask yourself: What does God say?** and

### I. Be Eager to Hear the Truth

Now this is often unpleasant. Just look at the message that God's people had to hear from him: "'This house shall be like Shiloh[, a city destroyed for their lack of reverence to God], and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant.'" Are you eager to hear that your home may be torn down? that your family may be killed? that you yourself will come to bodily harm? The objections of these Jews is understandable, isn't it? Listen to Jesus' own words to some in the church (do they apply to you?): "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.... If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you" (Rev. 3:1-3).

In name, Jeremiah's audience was God's people. But in reality, they were heathens. Going astray after their own preferences, neglecting *true* worship of God, they had become secure in their lives. They thought that God's Law didn't apply to them. They thought that by attending God's house, by living in God's land, they had a get-out-of-jail-free card. But the faith wasn't there. That's why Jeremiah preached destruction.

Don't become secure in self-righteousness. Instead, hear the truth of God's Word: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Ex. 20:5); "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it" (Matt. 10:37-39). Rather than refuse to hear the bad news, rather than rejecting the application of God's Law, be ready as you hear it, eager to apply it to yourself. For example, when you look at the Ten Commandments, what is your first thought? Is it, "I'm glad I don't have any other gods"? Is it, "Good thing I don't take God's name in vain"? "I always keep the Sabbath holy"? "I was always good to my parents"? "I never hurt anyone"? "I'm faithful to my spouse"? "I don't steal"? "I've never lied about anyone"? "I'm content with what I have, so I never covet anything of my neighbors"? If those are the thoughts that run through your mind, then you are no better than these priests and prophets who wanted to kill God's mouthpiece. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

When you read the Ten Commandments, instead of hardening your hearts and blinding yourselves to your sins, think, "God is not always my foremost concern; that is a damnable sin"; "God's name and revelation are frequently empty to me; that is a damnable sin"; "I don't always appreciate God's Word and worship; that is a damnable sin"; "I sometimes think I know better than my authority figures and reject their leadership; that is a damnable sin"; "I do hurt others, if not by my actions then by my

words and my thoughts; that is a damnable sin"; "I am unfaithful and unchaste in dirty thoughts, coarse language, indecent actions; that is a damnable sin"; "I have cheated my way into getting something, even convincing myself I wasn't really hurting anyone; that is a damnable sin"; "I have held unkind thoughts about others, even spoken unkind words—however true; that is a damnable sin"; "I am often eager to gain what I don't have, and even jealous to keep what is mine, valuing these possessions above other things; that is a damnable sin."

Here is the true reason you should be eager to hear this truth, rather than hardening your heart to it, preferring to listen to the parts you like and sweeping under the rug some of the less happy parts: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As Jeremiah said, "Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you." If we don't confess our sins, we're holding onto them, refusing to let God forgive them. God's wrath and judgment are plummeting toward us like a massive asteroid. Doom is certain. How can we be saved from it? Repent. Confess your sins, and mend your ways.

There is a service in our *Hymnaries* on pp. 130-132: "The Service of Corporate Confession and Absolution." In it the Pastor asks a series of questions and the Congregation responds, such as: "Do you sincerely confess that you have sinned against God and deserved His wrath and punishment?" to which the Congregation answers, "I do so confess." And, "Do you heartily repent of all your sins committed in

thought, word, and deed?" to which the response is, "I do repent." Then, "Do you sincerely believe that God, by grace, for Jesus' sake, will forgive you all your sins?" and the Congregation responds, "I do so believe." And then, "Do you promise that by the power of the Holy Spirit you will amend your sinful life?" that is, turn back from sinning and instead perform good works and live a godly life; and we answer, "I do so promise." The prayer follows, in which the Congregation pleads with God, "But we believe in Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who has suffered for our salvation; and for His sake we pray You: Forgive us all our sins!" This is the truth of God's mercy which we should be eager to hear: we ourselves could not mend our ways, but we have been sinners since our conception. But praise be God! He "sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). God's wrath is turned aside, by the cross of Christ. Hearing that word of the Law calling us to repent leads us also to hear the word of the Gospel, calling us to hold onto that cross, so that God's wrath is turned aside from us also. Because we believe this joyful news, we cannot keep it secret, but like all Christians, "we also believe, and so we also speak" (2 Cor. 4:13). So you:

## **II. Be Brave to Speak the Truth**

This means both that truth of wrath, that truth of God's Law, and the truth of mercy, the truth of God's Gospel. Not just with non-Christians either. Yes, evangelism is part of it, sharing the Gospel with those who have never heard of it or don't believe it. But that wasn't Jeremiah's audience: Jeremiah spoke with the people of Judah, those who ought to have been God's people. They nevertheless needed to hear the truth of

what God says. Undoubtedly you know people, Christians like yourselves, who nevertheless need to hear again the message of God. But I am also certain that most of you are like me. We get scared to tell anybody else. It's easier for us to be content with *our* faith: *I* know that I believe, and that's enough. Maybe you wouldn't call it fear. Maybe you just don't know what to say. You have the will, just not the ability. Well, both of these are addressed by St. Peter in the book of Acts: "We must obey God rather than men," he says — don't be *afraid* of what others think of you (and I know, easier said than done). He goes on: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:29-31). Do you still not know what to say? Write this passage down: Acts 5:30-31. That's what Peter said. It contains the whole truth of salvation: our sins nailed Jesus to the cross, but God raised him from the dead, and now, living again, he rules to dole out forgiveness to those who repent. It's as simple as that. And you know what, if people have more questions, you have resources: You have your Bibles, and if you don't always know what to answer, you have a pastor, you have other members of the congregation. Use the support system.

We all know the beginning of that passage: "We must obey God rather than men." But it's more than that. Look at Jeremiah's example: he stated, "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard." So he obeyed God. And then he said, "But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you." What bravery! Jeremiah can be counted among those spoken of in Revelation: "they have conquered [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb *and by*

*the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11).*

He not only obeyed God *even though* it meant he may die: he obeyed God *because* it meant he may die. One great Christian from the generation after the apostles was similar: St. Ignatius of Antioch: he dedicated his life to becoming an imitator of Christ: as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1), and in Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:1-2). This Christian Ignatius took this to heart. Being an imitator of Christ meant willingly going to death. He did. Persecuted for the faith, he was fed to the wild animals in the Coliseum. On the way, he wrote several letters, and in one he said,

I am God’s wheat and shall be ground by the teeth of wild animals. I am writing to all the churches to let it be known that I will gladly die for God if only you do not stand in my way. I plead with you: show me no untimely kindness. Let me be food for the wild beasts, for they are my way to God. I am God's wheat and shall be ground by their teeth so that I may become Christ's pure bread. Pray to Christ for me that the animals will be the means of making me a sacrificial victim for God. No earthly pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth. He who died in place of us is the one object of my quest. He who rose for our sakes is my one desire.<sup>1</sup>

This faithful child of God was empowered by the Holy Spirit to even eagerly give his life in the name of the truth, just like Jeremiah.

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, “St. Ignatius of Antioch,” *Catholic Online*, [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=677](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=677).

And both of these, see, are overshadowed in the self-sacrifice of their model: Jesus Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). And he didn’t stay dead, but because of his sacrifice, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). Therefore we ourselves can be confident when we speak the truth, “knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (2 Cor. 4:14).

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,” and be ready, *eager* in fact, to place yourselves at the mercy of executioners (Phil. 2:5). For by risking your life, you may save a soul. Christ gave all, won the victory over death and the world, so that you can with boldness place your neck on the executioner’s block; it can’t defeat you. Jesus did it all.

For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:15-18).

Thus says the Lord.

Amen.