

Scripture: Jeremiah 12:5

Hymns 21, 610

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Practice Tests for the Final Exam

Jeremiah 12:5

INTRODUCTION

Can a man outrun a horse? The thought seems ridiculous doesn't it. In preparation for this sermon I watched the video from the 1973 Belmont Stakes just to refresh my memory on how fast horses can run. Now I am not into horse racing or gambling, but there is something inspiring to see how Secretariat, that great thoroughbred, just ran away from the rest of the field. As far as I can tell, his jockey never touched him with the crop. It wasn't what he did. It was what he didn't do. He just didn't hold that horse back. Secretariat ran each successive quarter mile of that race faster than he had run the previous one. Imagine - 1 1/2 miles in 2 min 24 sec. That's more than twice the speed that a world class runner could do. So is it possible for a man to outrun a horse? Well, the answer, surprisingly is yes. As fast as horses are for short distances, people can outrun them in a marathon (26.2 miles). It's been done a number of times, especially in warm or hot weather. So the secret to keeping up with the horses is to go for the distance and to not be afraid of the heat.

The Christian life is very much a distance run, isn't it? The prophet Jeremiah was discouraged by the stubbornness of the professed people of God. In our Scripture reading this morning, we find God gently exhorting him to step up his game. Please take your Bible and navigate to Jer. 12:5 and let's read that together: "If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, Then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, Then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?"

(Jeremiah 12:5 NKJV)

Si corríste con los de a pie y te cansaron, ¿cómo competirás con los caballos? Y si en tierra de paz te caes al suelo, ¿qué harás en la espesura del Jordán? Jeremiah 12:5, RVA

In today's message I want to point out three essential things:

1. I want to point out that God's message for any generation, especially ours, is always counter-cultural
2. God often calls His messengers to tests of faithfulness before He brings them up to the great test of their life work
3. With these principles in mind, I want to point out two areas (and there are others) where I believe God is calling His people to take a very public stand, in preparation for the great contest in the future.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Jeremiah prophesied at a time of great peril for the nation of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel was already long gone. Having turned away from God stubbornly and persistently, they had been given up to be conquered by the Assyrian empire. Instead of learning the lessons from this tragic course of events, Judah was repeating them. You can imagine how Jeremiah must've felt under these circumstances. His message was unpopular. His every word was diced and twisted. In the beginning of chapter 12 he asks questions of God about the situation. God responds to him in verse 5. So let's make a couple of general observations here.

First, note that God is forecasting even greater difficulties in the future. What He tells Jeremiah is this - "things are only going to get more difficult from here, so be prepared." This certainly proved to be true for Jeremiah. He was hated, derided, mocked, and imprisoned because of his faithful proclamation of the message of God to a people that were bent on apostasy.

A second thing we should see about this text is this: God, in His mercy, does not let go of the winds of strife all at once, otherwise we would be completely overwhelmed. Instead,

He gives us opportunity to prepare for (or to get in shape for) trouble to come. Running with the footmen gets us ready for the horses, so to speak. I say this with the assumption that we are paying attention to and cooperating with what God is doing in our church and in our personal lives. If we are ignoring His work and help, then of course the final crisis will come as an overwhelming surprise to us, and we will be unprepared to face it. But if we are taking the stands we ought to take on the issues as they arise - the footmen, as it were, then we will be prepared to stand for the right when the great, final test comes. There is plenty of evidence for this throughout the Bible, but I will focus, for the sake of time, on a perfect illustration of this principle - the story of Gideon.

AN EXAMPLE OF A PRACTICE TEST - GIDEON

Gideon was called to take a stand on the commandments of God, which were being violated daily in Israel. This was a test of his commitment to God. Evidently God thought it as necessary before he could go out to fight against the Midianites. You may recall how the story began. The Midianites were the ringleaders of a coalition of people that were allowed by God to harass Israel because Israel had done "evil in the sight of the Lord." Judges 6:1. Verse 3-6 give the description of the problems that came about because of this. Now I won't go into detail on that, but I will say this - it sounds a lot like they were dealing with the equivalent of high taxes and open borders. Israel was being impoverished and their safety was being compromised by the Midianites. You remember, I'm sure, that the Angel of the Lord found Gideon threshing wheat in the winepress in order to keep it hidden. When told that he was to save Israel from the hand of the Midianites, Gideon reluctantly agreed to do so. But now let me share with you the really fascinating part of the story, that we often don't pause to remember. That same night, after he had been visited by the Angel of the Lord, the Lord spoke to him again and gave him a preliminary task. Do y'all remember what it was? Yes - that's right - he was to tear down the altar of Baal that belonged to his father and to cut down the wooden image that stood beside it. Now I want to pause here so that we recognize what this meant. The worship at this altar and the image that stood beside it entailed the violation of the first commandment, the second commandment, the third commandment,

possibly the fourth commandment, the fifth commandment, possibly the sixth commandment, definitely the seventh commandment, and also the ninth commandment. Gideon, by tearing the altar down, and building a new altar to Jehovah, Gideon was taking a bold stand for the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus!

Now lest we think that the people of that generation were any less attached to their idols than are the people of the present time, note the response of the men of the city when the discovery is made that the altar to Baal had been destroyed. They wanted to cancel Gideon! Judges 6:30 says this - "Bring out your son, that he may die," they say to Joash, Gideon's father. Joash, to his credit, refused - "If he is a god, let him plead for himself," he says of Baal. And Gideon got a new name that day - Jerubbaal - which means "Baal will contend". This was intended to be a forecast of Gideon's cancelation. However, as the Bible story points out, Gideon refused to be canceled. He took the heat. God sustained him, and the next thing we read of Gideon (verse 34) is this: "But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon." You know the rest of the story. Gideon, by taking a stand against the prevailing sins of his age, was prepared for the greater task of defeating the Midianites. Had he refused to speak up and take action in this local context, it is doubtful that he ever would have ventured onto the larger battlefield.

WHAT ARE SOME OF OUR PRACTICE TESTS?

I fear that there are many Seventh-day Adventists who have a misunderstanding of our prophetic role. They rightly see that the great, final test will have to do with the recognition of God as the Creator and Redeemer of earth by honoring the day which He set aside from the rest of the week to commemorate His work - the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment. They believe that when the keeping of that commandment is infringed upon by the civil government under the influence of an apostate church, that then it will be necessary to take a stand. I agree that this will be the great, final test of loyalty to God. But the question that I want to ask is this - has God called us to sit idly by while the other nine commandments are mocked, ridiculed, vilified, and generally disobeyed? Listen to these words, written over a century ago: *In every generation God has sent His servants to rebuke*

sin, both in the world and in the church. But the people desire smooth things spoken to them, and the pure, unvarnished truth is not acceptable. Many reformers, in entering upon their work, determined to exercise great prudence in attacking the sins of the church and the nation. They hoped, by the example of a pure Christian life, to lead the people back to the doctrines of the Bible. But the Spirit of God came upon them as it came upon Elijah, moving him to rebuke the sins of a wicked king and an apostate people; they could not refrain from preaching the plain utterances of the Bible—doctrines which they had been reluctant to present. They were impelled to zealously declare the truth and the danger which threatened souls. The words which the Lord gave them they uttered, fearless of consequences, and the people were compelled to hear the warning. GC 606.1

It seems that many of us are acting as if the **only** commandment we cared about is the fourth one. Friends, last I checked there are nine others. Are we being faithful to our commission as a prophetic movement if we fail to call out the transgression of the other nine commandments that is being either mandated or encouraged by both our government and our culture? Listen to what Isaiah says about that kind of thinking - Is. 56:10 *"His watchmen are blind, They are all ignorant; They are all dumb dogs, They cannot bark; Sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber."* What an indictment of the people, especially the leaders, who were supposed to serve as guardians of God's people! God forbid that these words would apply to us! But let me share two examples of what I mean:

Let's consider practice test number one - the LGBT movement. Now I want to state up front, that we must be kind to everyone, regardless of their choices. Loving our neighbor means that we speak of others and to others in a way that is calculated to redeem. But to say nothing when souls are in danger is not a loving thing to do. And so we must speak out. It's true that Seventh-day Adventists have published statements in the past regarding these issues. There is nothing wrong with doing that. But surely that's not all there is to it. After all, who would say we had fulfilled our mission as a church if all we did to spread the third angel's message was to publish the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*? Are we not also called to proclaim the message publicly and from house to house? Of course we are. Therefore, I am not convinced that we have fully done our duty if all we do is publish some general position

statements once in awhile - as accurate as those statements may be. The reality is that most people will never read those. No, what we need is live preachers and people who will do two things - love the sinner, but hate the sin and call it by its right name. The truth is that the LGBT phenomenon violates the seventh-commandment of the decalogue, because it adulterates a relationship that God designed to be pure, holy, just, and good. It introduces confusion into an area of life which God designed to be beautiful and fulfilling in its simplicity. In addition the LGBT movement also violates the creation order, of which the fourth commandment is a commemoration. The reality is that our culture today is, in this area especially, at war with nature and with the God who created the natural world. God created gender, folks - He created two genders, male and female, and though the two are equal, they are not changeable or interchangeable. A good surgeon could probably alter my face to look like that of monkey - but would that make me a monkey? No it wouldn't. Some people have pig valves surgically installed in their hearts to replace a diseased or defective human heart valve, but that doesn't make them pigs! Likewise, just because a man willingly allows his genitalia to be mutilated and transformed and takes certain hormones and has some other surgery to produce a feminine look - none of that makes him a woman, at least in God's eyes. What is so sinister about all this is that there are forces at work among our elected officials to make this despicable work something which children can embark on without the consent or even the knowledge of their parents. It's a sad thing, and a sin for an adult man or woman to take such a step, but to encourage impressionable children to do it while denying their parents the opportunity to give them counsel is a high crime against heaven, and should be called out as such.

Let me also make another analogy on this point. I mentioned a moment ago that God created two genders. Yes, I am aware of gender disorders that exist in a very tiny minority of people. Those cases should be addressed in a way that does no violence to nature. And I want to assert that it is always a bad idea to make the rules based on the exceptions. But I want to ask the broader question - what does it mean spiritually when people decide they want to change the gender that God, through His providence, gave them through their birth? Well, what did it mean when the church decided it was not happy with the Sabbath day of the

Bible, and wanted to exchange it for the first day of the week? Are the seventh day and the first day interchangeable? The reality is that they are not, and the effort to transfer the solemnity from God's day to another day is invalid, and will ultimately fail. You can make the first day of the week look like the Sabbath; you can try to make it feel like the Sabbath. You can hold church services on Sunday to make people *think* it's the Sabbath. But facts are facts - Sunday is not the Sabbath, and can never be changed into the Sabbath. If you are listening to this message you may already be convinced of that. But is it any different, in principle, to propose to change one's gender? I say, NO! The two issues are part of the same platform of opposition against the Creator. So then, is it possible for any Christian to truly stand for the eternal validity of the Sabbath and remain silent on the validity, immutability, and specificity of gender? No, friends, it is impossible, for both the so-called sex change, and the so-called Sabbath change are parts of the same war against God's authority. Both must be opposed with equal vigor.

Now I know that I am short on time, but I want to mention one other area where I believe we should be speaking out, and this is in the area of cancel culture and free speech. Oh, I know what some of you might say - those are political issues. No, they are not. These are moral issues that some politicians are discussing, but those discussions do not make the issues inherently political. Let me ask you this question - what exactly is cancel culture all about? Is it not about depriving someone of their livelihood because you disagree with their views? What does the word livelihood mean? It is defined as a person's means of maintaining life. So if you seek to deprive someone of their means of maintaining life, what are you leaving them with? Clearly, death! So what is the spirit behind this effort to deprive people of their means of maintaining life? It is the spirit of hatred. It is the spirit of murder. It is the spirit of persecution and intolerance. Now if the Bible condemns anything, it condemns this. Abel was the first person to be canceled in the Bible. His brother Cain canceled him quite completely. Why? Because he did not appreciate Abel expressing his religious views, which were different to those of Cain. And so, he canceled him. Pharaoh sought to cancel Moses and Aaron so that their message would not influence the Hebrews to break free from his totalitarian yoke. He called their message "lying words." Nowadays, he would have

referred to it as “harmful disinformation.” Pharaoh also made it much more difficult for the Hebrews to earn their living - in other words, he sought to deprive them of their means of maintaining life. Were it not for the interposition of God, Pharaoh would have ground Israel to nothing by his dreadful enactments. But God pronounced judgment against Pharaoh and then He executed it. Friends, I could go on and on, but you get the point, I hope. Ought we to remain silent as we see people being canceled? Whether we agree with them politically, spiritually, or on any other level, should we not defend every person’s right to speak freely without the fear of persecution? I assure you that the time will come when we will wish we had more of this liberty. Ought we not to defend it now, not as a political football, but as a God-given right?

APPEAL

Let me close with this call to decision. Almost 40 years ago, believe it or not, I was a distance runner. At the college I attended, I ran cross country. The coach used to send us out to a hill near campus. We would run that hill, sometimes the whole practice. I didn’t like that hill at the time. None of the guys did. But as we ran our hilly 5 mile course at home meets, we saw the value of the time spent on the hill. Other teams that came from flatter parts of the country were not used to hills. And even though I was not particularly fast, I would often glide up the hills past the other team because of time spent on that other hill.

Our mission is turning out to be a distance race, not a sprint. Are we willing to be trained and prepared on the hills of difficulty? For if we fail to stand up for the truth of God’s Word now, on what we might consider the smaller issues, how will we ever hope to stand when the great final test comes under the most difficult times the world has ever seen? God is giving us practice tests now - who will take advantage of them? Friends, the work of the final generation will not be a short sprint, but rather, a distance race in the heat. Please commit today that you will train now by speaking up for the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus wherever God gives you standing. Who will stand today in an indication of your pledge?