

5 Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord.6 He said, "Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. 7 Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: 8 From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms.9 But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true."

### **Yoked to the Cross**

I love big trees but I also have a fascination with saw mills and logging. From what I've read about the Oregon forests loggers were greeted with vast supply of timber that almost completely blotted out the sky. They were met with the challenge of harvesting that timber without roads, rails, and a sopping wet forest floor. So how did they do it? How did they bring a forest to it's knees? How did they move trees that look bigger than mountains without modern equipment? It was no easy task when you consider they relied on primitive technology. The axe, the saw, but most importantly the ox and the yoke. The yoke harnessed the strength of an ox or team to move massive logs out of the muck.

A yoke is a useful tool but it is also symbolic. In the past after battle a defeated king would be yoked to the general's chariot like an ox. The yoke became symbolic of submission and servitude. It became similar to waving a white flag and surrender as the leaders appeared on the tops of the walls wearing yokes. The yoke became associated with all that was bad, slavery, and taxes instead of strength and power.

In a similar fashion many look upon Christianity as a burden, as if we are missing out and you'll never have fun again. While the cross divides even the closest of relationships it isn't a symbol of defeat. We are yoked to the cross. There at the cross Christ's strength is put to work pulling sinners out of the muck of sin. Yes it's a yoke but it is not a burden. It's our strength and power.

Jeremiah was yoked to Israel in order to pull them out of the sopping wet forest floor of sin. Because they refused to return to the Lord, God made good on his promise. He sent one nation after another to remove his people. Nebuchadnezzar had already attacked. The Babylonian army had swept through their country taking Jews into exile, emptying the temple, carrying off the ark, all while leaving them with a puppet king, Zedekiah. It was to this king, this people, and to these surroundings that Jeremiah was yoked. He was

tasked with telling the people of Israel, "Don't fight back. Give yourselves up. Bear the yoke of Babylon." He not only went to Zedekiah but to the alliance, Moab, Edom, Ammon. Don't resist. Submit to the Babylonians. Can you imagine? That would be a whole lot like confronting American troops and telling them to bow before the Islamic State. That's what Jeremiah did.

That's because Israel thought they had God yoked. They thought they could control the Almighty. After all, they were the people of the promise, in the Promised Land. That's when God sent in Babylon, and Jeremiah to grease the skids and get them moving. But, Zedekiah didn't want to go. He didn't want to wear the yoke of the Babylon. That's where our lesson picks up with Jeremiah wearing a wooden yoke calling to all, "Get up. Get packing. Let's go." and Hananiah opposing him, *'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord's house... I will also bring back to this place our king, our exiles... declares the Lord.'* Hananiah enacts his message with an object lesson. He breaks the yoke of Jeremiah. It was a message Israel wanted to hear, but it was not the message they needed to hear.

All the people said Amen! Even Jeremiah joined in, *"May the Lord fulfill your words!"* He wished he could change his message. He wanted relief from the burden of pronouncing judgment. But he was instructed to go to the people and tell them death and destruction was coming their way. You can imagine his message didn't win friends or influence people. Instead it divided families, friends, and even a country between those who took seriously his words and those who didn't.

Jeremiah was yoked to the truth of God's Word. We too are under a yoke. We don't want to be bound, or burdened. So often the yoke or the cross is made into something more fashionable like a necklace. It's easy to wear and I'm carrying my cross, my yoke. The yoke is lightened; the cross is whittled and formed until it becomes as simple as suffering. We drag out our cross at the death of a loved one saying, "That's just my cross to bear." But that's not taking up your cross and following Jesus unless your loved one happened to be killed for telling people about Jesus. That's not a cross to bear that's a consequence of sin or living in a sinful world. But we like to tell ourselves, "I've taken up my cross. I'm following you Jesus."

But then like Israel we may only want to hear the good news. We may want to stay in the muck and mire of our sin instead of heading down skid row. We like to hear what we want, that we are such wonderful Christians, that we follow Jesus, that we don't have to change, that Jesus loves and accepts us as we are. Jesus loves and accepts us as we are but

he doesn't allow us to remain as we are. And while like Jeremiah we may wish God's word were different, we may wish we could change God's teaching on the principles of fellowship, Lord's Supper, we can't. God's Word, the cross won't win friends and influence people but it may divide families, friends, even the closest of relationships.

He has given us his word. He yokes us to the cross. He wants us to remain faithful to him but those *who don't take up their cross and follow fall under God's judgment, Jesus' pronouncement, "They're not worthy of me.* Those who lighten loads and clear cutting crosses are not worthy of being called a Christian as well as those who overburden an ox. That happens when we assume that being yoked to the cross only ever involves pain and suffering. If someone isn't suffering then they aren't doing Christianity right. They aren't doing enough. The only way to be sure that you are following Jesus is if life is miserable... but that's not anymore Christian that those who lighten loads. What happens when you turn the yoke into something it isn't?

What happens when you overload an animal? They give up. They lose their will to try. It can happen to you when you look at the yoke or the cross as misery. God is not the bull whacker up there using all sorts of colorful profanity trying to get his people to move. He works in an entirely different way and he loves them too much to give them whatever they want. There was a purpose behind being yoked to Babylon. It's because being dumb as an ox won't allow them to back up. They have to turn around. And an ox carrying a load doesn't turn on a dime. So they had to turn to Babylon before heading home.

Jeremiah predicted defeat at the hand of Babylon, He lived a lonely life as he tried to call them to repentance. He broke under that yoke. His yoke was more than he could carry on his own. But it wasn't for Jeremiah to carry this load alone. God was with him.

Israel faced a long road back down skid row. They were going to go, like it or not, but Jeremiah gave them comfort that they would return. They're just turning around. They were yoked to someone even greater than Babylon. He spoke about the person of Christ. *The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. This is the covenant I will make ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, Know the LORD,' because they will all know me ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. He knows of forgiveness freely given to him.*

And while he announces judgment and promises deliverance he doesn't say, "Make life miserable in Babylon." He tells them to settle down, do business, and increase in

number. Life doesn't have to be miserable as if the only gifts God gives are pain. Rather enjoy the life God has given and live it according to his will. A life lived in accord with God's Will is a blessing.

Like Jeremiah, you may suffer for being faithful. The cross is more than we can carry on our own. Although we are unworthy of to follow Jesus he has harnessed us to his cross. We are yoked to him at baptism. We are yoked to him in Lord' Supper. There he forgives our failure to follow and motivates us with his love rather than colorful words.

Jesus reminds us, *"My yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:29,30). Our yoke is easy and it's burden light because of the one with whom we are yoked. We are yoked to someone greater. Jeremiah's prophecy came true. A yoke was never intended to make work harder. The yoke Jesus took up could not be lifted by any of us. Jesus yoked himself to us. He joins us to himself. He is at work turning us around. Although it may feel like we are headed off into exile. God is there. He's bringing us back. In the meantime enjoy life. We're yoked to the cross.

Enjoy life knowing the forgiveness given to us. We are forgiven for the times we stood our ground and refused carry our cross. We are forgiven for the times we refused to go any further afraid of where God might lead us. Often we want to go our own way and do what we want to do but thankfully we are yoked to him and he leads us back. Take up each other's burdens. Join together and help each other carry one another's burdens.

A yoke doesn't have to be a bad thing. A yoke makes work easier. For the loggers in the Oregon Territory the yoke may have been old fashioned but it was still very useful even if they had to deal with the dumb ox. We are yoked to the cross. That's not a burden but a blessing as Jesus comes alongside us and puts his shoulder to work doing what we never could. He calls to us, "Follow me." Our yoke is easy. It's burden is light. The skids are greased and God leads the way. Follow God to the cross and there see his strength and power put to work for you. Amen.