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AND
EXPANDED

RUN *with the* HORSES



THE QUEST FOR LIFE AT ITS BEST

EUGENE H. PETERSON

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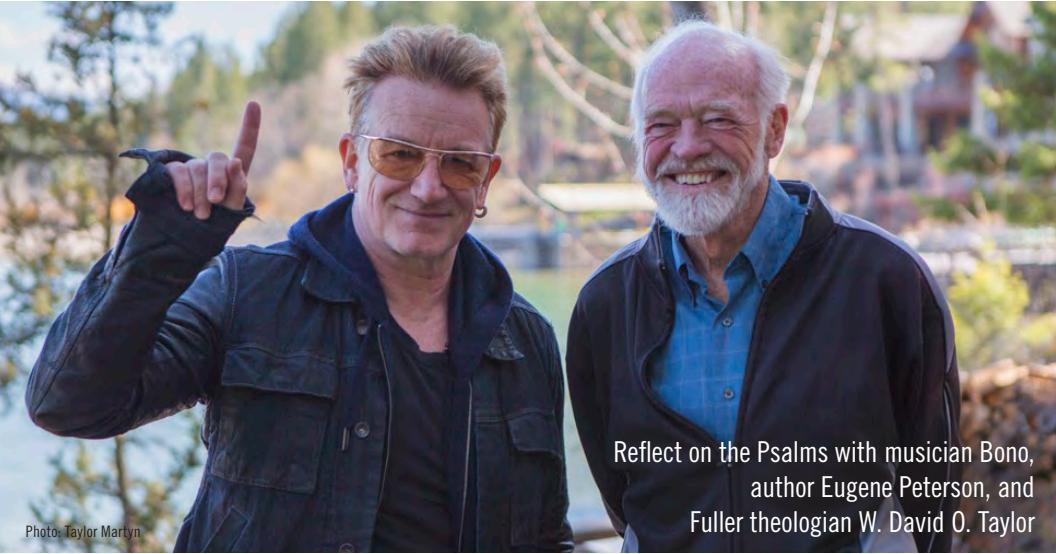


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What Makes You Think You Can Race Against Horses?

*So, Jeremiah, if you're worn out in this footrace with men,
what makes you think you can race against horses?
And if you can't keep your wits during times of calm,
what's going to happen when troubles break loose
like the Jordan in flood?*

JEREMIAH 12:5

My grievance with contemporary society is with its decrepitude. There are few towering pleasures to allure me, almost no beauty to bewitch me, nothing erotic to arouse me, no intellectual circles or positions to challenge or provoke me, no burgeoning philosophies or theologies and no new art to catch my attention or engage my mind, no arousing political, social, or religious movements to stimulate or excite me. There are no free men to lead me. No saints to inspire me. No sinners sinful enough to either impress me or share my plight. No one human enough to validate the "going" lifestyle. It is hard to linger in that dull world without being dulled.

I stake the future on the few humble and hearty lovers who seek God passionately

in the marvelous, messy world of redeemed and related realities that lie in front of our noses.

WILLIAM McNAMARA¹

THE PUZZLE IS WHY SO MANY PEOPLE LIVE so badly. Not so wickedly, but so inanely. Not so cruelly, but so stupidly. There is little to admire and less to imitate in the people who are prominent in our culture. We have celebrities but not saints. Famous entertainers amuse a nation of bored insomniacs. Infamous criminals act out the aggressions of timid conformists. Petulant and spoiled athletes play games vicariously for lazy and apathetic spectators. People, aimless and bored, amuse themselves with trivia and trash. Neither the adventure of goodness nor the pursuit of righteousness gets headlines.

Modern man is “a bleak business,” says Tom Howard. “To our chagrin we discover that the declaration of autonomy has issued not in a race of free, masterly men, but rather in a race that can be described by its poets and dramatists only as bored, vexed, frantic, embittered, and sniffing.”²

This condition has produced an odd phenomenon: individuals who live trivial lives and then engage in evil acts in order to establish significance for themselves. Assassins and hijackers attempt the gigantic leap from obscurity to fame by killing a prominent person or endangering the lives of an airplane full of passengers.

Often they are successful. The mass media report their words and display their actions. Writers vie with one another in analyzing their motives and providing psychological profiles on them. No other culture has been as eager to reward either nonsense or wickedness.

If, on the other hand, we look around for what it means to be a mature, whole, blessed person, we don't find much. These people are around, maybe as many of them as ever, but they aren't easy to pick out. No journalist interviews them. No talk show features them. They are not admired. They are not looked up to. They do not set trends. There is no cash value in them. No Oscars are given for integrity. At year's end no one compiles a list of the ten best-lived lives.

A THIRST FOR WHOLENESS

All the same, we continue to have an unquenchable thirst for wholeness, a hunger for righteousness. When we get thoroughly disgusted with the shams and cretins that are served up to us daily as celebrities, some of us turn to Scripture to satisfy our need for someone to look up to. What does it mean to be a real man, a real woman? What shape does mature, authentic humanity take in everyday life?

When we do turn to Scripture for help in this matter we are apt to be surprised. One of the first things that strikes us about the men and women in Scripture is that they were disappointingly non-heroic. We do not find splendid moral examples. We do not find impeccably virtuous models. That always comes as a shock to newcomers to Scripture: Abraham lied; Jacob cheated; Moses murdered and complained; David committed adultery; Peter blasphemed.

We read on and begin to suspect intention: a consistent strategy

to demonstrate that the great, significant figures in the life of faith were fashioned from the same clay as the rest of us. We find that Scripture is sparing in the information that it gives on people while it is lavish in what it tells us about God. It refuses to feed our lust for hero worship. It will not pander to our adolescent desire to join a fan club. The reason is, I think, clear enough. Fan clubs encourage secondhand living. Through pictures and memorabilia, autographs and tourist visits, we associate with someone whose life is (we think) more exciting and glamorous than our own. We find diversion from our own humdrum existence by riding on the coattails of someone exotic.

We do it because we are convinced that we are plain and ordinary. The town or city that we live in, the neighborhood we grew up in, the friends we are stuck with, the families or marriages that we have—all seem undramatic. We see no way to be significant in such settings, with such associations, so we surround ourselves with evidence of someone who is. We stock our fantasies with images of a person who is living more adventurously than we are. And we have enterprising people around who provide us (for a fee, of course) with the material to fuel the fires of this vicarious living. There is something sad and pitiful about the whole business. But it flourishes nonetheless.

Scripture, however, doesn't play that game. Something very different takes place in the life of faith: each person discovers all the elements of a unique and original adventure. We are prevented from following in another's footsteps and are called to an incomparable association with Christ. The Bible makes it clear that every time that there is a story of faith, it is completely original. God's creative genius is endless. He never, fatigued and unable to maintain the rigors of creativity, resorts to mass-producing copies. Each

life is a fresh canvas on which he uses lines and colors, shades and lights, textures and proportions that he has never used before.

We see *what* is possible: anyone and everyone is able to live a zestful life that spills out of the stereotyped containers that a sin-inhibited society provides. Such lives fuse spontaneity and purpose and green the desiccated landscape with meaning. And we see *how* it is possible: by plunging into a life of faith, participating in what God initiates in each life, exploring what God is doing in each event. The persons we meet on the pages of Scripture are remarkable for the intensity with which they live Godward, the thoroughness in which all the details of their lives are included in God's word to them, in God's action in them. It is these persons who are conscious of participating in what God is saying and doing that are most human, most alive. These persons are evidence that none of us is required to live "at this poor dying rate" for another day, another hour.

AN IMAGE OF MAN

This two-edged quality of Scripture—the capacity to intensify a passion for excellence combined with an indifference to human achievement as such—strikes me with particular force in the book of Jeremiah.

Cleanth Brooks wrote, "One looks for an image of man, attempting in a world increasingly dehumanized to realize himself as a man—to act like a responsible moral being, not to drift like a mere thing."³ Jeremiah, for me, is such an "image of man," a life of excellence, what the Greeks called *aretē*. In Jeremiah it is clear that the excellence comes from a life of faith, from being more interested in God than in self, and has almost nothing to do with comfort or esteem or achievement. Here is a person who lived life to

the hilt, but there is not a hint of human pride or worldly success or personal achievement in the story. Jeremiah arouses my passion for a full life. At the same time he firmly shuts the door against attempts to achieve it through self-promotion, self-gratification or self-improvement.

It is enormously difficult to portray goodness in an attractive way; it is much easier to make a scoundrel interesting. All of us have so much more experience in sin than in goodness that a writer has far more imaginative material to work with in presenting a bad character than a good person. In novels and poems and plays most of the memorable figures are either villains or victims. Good people, virtuous lives, mostly seem a bit dull. Jeremiah is a stunning exception. For most of my adult life he has attracted me. The complexity and intensity of his person caught and kept my attention. The captivating quality in the man is his goodness, his virtue, his excellence. He lived at his best. His was not a hothouse piety, for he lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt. There is not a trace of smugness or complacency or naiveté in Jeremiah—every muscle in his body was stretched to the limits by fatigue, every thought in his mind subjected to rejection, every feeling in his heart put through fires of ridicule. Goodness in Jeremiah was not “being nice.” It was something more like prowess.

Jeremiah has thus served personal needs. But he has also been of pastoral importance, and the personal and pastoral interests converge. As a pastor I encourage others to live at their best and provide guidance in doing it. But how do I do this without inadvertently inciting pride and arrogance? How do I stimulate an appetite for excellence without feeding at the same time a selfish determination to elbow anyone aside who gets in the way? Insis-

tent encouragement is given by many voices today for living a better life. I welcome the encouragement. But the counsel that accompanies the encouragement has introduced no end of mischief into our society, and I am in strenuous opposition to it. The counsel is that we can arrive at our full humanness by gratifying our desires. It has been a recipe for misery for millions.⁴ The biblical counsel in these matters is clear: “not my will but thine be done.” But how do I guide people to deny self without having that misunderstood as encouraging them to be doormats on which others wipe their feet? The difficult pastoral art is to encourage people to grow in excellence and to live selflessly, at one and the same time to lose the self and find the self. It is paradoxical, but it is not impossible. And Jeremiah is preeminent among those who have done it—a fully developed self (and therefore extraordinarily attractive) and a thoroughly selfless person (and therefore maturely wise). In conversations, in lectures, on retreats, in sermons, Jeremiah has, for fifty years now, been example and mentor for me.

A QUEST FOR THE BEST

We live in a society that tries to diminish us to the level of the ant heap so that we scurry mindlessly, getting and consuming. It is essential to take counteraction. Jeremiah is counteraction: a well-developed human being, mature and robust, living by faith. My procedure here is to select the biographical parts of the book of Jeremiah and reflect on them personally and pastorally in the context of present, everyday life. More is known of the life of Jeremiah than of any other prophet, and his life is far more significant than his teaching.⁵ It is noteworthy, I think, that when people were trying to account for Jesus, Jeremiah was one of the names put forward (Mt 16:14). By enlisting the devout imagination in medita-

tively perusing these pages of Scripture, I hope to stir up a dissatisfaction with anything less than our best. I want to provide fresh documentation that the only way that any one of us can live at our best is in a life of radical faith in God. Every one of us needs to be stretched to live at our best, awakened out of dull moral habits, shaken out of petty and trivial busywork. Jeremiah does that for me. And not only for me. Millions upon millions of Christians and Jews have been goaded and guided toward excellence as they have attended to God's Word spoken to and by Jeremiah.

I have arranged the passages that I have chosen for reflection in roughly chronological order. The book of Jeremiah is not itself arranged chronologically, and there is far more in it than biography. That means that readers not infrequently puzzle over transitions and wrestle to find the appropriate settings for the sayings. I have not attempted to sort out these puzzles or explain the difficulties. Nor have I described the complex international historical background of the times, a knowledge of which is an immense help in reading Jeremiah. That would be to write another kind of book and a much longer one. For readers who want to extend their understanding of Jeremiah and be guided through the text in detail, I recommend three books: R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (InterVarsity Press) for a good, readable introduction into the world and text of Jeremiah; John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Eerdmans) for a more advanced, detailed treatment; and John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Doubleday) for the most complete study of the prophet and the prophecy.

COMPETING WITH HORSES

Vitezslav Gardavsky, the Czech philosopher and martyr who died in 1978, took Jeremiah as his "image of man" in his campaign

against a society that carefully planned every detail of material existence but eliminated mystery and miracle, and squeezed all freedom from life. The terrible threat against life, he said in his book *God Is Not Yet Dead*, is not death, nor pain, nor any variation on the disasters that we so obsessively try to protect ourselves against with our social systems and personal stratagems. The terrible threat is “that we might die earlier than we really do die, before death has become a natural necessity. The real horror lies in just such a *premature* death, a death after which we go on living for many years.”⁶

There is a memorable passage concerning Jeremiah’s life when, worn down by the opposition and absorbed in self-pity, he was about to capitulate to just such a premature death. He was ready to abandon his unique calling in God and settle for being a Jerusalem statistic. At that critical moment he heard the reprimand: “So, Jeremiah, if you’re worn out in this footrace with men, what makes you think you can race against horses? And if you can’t keep your wits during times of calm, what’s going to happen when troubles break loose like the Jordan in flood?” (Jer 12:5). Biochemist Erwin Chargaff updates the questions: “What do you want to achieve? Greater riches? Cheaper chicken? A happier life, a longer life? Is it power over your neighbors that you are after? Are you only running away from your death? Or are you seeking greater wisdom, deeper piety?”⁷

Life is difficult, Jeremiah. Are you going to quit at the first wave of opposition? Are you going to retreat when you find that there is more to life than finding three meals a day and a dry place to sleep at night? Are you going to run home the minute you find that the mass of men and women are more interested in keeping their feet warm than in living at risk to the glory of God? Are you going to

live cautiously or courageously? I called you to live at your best, to pursue righteousness, to sustain a drive toward excellence. It is easier, I know, to be neurotic. It is easier to be parasitic. It is easier to relax in the embracing arms of The Average. Easier, but not better. Easier, but not more significant. Easier, but not more fulfilling. I called you to a life of purpose far beyond what you think yourself capable of living and promised you adequate strength to fulfill your destiny. Now at the first sign of difficulty you are ready to quit. If you are fatigued by this run-of-the-mill crowd of apathetic mediocrities, what will you do when the real race starts, the race with the swift and determined horses of excellence? What is it you really want, Jeremiah? Do you want to shuffle along with this crowd, or run with the horses?

It is understandable that there are retreats from excellence, veerings away from risk, withdrawals from faith. It is easier to define oneself minimally (“a featherless biped”) and live securely within that definition than to be defined maximally (“little less than God”) and live adventurously in that reality. It is unlikely, I think, that Jeremiah was spontaneous or quick in his reply to God’s question. The ecstatic ideals for a new life had been splattered with the world’s cynicism. The euphoric impetus of youthful enthusiasm no longer carried him. He weighed the options. He counted the cost. He tossed and turned in hesitation. The response when it came was not verbal but biographical. His life became his answer, “I’ll run with the horses.”