

Jeremiah 2-6

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[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible, turn to Jeremiah. If you haven't got a Bible, you're really going to need one. And so our stewards are there. Stick up a paw, stick up a hand, and they can hand you a Bible.

If you look at it on your phone, you'll probably struggle to follow it. So if you need a paper Bible, don't be embarrassed. Okay.

It's Paige. What page is it? Jeremiah 2. Six to eight.

Every marriage goes through difficult times. Every marriage goes through periods where you seem to be arguing all the time, or periods where you seem to be arguing more.

And arguments reoccur. Maybe you're in your marriage going through that right now. In 23 years, I've only ever met one couple that told me that they never argued, and they never had argued. They were lying.

[1 : 02] And if they weren't lying, there was something really, very seriously wrong. Every marriage goes through difficult times. Jeremiah 2 to six is a conversation between a married couple.

It's like a conversation between a married couple that have been arguing, fighting for years. And the conversation is not complicated. There's three, really, points to the argument.

One is, it's over. Two, come back to me. And three, enough is enough. It's over. Come back to me. Enough is enough. Chapter 2, verse 1 to chapter 3, verse 5. It's over. I should imagine a husband coming into his wife and saying, there's something I need to say, and there's something I need to tell you.

Her heart sinks. That's chapter 2, verses 1 to 13. The word of the Lord came to me. Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not so.

[2 : 13] But even we know that in the story of God's marriage to Israel, when it began, all was not sweetness and light. But compared to what comes next, it was pure joy.

The metaphor switches, and the people of God are described as a toxic harvest. And in a throwback to the Garden of Eden, all who ate of it incurred guilt.

Disaster came upon them. God's word becomes even more plain as he addresses them in verse 5. What wrong did your fathers find in me? That they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless.

Jeremiah uses the Ecclesiastes word. Vanity of vanities. This relationship is only going one way, and he highlights their ingratitude, and their amnesia, and their stupidity.

Verse 6, they did not say, where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness? Verse 7, and I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruit and its good things, but when you came in, you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

[3 : 26] The priests, they don't seek God. The Bible preachers don't know God. The kings defy God. The prophets don't speak for God. And according to verse 9, God has a significant problem with this.

Even on a basic level, this is self-evidently wrong. Verse 10, he says, And God's conclusion is cutting.

Verse 12, I think there is no more helpful or damning analysis of sin in the whole of the Bible than that verse.

Sin is defying and abandoning God, and it is choosing to be our own God in his place. And the image highlights the utter foolishness of this.

So imagine, and you're really thirsty, and there is a gushing spring of fresh water that is beside you. But you embark on the ultimately futile, back-breaking project of digging out your own rainwater

tank.

[4 : 49] It's a rainwater tank which will never hold water, and yet you keep digging it. Can you see the utter stupidity of sin? Many of us slip into an entirely kind of unreformed, unbiblical, works-based way of living.

Each day, we don't have a problem. Maybe you don't have a problem with thinking, I'm not perfect. I know that much. And we may even reflect, we give ourselves a score out of 100.

That was a 90% day. Today was a shocker. I only reached 63%. The Bible does describe sin as falling short, a shortfall.

And that is right, but it can actually flatter you. I would rather think of myself as doing well but falling short than an idiot.

An idiot who's broken faith with God and set myself up at the heart of the universe. At the heart of sin, according to God through Jeremiah, it is cosmically stupid.

[6 : 06] And sometimes we flatter ourselves, don't we? I just fall short. But actually, no, Jeremiah says, sin is cosmically stupid. And if we live with this moment to moment, we will take our sin incredibly seriously.

And when confronted with our sin, we won't minimize it. When we become aware of our sins, we won't take refuge that, well, we did well, just not well enough.

We won't say, well, yeah, I fall into sin, but look at all the good I do. Because when we do that, we are not addressing the heart of the issue.

We won't face the fact that we have been distinctly, catastrophically stupid. Jeremiah causes you and I to embrace the fact that we reject God and we deify ourselves.

We are guilty of unbelief on the one hand and idolatry on the other hand. And we do it again and again and again. The painful conversation goes on in verse 14.

[7 : 12] Instead of seeking security in God, Israel have made alliances with all kinds of nations. They've pressed the diplomatic self-destruct button.

And it's got consequences. Look at verse 15. The lions, they're metaphorical lions, the lions have roared against them. They've roared loudly. And they've come in, they've trashed your country.

And they've made his land a waste, his cities in ruins without inhabitants. Moreover, the men of Memphis and Tehaphanes have shaved the crown of your head, they've humiliated you. And you've brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God when he led you in the way.

And now, what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? Your evil will chastise you. And your apostasy will reprove you.

Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God. The fear of me is not in you. And there are very few of us that enjoy hard conversations.

[8 : 20] There are fewer still of us that enjoy our hearts being ripped open and torn into tiny pieces. But that is the kind of thing that's going on here.

God lays out the reality of Israel's past and present in a way that can be neither denied or ignored. In chapter 2 in verse 20 to 37 there's a long section and it's actually quite easy to pick your way through it.

Jeremiah builds this case on seven statements that Israel makes. Verse 20 For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds but you said I will not serve.

Yes, on every hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore. And God's assertion in verse 22 is despite all this scrubbing the stain of your guilt is still before me.

Israel speaks again and they say I'm not unclean. I haven't gone after the bales but God says in verse 24 you're like a randy donkey. And their third statement in verse 25 confirms that assessment.

[9 : 26] It is hopeless for I've loved foreigners and after them I will go. It's just the way I am. It's just the way I am. And the people of God continue to give themselves away by their ideology.

Verse 26 they're kings they're officials they're priests they're prophets who say to a tree you are my father who say to a stone you gave me birth. And in the light of that their plea to arise and save sounds well ridiculous and presumptuous.

And they've repeatedly asserted their independence. The sixth statement in verse 31 says we are free we will come no more to you the relationship is well and truly over.

There's no repentance no self-awareness no recognition of reality and finally verse 34 in spite of all these things you say I'm innocent. Surely his anger has turned from me.

God says it is over. Chapter 3 verse 1 to 5 sums it up not only is the honeymoon over the whole marriage is over.

[10 : 34] If a man divorces his wife she goes from him and becomes another man's wife will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? Again for us that's Deuteronomy 24 language.

God has prohibited this kind of behavior. This language was there to protect women from becoming like a kind of marital football getting kicked around from one man to the next and Jeremiah uses this text to say it's over.

You've played the whore with many lovers and would you return to me to declare to the Lord lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see where have you not been ravished by the wayside you've sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness you've polluted the land with your vile whoredom therefore the showers have been withheld and the spring rain has not come it's the curse of the covenant.

You have the forehead of a whore you refuse to be ashamed have you not just now called to me my father you are the friend of my youth will he be angry forever will he be indignant to the end behold you've spoken but you've done all the evil that you could.

And at this point it's really tempting to rush to the New Testament and ease the relentless discomfort of these chapters but stop.

[11 : 56] stop and let the relentless pain of these words sink in. God's marriage has been difficult for a very long time God's marriage to Israel has been difficult for a long long time they've been fighting night after night after night there's no question who is at fault and the disbelief how can it be over?

You've always forgiven me what's different about this time? Why can't we have one more chance? Another go but God says it's over and what I think is interesting and quite disconcerting is that there are places in the New Testament that pick up on this kind of language.

The idea that our relationship as a church with God is a fragile marriage and so the Apostle John in Revelation applies it to the church and Jesus speaks to the church in Ephesus to the angel of the church in Ephesus and he says the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lampstands I know your works your toil your patient endurance and how you cannot bear with those who are evil I know you are endearingly patient and bearing up for my name's sake and you've not grown weary but I've got this against you that you've abandoned the love you had at first.

Remember therefore from where you've fallen repent and do the works you did at first if not I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. And we mustn't soften those words by kind of doing a theological sleight of hand about whether or not Jesus actually really means what he says and we must hear those words as a real warning against spiritual adultery but we must also recognize we are not in the same place because of the Lord Jesus Christ things have changed and we are his bride and ultimately he will not let his people go. John goes on to say in Revelation 19 doesn't he says hallelujah hallelujah for the Lord our God the almighty reigns and let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory for the marriage of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready it was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen bright and pure for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints and the angel said to me write this blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb and God will never say to us because we are in Christ it is over but the power and the strange dark beauty of Jeremiah is that it encourages us not to run there too quickly it's not exactly what we might expect at this point in the narrative but in the wake of all these passionate outbursts aimed at convincing the really complacent

[15 : 14] Judahites that the writing is on the wall and so in chapter 3 and verse 6 God's prophet calls the people to repent come back to me come back to me 3 verse 6 to 4 verse 4 the word occurs 14 times 15 times actually in different forms return return return return return return return this drumbeat of the call to repentance is silenced only by the fact that those reading the final version of Jeremiah's work in exile would know only too well that those 15 calls to repentance were ignored along with many others I don't know whether you've had this experience you are given a list to go to the shop you go to Lidl and the list isn't as clear as you would like it and so there are a number of

options you could so you ring your wife but she doesn't answer and so you ring again and she doesn't answer and you ring a third time and she doesn't answer so you ring your son and he doesn't answer and then you ring your daughter and she doesn't answer and finally you ring your wife again and she does pick up the phone what do you say oh it's lovely to speak to you don't you the experience of being ignored drives me mad drives you mad time after time time after time you ring and they don't pick up the phone well God presents himself as a God who time after time after time is calling his people he calls his people again and again and again and they don't answer during

Josiah's reign God gives Jeremiah an insight into this what it was like for him from his perspective and he goes back to the days of the northern kingdom to Israel and he says do you remember what happened to the northern kingdom Israel chapter 3 verse 6 have you seen what she did the faithless one as she went up on every hill and every under green tree she played the horn and I thought after that she'll come back but she didn't and all the while her treacherous sister you in Judah you saw it you saw the adulteries of the faithless one Israel you saw that I sent her away with a decree of divorce yet her treacherous Judah you did not fear but she too went and played the whore because she took her whoredom lightly she polluted the land committing adultery with stone and tree yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart but in pretense declares the Lord do you hear that it's Josiah's day great king Josiah Judah it seems had learned nothing from the destruction of Israel chapter 3 verse 11 faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous

Judah you do wonder don't you what it would have been like to have Jeremiah come as a visiting preacher he doesn't pull his punches does he and this is Josiah's day not evil king Manasseh's day it's not the reign of any of the hopelessly idolatrous kings these words are spoken in the middle of good king Josiah's reform of the nation and God says you're worse than Israel he compares his people with Israel I don't know how you fight how that works in your marriage but I think comparing people unfavorably seldom gets a positive response you are just like your mother do you know who you're behaving like you're behaving like your dad I have found that doesn't diffuse the situation it doesn't tend to think of course that's exactly what I'm like thanks for pointing that out

I really appreciate that that's not how I respond and so comparing Israel to Judah must have been deeply irritating but it leads to an outpouring of God's compassion go and proclaim these words towards the north and say I will not look on you in anger for I am merciful declares the Lord I will not be angry forever only acknowledge your guilt that you rebelled against the Lord your God and you scattered your favours among foreigners under every green tree that you've not obeyed my voice declares the Lord return oh faithless children declares the Lord for I am your master I will take you one from a city two from a family and I will bring you into Zion god god god god god god god god This is new covenant country.

Let the detail wash over you. Hear God saying, come back to me and I will fix everything. Verse 19, how would I set you among my sons and give you a pleasant land? A heritage, most beautiful of all nations.

[20 : 53] And I thought you would call me my father. And would not turn from following me. That's not what happened. So he cries out again, verse 22, which is literally, turn, you turning away sons and I will heal your turnings.

Come back, a day is envisaged. Behold, we come to you for you are the Lord our God, truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.

But there's no softening. Chapter 4, verse 1, he cries out again, if you return to me, if you just repent, the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. Nations will bless themselves in him and in him they shall glory.

God says in verse 3, break up your fallow ground. And he's drawing on Deuteronomy 10. Think about this.

Why does God give us all this to go through? Couldn't Jeremiah have got to the point a bit more quickly? Couldn't Jeremiah have just said, listen, it's over.

[22 : 09] God loves you. There's plenty of evidence of that. But this is it. You're toast. You're done. Well, he could accept the extent of his material. The heightened emotional level.

The chapter after chapter after chapter of this is part of the point. All of this is here to convey to you this is what God is really like. And we need to be careful, don't we, reading these prophets.

Because we can never quite grasp what God is like. John Calvin speaks about when God communicates with us, he lisps.

God lisps to us. That means he condescends to us. God lowers himself. He accommodates himself. He accommodates himself.

Where God actually gives us the categories to understand something of what he's like. God is God. And though we are made in his image, we must never repay the compliment and remake God in our image.

[23 : 21] God is not exactly like us. Westminster Confession of Faith makes this clear. It says this. There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his will, his own immutable and most righteous will.

And so on. God is like us. But he's not like us. God cannot be made to suffer or to change from the outside.

God cannot be overcome with passions. God does not have strong desires that cause him to sort of lose it and behave in an ungodly way.

If you want the technical term, he is impassable. But God is not dispassionate. He cares deeply. God may not have emotions in the way that we do, but God feels things in a higher, purer way. But he feels things nonetheless. To lose that is to rip the heart out of the revelation of God in the Bible. Paul Helm, he's a theologian, he's just died.

[24 : 44] He coined the term, themotions. I think that's quite helpful. Themotions. God has themotions. Like human emotions, but God's vision is higher and purer.

And that's what we see on full display here. God longs for us in a way that is packed with themotion for his people. He longs for his people to return to him, to come home to him.

To repent, to realign their lives to his agenda. So that his great mission to the nations might move forward. And I do wonder whether this evening we need to be confronted again with what we call the heart of God.

For his people. Our God is the God who in the human nature of Jesus Christ, freely, willingly, sovereignly, endured suffering.

Actively taking it to himself. That ours might be put to an end. And there is nothing other than the beautifully gratuitous outpouring of his invincible, unsurpassable, endearing love for his creatures like you and I.

[26 : 02] It's the foundation of grace itself. This is how God is. Our God is the God who says to people like us in Christ, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

My yoke is easy, my burden is light. And yet our God is also the God who says enough is enough. And so from chapter 4, verse 5, to chapter 6, verse 30, he brings this section to a close.

And God tells his people in no uncertain terms that even though life seems to be fine and rosy, judgment is coming.

Chapter 4, blow the trumpet through the land. Cry aloud and say assemble and let us go into the fortified cities. Let's run and hide, raise a standard towards Zion. Flee for safety, stay not, for I bring disaster from the north and great destruction.

And remember, Jeremiah is saying this when things are going well, and they are prosperous, stable, and safe. But then there's Jeremiah, the harbinger of doom.

[27 : 09] The end is near. And he does it over and over and over again. Disaster is coming. He keeps saying the Babylonians are not only knocking on the door today, well, they will be, they'll be through the door tomorrow.

If you just glance with me, let me show you this. Chapter 4, verse 11, God is coming with swift chariots and horses in the form of a Babylonian army. Chapter 4, verse 23, and following, the earth is about to be uncreated, and the nation as a whole is going to be trashed.

By chapter 5, verse 10 and 11, the vineyards are going. The whole nation is being eaten up in chapter 5, verse 15 to 17. Chapter 6, verse 1 to 5, a siege is about to be led.

There's the sound of marching boots, can you hear them? And clashing swords. Chapter 6, verse 21 can be heard even now. Jeremiah joins excerpts of his preaching over the years.

I don't think he did this in one hit, but he draws together his greatest hits, and he draws them together to frightening effect. Chapter 6, verse 23, terror on every side.

[28 : 18] That's his nickname. And what effect? Nothing. God's people are so complacent.

Chapter 5, verse 12, they've spoken falsely of the Lord, and have said, he will do nothing. No disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. The prophet will become wind. The word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them.

It'll happen. Chapter 5, verse 30. An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely. The priests rule at their direction. My people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?

Chapter 6, verse 13. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain. And from prophet to prophet, everyone deals falsely. They've healed the wound by people lightly, saying, peace, peace, when there is no peace.

But all will be overthrown. And what does Jeremiah have to do? Well, he patiently explains why all this has happened. And he piles up the reasons. 4.18. Your words and your deeds have brought this upon you.

[29 : 16] 4.22. For my people are foolish. They know me not. They are stupid children. They have no understanding. They are wise in doing evil. 5.3. They refuse to take correction. They've made their faces harder than rock.

They've refused to repent. Verse 5. They've broken the yoke. Verse 6. Their transgressions are many. Verse 7. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of whores. Verse 8.

They were well fed. Lusty stallions. Neighing for their neighbors' wives. Verse 11. The house of Israel. The house of Judah has been utterly treacherous. Verse 23. These people are of a stubborn and rebellious heart.

Verse 28. They've grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds of evil. Verse 30. An appalling and horrible thing has happened. And so it goes on and on. Chapter 6. Verse 6. Cut down the trees. Cast up a siege mound against Jerusalem.

This is the city that must be punished. There's nothing but oppression within her. Verse 10. To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised.

[30 : 11] They cannot listen. And so I hope you feel the relentlessness of these chapters. Jeremiah wants you to feel like we were there. Day after day after day after day.

As he announces, God has said enough is enough. You see, these chapters do not so much explain sin to us, but they batter us with a sense of seriousness.

With unceasing, unflinching persistence. Do you feel assaulted by these chapters? Drained by listening to them? Do you want it to stop so that you can go to tea and coffee?

Amen. If you feel like that, good. Because you're getting it. They are overwhelming chapters. And they are designed to be overwhelming chapters. And they are designed to bring Judah to its senses. But amidst the warnings, the declarations of judgment, and amidst the pleas and the pain, there's this scarcely perceptible but persistent note which beeps away in the background.

[31 : 21] I don't know whether you've ever had the experience of having an alarm clock go off in your suitcase. Do you know that feeling?

And you can hear the beep, but it's imperceptible, and you can't hear it, and you don't know where it is. But it's going off, isn't it?

You open your suitcase, and there it is. You turn it off. And throughout this little passage, these passages, and there's this scarcely perceptible but persistent note that keeps beeping away in the background.

Sometimes you hear it, sometimes you don't. You don't know what you're hearing. Are you hearing it in chapter 4, verse 27? Can you see that? The whole land shall be a desolation.

Yet I will not make a full end. And if you listen carefully, you can hear it in chapter 5, verse 10, go up through her vine roads and destroy, but make not a full end.

[32 : 26] And chapter 5, verse 18, but even in those days declares the Lord, I will not make a full end of you. This is not the end of the story. A day is coming when God will say, will not say it is over, and enough is enough, but God himself will say, it is finished.

When Babylon herself is fallen and judged for her sin, when there is no longer terror on every side, when saying, peace, peace, is not wishful thinking, but reality.

When because of what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection, we face not judgment, but salvation uninterrupted, uninterrupted, and ending life with God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Do you remember how John finishes the book of Revelation, chapter 21? And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God.

[33 : 46] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

And that is the hope that the prophet and preacher Jeremiah will hold out to his people. But first, they and we must take seriously the awesome reality of their God, who is their rescuer, but is also their judge.

Let's pray.