

Jeremiah 14:7-9

Forgive Us, Lord

One of the things that I really like about computers is that you can justify your text. There are four wonderful little buttons at the top of your screen; you've probably seen them on your word-processing program. If you take the mouse and click "left justify," all your text slides to the left and makes a ruler-straight left margin. If you want the right edge to be justified, you click "right justify," and everything slides to the right. Or if you're making a poster or a menu or perhaps a poem and you want everything right down the middle, you take your mouse and click "center." Perhaps you want both sides to be justified. Click "full," and all the extra spaces will be in the middle and both ends will be squared up, the way a book would look.

Now wouldn't it be nice if we had justification buttons for our lives when we wanted to straighten out messes that we have made or when we want to get things squared up? Sometimes we think we have these magical justification buttons.

One of them is the "blaming button." If you want to justify yourself, blame somebody else, even when you know it's your fault. If you're a kid and you bring home crummy grades, you might try to work the blaming button: "My teacher hates me. She never gives me a break." Or, as an adult: "My boss is so crabby all the time; there's nothing I can do to please him, and he was just looking for a reason to fire me." "No, I'm going into foreclosure not because I've been careless with my money. It's just that nobody will lend to me anymore." It's somebody else's fault. That's self-justification button number 1.

The second one is to make light of or minimize the fact that there is even a problem: "Oh, that's nothing. It's no big deal. I didn't do anything wrong." Suddenly there's a new baby about to appear in the family without a marriage: "What's your problem? What's the big deal with that?" Someone who is caught up in drugs or abusing alcohol will often deny the existence of a problem. Lying and self-deception are enormous, and we all go for that button when it suits us: "What problem?"

The third button often pushed is what I like to call the "comparison button." If I'm feeling kind of fat, there's a number of different ways I can go about not feeling fat anymore. I can make myself less fat by eating better, exercising more, and actually losing weight. Or I can pick somebody out who's fatter than me and stand next to that person. Then by comparison I look thinner. Except that doesn't help anything. It's like a person on the Titanic. As the ship is going down, he is trapped way up in the stern thinking, "I'm much farther from the water than that woman at midship." Well, both people are going to drown. What does it matter if you're temporarily just a little bit higher? The comparison game doesn't really get at anything important.

The last way to self-justify is to push the "plead ignorance button." Police officers know all about this one. People are driving along. All of a sudden—oh no! Lights go on behind, the siren pulls the car over, and a cop comes to the car and says, "Do you know how fast you were going?" "No, officer." He says, "Do you know what the speed limit around here is?" The car's headlights are squarely on a speed limit sign right in front. In gigantic black and white letters it reads, "Speed Limit 25." He had been going 35 in a 25. The person's ignorance of the speed limit was of no interest to the cop. He ticketed the driver anyway. When people try to plead ignorance in God's court of law—"I didn't know"; "I had no idea"—it does them no good.

You may have already gone through some hair-raising experiences in life. Maybe you've gone through personal bankruptcy, been fired from your job, or by your own recklessness have

destroyed your marriage. Maybe you've so alienated yourself from your children that they won't call anymore and you can't even find them. Maybe you've done some terrible harm to another human being. Maybe you've participated in a crime and are now embarrassed and ashamed. How do you deal with these situations? What do you do when your self-worth has collapsed and it's your fault?

I want to tell you some stories about the prophet Jeremiah. It was his sad job to explain to people who could not justify themselves that their situation was their fault. Jeremiah knew a few things about collapse. It was his call into ministry to serve the Israelites at the end of the 600s B.C. and at the beginning of the 500s B.C. At first he served with good King Josiah. But Josiah's sons and his one grandson who succeeded him were miserable examples of leadership. And what had once been a country with some stability now simply began to collapse. The invasions of the Babylonians took away all of the Israelites' once-mighty empire and shrank it down to a little rump. The land of Israel was not big. It was only about 30 miles wide in the north, 60 to 70 miles wide in the south, and maybe 130 miles from north to south. And now, two-thirds of that was gone. There was only a little bitty piece left, and it was Jeremiah's ministry to tell these people that it was going to get even worse. The Babylonians were coming. The Israelites needed to surrender to them and allow God to do this because it was their fault.

It was Jeremiah's job to tell them: "Stop resisting and take the blow. All your stuff is going to be taken from you. You're going to lose everything material, but you'll save your lives. Even better—you will save your soul, and you will save our national identity because God is going to keep the nation together even when you go off into captivity." Jeremiah had a prayer to the Lord that to me is a spectacular model of what to pray about when the wheels are coming off in your life. And I'd like to look at that with you. It's in Jeremiah chapter 14.

Maybe some of you are going through personal financial collapse or fear it will happen because your debt load is so huge. Maybe your marriage is on its last shreds of togetherness and at some point is going to blow up. Maybe you don't know it, but you will not be employed at your company by summer. Perhaps you are in a time of crisis right now. Have you discovered that pushing the four justify buttons—the blaming button, the minimizing button, the comparison button, or the pleading ignorance button—isn't going to help you? Well, then, what should you do?

Jeremiah gives you some better buttons to push, and here's the first one. In verse 7 it says, "*Although our sins testify against us, O LORD, do something for the sake of your name.*" What Jeremiah is saying is: "Lord, this is really all about you. Don't think about me first, but you might look bad if I continue to struggle and suffer because I've identified with your name. If I'm doing poorly and I'm one of your people, other people will not be inclined to trust you or believe in you or look to you. In other words, Lord, help me, and in this way, you will make yourself look good. Do it for the sake of your name."

In the second half of verse 7 comes God's button number 2 to click when we're speaking with the Lord. Jeremiah says, "*For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you.*" Jeremiah could have blamed bad leadership. In parts of his message, he did indicate that there had been a terrible leadership failure in Israel. But he realized that he himself was adding to the overall sin of the nation. He was part of the problem too. And he didn't just say the word they. Notice the pronouns here. Who's backsliding? Whose sin? It's "*our backsliding ... we have sinned.*" He accepted responsibility for his own sins and came to the Lord to ask for forgiveness with all the other sinners. The beauty of this approach is that God does not despise people who

come and ask for mercy and confess their sins. In fact, he loves to hear from us at just such times.

Button number 3 to press is in verse 8: "*O Hope of Israel, its Savior in times of distress.*" Keep those words in mind. Here is where your way out comes from. Call God your Hope; call God your Savior. That's where your justification comes from. It comes from Calvary; it comes from the Son of God who hung upon a cross, holy and pure, having earned the right to represent you. He is fully human like you, yet perfect because he is God. He offered himself as the ultimate go-between. Or, as I like to think of him, he was the lightning rod that absorbed the blast and took the punishment of sin so that while we are going through our struggles, whatever they might be, we will never lose our forgiveness because it originates from the loving heart of God. That's what grace means—that God forgives you, based not on your performance but because he chooses to love and forgive you. Never get tired of going back over and over to your Savior. He truly is your hope. Hope means that although your life is hard now, it will be better. You know it will be better because the promise that is made is not coming from you. And even though you cannot see how things will get better, when you are connected to the hope-giver, you know that there is relief for you in the future that you can depend on.

Clicking button 3 is remembering how God has described himself. These aren't terms we made up; he says that he is the "*Hope of Israel*" (verse 8) who gets us out of all kinds of trouble. A hope is something you put your trust in even when everything around you looks like an awful mess. God is the "*Savior in times of distress*" (verse 8). Saviors save people. Even when things are going very wrong, saviors do things to make things better. So confident is Jeremiah about this—"*O Hope of Israel*" and "*its Savior in times of distress*"—that he utters what almost sounds like blasphemy. He gets right in God's face and calls on God to do what God said he was going to do. In the last half of verse 8 and the first half of verse 9, Jeremiah gets very frank with God about how desperately we need him: "*Why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who stays only a night? Why are you like a man taken by surprise, like a warrior powerless to save?*" The point here is not to show disrespect toward God. The point here is that Jeremiah is so convinced that God is going to come and rescue his people that he's calling on God to get even more involved. He's not afraid of God's involvement. He wants more of it, so he says: "You remind me of a *stranger*. You're just passing through, like a traveler who's only briefly here. But you're more than that, Lord. Come and be what you said you would be. You're *like a man taken by surprise*. Don't make yourself look like a warrior who is powerless to save, Lord, because you're so much more than that."

Button number 4 comes in the last half of verse 9: "*You are among us, O LORD, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!*" So when you're clicking God's justification button 4, call on God to recognize the relationships that he has with his people: "*You are among us.*" What does this mean for you and me? It means we can call on a God who is involved in our lives and who has identified himself with us. Not only has the Lord spoken to us through his Word, but we are connected to him through the power that comes through that Word. The Bible is not just an interesting source of ancient information. It's an actual spiritual electricity source that gives us power as we talk to the Lord.

Through our baptisms, God leaves absolutely no doubt that he means you and me personally, not just in general, not as a generic kind of relationship, but that he loves you and me individually. When the water of Baptism splashes on an individual, God is singling him or her out: "I mean you! You now have my mark, my seal, on you." We can call on that certainty in our times of need. "Lord, we belong to you! We bear your name."

When you receive Holy Communion, you can't miss the body and the blood of Christ himself, your Hope and Savior, placed in your mouth. So we can call on that: "Lord, I know you know my name, and I know yours. I'm carrying your name. It's personal. Don't be like a traveler, a stranger in the night, but do what children can expect their loving fathers and brothers to do for them."

Imagine one of your kids borrowed your car. He walked around for a while, enjoying a pleasant night. When he got back to the car, he realized he had left the lights on. The battery was dead. What does he do? He calls Dad. And Dad comes because he's not a stranger. That kid bears his name. He gave him his name, and when he called Dad in his time of need, he goes to rescue him. He hooks him up, gives him a jump, and he is on his way.

God answered Jeremiah's prayer, even though it may not have seemed so at first. The Babylonian captivity brought great destruction of the Israelites' property and wealth, but God kept the nation together in a strange land and kept their faith and purpose alive. After a 70-year "Sabbath," or resting time, for the land, God brought the exiles back home and their national life was resumed. Mighty Babylon? After a brief time of dazzling glory, its power ended overnight. The people of Israel returned to their land, and by and large they got rid of their poisonous Baal worship. They prepared themselves for becoming what God had intended them to be: the means by which the Savior of the world was given to the world. And when the time was just right, little Jesus was born in little Bethlehem. The Hope and Savior of the world did come exactly as foretold.

That brings us to today. What do you do in times of trouble? Skip the self-justify buttons and use the buttons that God gave you. First, in humility, confess your sins. Does this sound painful? Actually it's like releasing the infection from a wound deep inside your skin. It gets the sickness out. No blaming, minimizing, denying, or acting dumb. Just ask for mercy.

Second, call on the One who describes himself as your Hope and Savior. Believe that the Savior has saved and forgiven you in God's court. Believe that the Hope of believers has hope for you.

Third, don't be afraid to remind God: "It's all about you. The first reason why I need forgiveness and a rescue is to make you look good. Help me become part of your agenda rather than trying to manipulate you to accomplish my agenda."

Finally, don't hesitate to claim God's fatherly ownership over your life. Call on him as your heavenly Father; don't ever stop praying. He not only allows you to claim him; he reminds you that he has claimed you. Expect his involvement in your life at just the right time—his time. Fathers obligate themselves on behalf of their children. Your heavenly Father loves you unconditionally and is committed to helping you achieve your mission in life.

Don't you feel better already?