

Jeremiah's one of my favorite prophets 'cause he hates being a prophet. I mean, he's willing to deliver God's message, but he's grumpy about it. Now, Jeremiah came onto the scene before things got bad. The kingdom of Judah was on its last legs, but it wasn't quite the end, not yet. God called Jeremiah to warn the people in charge that the end was coming if they didn't act right. So of course, they didn't, and instead of getting their act together, they went after the messenger. Jeremiah was beaten, disowned, imprisoned, imprisoned again, and then imprisoned again. He was exiled. He argued with kings and priests and false prophets. He was aggravated by telling the same old truth to people who just wouldn't hear it. The rulers had plenty of chances to listen to God's truth, but they couldn't hear it over the comforts they'd become accustomed to. Judah was one Jenga-style pull away from crumbling, and the wealthiest leapt at the chance to gobble up even more resources, stripping everything from the poor.

Another prophet at the same time, Zephaniah, warned that the coming catastrophe would be so great that, though the wealthy built houses, they'd never get to live in them. Jeremiah wasn't the only prophet, but he suffered more than most in large part because he was especially direct while standing up to the powerful. To serve the poor, Jeremiah said, was to know God. That wasn't new, but the rulers were quick to justify ignoring God's most basic instructions. Jeremiah responded, reminding them that God's followers don't occasionally help the poor; they exist to serve the poor. Things are bad and they're gonna get worse because you replaced God with money and chased wealth instead of helping people. Once Babylon laid its siege, Jeremiah kept shouting about the greed inside the walls that invited the threat outside them. The enemy outside was visible and enormous and patient. The enemy inside was voracious, selfish, and inhumane, and they're the reason for the encamped thousands waiting for the right time to strike. The great sadness is that when the Babylonians finally breached the walls, they didn't go after only the wealthy who brought this horror down on the city. The Babylonians went after everyone. Some were captured, some left behind, but most were slaughtered.

But before the Babylonians poured in, while Jeremiah was imprisoned, he did something crazy even for a prophet. Jeremiah bought some land. He didn't know if he was going to survive. He didn't know who was more likely to execute him, his king or a foreign one. He couldn't leave his cell and live out the rest of his days in solitary bliss. For all Jeremiah knew, death waited for him every morning. There's an old saying that farmers are the world's biggest optimists. To plant a seed is to gamble. Beneath the soil, seeds sprout or don't. If they do, they face one uncertainty after another with sunlight and chlorophyll and the careful hands of a farmer. And if all comes together just right, there'll be food and comfort and another year of security. And that assumes that the year ahead's worth all that worry and chance and work now. In other words, there's something worth sticking around for in the future. Optimism waits in the soil. That's what Jeremiah buying land means. It means he expects that place to exist. It means he expects to exist or someone he cares about. And whoever it is, that purchase will be a land free from imprisonment, insecurity, and inequality. Jeremiah's taking a little piece of the kingdom away and setting it aside for God's people, the poor, the abused, the manipulated, and the imprisoned alike. He doesn't set it aside for those in power. They had their chance. Jeremiah's a realist. He knows things are broken. He knows, in some sense, he failed. He knows worse is coming just as soon as the Babylonians loose their swords. And still, still he has hope.

These days, we've got a million reasons to worry, to seek comfort, and maybe even store up treasures of our own, penny by penny. If we zoom out a little, we get these jolts like history's screaming at us to catch the patterns repeating in front of us. We've been following God and trying to get folks to see just how far the world has slid away from the care of the lowest castes who dream of having enough in favor of the wealthiest who just

can't get enough. It's easy, my God is it easy to spiral into a place of deep disappointment, depression, hopelessness, and even resignation that this is just how things are. But y'all there's one thing God is consistently clear about: it doesn't matter how the lowest in our society got there, they, the ones who have nothing, they are the ones we serve. We outta figure out what perpetuates this stuff and stop it, but in the meantime, we serve them. We prioritize them. We seek salvation at their feet. They are the land we place our hope in. They are the suffering present. And they are the embodiment of that thriving, safe, and inclusive future. We've got Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and a flood of people now living in fear -- and they all need us to listen. We've gotta make sure those voices aren't extinguished. And as long as those voices cry out, we amplify them for others to hear, and we respond to what they're asking of us.

And what are they asking of us? The same things they've been asking for millennia. They want to be able to eat. They want to be able to afford more than bare survival. They want to care for their children. They want to hope, and they want to see hopes realized. They want to live without the fear that a minor health scare could derail their lives. They want to retire. They want to travel. They want to be themselves. They want to love. They want to thrive. We ought to be out here making life easier for everyone who comes up, removing barriers for people now and laying foundations for those ahead. Buy up a plot of land so there's a place to start again. Babylon may be at the gates, but there will be something on the other side of this that is good and holy. In that soil there is great hope, and new seeds will sprout. I know it's easy to get caught up in the fear of now. I think we should be afraid. But fear cannot consume us. We can fear and still have faith. That's courage, and in that courage our hope sprouts. If Jeremiah has anything to say about it, we get to choose if we're on God's side or not. Every day, we get to choose, get to choose where we invest our energy, our faith, our compassion, and our love. On the side of the rich, we have greed and destruction. And on the side of God, we have humility and justice. Babylon's at the gates. It's time you choose.