

DARE TO

Hope

LIVING  
INTENTIONALLY  
in an Unstable World

MELISSA SPOELSTRA

## **Praise for *Dare to Hope***

“Melissa has a wonderful way of making the book of Jeremiah come alive, not only in our heads but also in our hearts.”

—**Marilyn Hontz**

author of *Shame Lifter* and *Listening for God*

“The message of HOPE right now is countercultural, and God’s people can be viral kingdom agents with this message. Melissa Spoelstra helps us understand how critical Jeremiah’s words are for us. Her deeply personal and insightful treatment of these scriptures makes them more relevant than today’s news.”

—**Reggie McNeal**

author of *Kingdom Conspirators* and *Kingdom Come*

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MELISSA SPOELSTRA

Abingdon Press  
Nashville

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# INTRODUCTION

When we look around at today's world, hope usually isn't the first word that comes to mind. In many ways we live in an age of uncertainty. If we allow our thoughts to linger on things such as the national debt, the condition of the environment, the increase in violence toward even our most innocent, and the looming moral bankruptcy of our culture, we can get pretty discouraged. The situation only compounds when we add our personal issues to these corporate ones. Life can be rough. When marriages fail, bank accounts run low, friendships end, or the everyday demands of a fast-paced life get us down, we sometimes feel the ground shaking beneath our feet.

Living in such an unstable world can give us a propensity to worry. Other choices of fear, doubt, and bitterness call us to select their posture when life gets overwhelming. Yet God offers us another choice. Through Him we can dare to hope—not in the government, our family, a job, or even the church. God calls us to surrender our wills to His and rest our hope in Him alone.

Sometimes I get moving through life at a breakneck pace and forget to be daring with hope. I command the calendar, devote time to work and ministry, juggle the kids' schedules, do some laundry, take

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care of other chores and errands, make plans for dinner, check in with friends, and then get up tomorrow and start all over again. I need a caution light as I'm racing through life to wake me up and say, "Slow down and pay attention!"

I got one of these wake-up calls one day while driving. Instead of a caution light, I got a caution bump. I had just dropped my girls off at a school activity and was on my way home. Earlier I had dumped out my purse on the passenger seat, frantically looking for something I needed at a moment's notice.

Now I was stopped at a red light, and I leaned over to put things back in my purse. Suddenly I felt a huge jolt as my van bumped into the minivan in front of me. I slammed the brake down hard, backed up, and went to talk to the woman in front of me. Thankfully, there was no damage to either car, but as I finished the short drive home, I was a little shaken. How could my foot have let up on the brake without me even realizing it? I was so caught up in my task that I slowly let the car slide forward without even being aware of what I was doing.

I laughed with God as I thought about what He was showing me: I need to pay attention to really important things instead of letting a small distraction put me in danger of hurting myself and others. This is so true in my spiritual life too. The minutia of day-to-day life as well as the trials that so frequently present themselves put me in danger of missing the hope in God's plans for me.

A similar wake-up call came in my life several years ago as I studied the Book of Jeremiah and discovered the words of the prophet echoing into my life and our culture with great relevance. This prophet found himself in a nation known for materialism, economic crisis, political globalization, and religious plurality. Sound familiar?

Much of the content in this book is drawn from the lessons God

taught me then as I wrote the Bible study *Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World*, which continues to be going strong because hope is something we still desperately need in our world today. And there are no signs that is going to change! My prayer is that by sharing these insights in this new format, God’s message of hope will reach even more people. Each chapter ends with a Dare to Hope challenge, and there are Scripture memory verses and practical helps at the end of the book.

A number of years ago, Francis Schaeffer said it this way,

What, then should be our message in such a world—to the world, to the church, and to ourselves?

We do not have to guess what God would say about this because there was a period of history, biblical history, which greatly parallels our day. That is the day of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations show how God looks at a culture which knew Him and deliberately turned away.<sup>1</sup>

In the Book of Jeremiah, God calls out to His people, continually asking them to place their hope in Him instead of political alliances, material possessions, and people. Jeremiah gets his reputation as the “weeping prophet” honestly as he delivers weighty messages full of bad news and cautions for living. Yet if we are willing to look beneath the surface of God’s warnings to His heart of love behind them, we find this underlying message:

***Hope-filled living is possible even in an unstable world!***

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But how do we do this? Where do we start? That is what we will be considering together in this book. In the following chapters, we'll explore six incredibly relevant themes that lift right off the pages of Jeremiah's manuscript, providing six practical guidelines for hope-filled living:

1. Surrender
2. Reject Counterfeits
3. Listen
4. Check Your Heart
5. Take Personal Responsibility
6. Pursue Intimacy with God

We'll discover that Jeremiah's message was not a popular one. Unfortunately, the people of Judah did not see the hope in God's plans for them, and they did not heed Jeremiah's warnings. Their failure to make life changes in light of God's call to hope in Him led to exile. My prayer is that we will not be like them. I pray that God's timeless truths from this ancient book will help us take a careful look at our lives as we slow down and examine where we might be off course and how we can get back on track.

God is calling us to open our ears to Him. He knows life can throw us curveballs, and He knows how easy it is to get swept away with the cultural current of despair. Jeremiah dared to hope—even when his family rejected him. He lost his home and was mocked, imprisoned, and unjustly accused. He lost friends and finances. His circumstances remained bitter, but he learned to keep his heart soft and hopeful in the midst of tough stuff. That is my prayer for you and for me, that we can dare to hope no matter what we face. I pray that we may be able to say with Jeremiah:

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Yet I still dare to hope  
when I remember this:

The faithful love of the LORD never ends!

His mercies never cease.

Great is his faithfulness;

his mercies begin afresh each morning.

(Lamentations 3:21-23)

If you are in need of fresh mercies today as I am, then I dare you to hope!



## CHAPTER 1

# RAISING THE WHITE FLAG

## Surrender

*When I discovered your words, I devoured them.  
They are my joy and my heart's delight,  
for I bear your name,  
O LORD God of Heaven's Armies.*

*—Jeremiah 15:16*

**M**y husband and I discovered in our first year of marriage that doing home projects together is dangerous. When we tried to put up a wallpaper border in a bedroom, we had some pretty rough interactions. The root issue stems from both of us being control freaks. We like to lead and direct how things go. This can be a good thing in certain situations like when God has called us to lead, but when we have different ideas about anything from parenting to finances, our controlling natures war against each other. After several decades of marriage, I hope we have made some progress in the area of compromise—at least in the domain of painting walls and organizing the garage.

Being a control freak can get me in trouble in the spiritual realm as well. When life seems to be going as I think it should and God's instructions through His Spirit and His Word make sense to me, then I don't have to be daring with hope. However, I find more often that life feels complicated and often God's instructions take faith rather than sight to obey. It is during these seasons that I must raise the white flag and surrender to God's way.

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The prophet Jeremiah experienced some instructions from God that didn't follow the rules of logic. God told him to hide underwear, speak bold messages, and identify counterfeits in the lives of the political and spiritual leaders of his day. I can't imagine what this would have been like when he was first called to deliver God's message of surrender as a boy of likely fourteen or fifteen years old. Though we might think that Jeremiah and other prophets of the Bible were super righteous, had it all together, and never struggled, the truth is that they were normal people like you and me. Jeremiah got depressed, made excuses, and even did some whining occasionally. But there is something that sets him apart from most of us: his unrelenting commitment to communicate God's message. You might say that Jeremiah was both deep and relatable!

Although Jeremiah's words resound from over twenty-six hundred years ago, they echo into our day with uncanny relevance. Our world is rife with greed, poverty, injustice, racism, and oppression, just to name a few of the challenges and battles. So what is our message to the world, and how do we go about sharing that message? To answer that question, we can look to the prophets—whose message, the disciple Peter said, is the light our dark world needs:

Because of that great experience, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were

moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from  
God. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

When we pay close attention to the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, we discover that the changing of a culture starts with those who are living within it. If we long to see a turning back to God in our land, then we need to recognize that it starts with us—with you and with me. Not only does Jeremiah's prophecy matter today; God Himself gives us some direct instructions regarding how we should respond to it. Let's unpack a few of these together.

## Surrendering Our Excuses

Jeremiah is the longest and what most consider to be one of the most disorganized books—chronologically speaking—in Scripture. We might find ourselves throwing in the towel and assuming that we don't have the biblical expertise to read Jeremiah, thinking, *It's too hard to understand; I don't know the geography or cultural context; how am I supposed to relate it to my life?* But as Peter's words remind us, we must pay close attention to what the prophets have to say to us—even now. And when we do, we will find direction regarding God's call on our lives.

We are not alone in our timidity to dig in to God's messages about our call. As a matter of fact, the Book of Jeremiah begins with a glimpse into his own tendency to excuse his ability to obey God's call. Jeremiah was the son of a priest living in the small town of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, the least significant of the twelve tribes of Israel. We might compare it to the suburb of a bustling city with the lowest real estate values. It wouldn't have been the hot spot with the incredible school districts and rule-filled HOAs!

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Jeremiah emerged during a time of great political upheaval. Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria rivaled for world domination, and the land of Judah was shuffled back and forth between them as vassals paying tribute to keep from being destroyed. It was in this climate, during the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign in the land of Judah, that God called Jeremiah to deliver His messages.

In the very first chapter God speaks kindly to Jeremiah, saying that God knew him and set him apart for this work before he was even born (v. 5). Psalm 139 gives a similar picture from David's pen:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body  
and knit me together in my mother's womb.  
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!  
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I  
know it. (vv. 13-14)

Now, Jeremiah did not hear God's precious words and say, "Yes, sign me up!" He had some reservations about speaking God's messages to the people of Judah, just as we might. He was too young and couldn't speak well. And remember the small town and the least tribe that he came from? Who was he to speak for God to a culture that wasn't listening? He was more than just concerned about his ability to be used by God, set apart from the womb or not.

We, too, make our fair share of excuses when it comes to obeying God. I know I have come up with some good ones: I'm both too old and too young, I don't have time, and I am not qualified. At times I've felt nudges to do something outside of my comfort zone for God only to talk myself out of it. As a young mom, I started writing some articles but convinced myself no one would want to read what I had written. In Christian circles, ambition to do something big can be

labeled as pride or self-promotion. Somehow we convince ourselves that humility means staying under the radar and not attempting anything great for God. Like Jeremiah, we want an “out” to disobey. Perhaps you’re nodding your head in agreement right now. Or you might be thinking, *I’m not sure God has ever called me to do anything!* But the reality is that God has a calling on each of our lives. Let’s look at what He asked of Jeremiah to see if it might speak to our own call from God.

In the simplest of terms, God asked Jeremiah to speak His messages; and, in fact, God’s mission for us as followers of Jesus is very similar to that call. God wants us to go when and where He sends, speak His words, and prepare for action without fear. But let’s be honest. How many people do you know who actually live like this, ready to follow God whenever to wherever, no matter the task? If you’re like me, you might be prone to give up with the least amount of resistance. Insecurity and fear of failure can keep us from trying new things. We wonder if others will think we are prideful. We question if we really heard God correctly. But the good news is that God knows following Him can be scary for us in our humanness. That’s why He told Jeremiah twice in chapter 1, “Do not be afraid” (vv. 8, 17). And like Jeremiah, God wants us to face our fears and trust Him.

Many Christians today often have a difficult time saying yes to big things for God—and women in particular can struggle with this. Dr. Jennifer Degler, coauthor of the book *No More Christian Nice Girl*, says, “Many times we find that women get a pass on not being courageous. . . . We want to call that ‘having a gentle and kind spirit,’ but really it can be timidity or fear that’s holding us back.”<sup>1</sup> We also can neglect to encourage others to step out in faith with bold moves. The success of another—or even the potential that another might be

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greatly used of God—can threaten our own sense of worth, so we sometimes talk each other down. Instead we should be encouraging each other to listen to God and then step out in obedience. I know I need that; don't you?

Thankfully, God understands that His callings can be scary. He doesn't give us marching orders and a slap on the back and then fling us out to figure things out on our own. As we see in His words to Jeremiah in chapter 1, God tells us to be brave, assuring us that He will be with us and fight for us (vv. 17-19). He will take care of us even when the task seems too big for us, always assuring us that He will not leave us without His help.

Let this sink in: *God has a purpose for each of our lives.* He not only has a purpose for us; He has *big plans* for us! Sadly, we often miss it because of our own fear, insecurity, and excuses. As Craig Groeschel says in *The Christian Atheist*, “Before you can tap into God's life-changing power, you have to eliminate the excuses.”<sup>2</sup> Excuses keep us from daring to do what God has called us to do. But when we raise the white flag of surrender—letting go of all our excuses, saying yes to God, and trusting Him—we get to experience the power of God at work in our lives. Incredible!

## Surrendering Recognition and Popularity

In addition to the instruction to surrender our excuses, we find in Jeremiah's writings wisdom regarding the need to surrender our desire for recognition and acceptance. This is a message that goes against the grain of our culture.

When I was in junior high, my mom told me not to worry about popularity because once you leave high school, no one cares about that stuff anymore. She was wrong! I see it in the neighborhood. I see



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it at PTO meetings. I see it in the church. We size each other up all the time. A blend of confidence, money, career success, appearance, education, and experience (even in ministry) all contribute to our “status” in whatever social circles we run. If anything, it gets more complicated as we grow older. We are still trying to find the right “lunch table” at every stage of life. Can you relate?

We learn from Jeremiah that God is not as concerned about our popularity as He is with our faithfulness to His message. While earlier God had told the people of Israel through Joshua to go in and take the Promised Land, we see that God gave a very different message through the prophet Jeremiah: admit defeat without a fight. Though the messages were different, the importance of responding faithfully was the same.

In Jeremiah’s case, his words failed to win him popularity with the people, and we can understand why. Imagine the day the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell. Now pretend the people responsible for such brutality launched a full-scale attack upon our land. Suppose one of the great Christian leaders of our day began preaching that we should admit defeat without a fight. To say that we would resist that message is an understatement, right?

Remember that Jeremiah was the young, unknown son of a priest from a small town and tribe. No wonder he didn’t jump up and down at the task set before him. His message foretold the destruction of their communities. Yet despite the risk and cost, Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed God’s words over and over, and he began to get a reputation as a prophet of doom and gloom. This didn’t go over well with the government officials.

Babylon was nipping at Judah’s heels, demanding tribute, taking their best people (like Daniel), and threatening total destruction.

Jeremiah's suggestion to fully give in didn't sit well with a government that was trying to rally its fighting men and boost morale.

In our lives as well, the message of surrender is not as popular as the message of victory. We want God to fix our circumstances and tell us everything is going to work out fine. We want our money problems solved, our physical illnesses healed, and our relationships simplified. Though sometimes God chooses to intervene in those ways, other times He calls us to surrender—such as allowing us to endure health challenges, grow through relational conflict, and learn to look for eternal blessings while temporal ones persist. But ultimately, God gives us victory through that surrender. He teaches us things, develops our character, and draws us close to Him through our struggles.

These prophecies in Jeremiah give us more than just a history of how Judah rebelled against God and faced punishment. While their story warns us to live righteous lives in obedience to God, it teaches us so much more, pointing us toward surrender to God's plan and purpose in the overarching biblical story. In fact, the last pages of the canonical Word drive home this truth: *God's intent in prophecy is to give us a clear picture of our Messiah*. Jesus is all over the pages of Jeremiah from start to finish! Although it may come in whispers, hints, foreshadowing, and messianic prophecies, we now have the fullness of God's Word and the hindsight to connect the spiritual dots; and we can praise God for allowing us to live at a time in history with access to so much of His truth at our fingertips.

The New Testament sheds further light on how the gospel carries a message of surrender. Jesus calls us, His followers, to deny ourselves and take up our crosses (Luke 9:23), essentially calling us to surrender. This message of surrender is not a "one-time" salvation experience. Rather, it is a daily call to surrender—and it can look different

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for different people. This is so important for us to take to heart and remember daily.

I recall a time when I was asking God to lead me in whether to help a single mom on welfare by taking her to lunch and giving her a gift card. My close friend who had a connection with her before I did felt that we should demonstrate tough love and not enable her because of some particular choices she had made recently. I struggled. I prayed. I read Scripture to look for guidance. I asked God to confirm His leading. As a consummate people-pleaser, it was hard for me to surrender to God's call to help the woman when I knew my friend might not be happy with my decision. She truly wanted to help the woman as well but felt that God was calling her to keep her distance. In this instance, the call to surrender looked different for each of us. (Incidentally, my friend ended up being totally fine with my decision; the battle was more in my insecurity than in reality.)

Just as God called John the Baptist to fast and Jesus to feast, He sometimes has us follow different directions for His purposes. The key is to stay close to Him so that we can hear. While God led His people to go in and conquer the land with Joshua, through Jeremiah His message was "surrender."

Maybe even now you are sensing God's call to surrender—perhaps by making amends with someone you are at odds with, by taking the leap to begin tithing to your church, by getting up earlier so you can pray, by obeying Christ in an area that you know won't be popular, or by becoming involved in or stepping down from a ministry because God says to. Whatever the specific call, we can know and rely on the fact that God will be with us in every faith-filled, obedient step.

## Surrendering When Life Happens

So, we hear God's call or voice and we surrender. Sounds simple, right? Actually, acting on God's call and obeying God's message of surrender take faith and obedience. And once we've taken that step of surrender, it is often tested by fire. Sometimes even when we obey completely, we still end up in a pit. When my husband and I sensed the Lord calling him to plant a new church, we found confirmation as people joined our team and someone gave a large financial gift to get us started. It felt like such an adventure in the early days with all the new possibilities on the horizon. While we've seen God do amazing things in the season of church planting, we also spent many days in what seemed like a pit. Strained friendships, complaints, and misunderstandings made us want to give up and surrender to despair rather than to Jesus at times.

The pit, or cistern, was literal for Jeremiah. As we read in Jeremiah 38:4-6, the king's officials actually threw Jeremiah in a pit of mud. Now, a cistern was essentially a large pit that was cut into a rock and covered with a plaster made of mud. The people used cisterns to collect rainwater in the winter that they could use in the arid months of summer. We read that this particular cistern was actually so deep that Jeremiah had to be lowered into it by ropes. (Imagine the sinking feeling he must have had—literally!) We also discover that there was no water in this cistern—probably due to little rainfall—though there was some mud at the bottom from whatever rain there had been. Jeremiah could starve or freeze waiting for death in this solitary place.

Though we've probably never found ourselves in a literal pit facing death, we can relate to being in a pit of despair and hopelessness because of our circumstances. Often when we commit to obey or

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deliver God's message, life still happens. Friends betray us. Husbands leave. Children go astray. Jobs are lost. Health declines instead of improves. These are the times when we must trust God's greater plan even though our circumstances are screaming foul.

You might be thinking, *But obedience should be rewarded, right?* Jeremiah honestly dialogued with God over questions such as this; yet, ultimately, he surrendered to God's way even when it made no human sense. And as we continue reading his story, we see that it didn't end in the bottom of a cistern. He had a friend in the king's court who pleaded for him, and eventually he gained the ear of the king himself. Talk about hope!

When we are in the pit despite our obedience, we must continue to surrender to God. And when we are experiencing difficulty *because* of our obedience, as Jeremiah was, God says we actually have cause to be happy—for Jesus says when this happens, your reward in heaven will be great (Matthew 5:11-12). In those times we can remember Jeremiah's unpopular message and rough times and then recall God's faithfulness to take care of him, trusting God to do the same for us.

Jeremiah told the people that God wanted to save and rescue them, but first they had to surrender. Similarly, we need to yield completely to Christ. He wants to give us rich, satisfying, abundant life (John 10:10), and He knows we won't find it apart from Him. As Jeremiah discovered, surrendering to God brings peace and purpose even in the midst of terrifying circumstances. Sometimes all we need is a little reassurance.

### Asking for Confirmation

Jeremiah was chosen as God's anointed prophet and spent a lifetime writing the words now contained in the book identified by

his name—a total of around ninety separate revelations from God over a span of forty years. As I read Jeremiah's writings, I am amazed how boldly he proclaimed God's messages. Over and over he said things such as "Then the Lord spoke to me again," "The Lord gave me another message," "Then the Lord said to me," "This is what the Lord says." How could Jeremiah share God's words so confidently? Did God speak to him with an audible voice? Were the words written out for him like the Ten Commandments carved in stone? Or was it an unmistakable inner voice saying, "Jeremiah, I have another message for you"? What enabled him to trust that he had heard God clearly and correctly? Didn't he ever doubt?

Since Jeremiah was just as human as we are, I would imagine that he doubted and needed reassurance just as we do. The secret of Jeremiah's confidence and the reason he was able to speak with assurance is that he allowed God to confirm His messages. Let's glimpse into Jeremiah's intimate prayer life and look for specific ways he knew God was speaking to him.

We see in Jeremiah 20 that the priest in charge of the Temple, Pashhur, had just learned of Jeremiah's prophecy calling for surrender and defeat. He arrested Jeremiah and had him whipped and put in stocks—not the outcome Jeremiah had hoped for, I'm sure! Although Jeremiah was released the next day and continued to preach destruction, he had some heavy questions for his Lord; and he talked with God from a very honest place. When he was confused, he asked questions. When he didn't understand, he rehearsed the character of God. And the result was that he was able to carry on for forty years proclaiming a message almost no one embraced. He started telling God all his real feelings and doubts but then found reassurance and

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peace as he recalled God's character and might. We all can learn from Jeremiah's example.

When God asks me to do things I don't want to do—such as confront people, take bold steps that could be misunderstood, or write Bible studies on difficult topics—I usually resist at first. But when I finish arguing with God and making excuses, I'm then able to do the things Jeremiah did: rehearse God's character, ask honest questions, and wait on God's response. Only then am I able to surrender to God's voice; and when I do, I have a peace in my soul that literally feels like a weight has been lifted. I smile when I should frown. I experience God holding me together when I should be falling apart. All because I allowed God to confirm His message to me.

It's true for each us: we can count on God to confirm His voice as we honestly wrestle with Him and rehearse His character and Word to combat our conflicted emotions. And the result when we follow God's leading is His supernatural and abiding peace.

When it comes to confirming God's voice, there is one other important element we need to consider, and it's this: *when God tells us something specific, it should happen.*

I can think of times in my life that I clearly heard God's voice. All four of my children struggle with asthma. Many nights I have sat up listening to them breathe, trying to discern whether to call 911 or wait it out until morning. One particular night my five-year-old daughter had a horrible night exchanging air in her wheezy lungs and also felt an intense pain in her side. By morning I drove to the emergency room, unsure whether something was seriously wrong or this would be just another day of asthma breathing treatments.

After X-rays, blood tests, and a visit from a surgeon, there still were no clear answers; and my "momma radar" told me my lethargic

daughter was very ill. Shortly after a CAT scan revealed double pneumonia and a lung full of fluid, her organs began to shut down as she went into septic shock. We later found out that the fluid had been infected with a strep virus that had become more than her body could fight off. However, while doctors rushed around her room hooking her body up to machines and calling out medications and dosages, I stood in the midst of what seemed like a medical TV show episode and heard God speak these words very clearly to me: “She will not die.” I thought He said it audibly because it was so clear, and so I looked around at the many doctors and nurses flooding the room to see if they had heard it too. It was unmistakable. For those hours when I should have fallen apart, I felt God’s peace and lightness.

When our pastor arrived with my husband, Sean, to pray with us, I was embarrassed that I laughed when Sean tried to warn me that she might not make it through the night. I knew what God had said so clearly and believed it with all my heart. Of course, in the weeks that followed, I allowed myself to worry over her health during much smaller setbacks in her recovery. But in that moment, I definitely heard God’s voice, and He confirmed it with a miraculous healing of my daughter.

Other times God’s voice has not been so clear. A dear friend of mine was struggling with infertility. I prayed almost every day for her, and when I read Scripture that spoke of the blessing of children, I would write her name in the margin of my Bible. One day I thought I heard God say in my spirit that she would get pregnant. “Do you mean this month, Lord? What are you saying?” I asked. When she didn’t get pregnant that month, I wondered if I had heard incorrectly. I was concerned about telling my friend what I thought I had heard and giving her false hope. Several months later she underwent

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a medical procedure, and thankfully, she now has a beautiful baby boy. She did become pregnant, but not during the month I thought she might. I had heard God's voice but added my own expectations regarding the time line.

So how can we tell if God is speaking to us in that still, small voice as we seek Him in prayer or if we are hearing things we want to hear in order to give ourselves permission to do what we want to do? Did God say our church would grow, or do I just want that to be true? Did God bring that friend to mind because I need to call and check on her, or is that just my crazy brain in overdrive? Does God want me to buy these things, or does He have a different plan for this money He has entrusted to me?

In Jeremiah 32, God gives us an example of one way we can know we are on the right track. God told Jeremiah his cousin would come, *and he did*. The Lord offered proof that His words would come true. God said that confirmation would come through the events He prophesied through Jeremiah actually happening—*and they did*.

God wanted the people to know that even though He was going to allow them to suffer, there was still hope for future generations. His desire was not for them to be destroyed but for them to turn from their sin. God's message for His people was hope through surrender. One day God would bring the people back, and they would buy and sell houses again. And the proof would be that what God had said would come to pass.

Many voices shout at us that they have the words of God. But without fail, whenever people claim they have heard God say something, it should happen. We can be confident that when God says something will happen, it does—100 percent of the time.

As followers of Christ there are some messages we don't have to

question. We don't have to walk into a store and say, "God, should I steal today?" He has given us His Word with directions and examples for how to live. The message of His gospel does not have to be questioned—God's love, humanity's sin, Christ's death on the cross, and our need to receive Christ personally are clear through Scripture (read Romans for a non-CliffsNotes version). Our commission to tell others the good news is also clear. Yet we need the Spirit's clear leading on how and when to invest in others to be able to share that message.

So here's the bottom line for me and for you: as we listen to God's voice about how we should spend our time, what job we should take, whether we should have another baby, what ministry He is calling us to, or what kind of education is right for our children, we need to look for God to confirm His messages in our lives. Most often in my own life, God uses His Word to bring confirmation, whether that word comes in a sermon, through a friend, or in my personal daily readings; regardless of the source, it is always too clear to be a coincidence. Other times God uses circumstances to confirm His Word—such as when my daughter was healed from septic shock, revealing the truth of God's promise; or the time when time my husband and I heard God say He would provide for a need, and we received a gift for the exact amount the next day. Our God loves to show Himself real to us as we listen for His voice; and when we seek Him for confirmation, we will find Him faithful.

In whatever areas of life we need answers, we can ask God to give us a clear leading. We can bring Him all our questions and complaints and then rehearse back to ourselves what we know to be true about Him. If we will do this, asking God to give us the mercy of confirmation so that we can know we're on the right track of obedience,

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He will be faithful to respond. But we must stay close to Him if we are to know His voice.

Learning to discern God's voice and wait for confirmation not only makes us increasingly brave to obey His call but also helps us sort out what success looks like when we obey and things don't look like we thought they would.

### Defining Success

In our churches we often measure "success" by how many people attend worship or an event, how many dedicated themselves to Christ in a given period, and how cool and trendy we are as we go about it. Likewise, in our personal lives we often gauge our spiritual success by the ease of our circumstances or the approval of others. We want to see results from the work we do for God. If we don't, then we think we must be doing something wrong. Have you ever thought that?

Of course, we want our lives to have meaning and purpose. God created us with vision, drive, a work ethic, and dreams. These things are not inherently bad. However, we need to evaluate our measuring rod for what constitutes success.

Whether we're aware of it or not, this is where a version of the prosperity gospel sometimes subtly infiltrates our Christian walk. I find this thinking creeping into my own soul at times:

*I follow God = everything should go well for me.*

But this is not biblical!

The list is long of those who followed God and found hardship and difficulty. Job is a classic example. David lived in caves. Joseph was thrown into a pit and wrongly accused. Jesus ended His ministry

with exponentially fewer followers than He had at one time and a gruesome death on a cross. Jeremiah also followed God and encountered difficulty.

Throughout Jeremiah's writings, we see his emotions and some of his thoughts as he struggled to pursue God radically. Jeremiah related his responses to real-life fears and threats with gut-wrenching honesty. He didn't stuff his feelings about what he was going through—and that's a much-needed lesson for many of us "good Christians."

As you evaluate your life, remember that some circumstances are just difficult. God didn't expect Jeremiah to celebrate the sin of his people, death threats, or rumors spread about him. In the same way, He doesn't want you to pretend your own problems are of no consequence. He created you with emotions that respond to circumstances, and it's okay to feel and express them. In fact, it's *necessary*.

Whether it's something small like a teenager not making a sports team or a bigger trial like a health challenge that persists, we have to learn that it is okay to not be okay. When my daughter lost all of her hair to an autoimmune disorder called alopecia at the age of twelve, a well-meaning friend said, "Well, at least she doesn't have cancer." That is true, but it doesn't diminish the emotions that I had in watching my sweet girl grieve the loss of her hair. When we express our feelings to God and others, we bring our pain into the light rather than letting it fester in the darkness.

Jeremiah shows us that even the most faithful followers can feel anxiety and depression and struggle to believe God through rough circumstances. These struggles do not mean we are unsuccessful Christians. Instead, they give us an opportunity to take our thoughts and emotions to God, who always invites us to come to Him and wrestle through our personal battles. We must resist the urge to numb

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ourselves with food, television, social media, and any other distraction that keeps us from dealing with our pain and, instead, take it to the Lord. I know, I know—*this can be hard!* It's so easy to reach for the remote, cell phone, or refrigerator door. That's why we need prayer, God's Word, Christian community, and sometimes a good counselor to help us sort out the very real trials that ravage our lives.

Our trials are often seasonal and temporary. However, Jeremiah's ministry did not have a silver lining like the stories of some other Bible heroes. David lived in caves but eventually was crowned king. Joseph labored in prison but was elevated to second-in-command over all Egypt. Jeremiah, on the other hand, is called the weeping prophet because the message God gave him was difficult. It wasn't fun to deliver, and people didn't listen.

Jeremiah was imprisoned, mocked, put in a cistern, and eventually taken to Egypt against his will. Though he wasn't left in that cistern, he didn't end up on top with a great life after just a few years of difficulty. He may have seemed unsuccessful according to the world's standards, and yet in God's economy he was very accomplished. He lived for God's kingdom, followed God's instructions, and stayed true to the words God gave Him to speak. To put it simply, Jeremiah was a success in God's eyes because he was faithful and obedient. In eternity he can look back on his rough road in life knowing that he lived it well even though it wasn't easy.

Jeremiah's story gives us great hope for our own struggles. In our culture we tend to want instant gratification and to measure success by immediate results. Did it "work"? What do people think? Do my kids behave, get good grades, and excel in sports? Are others impressed with my nice home? Do I have enough status in my job? When will I get a promotion? These are the outward measures of doing it right

today. But God's standards of success are not the same as ours. We might follow God wholeheartedly and still lose our job, get sick, or face financial ruin. We may not look to others like the greatest now, but God says that those who sacrifice their wills for His will be great in heaven.

The world says "blessed are those who are rich, happy, proud, selfish, self-indulgent, critical, promiscuous, demanding, and rewarded." But Jesus says "blessed are the pure" (Matthew 5:8 NIV). The world says to mix in a little "bad girl" or "bad boy." Yet God's standards starkly contrast what the world labels as desirable. He blesses those who are poor, sorrowful, humble, and hungry for what is right, merciful, pure, peaceable, and persecuted.

Here is a sure truth to grab hold of when we are lost in the lies of this world:

*Even though God allows us to experience trials, He promises to be with us and take care of us through them.*

Though Jeremiah's life was difficult, it was also truly blessed. He was surrendered to God's call. He based his success on his obedience, not on any temporary circumstances. He was also super honest with God about his feelings, pain, uncertainty, and even despair. When surrender gives us anxiety, Jeremiah shows us that we can bring all of it to God.

## Dealing with White Flag Anxiety

I felt sick to my stomach with fear and anxiety. I had just found out that the school district where our church and four other church

plants hold services was doubling the rental rates. This came at the same time when support from our sending church ended and offerings were down. I was freaking out. *Where does a church planter's wife go to resign?* I wondered. Can you quit a job that has no monetary compensation?

Then, as I lay on my face asking God what He was doing, He told me to think about what I was writing at the time—a Bible study on the life of Jeremiah. Jeremiah faced one difficult situation after another. He struggled with depression. He was left in a cistern to die. He knew that according to God's messages, the people of Israel were facing seventy years of captivity. Yet in the midst of it all he clung to the Lord, trusting in God to take care of him.

Jeremiah didn't try to sugarcoat his pain but boldly told God that he wished he were never born. He actually called God's help uncertain and blamed Him for the suffering he endured. You might say that Jeremiah held nothing back.

Our lives are often like Jeremiah's, with circumstances that range anywhere from puzzling to downright depressing. At times we all find ourselves saying things like "I'm done!" or "I give up!" But we can know with confidence that God is the One who will take care of us. Rather than leave us as orphans in a sea of questions, trials, and difficulties, God promises to walk with us just as He did with Jeremiah.

Let's take a look at two active steps Jeremiah took as he brought his complaints to God. We find them in Jeremiah 15:16-17. The first thing Jeremiah did was devour God's Word. Though he didn't have access to the entire biblical canon that we are privileged to possess in great abundance—even having the entire Bible in multiple translations on our phones—we know he came in contact with

the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. How do we know that these scrolls, which were rediscovered by King Josiah early in Jeremiah's ministry, influenced the prophet?

For one thing, the prophets Isaiah and Hosea wrote one hundred years before Jeremiah began to dictate his messages from God to the scribe named Baruch, yet we see glimpses of their influence on Jeremiah in his messages. Also, word pictures from the psalmists echo into the pages of his prophecy. The evidence is unmistakable: Jeremiah devoured God's inspired words like food. And he didn't consume God's Word accidentally; it was an intentional act of his will, not his emotions. (After all, his emotions were much like ours—flitting from despair to hope from one moment to another.) Jeremiah set his will to study God's Word, and his emotions followed truth as he argued and experienced the living Word.

The second practical step Jeremiah took was to stand alone. Jeremiahs 15:17 says he chose the unpopular route of nonconformity. God responded by clearly calling Jeremiah with a powerful passage:

“If you return to me, I will restore you  
so you can continue to serve me.  
If you speak good words rather than worthless ones,  
you will be my spokesman.  
You must influence them;  
do not let them influence you!”

(Jeremiah 15:19)

I don't know about you, but I'd like to inscribe this verse on some of my children's belongings. For that matter, I need to carry it with me as well!

Though translators have used words like *return*, *turn*, and



*We should be people who draw others  
to our God rather than people who are  
pulled away from Him by our culture.*



*influence* when translating this verse, the Hebrew word used here is *shuwb*. It means “to turn back, to lead away.”<sup>3</sup> We should be people who draw others to our God rather than people who are pulled away from Him by our culture. God called Jeremiah to be the influencer, and we, too, are called to be influencers in a world where we’re continually surrounded by all kinds of stimuli. In a world full of screens that have a constant flow of information and entertainment, God calls us to set an example rather than embrace the status quo.

In order to be the influencer instead of the influenced, Jeremiah devoured God’s Word and chose to stand alone. We must do the same if we want to be able to stand for God in our culture. The truth is that the tendency to fall in with the crowd didn’t end in middle school for any of us. I have to confess that I have joined in with the crowd regarding media choices, gossip, spending habits, and other areas of life where taking a stand could be unpopular. I’ve also been dragged down instead of being a spokeswoman with God’s message. What about you? Have you ever found it easier to get sucked into the habits of those around you when it comes to your time, thought life, and media choices? Where is God calling you to be His spokesperson in not just what you say but also how you live?

It can be hard to stand alone—it might even give us some anxiety and internal struggle. But God is a safe place. We can trust Him with our fears, our anxiety, our wins, and our losses. He is our refuge.

## Making God Our Safe Place

What does it mean to say that God is our refuge or safe place? Every trial, frustration, and battle with flesh and sin that leaves us ready to call it quits fades in comparison with the blessing that comes from fully yielding to our God. He paints a picture so that His people

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won't miss the joy of a life fully yielded to His message. In fact, God so desperately doesn't want us to miss this truth about His protection and care for us in the midst of life's trials that He gives us two visuals.

The first picture, found in Jeremiah 17:5-8, is the dry shrub for those who trust in human strength:

This is what the LORD says:

“Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans,  
who rely on human strength  
and turn their hearts away from the  
LORD.

They are like stunted shrubs in the desert,  
with no hope for the future.  
They will live in the barren wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salty land.

“But blessed are those who trust in the LORD  
and have made the LORD their hope and  
confidence.

They are like trees planted along a riverbank,  
with roots that reach deep into the water.  
Such trees are not bothered by the heat  
or worried by long months of drought.  
Their leaves stay green,  
and they never stop producing fruit.

The Hebrew word for trust in this passage is *batach*, which actually means “a place of refuge” or “safe place.”<sup>4</sup> When we make people or anything wrought of human effort our safe place, God lets us know what we have to look forward to—and it's not pretty. The people in Jeremiah's day chose to trust in political alliances and idolatry. They lost faith in the God of their ancestors. They even looked to Egypt for

help—the same country that held them captive as slaves for over four hundred years in the days of Moses. God called them to trust Him, letting them know clearly what the results of human help would be.

In His Word God doesn't leave us to wonder what will happen if we make our safe place the government, our jobs, our friendships, or even our families. People die, children grow up, and regimes change. God tells us that we will find ourselves in the condition of being unproductive, hopeless, isolated, and bitter if we place our ultimate trust in anything but Him alone. He says that we will live in a barren wilderness, an uninhabited salty land. God graciously will do whatever it takes to “wake us up” from this state—just as He allowed the people of Judah to face destruction and captivity in order to help them see their “barrenness” and how far they had drifted from Him.

God also gives us a picture of the other alternative, telling us that when we trust in Him we will be stable, nourished, vibrant, and productive. Deep roots in Him will make us stable! This blessed life will not be problem-free; God honestly tells us we may still encounter heat and long months of drought. However, we won't dry up because His water from the river will nourish us. He promises to keep our leaves green and still produce fruit in our lives—even in dry times.

What a contrast to the salty shrub is the sweet fruit of the Spirit in our lives, nourishing those around us. When we make the Lord our hope and confidence, we not only will produce fruit but also will get to be part of God's plan for healing in this broken world. Making God our safe place means that He will take care of us *and* use us for His kingdom work; and that's a double blessing.

Jeremiah's life may not have been one of comfort, status, and material wealth; but he had great treasure—blessings to come in the next life as well as blessings to enjoy in his life on earth, even in the

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midst of trials. I don't know about you, but this speaks to my soul! The blessed life is far better than the circumstantially happy life because it is not dependent on anything but the Lord. Only He is unchanging. Only He is secure. Only He can be fully trusted. The most secure of careers can end tomorrow; the most stable family can be quickly interrupted by divorce or tragedy. Whenever we trust in human resources, we are like a shrub in the desert that dries up and dies. But when we make the Lord our confidence, we can weather the times of drought and heat.

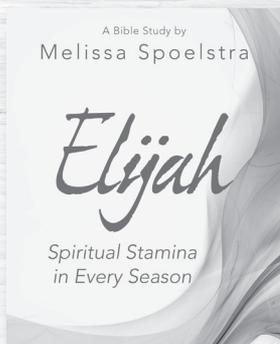
Like Jeremiah, we are God's messengers, and He promises to take care of us. He gives us His Word to build our faith and encourage us to trust Him even when it seems like He doesn't care. As a loving Father, He longs to be close to His children. He never forces us to come near, but He calls to us through His Word to put our hope and confidence in Him alone. How will we respond?

Just as Jeremiah brought his complaints and then waited for God to respond, take time to ask God your hard questions. Then listen for His voice; and when He answers you, surrender to that voice with obedience. He will not fail you!

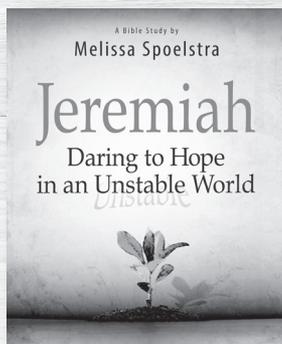
## **Dare to Hope Challenge**

What pulls you away from God? It might be a person, an addiction, an activity, or something you turn to instead of (or before) God. List everything that comes to mind on an index card. These are the idols in your life—those people or things that you have elevated above God. Spend some time in prayer, surrendering your list to God and asking what steps you need to take in order to draw closer to Him. Write these steps on the other side of the card, and post it somewhere you will see it regularly.

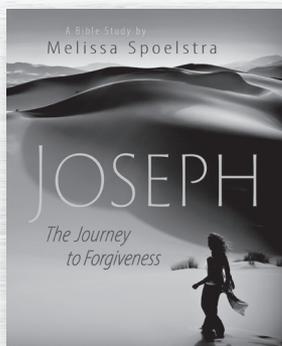
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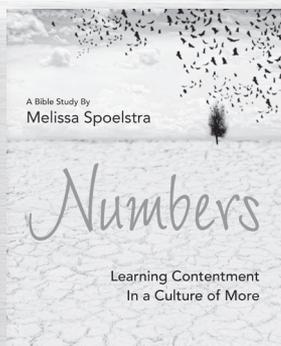
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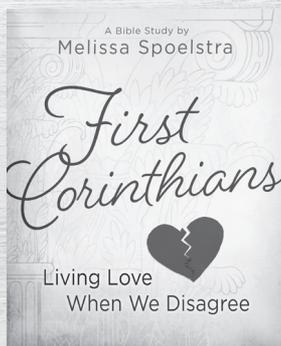
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