

Surviving Saturday: When Everything You Believed Collapses

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[0 : 00] So as some of you may know, my familiarity with the Lord of the Rings books and movies is limited.! I know that's a grave sentence. This is my first confession of the year.

I am not a ringer, which I just found out was a thing. Some of the fans of the series call themselves. Yet everywhere I turn, I mean everywhere, I come across in Christian books and commentaries, quotes and references to Tolkien's masterpiece.

I found myself recently chewing on one such reference, and it feels appropriate as we move as a church into 2026.

So many of us are making resolutions and are setting intentions. The particular quote comes from the Fellowship of the Ring and occurs just after Gandalf has explained the shadowed history of the ring to Frodo, insinuating that Frodo can no longer stay safely in the Shire with the ring.

In response to the call to leave home, Gandalf and Frodo, they exchanged these insightful words. I am not made for perilous quests, cried Frodo.

[1 : 25] I wish I had never seen the ring. Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen? Such questions cannot be answered, said Gandalf.

You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess, not for power, not for wisdom.

But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have. While I may not be a ringer, I can relate to Frodo's desperate hesitation.

Like Frodo, I don't feel like I'm built to withstand the kinds of adventures which would continually place me on the knife edge of life and death.

A joke that I continually return to whenever I am in a discussion about the military is that no matter how complex and convoluted my thoughts are about it, I could never join it anyway because I would be the first person to die.

[2 : 41] Some of y'all are with me too, okay? I would absolutely shoot myself in the foot. I'm like day one. Like I would just, I am not made for such things.

The largest part of me just really wants to read good books and sip hot tea. That's what I want to do with myself. Like Frodo, I don't feel like I'm made for the perilous quest and there is nothing in me that wants to invite one.

And perhaps you can relate to that. Perhaps you enjoy watching a good superhero movie because in some ways it helps you rest assured that you don't have to be one yourself.

That you can be brave and do incredibly hard things by association. But the life of faith, real spiritual formation in the way of Jesus will not let any of us get off that easily.

By virtue of our discipleship, we have been chosen for a perilous quest whether we fill ourselves up to it or not. Some of you were present here in September when Pastor Anthony preached one of the most important sermons I have yet to hear concerning our common life together.

[4 : 04] When speaking of the letters to the churches of Asia Minor in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, Pastor Anthony imagined what a letter to the table church might contain.

Here's just a little portion of that brilliant reflection concerning areas that need to be strengthened in our church. But I have this against you.

In your necessary work of tearing down false idols, you have become afraid to encounter the living God. Your deconstruction has been brave, but where is your reconstruction?

You speak beautifully of justice and community, but when did you last allow yourself to be undone by mystery? To be surprised by grace?

Your cynicism, though earned through pain, has become a wall that keeps you out, that keeps out not just harmful religion, but transformative encounter.

[5 : 06] You've learned to critique, worship, but forgotten how to surrender in it. You analyze scripture, but resist letting it analyze you. You've become so good at spotting spiritual manipulation that you've lost the ability to be spiritually moved.

That letter, I believe, was a particularly anointed word for our community. And it is a word that I hope that we can carry into 2026 and kind of circle around a little bit.

How can we set ourselves toward encountering the living God this year? How can we allow ourselves to be undone by grace and by mercy?

How can we become those who sense and respond to the movements of God? In a word, how can we become saints in the traditional sense of that word?

According to Richard Beck, a saint in the traditional sense, by virtue of their association with miracles is literally an enchanted person.

[6 : 21] They are, as he says, a human thin space between heaven and earth. Then he adds, they bring us into closer contact with God.

So two things are true. You have been chosen for a perilous quest. And you have been invited to become a saint.

An enchanted person. When we look to the Bible, we might expect it to be full of people who are unquestionably saints.

People whom we can imitate. But the hard truth is that apart from Jesus, nearly all the prominent people in Scripture come to us flawed.

Yet a few people stand out, and one of those people is the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was summoned by God to a perilous quest, and along the way, despite the dramatic ups and downs of his life, he became a human thin space.

[7 : 27] For our first sermon series of 2026, we're going to spend time with the book of Jeremiah. We're going to explore both the prophet's life and the prophet's words.

The book of Jeremiah has the distinction of being one of the only prophetic books that has both stories about the prophet and words from the prophet. He was a man who lived faithfully inside of the adventure that God had invited him to, and he lived faithfully during a time of exile.

See, the nation to which Jeremiah belonged was constantly subject to the whims of much more powerful nations, the nations that surrounded it. When Babylon, the dominant empire of the time, invaded not once, not twice, but three times, it destroyed the Jerusalem temple and carried off the population to Babylon in waves that essentially decimated the nation.

It was a time of national collapse and theological disaster. Yet Jeremiah lived a faithful, God-saturated life through all of that.

He had experienced the Friday of his people. He had experienced the Friday in which it must have felt like God had died.

[8 : 58] And his words in his life make clear that he looked forward to the Sunday when his people would know resurrection and restoration. But the book of Jeremiah holds us on the long Saturday, the devastating in-between time.

I think it's crucial that we learn from the prophet Jeremiah how to survive the Saturdays of our lives, how to be faithful in seasons of exile.

See, maybe you were already disillusioned with the history and politics of our nations, but you thought the foundations of our democracy would hold. Or maybe you knew that armed officers would come for black and brown bodies, but you did not realize that they would come for a white woman, a mother of three in broad daylight.

Or maybe you just thought that the days of brazen imperialism were behind us. It is so easy to go numb when we have lost what we had taken for granted.

For some of us, what we had taken for granted has nothing to do with our country. Maybe you took for granted certain theological ideas.

[10 : 37] Maybe you believe that everything happens for a reason until the worst tragedy of your life struck. And it didn't make sense.

Maybe you believe firmly that God answered prayers until God didn't answer the one that you most needed him to. Maybe practicing faith has just become too difficult, too confusing, too much of a stretch, and it is just easier to consume rather than to commit.

It is so easy to stay stuck when we have lost what we were once willing to stake our lives on. The book of Jeremiah is a survival guide of sorts.

Through its multi-voiced conversations, we find space to consider how to heal. It asks us to settle down into the uncomfortable places and to believe that we can be faithful and maybe even flourish in times of exile.

By not softening the difficulty of the Saturdays of our lives, it gives us lessons about how to return from the abyss, how to survive the ends of our world, and how to remain steadfast on our perilous adventures.

[12:04] There's so much more that I want to say by introduction to this series, but with the time I have left, I just want to take us to chapter one of the book of Jeremiah to look at the very first lesson.

So this is Jeremiah 1. I'm going to read until about 10. Jeremiah 1 through 10. It'll be on the screen. Feel free to also pull out a Bible or a phone. The word of Jeremiah. The words of Jeremiah. Son of Hilkiah.

One of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the 13th year of the reign of Josiah, son of Ammon, king of Judah.

And through the reign of Jehoiakim, of Josiah, king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the 11th year of Zedekiah, son of Josiah, king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

[13:10] The word of the Lord came to me saying, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart.

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Alas, sovereign Lord, I said, I do not know how to speak. I am too young. But the Lord said to me, do not say, I am too young.

You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord.

Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

So in the first three verses, we get some key information about Jeremiah. Jeremiah. First of all, we learn his name, which means the Lord exalts or the Lord hurls.

[14:29] We learn his father's name, that it was Hilkiah. We find out that he's from this town called Anathoth, which is north of Jerusalem. And we find out that he is a part of this priestly lineage.

And then we get the most important bit of information about him. The word of the Lord came to him. Jeremiah is a prophet and he prophesies during the reigns of King Josiah and Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah.

He witnesses some of the best days of the nation, but also some of the worst days of the nation when they go into exile.

And through it all, he's faithful. In this passage, we get the beginning of his story. He is called on a perilous journey. Before he does anything, before he's even born, he is given an adventure.

He is summoned by God as a prophet quite apart from his own choice. Imagine it. Jeremiah is someone who likely was trained as a priest like the rest of his ancestors.

[15:42] He would have been given the foundations of faith that he needed to live in covenant with God and that he was trained to pass on to his community. But here in this passage, God comes to him saying, I'm going to consecrate you not for the sanctuary, but for the streets.

He is told that he is to do what he, that he essentially was to do what he was brought up to do, but in a different key.

Some of us might know how that feels this morning when God remixes the plot of the song that you thought you knew by heart. God does not set Jeremiah apart for the clear role of a priest.

No, he identifies him as a prophet, someone whose authority would always be questioned and whose role in the religious landscape would always be unclear.

Later, we come to find out that the very people who shaped his faith in Anathoth are vehemently against his message. They set the direction of his faith, but they will not be able to understand the words that are put in his mouth.

[17:04] And some of us might be able to relate to that too. So, when Jeremiah receives his appointment as a prophet, it is no wonder that he hesitates.

It is no wonder that he, that he might have felt something akin to what the character Frodo did. I am not made for perilous quests.

Why was I chosen? What Jeremiah actually says captures that same sentiment. I am only a boy. And who can fault him? Jeremiah is living in a culture that believes wisdom and insight come with age. And by that measure, he's pretty young.

He's completely unqualified. But God commands him to not say I am only a boy. God promises to be with him.

[18:07] Then God touches his mouth, giving him what he needs to meet the task to which he has been called, the work of dismantling and rebuilding. The very first lesson I want us to learn from the book of Jeremiah is that God is commanding us to stop saying I am only.

Jeremiah was not qualified but he was called. Jeremiah did not have the right competencies but he was called. Jeremiah did not have executive presence or a charismatic personality or a compelling ambition but he was called.

To use a phrase from Eugene Peterson Jeremiah reminds us that it is time to stop pleading inadequacy. Inadequacy to show up faithfully in the fraught politics of our time.

Inadequacy to deliberately pursue a reconstructed faith that can give us a place to stand.

Inadequacy to live out that niggling call in the back of your mind that you know has nothing to do with your own good ideas and which won't let you go.

To stop pleading inadequacy as a church. Believing that we are just some unicorn which is destined to toddle along but never to enjoy mature abundance.

[19:40] let me say it clearly. You are not inadequate for whatever God is calling you to and we are not inadequate.

a few years ago an acquaintance of mine wrote a poem that went viral and it explains with haunting beauty the weight of the inadequacy that many of us carry around.

It's called What You Missed the Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade. Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas, how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer.

She took questions on how not to feel lost in the dark. After lunch she distributed worksheets that covered ways to remember your grandfather's voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep without feeling you had forgotten to do something else, something important, and how to believe the house you wake in is your home.

This prompted Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing how to chant the psalms during cigarette breaks and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts are all you hear.

[21:07] Also, that you have enough. The English lesson was that I am is a complete sentence. And just before the afternoon bell she made the math equation look easy.

the one that proves that hundreds of questions and feeling cold and all those nights spent looking for whatever it was you lost and one person add up to something.

I love that poem because if I'm honest it explains how I feel most days.

Like I miss something that everybody else knows. Like I don't have what I need. It's true that we haven't been chosen because of our merit or power or wisdom as Gandalf says but that we have been chosen and must use the strength and heart and wits that we have.

Whatever the adventure you are being invited to by God whatever the form your sainthood is to take your capacity for it is grace and gift from God and that is true no matter how often you feel lost in the dark no matter your hundreds of questions.

[22:39] This past week famed gospel singer Yolanda Adams made headlines for her inclusive stance toward queer people on the Clay Kane radio show. Anybody else see this?

No? Okay. All right. Yeah. One line that struck a chord with me from what she said was this bold comment.

She said God is not surprised by anyone he created. God is not surprised by anyone he created.

And I needed to remind myself of that. When people I meet are surprised when I tell them I'm a pastor I have to remind myself that God is not surprised. When people express belief when you say that you lead worship you.

God is not surprised when you tell people that you're starting a non-profit. God is not surprised when you say I'm going to write a book. God is not surprised whatever task you sense God calling you to God is not surprised.

[23 : 46] God is the one who has anointed you. When you tell people the kind of church that you go to and they look at you quizzically God is not surprised that this place exists and that you are called to be here.

To all of us who are tempted to plead inadequacy as we consider the landscape of our nation and the rough places of our faith lives I want to end by pointing out just one aspect of Jeremiah's vision. after God gives Jeremiah the contours of his call God gives him two visions and the first one is especially interesting.

The text is in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 1. The word of the Lord came to me.

What do you see Jeremiah? I see the branch of an almond tree he replied. I replied the Lord said to me you have seen correctly for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.

[24 : 57] What is not obvious is that this is a play on words. Scholar John Golden Gate translates it this way. Jeremiah says I'm looking at the branch of a watcher tree.

God says because I'm watching over my message to put it into effect. God shows Jeremiah a tree whose name in Hebrew sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for watching.

God will shepherd his word to Jeremiah. God will shepherd his word to us. No matter how large the national disaster, no matter how deep the disorientation and sense of displacement in your faith, God will not abandon you in what he has called you to.

you can be faithful even in times of exile, even when it feels like Sunday will never come and Saturday is all there will ever be.

You have enough. I am is a complete sentence. Amen. as