

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You should have received a piece of paper from one of the ushers when you entered the nave today. If you didn't, just alert one of them. I'd like you to write down what your life would look like if you could have exactly how you wanted it to be. You can make a list or draw a picture or however you would like to do it, but how would you describe your ideal life. We will come back to this in awhile.

Joel Osteen is the pastor of a large congregation down in Houston, Texas. He is also the author of several books. He preaches a very positive message to those who attend Lakewood Community Church: God wants you to have an abundant life and to live at your full potential. In his book, *Your Best Life Now*, Joel writes in the introduction:

“Happy successful, fulfilled individuals have learned how to live their best lives now. They make the most of their present moment and thereby enhance their future. You can, too. No matter where you are or what challenges you are facing, you can enjoy your life right now! Within these pages, you will find seven simple, yet profound steps to improve your life, regardless of your current level of success or lack of it. I'm confident that if you take these steps along with me, you ultimately will be happier than ever before, living with joy, peace, and enthusiasm - not just for a day, or a week, but for the rest of your life!”

No doubt Joel Osteen probably says some very good things in his book, many of which I would agree. However, there is a lot of his message with which I struggle. Mr. Osteen's message doesn't make as much sense to me if you spend some time with the prophet Jeremiah.

Did you grasp what was happening in the first lesson today?

Jeremiah has been called by God to speak the truth to Israel. The truth is not pleasant. Israel has not been faithful to God but are serving false gods and neglecting the poor.

Because they have refused to turn back and serve God,
Israel will be dragged away to Babylon for exile
and Jerusalem will be left in shambles.

This is the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah to speak.

As you can imagine, Israel does not like what Jeremiah says.

He is berated, placed in the stocks, and imprisoned.

He is a laughing stock with all the prophets of Israel declaring
a totally different truth. Jeremiah stands alone. God instructs him
not to take a wife or have children for mothers, fathers
and their children will all die. They will not be buried.

They will not be mourned but will become food for the birds
of the air and the wild animals of the earth.

Jeremiah is to speak the truth to these hard-hearted people
who will not turn back to God and change their hearts.

He will stand by helplessly as a witness as his homeland
is decimated and his fellow Israelites are killed or made slaves.

So in our first lesson today, we get a window into what life is like
for Jeremiah. Life stinks. His life is awful. Jeremiah just prior to this
declares that he wishes he was never born. Jeremiah has done
what God has asked him to do. He ate God's words.

He delighted in them. He followed God's rules and direction.

Yet why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? God, I'm suffering here.

This isn't what I signed up for. Truly, you are to me
like a deceitful brook. You are like a wadi in the desert
that when it rains, the low place is filled with water,
but when I'm thirsty, there isn't anything to drink
and the wadi is bone-dry.

God responds to Jeremiah but maybe not in the way you would expect.
He doesn't give Jeremiah an easy way out. Instead he tells Jeremiah,
if you turn back to me, then I will take you back and continue to use
you as my mouth. I will make you to this people a fortified wall

of bronze. You will not turn or give in to them. It is they who will have to turn to you. For I am with you to save you & deliver you. Jeremiah continues to live out his difficult call as a prophet of the Lord sustained totally by God's hand.

In our gospel, we catch Peter a little earlier in the call process.

Peter has just proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah.

And in response to that Peter is told by Jesus that he is the rock on which Jesus will build the church & that he will be given authority & the keys of the kingdom. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Then Jesus drops the bombshell. Jesus will undergo great suffering at the hands of his enemies and be killed.

And Peter calls for a timeout.

This isn't the way it is supposed to work. This is not what he envisioned being a disciple to look like. Here Jesus, look, I've got it all figured out.

When you go up on the mount of Transfiguration in the next chapter and James and John and I see you in your glory talking to Moses and Elijah; Well, I'll put up three tents, three dwellings up there; one for you and Moses & Elijah. Then we will just stay up there with you all and you can continue to teach us. Not a bad plan, in my mind, especially if Peter knew what laid in store for him.

But there was one problem with all of this. Peter didn't get to call the shots. Jesus did. Peter did not get to decide what life would be like to follow Jesus. Jesus leads and Peter is told to follow.

Peter is to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Get behind me, Satan!

You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter's mistake is an easy one to make. We love Jesus.

We want to follow Jesus, but we want to follow Jesus on our own terms.

Take out your listing of what your ideal life would be.

Here are some things you may have addressed on your list.

You may have put down something about your career

and how you would like to advance. You may have mentioned good health or financial security, the kind of house you would like or the car or other things you would like to have. You may have listed your dream vacation or your hopes for your family or other relationships that are important to you. You may have even mentioned your relationship with God and how you want to grow in your faith and in your church life.

Most, if not, all these things are good things to have on your list. Having them makes you happy and gives you a sense of fulfillment. If your life works out this way, you will be comfortable and know the joy and peace that Joel Osteen is talking about. However, there is one problem with all of this. This is not truly following Jesus. This is bringing your personal agenda to our Lord and saying, "Jesus, I've got this plan. I've mapped out how I want my life to go and I want you to make it happen. So I am going to pray for this and ask you to give it to me so I can have a blessed and abundant life."

We are fine following Jesus as long as it doesn't interfere with the plan in our head, but when something enters in here that we didn't map out, we want to bend God's ear like Jeremiah or pull Jesus aside just like Peter and say, "Whoa! This isn't how it's supposed to play out. I didn't sign up for this." We want to call the shots. We want to be in control of our lives. But to do so is not to follow Jesus. If we want to follow Jesus, we have to let him lead. That means that the cross doesn't remain here as one item among many.

It means that all these things come under the cross. They all become arenas in which we learn to obediently follow Jesus by setting our mind on divine things and not human things. As disciples of Jesus we ask Jesus what we should do with our careers and how to use our money and time

and what we should do in our relationships. We allow Jesus to be in charge of our lives. He has given us all we have so we seek his guidance on how to use it.

To follow Jesus is to love Jesus. It is to trust him with all that you have and all that you are. To follow Jesus is also to acknowledge that our Lord's greatest concern is not your personal happiness as you understand it. Because your understanding of what true happiness is may be really off base. Instead Jesus longs for us to follow him and know a joy and peace that only comes from being close to him and pursuing a dream far bigger than ourselves. True happiness comes in working with God to help all people to return to him & know his love.

It is hard to give up control and follow Jesus. I think in the back of our minds we fear what will happen if we totally do it.

Could we end up suffering like Jeremiah? Could we in some way end up hanging on a cross just like Peter did?

For many it is the case. Ask Kyle Funke, the college student, on our prayer list whose brain tumor instead of shrinking after chemo has doubled in size. Ask Brian Luke who felt called and now is serving in the Peace Corp. Ask Mother Theresa who followed Jesus into the poorest streets in Calcutta.

The path is not of our own choosing, but we are promised that in following Jesus, he will provide us what we need and we will know the profound, never-ending love of our Lord.

Don't get rid of your list. Some of the items on there may very well be inspired by God. But I would ask you to place a big cross on the top of that list. And then I would ask you to pray and ask Jesus how he is calling you to follow him in all of these areas. Then be patient and wait.

Listen in the silence to what he says.

May Jesus help us to trust in him and give us the courage to follow him.