

True story: there was once a call in show whose guests were a Bishop and a Rabbi. The caller said to them: "If science contradicts the Bible, then science is wrong because the Bible is clear and easy to understand and science isn't. Clarity is a sign that the Bible was given directly by God." The rabbi laughed.

There was a moment of silence from both the Bishop and the Rabbi. Then the rabbi said; "God does not make the Truth easy to find. God hides the Truth from us and expects us to use our Reason to uncover it. Why God does this I do not know. But this is what the Rabbis have always taught." The bishop nodded his head yes to the rabbi's words.

But it is true. The bible is often unclear and hard to understand. The truths confound us as times, and at other times we nod our heads in understanding. The bible may be many things to many people, but it is rarely simple.

And that's because life isn't simple. We expect one thing and get another. We don't understand why it happens, but it does.

Jeremiah had been telling the people of Israel that they were in danger. That they would be conquered and sent into exile. And it happened. Babylon invaded, they destroyed Jerusalem and leveled the Temple. Many people were killed and the remainder: thousands upon thousands were walked from Jerusalem to Babylon. There they found themselves in an unfamiliar land with strange customs and beliefs. They were not trusted by the Babylonians, and they felt abandoned by God.

Picture this: your homeland has been conquered by a foreign army and you have been relocated to their country. You don't know the language, you miss what is familiar, and you are filled with fear and resentment. The false prophets played on that resentment. They whipped up the people, saying to not assimilate, to hold themselves aloof from the foreigners. These false prophets told the people that their future was back in Jerusalem, with the remnant who would survive.

From our perspective, that even seems like good advice. Then Jeremiah spoke. God's will for them was this:

*"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."*

For Jeremiah's followers this must have been a "you have got to be kidding me" moment.

What they were probably thinking—what many people would think—is: These people have ruined our lives. These people are the enemy. We want to call down God's curses on them and you are telling us that we have to pray for them. That's too much.

One prophet is saying one thing, and Jeremiah another. I told you the bible was confusing.

Why does God do this? I do not know.

Several years ago when I lived in Little Rock, I was looking forward to visiting my daughter for Thanksgiving. When I got to the train station at 11:15pm, I discovered that my train would be delayed for 12 hours. I could feel my blood pressure rising. It had only been delayed 12 minutes--at that point-- and I was getting cranky.

I called Amtrak and discovered that the train had hit a truck stopped on the tracks. I was at once horrified, and at the same time irritated by idiots who try and beat the train at crossings. I was trying to be understanding but it wasn't working. My stomach hurt. I went to the Amtrak counter and I'm pretty sure I was less than pleasant to the guy behind the counter.

I finally came to the conclusion that I was causing my own unhappiness by insisting on being upset about something I had absolutely no control over. Packing? Check. Dog to the sitters? Check. Train schedule? Nope. No control.

I started to talk with some ladies who also had to stay there all night, getting their stories, commiserating. There was a black guy who had lived in Ferguson, Missouri all his life—remember the Ferguson riots? We had a long, thought-provoking talk about racism and prejudice.

A woman with two children was trying to get to Milwaukee. Her son played quietly with his toy cars while his teenage sister alternatively slept and texted.

An older photographer told me how he routinely visited the train station to get pictures of incoming trains at 3am. This trip, he was a passenger.

And then there was the Amtrak station attendant, Mark, I soon found out-- who had been there since 10:30 the previous night. He was quickly coming up on 13 hours of working and he couldn't leave until we were safely on the train. We discussed how trains work. He said that in the Northeast Corridor there are tracks that are used exclusively by passenger trains. They keep to schedules that are virtually always on time. Life is good in the northeast.

Then he was transferred to Arkansas, where the passenger trains are forced to share the same tracks with the freight trains. This is evidently the case throughout much of the non-northeast corridor. This practice routinely throws trains off schedule, sometimes making them run 2 or 3—or more-- hours late.

I asked him if he liked his job. "Not here. Not when the trains are always late." I suddenly realized my stomach hadn't hurt in over an hour.

I wanted to get to my daughter's, but I was no longer angry. And the more people I talked to, and the more we introduced ourselves to each other, the less tense the room became.

Sometimes God leads us into situations that make us yearn for the simpler life, the good old days. Our old friends. Jeremiah knew that.

But we are sometimes urged, by God, to live where we are placed. To work for the welfare of the people we are living with. To thrive. And sometimes it's easy to understand—we have clarity. And sometimes— as the Rabbi reminded us with a laugh—God does not always make what he wants-- or our path towards him-- easy to find. God expects us to use our reason to uncover it.

Why God does this I do not know. God is tricky that way. Not simple. The world isn't simple.

And really—every lesson we will learn in life is a lesson of love. Love for God, and love for neighbor. Sometimes we need to unclench our jaws and do some breathing exercises to get there. But love of God is found everywhere-- no matter who we are with, or where we are placed. Even in train stations.

Amen.