

WOODED

Oh LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed.

Jeremiah 20:7, NRSV

Preaching was in the man's bones. But hardly anyone wanted to sit through his sermons. He had a few supporters and a faithful office administrator. That was about it.

He thought about quitting a million times, but he couldn't. It wasn't that he needed the job. He had no family to support. No mortgage payments to make. Besides, he surely could have made a better living doing something else.

Maybe it takes a preacher to understand one; I know how he felt. He just *had* to preach. There's no other way to describe it.

But hardly a week went by that he didn't ask, like most preachers do at some point, "Why am I doing this? Why can't I have a normal life?"

Then one week things got really bad. The preacher was falsely accused of misconduct by some denominational officials, who proceeded to drag his name through the mud.

Amid the scandal the faithful preacher saw an image that put words to his feelings. He pictured himself as the wife of a noble-but-unpopular husband. Like the wife, he was bound to the Lord, his Husband. Divorce was out of the question. But to stay

by the Lord's side meant he, like the wife, would receive the scorn meant for the Husband. As the preacher considered the image and pondered his predicament, he asked himself, "How did I wind up wed to God?"

He considered the incredible, compelling draw that God had upon his life. Then a shocking thought shot through his mind. His agony was great enough that he dared utter it aloud to God: "Lord, You seduced me!"

Before you shake your head in disgust at the desperate preacher's choice of words, be clear about his meaning. The preacher didn't need Freudian therapy for some sexual hang-up. He just knew the depth of his love for the Holy God of Israel. The preacher had no other way to explain his irreversible connection to the Lord. He had no other terms to describe his irresistible attraction to the Word of God. He had no other image to explain a calling so strong that he could not let it go. So the preacher admitted it aloud. He had been allured by an altogether winsome God. He had been wooed by the heavenly Suitor's attractive promises. He had been smitten by the magnificence of Jehovah.

The preacher's name was Jeremiah. He really said it. "Lord, You seduced me!" He really meant it.

The New Revised Standard Version uses a more tasteful word: "O LORD, you have *enticed* me, and I was *enticed*" (Jeremiah 20:7, emphasis added). Other translations soften it even further. But the Hebrew word literally means "seduced." It's the same word used in the law that describes a man who lures a virgin to his bed (Exodus 22:16). It's the word the Philistine rulers used to tell

Delilah what they wanted her to do to Samson (Judges 16:5). But most compelling of all, God Himself used the word to describe how He planned to bring Israel out of exile: "Therefore I am now going to *allure* her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:14, emphasis added).

What does a man do to catch the attention of a lady? He might fill her home with flowers or perhaps send a single rose every day. He might serenade her, compose poetry for her, or write love notes to her on the Internet. In true courtship there is no room for pride. The suitor must pour out his heart.

But a wise suitor does not reveal all his qualities at once. He wants to attract his beloved, not smother her. He wants to intrigue her, not suffocate her. After all, a gentleman doesn't want to consume his sweetheart; he wants to commune with her. Most of all, he wants her to want *him*.

That's God's nature too. He could easily smother you, suffocate you, and consume you. He could easily engulf you, ensnare you, and enslave you. But the Lord doesn't need you as His possession. He already owns you. The heart of God longs for your freely given love. He wants you more as a willing bride than an unwilling slave. As He said: "You will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'" (Hosea 2:16).

And so the Lord reveals His beauty to you little by little. He grants little samples of His grace so you will "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). He wants what every good husband wants in a bride—that she be comfortably content in His love yet genuinely desirous of deeper intimacy.

Maybe that's why Jesus taught so cryptically. He regularly tossed out puzzling statements like "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

He deliberately shocked people with His symbolism: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19).

The Messiah loved to whet His followers' appetites with mysterious allusions to coming attractions: "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that" (John 1:50). He sometimes withheld information just for the purpose of intrigue. For example, when the first disciples asked Jesus where He was staying, the Nazarene replied simply, "Come...and you will see" (John 1:39).

Jesus was a fisherman casting lures, not a hunter spearing His prey. He was a shepherd leading His sheep, not a thief snatching lambs. And so He came not to scare us into submission but to woo us into fellowship.

*P*erhaps you have been walking hand in hand with this eternal Prince for many years. Maybe you have just begun your honeymoon. Or maybe you know this Messiah only by name. I don't know how much of His affection you have felt. But I know this for sure: You are where you are only because He wooed you.

You certainly didn't entice *Him*. Call me old-fashioned, but the perfect gentleman always goes first. *He* opens the door for her. *He* proposes to her. *He* says his vow first. *He* carries her across the threshold.

Jesus spelled it out: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). And John made it equally plain: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

I used to think the Bible was telling me, "Obey God. Yield to Him. Give your life to Him, then He will really love you." But that's not how a groom courts his bride. Here's the marvel of the gospel: God loves you. Always has, always will. Tenderly, passionately, the Groom is wooing you. Your hand in marriage is His highest desire. Your love, His greatest goal. Therefore, because He loves you so dearly, obey Him. Yield to Him. Give your life to the One who loves you most.

Imagine it. The King of the universe, who could smite you with a word or turn you into smoke with a single burst of light, takes time to entice you. Instead of consuming you, the Messiah decided to court you.

When a man's in love, he gets creative in his courtship. Check out how Steven got Lisa to say "I do."

Lisa is a dolphin fanatic. She stocks dolphin stuff on her living-room shelves and hangs dolphin pictures on her walls. So Steven, the sly guy, snatched Lisa by surprise one day and fulfilled her fantasy. He had arranged for the two of them to go behind the scenes at Sea World and swim with the dolphins.

The couple donned wet suits and dipped into the dolphin tank. Lisa got to touch the lovable bottlenoses, hold their fins, and swim with them. The trainer led the clever animals in a few neat tricks. Making Lisa's dream come true was a fine piece of courtship. But the real surprise came with the finale.

One of the dolphins bounced a giant beachball off its nose. As the ball sailed toward Lisa, she saw big letters spelling out: "Will you marry me?"¹

Proposing in a dolphin tank was pretty clever. But where the heavenly Bridegroom proposed to us was unthinkable. He gave up a King's castle for a cave. He gave up bowing angels for baying animals. He gave up celestial aroma for barnyard stench. He came to swim in our puny tank and to let us swim with Him.

Steven's proposal just doesn't compare. Maybe if he'd become a dolphin. No, that doesn't compare either. Dolphins are gentle, lovable animals. Jesus "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). He not only let us touch Him—He let us tear Him. He not only let us stroke Him—He let us strike Him.

He was a Suitor courting His bride. He intended to spare no expense for her hand. He would pour out His heart, His heavenly riches. He would pour out His blood.

I'm not suggesting that theologians add *seductive* to the list of divine attributes in the Westminster Confession. Nor do I think you ought to use this word when you share the Bible's plan of salvation with others. Our world has become far too perverted to redeem such a suggestive word.

But I'm convinced you'll not know how much God loves you until you behold the extravagant way He courted you. You'll not feel His affection until you see His attractiveness. You'll not know the grandeur of God's grace until you know that He wooed you in order to win you.