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Jeremiah 9:23–24, ESV.

²³ Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

Off a Small Cliff: *To Understand and to Know God.*

The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible spoke for God. As Christians, we see Jesus as the ultimate prophet, and since we have a personal relationship with him, we no longer need prophets. But in the eyes of the people of the Old Testament, there was a desperate need for people who could help them understand why they were constantly victimized by invading pagan empires, how they could make themselves right with God and earn God’s protection, and how they could develop a stable, joyous, and radiant culture in the Kingdom of God. We’re going to look at two Prophets today, as well as the wisdom found in a Psalm, and try to see what we, as followers of Christ, can learn from these passages.

Jeremiah served as a Prophet starting in 627 B.C., we believe. This was during the reign of King Josiah, and Jeremiah was quite young at the time –

perhaps eighteen years-old. His is the longest book of the Bible. He served during a violent and tragic period in the history of Israel. Here is some context. After King Solomon died, Israel was divided between the nation of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, with Jerusalem in Judah. Jeremiah was in Judah, the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom, Israel, was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., long before the time of Jeremiah, but eventually, it lost its control of the area and King Josiah of Judah extended his kingdom north into Israel. Then, during Jeremiah's time as a prophet, Babylon rose as a major power, and Judah fell to Babylon, with Jerusalem being destroyed. Jeremiah knew this would all unfold: God would use the army of the Babylonians to punish the sinful nation of Judah. He prophesized about impending exile. Because of his warnings, Jeremiah faced persecution, imprisonment, and attempts on his life. Despite Jeremiah's warnings, the Israelites did not turn back to God, and they were conquered.

Jeremiah was not himself sent to Babylon. Consider Jeremiah 9:23–24:

²³ Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

This is often called a "wisdom" oracle. Through the voice of Jeremiah, God compares the typical goals of people, that is seeking power and money, with the

goal that God wants us to pursue, and that is the knowledge of God. People should boast, not of their worldly successes, but rather of their righteous deeds, and their following of God's command to love all people and to give all people justice. God wants us to invest our lives, not seeking the things of this world, but coming to a deep understanding of who God is and how to follow God's guidance.

When I was in my early twenties, I bought my first car that had a steering column lock. You know - that anti-theft thing that keeps your steering wheel from turning if there is no key in the ignition. My car was a tiny yellow Toyota Corolla wagon. I was entering San Francisco on a curvy freeway, doing about 75 miles per hour. As I was about to take a curve, my steering column locked up. There was indeed a key in the ignition, but I couldn't turn the wheel. I tried slamming the wheel to the left and to the right. It didn't budge. I hit my brakes. There were no anti-lock brakes back then, and so I laid down rubber. I kept my cool, put the clutch in, and turned the ignition, trying to get the steering column lock to let go. But the steering wheel did not budge. Still going over fifty miles an hour, I veered straight off the freeway and off a small cliff. I looked down. Underneath me was a steep embankment leading down to a street below the freeway.

Let's consider another major prophet: Isaiah, who served more than a century before Jeremiah. In Isaiah, God punishes the people of God by sending

the Assyrian Empire to invade and conquer Israel, just as he would later do with the Babylonian Empire. The massive Assyrian army sweeps in from the north. It destroys Jerusalem. The Israelites are sent into captivity. This is all part of a massive military campaign whereby the Assyrian army incrementally builds up a truly vast empire, consisting of not only their original lands, but Babylonia, Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Israel, and several other previously independent empires. Israel is conquered and surrounded by its enemy, and many of its citizens are sent into exile. But in Chapter 43, after preaching about God's vengeance, Isaiah shifts his tone and begins to tell the people of God that God will lead them back to their Promised Land. Ultimately, Assyria will be conquered by another colonial empire – the Babylonians - just as the Assyrians conquered so many other nations. But the important lesson isn't what happens to the Assyrian Empire historically. What matters is the faith story and the lesson it tells: if the Israelites renew their close relationship with God, he will not abandon the Israelites, even after they have gravely sinned. This holds, of course, for us, too. As long as we are breathing air, God will be willing to forgive, to rescue, to regenerate, to save us. In the latter part of Isaiah's service, the people of God are no longer living corrupt lives. At the time, the most common form of moral corruption among the Israelites was in

mimicking their corrupt, pagan neighbors and worshipping multiple, false gods.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks for God and declares this in Chapter 43:1b–3:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

³ *For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

This says that God will call us by name and that we are his. God will protect us from drowning and from fire – if indeed we accept God as our savior. This is very important. The reason the Israelites are welcomed back by God, and are able to renew the protection given by God, is because they have a long-standing relationship with God as their moral, ethical, and physical savior.

Consider 91st Psalm. We do not know who wrote it, but traditionally, it was attributed to Moses. It is a song and prayer of joy, delivered by someone who has a deep, enduring relationship with God and who knows that God will always be there for them. The psalmist declares that God will provide protection from disease, enemies, demons, plagues – anything that threatens those who truly believe and have a deep faith in God. Here is an edited version of verses 2 to 13:

² *I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”*

- ³ *For he will deliver you from
the deadly pestilence.*
- ⁴ *Under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*
- ⁵ *You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,*
- ⁶ *nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.*
- ⁹ *Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—*
- ¹⁰ *no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.*
- ¹¹ *For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.*
- ¹² *On their hands they will bear you up.*

By the way, if you are wondering about that line, “*his faithfulness is a shield and buckler*”, a buckler is a small, round shield used in swordfights. In powerful, poetic language, this Psalm tells us that God will protect us, and importantly, there is a reason why God will always be our refuge: because we have decided to live in the Kingdom of God. If that’s where we spend your lives, God’s angels will always guard us and bear us away to safety when we are in trouble.

Now, the Israelites were concerned with physical, earthly - and not eternal, spiritual - protection. They were an endangered people constantly being threatened by aggressive empires. They were living under the Old Covenant and the Jews only incrementally over many hundreds of years developed a true notion

of an afterlife. Their concern was that they receive God's protection here and now. The Old Covenant promised them 1. land, 2. progeny, and 3. God's blessing. As their notion of Heaven was still evolving, this was their form of eternal life – having descendants who will live under God's protection in a land given to them by God. The promise is good for as long as there is an Earth. Only when all human life ends, only when the world ends, will the Israelites disappear as an earthly people. We live under the New Covenant, however. We want to be protected spiritually. We want our eternal lives, our spiritual lives protected.

But God made us so that we also turn to God when we are in danger here on Earth. We look to God when we are sick, when we face financial disaster, when we lose a job, when a spouse leaves us, when a loved one is sick or injured. Of course, times of physical struggle serve to help us with that more important goal, and that is keeping our spiritual lives healthy and vibrant. Earthly pain brings us closer to God by keeping God in our minds, by reminding us of our dependence on God, and by giving us empathy for other people who are suffering. So, God does want us to turn to him whenever there is a threat either here and now, or a threat to our eternal lives. This makes us stop living in a corrupt fashion and puts us back firmly in the Kingdom of God. Now, does God always send angels swooping down to rescue us? Not necessarily to protect our

physical lives or the physical lives of our loved ones, or to protect us from earthly ruin. But even if the outcome doesn't seem like the right thing to us, if we trust God in times of fear and anxiety and panic, God will be there with us.

Importantly, God will get us through whatever happens. God will walk us through our suffering. And eventually, we will learn that God did do what was best, even if it certainly didn't seem that way at the time. But there is a catch to God's protection. There is a caveat in these passages from Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Psalms.

So, there I was, flying off a freeway at fifty miles per hour. I did indeed turn to God. There wasn't much time. I let go of my useless steering wheel and spoke to God: *Let me walk away from this, please. I don't care about this stupid car. I just want to keep on living and to not be hurt. God, I do trust you.*

My car did not go airborne. It just barely stayed on the ground as I raced down the steep embankment. I slammed through some thick bushes. It was only a handful of seconds, but it seemed to go on forever. My brakes did nothing as I bounced through the loose, uneven dirt. But eventually, I came to rest. I was inches from a huge sign for the street that was below the freeway. I got out of my car and walked around it. It was completely undamaged. I did have to be towed out of there, but later that day, after I fixed the steering column lock, I was driving my car again. And yes, I then disabled the steering wheel lock permanently.

It seemed that God did indeed protect me. But there's more to this. I was young. I was a technical guy caught up in a material world. I was not someone who lived each day deliberately following in the footsteps of Jesus, walking through the Kingdom of God, dedicating my life to living the way God wants me to live. My faith was very far from mature and deep. The Assyrian people still live today, largely in northern Iraq, but also in surrounding nations. However, their empire and the Babylonian Empire are long gone. There is an Israel today, but ancient Israel is gone, and its people were dispersed long ago. Our nation will not live forever. Throughout history, God has repeatedly reminded us that only God's empire will last forever - and we want to make sure that when the end of earthly life comes for us, that's where we are. This was not my concern, though, in the years and seconds leading up to my steering column locking up. From God's perspective, I popped up from nowhere, suddenly calling on him for help.

When the tow truck showed up to drag my car away, the driver, who was a young guy like me, was amazed. He stood there with wide eyes as I told him what had happened. He said that I was very lucky. I didn't think of it at the time, but I should have told him that I wasn't lucky at all. I was *blessed*. God had decided that this incident would end without me being hurt, without anyone else being hurt, and without my car being damaged. This was despite my shallow faith.

We don't know what will happen next month, tomorrow, or even tonight. We are totally dependent on God. We should pray every day. We should have God in our minds many times a day. We should study Scripture and follow the path through the Kingdom of God, not the path to earthly power and riches. Here is the bottom line: we shouldn't wait to turn to God when the steering column on our car locks up. That's the lesson that we find in our Bible passages today.

To summarize, first, our Psalm tells us about how to ensure that no evil will befall us, and that is by making the Kingdom of God our permanent home:

⁹ *Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.*

Second, our passage from Isaiah tells us about the nature of the relationship that we must have with God if we want God's protection:

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

And third, Jeremiah tells us that if we want to please God, there is one thing that we should be proud of, and that is the depth of our relationship with God: *but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.*

We are to have a deep, consistent relationship with God, one that pervades all aspects of our lives, and one that forms the core of who we are as people made in the image of God. That is how we know we can depend on God.