

“Arguing with God”
(A Dramatic Sermon)
Jeremiah 1:4–10
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
August 21, 2022

Have you ever won an argument with God? Have you even tried? I am not saying I have a winning strategy for you, but it is worth trying, not because we need to win, but because honesty is a virtue. We are all going to disagree at times, even with God, and if we are honest, we’re going to argue or at least have some lively debates.

My entire life was as argument with God. I was called to be a prophet when I was very young, too young, I think I made this point well. I had no experience with public speaking, I told God this too, but it didn’t make any difference. God’s mind was made up, God had formed me in the womb for this very purpose, consecrated me for it, God said. So, none of my complaints was valid. God would give me the words I needed to declare, and God would be with me and deliver me from harm, but I still didn’t like it, and I said so.

I was called to proclaim a message no one wanted to hear, a message I didn’t want to preach, a message no one listened to anyway! What was the point? It was a message of judgment and ostensibly a call to repentance, but no one was repenting. The people were being judged for mistreating each other, choosing foreign alliances over trust in God, worshiping with their lips but failing to honor God with their lives.

I had no quarrel with God’s judgments. I stood at the gate of the temple and told the people in no uncertain terms that using all the God language in world wasn’t going to do them any good if they didn’t care for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Jeremiah 7). They could say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” all Sabbath long. God saw what was in their hearts. If they changed their ways, God would dwell with them, but if they did not, judgment was coming. The Babylonians would conquer them because God would give them up to the consequences of their own decisions.

But they didn't listen, at least not to me. They listened to the court prophets, to those who said what the leaders wanted them to say, what the people wanted to hear — that all was well in God-land. There are always some willing to cater to the people's whims and the Empire's ringleader. And it is true that while you can't fool all of the people all of the time, you can fool most of the people most of the time. That ancient philosopher Diogenes had it right — discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves, whistle and dance the shimmy and you've got a crowd!

Well, the official prophets, aka false prophets, got a crowd, and what did I get? Physically beaten, put in stocks, threatened with death... and called one name after another except my given name, Jeremiah. Their favorite was *magor mis a viv*, terror all around. They were using my own prophetic words against me as a mocking nickname. I said, "Terror is coming, terror all around!" so many times that when they saw me coming, they would say, "Here comes old Terror All Around! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha..."

I complained bitterly to God often, for what good that did, asked God to punish them for their callousness and hostility, but no good deed goes unpunished in this world, and no bad deed goes unrewarded, or so it seems. I argued and fussed with God about all of this, to no avail, begged to be relieved of my sad duty, but I was not.

In the end, of course, God's message turned out to be true. Judgment came, the nation fell. I wish it hadn't... but I suppose it was some vindication, though little solace, and God was with me, delivering me from my enemies. I survived. For that I was grateful.

So, I was a prophet, despite all of my objections and complaints. The message I proclaimed turned out to be true — the people were not pleasing God and they were judged as a result; they paid a high price. But I would still say it is okay to argue with God, to debate vigorously. It's what God wants from us, honesty in all things, but more than that, God wants us to be passionate about our thoughts and feelings, our beliefs and convictions. God doesn't want passive wallflowers or robots who step in line. God creates us with freedom. Our willingness to use it and our passion for life expresses gratitude to God.

I didn't win my argument but nor did God judge me for arguing. Maybe God knew I had a point. This was a miserable calling. Just because a person feels paranoid doesn't mean the world isn't out to get him! It was out to get me! Maybe you feel like it's out to get you sometimes or that God either doesn't care about you or God's plan for you isn't what you would choose. I would say it's okay to tell God what you think. God can take it, and God already knows what you feel.

I would also say — be careful who you listen to, in every way you listen, about everything. Discerning who speaks for God especially is a tricky matter, but figuring out who is speaking the truth about any subject can be a daunting challenge. This was the case in my time. There were so many people who spun webs of lies and many of the key religious leaders got together and just put out one crazy notion after another about God blessing us, and the people bought it hook, line, and sinker. Perhaps you have something similar to contend with in your time. Pretty much every time does. How do you know who to trust?

Well, you can use your brain, for goodness' sake; in fact, for God's sake, use the brain God gave you! If it doesn't seem true, it probably isn't. If it seems made up to suit an agenda, it probably is. You can also pray, ask for God's guidance, that's what I did, even if I didn't always like what God said. And you can compare any new claim with what you already believe to be true about God, people, and the world around you.

But you might also take note of a couple realities. The truth, including God's truth, isn't always what we want to hear nor does it always make us feel good. Life isn't a fairy tale, and faith isn't a ballgame where our team always wins. Sometimes God's message, the very message we need to hear, is unsettling, and quite often God chooses as a messenger the last person we expect — someone like me!

So, be honest with God, and be careful who you listen to or read often or trust. But there is one other thing I would say to you — quit worrying about how many people join your little tribe and focus on being faithful. Faithfulness has always been the gold standard for God's people, not numbers or any cultural measure of success. How many people do you think followed my teaching? Did I get a poor response because I hadn't taken enough courses in public speaking? Was I not

dynamic enough? Did I not know how to make friends and influence people? Did I make a bad first impression?

Most importantly, did the lack of response mean that I was a failure? Maybe that's why the book with my name attached is in your Bible, to provide an example for how not to do things! That might fly at some of your thinktanks these days... but not in God's ledger. God's accounting is different from ours. My calling was to proclaim God's message, which I did faithfully. That is all I could do. Indeed, that is exactly what I had to do.

And if you will recall, my message was not entirely doom and gloom. God called me to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. There would come a day when the people would return to the land. I believed this, so much so that I bought land just as we were being forced out, at Anathoth (Jeremiah 32:9-15). I might not see that day, but it would come. So not all was lost. With God it never is.

That is where you need to place your trust in a time of many threats and changes, as well as many voices telling you what to do and how to measure your "success." Trust in God and be faithful to your calling, and quit worrying about how successful you look. It's easy to gather a crowd, if that is what you want to do, but what will you do with that crowd? How will you pursue God's will with it? Your Jesus wasn't fooled by crowds. He appreciated their affirmation, but he also knew how quickly they could turn, and his focus was on his calling.

By the way, he argued with God too. "If it be your will, let this cup pass me by," he said. But he didn't win either. I suppose that's okay. He looked like a failure, but that too depends on who you listen to, doesn't it? Only a few women were around when he died, but after he was raised, and word spread, well, his ministry was vindicated too, really vindicated. Faithfulness is rewarded in God's own time and way.

Thanks for listening to me — like you had a choice — but thanks anyway! I guess I still have some pent-up frustrations, even after all these years. But, if I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't do anything different. I might change the people's response, if I could, but I would follow God's calling again, and probably argue still, definitely argue!