

Faith and Common Sense
Jeremiah 42:7-43:7

Why in the world didn't the people take Jeremiah's advice? After all, he had been right about all his other prophecies, hadn't he? Over and over again from the very beginning of his ministry he had kept insisting that, because the people of God had given themselves over to the worship of idols, the Lord would give them into the hands of other worshippers of those same false gods: the Babylonian army. In fact, Jeremiah's message was so consistent and relentless that it takes a lot of discipline for us modern readers to plow through his unwavering pronouncements of impending disaster.

And by the time today's passage opens, all those prophecies of woe had been fulfilled: The Babylonians had in fact besieged and then conquered the city of Jerusalem. All the sons of the King of Judah had been killed while he watched, and then the Babylonians put out his eyes so that would be the last thing he ever saw. They then burned down all the houses in Jerusalem, including the king's palace and the Temple, and they destroyed the walls of the city. Yes, everything turned out just as horribly as Jeremiah had said it would.

But that wasn't the end of the people's disasters. For even though vast numbers of their countrymen had been killed, and even though thousands more had been carried off into exile in Babylon, some of the poorest people had been allowed to stay in the land. And the Babylonians had appointed a man named Gedaliah to rule over them as governor. But a revolutionary named Ishmael had staged a coup. He killed Gedaliah, and tried to force the remaining population to flee across the Jordan River to the east, to take refuge among the Ammonites. Yes, the coup had eventually been thwarted by another powerful warrior, a man named Johanan. But nothing could change the fact that Gedaliah had been murdered.

And so, at the time chapter 42 opened, the people had a big choice to make. Should they stay in the land of Judah, waiting for the reprisals of the Babylonians whose governor had just been killed? Or, should they follow Johanan who was prepared to take all of them down to Egypt? What should they do? Which choice should they make?

Well, the leaders of the people made a good beginning. They said they wanted to listen to what God said (42:3). They even swore that they would do whatever Jeremiah told them to do (42:5). Yes, it seemed that they had finally learned their lesson, and that they were ready to admit that Jeremiah really had been speaking the Word of God to them, no matter how unpleasant that Word might have been.

And maybe that's where you are in your faith journey today. Maybe you believe what the EPC's "Essentials of Our Faith" says about Scripture: that it is "self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life." Maybe you agree that the Word of God is "infallible," that it is "uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit, ... the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks." Maybe you believe what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about the Bible, that it is our one "rule of faith and life."

But what do you do when the Bible tells you something you don't want to hear? For that, you see, is what happened to God's people in today's passage. For remember, the leaders of the people wanted to do what made sense to them, to take all of the people down into Egypt, so they would be protected by Pharaoh's mighty armies. They wanted to move to a place of agricultural bounty, where

the annual floods of the Nile River provided regular nutrients for the farmers' fields, and where the Nile's dependable source of water for irrigation allowed crops to grow even in a place where it seldom rains. Yes, the leaders of God's people saw Egypt as a place of safety and prosperity, a place where they would not "see war or hear the sound of a trumpet or hunger for bread" (42:14). Moving to Egypt was the logical choice, the commonsensical choice.

But Jeremiah the prophet told them to do something different, something that made no sense to them. He told God's people to stay in the land of Judah, where the obviously cruel and vindictive Babylonians could easily punish them or even kill them because their governor had been murdered. Moreover, in the land of Judah God's people would remain under the thumb of the Babylonians, having to endure onerous regulations and high taxes. Oh, and God's people would have had to depend on rain to water their crops – and in the midst of a hot, dry spell as we are in Southwest Mississippi, we know how undependable such rain can be.

In sum, Jeremiah had no worldly wealth to offer God's people. He commanded no soldiers who could protect them from the Babylonians. All he could give them was the promise of God: "If you will indeed stay in this land, then I will build you up and not tear you down, and I will plant you and not uproot you.... Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, ... for I am with you to save you and deliver you from his hand" (42:10-11). Jeremiah thus called God's people to walk, not by sight, not according to what made sense to them or felt right to them, but by faith. Jeremiah asked them to place their trust not in their own reason or feelings or traditions or experience, but in the Word of God alone.

And you know, Jeremiah had done the same thing throughout his ministry. After all, he had told God's people that they should stop clinging to the false idols on which they had been depending to provide for them. He told them to stop trusting in the strong stone walls of Jerusalem to protect them. Instead Jeremiah insisted that they should surrender to the wicked, brutal Babylonians if they wanted to save their lives. Yes, before Jerusalem had been captured, Jeremiah was calling the people to abandon all worldly wealth and safety, and trust in the Lord alone. That didn't make any sense either.

But you know, that's really the same way that all of God's people have always had to walk, not by the light of common sense, but by faith alone. For think about our responsive reading from the New Testament book of Hebrews. Did it really make sense for Noah to build a watertight wooden box on dry land, a box big enough to protect him and his family and two of every species of land animals and birds, and to do this when there was absolutely no rain in sight? Wasn't Noah called to walk by faith?

Did it really make sense for 75-year-old Abraham to leave his family and the only place he had ever lived – the sophisticated society of Mesopotamia – so he could move to a place he had never seen, a place where he would be surrounded by unbelievers? Did it make sense for him and his wife, who had never before been able physically to bear children, to believe God's promises that they would have more descendants than there are stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore? Wasn't Abraham called to walk by faith?

Come to think of it, did it make sense for Moses to leave his life of luxury in Pharaoh's palace just so that he could share in the hardships and abuse that his people endured as slaves in Egypt? Did it make sense, when Pharaoh's army was pursuing them, for God's people to run into the Red Sea, with the waters piled up to their right and left, and thus leaving them no place of escape from the much faster Egyptian chariots? Wasn't Moses called to walk by faith?

And in New Testament times, did it make sense for Peter and John, for Paul and Silas to keep on preaching the resurrection of Christ, even when they were threatened and beaten? Did it make sense for Paul to give up his prominent position in Jewish society to become one of the Christians he once zealously persecuted? Did it make sense for any of their followers to choose to be burned as torches in Nero's gardens or to be thrown to the lions in the Colosseum rather than to reject their faith in Christ? Weren't all those New Testament believers called to walk by faith?

More recently and closer to home, did it make sense for missionary Jim Elliot and his four friends to leave the relative wealth and comfort of the United States to travel to Ecuador in order to preach the gospel to the Waorani tribe, only to be killed before they had a chance to preach a single sermon to them?

No, none of that made sense. Instead, for Noah and Abraham and Moses, for Peter and John and Paul, for the American missionaries Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming and Jim Elliot, their faith, their absolute trust in the Lord was, as the author of Hebrews puts it, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That's why they didn't have to see the blessings God promised them in order to be sure God was telling them the truth. No, what Jeremiah offered to the people of his day was enough for them: God's promise that "I will build you up and not tear you down. I am with you to save you."

And that's the same promise Jesus makes to all of us today. He promises welcome and pardon to all those who will come to Him in faith, to all who will receive Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. And He promises that one day, He will return to rule and reign over everyone and everything, to set all things right and to make all things new.

But until that day, He calls us to the same sort of faith to which Jeremiah called the people of his time: to keep on depending on the promises of God, even if they don't make any sense to us; to turn away from any sin, away from any other source of assurance, and trust only in the Lord to protect us and to provide for us, even when we don't see any change in our outward circumstances. In short, Jesus calls us to walk by faith, not by sight, trusting in Him instead of in our common sense.

But you know, it turns out that trusting in God is actually the most commonsensical thing to do, at least in the long run. For what happened to the people of Jeremiah's time who rejected the Word of the Lord that he proclaimed to them? Those who remained inside the walls of Jerusalem were killed or captured by the Babylonians. And those who followed Johanan down to Egypt, those who sought worldly prosperity and security ended up dying by the sword or by famine or by pestilence (42:22). No, however wealthy and powerful he was, Pharaoh was ultimately unable to protect them from the danger and poverty that they were so afraid the Babylonians would bring them. Only the Lord could save them – in His inscrutable way, according to His mysterious schedule.

And you know, the same thing continues to be true today. Sure, it seems to make sense to trust what we can count and calculate, to trust in our paychecks or our pensions, our portfolios or our bank accounts to provide for us. But can any of those things protect us from the crippling expenses of serious illness? And as Jesus reminded us, moth and rust, not to mention inflation, can destroy any of the riches of this world. And so many of us have had the sad experience that thieves can break in and steal even our most precious possessions.

And sure, it seems to make sense to look to our sheriffs and governors and presidents to keep us safe. But are there really enough deputies and soldiers to guard every house from burglars, to stop

every act of vandalism? No, it has never really made sense to flee to Egypt. It has never really made sense to trust only in what we can see and touch. It has never really made sense to walk by sight.

But what has happened to all those throughout history who have trusted in the Lord instead of in their common sense? Well, the fact is that Noah eventually saw the flood come, so he really did need that ark. The fact is that Abraham's grandson Jacob did have lots of physical descendants. Moreover, through his descendant Jesus, Abraham has become the father of the faith, the spiritual ancestor of all those who are joined to Christ by faith. And however tempted Moses may have been to trust in the wealth and power of Egypt, none of those things ended up protecting Pharaoh from the plagues God sent upon him and his people.

And the same thing is true for us New Testament believers, for all who share the faith that the prophets and the apostles so boldly proclaimed. Even though many of us through the years have been called to suffer or even die because of our faith, the Christ in whom we trust has promised to be with us and to save us. Can any worldly wealth possibly match the blessing of eternal life in the presence of God? Can the most powerful armies in the world possibly do what Jesus did on the cross, overcoming the worst of our enemies, death itself?

No, trusting in Jesus is really the only choice that ultimately makes sense. Jim Elliott, one of the missionaries who died in Ecuador, put it this way in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

And so, that's the question that faces us today: will we let go of those worldly things to which we look to protect us and provide for us, those things which death will eventually prevent us from keeping anyway? Will we trust in Christ, even when we don't see answers to our prayers? Will we trust Him even when we are afraid, even when His Word doesn't make sense to us? Will we follow Him, even when it's risky or costly? Instead of relying only on what our eyes can see, will we keep looking to Jesus in faith? For by doing so, we will gain the eternal life that we cannot lose.