

Jeremiah 2 — A Lousy Exchange or Two

Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn's 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2021. References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.

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Introduction

In Jeremiah 1, we began this full study of the book of Jeremiah. Now the prophet gets down to business. In today's lesson, Jeremiah uses more imagery than an ambrosia salad to help Israel see her sins and the resultant problems. We encounter an unfaithful wife, broken cisterns, a lost slave, a mule-like stubborn animal, a corrupt vine, a defiled body, an animal in heat, a captured criminal, children who refuse discipline and an unbroken prisoner of war. That is an enormous amount of imagery, and if you cannot find yourself in any of those, buckle your seatbelt. There's much more to come in the book.

Live in truth or else there will be consequences.

Remember Your History — Verses 1–3

God says, I looked back over your history, and you were my delight. The nations which warred with you lost and lost badly. Think of Og and Sihon from the lands east of the Jordan. Think of the people of Jericho, or any number of battle locations. They all lost, and their losses are perpetual. Anyone who messes with the Almighty loses.

History informs us. History is one of our best teachers, if we are good students. We look back and see when a victory happened and learn the lesson. Or we look back and see when a defeat happened and learn the lesson. Jeremiah begins by asking Israel to do exactly that: look back. Remember what God did. Remember who you were. Remember the relationship you had with him.

The first of Jeremiah's images is the unfaithful wife. Israel once followed the Lord with the devotion of a bride, but that covenant love had implications. Israel's relationship with God was not merely sentimental. It demanded loyalty both religiously and politically. To pursue other gods or to place ultimate confidence in foreign powers was to violate the covenant relationship itself.¹

Historical Failings — Verses 4–8

God asks a good question: What did I ever do to you? That is, to your fathers, your priests, your teachers, your prophets—those who led the religion after Moses and Joshua. Why did they defile my land? Why didn't they seek God? Twice God asks, "Why didn't they say, 'Where is the LORD?'"

This idea of the lost God is tangible in our history at various times. The old bumper sticker asked a similar question: "If you are far from God, who moved?" In other words, God is available and reachable. He longs to be in relationship with us, if we will only seek him.

Moses said, "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul" (Deuteronomy 4:29). The same testimony appears elsewhere in Scripture. Asa was told that if Judah sought the Lord, he would let them find him (2 Chronicles 15:2). Isaiah urged his hearers to "Seek the LORD while He may be found" (Isaiah 55:6), while Hosea called the people to break up their fallow ground and seek the Lord (Hosea 10:12). David sang of seeking the Lord and being delivered from his fears (Psalm 34:4).

The testimony of Moses, David and the prophets is the same: seek the Lord while he may be found. Don't seek God and you will be lost. How simple can God make it for us?

I'm not sure how you get around in the city where you live. Perhaps your family has lived there for generations and you don't need any assistance finding the library or the route to the farmer's market. But cities change. New roads and tunnels appear, shops and restaurants move, and most of us have learned to ask Google, Siri or the map app on our phone how to find our way to a certain location.

This is tough for some "on their own" people. Some make jokes about the children of Israel being lost in the wilderness for 40 years because, being led by Moses, an 80-year-old man, they wouldn't stop and ask directions. I get that. I remember in 2003, when my family was on holiday in Europe, dismissing my son's clear directions from the back seat as I drove the family in Austria. He was reading the map. I knew better, even though I'd never visited Vienna, and thus made us backtrack a long way out of our way by my disregard. The worst was not listening to my son. I'm still sorry about that episode in my life.

So here we have the righteous of the ages trying to get through to the people of Judah and Israel and to help us get it right, and we say, "No thanks. I've got this. I know where I'm going." And we don't know! God shakes his head.

Two Great Evils — Verses 9–13

God declares his intention. He's upset. He wants us to learn, and for our children and grandchildren to learn. Look around and see if there is any testimony in public which agrees with the disregarding Israelites. Nope. Then God calls the heavens to testify. They must observe the goings-on, and the heavens are now shaking their heads too.

Verse 13 is the one to underline in your study today. Here are the two great evils committed by the Jewish people in this section. The first is turning away from God. Dismissing God. Considering God to be unworthy of our attention. Firing God from our workforce. Declaring to God that he is “the weakest link” and kicking him off Survivor Island. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out. You are unnecessary.

Do any of these statements to the Almighty bother you? If you are a believer, they should sound as bad as the scratch of fingernails on a chalkboard. They are the sound of a dentist’s instrument warming up right next to your ear before the Novocain has worked its magic on your awaiting gums. An awful sound. The screech screams against everything we have learned and known about the Living God.

But wait, like the late-night infomercial, there’s more. The second evil God declares is that the cisterns we have stocked up in the place of Deity are broken and won’t sustain us at all. We exchanged the good stuff of the fountain of living water for a parched desert supply that is out-of-supply.

The Apostle Paul wrote of a similar exchange in Romans 1. People knew God but did not honour him as God or give thanks. They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for created things, and ultimately “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Romans 1:21–25). Paul goes on to say more about what their exchange will give them, but for our purposes the observation here is that once you abandon—or, using Jeremiah’s word, forsake—God, you are destined for loss and impurity, to death in every form.

Smell the Coffee! — Verses 14–19

Wake up and smell the coffee, O Israel! You aren’t designed to be shaved. You aren’t supposed to seek support from Egypt or Assyria. Your foreign alliances will not help you. You aren’t a slave people any longer—you are supposed to be the head and not the tail.

Deuteronomy 28:13 says, “The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you only will be above, and you will not be underneath, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I charge you today, to observe them carefully.”

Let your own wickedness and your apostasies correct you. Learn from your mistakes. There is still time to turn around and look at me. I’ll save you. That’s my history. That’s my love for you, Israel.

Like an Animal in Heat — Verses 20–28

God again asks, pleads, begs Israel to reconsider. He says, “I helped you out of the biggest jam you had ever experienced. You begged me to help and I helped. Now look what you have done in reply.” You lay down like a prostitute at a Kings Cross brothel. You took what you could get and you thought that was love. It was not love. It was emptiness. You turned to idols and vain things, things that built you up, but they were lies and vanity.

You thought it good to clean up at times, and although you took massive, long showers with the best soap from Johnson & Johnson, you are still filthy and outside the camp. Then you excuse yourself and say, “Oh well, I’m actually a good catch.” We are so used to hearing the advertising about how good we are that we start believing our own publicity. But then you exchange again. You say, “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals,” when you have done so. You are defiled. You are broken. You are deluded. You think the world owes you. You believe you are entitled. You call yourself privileged and yet you are at the bottom of the ladder’s lowest rung.

The animal first shown is the stubborn, unruly one who won’t wear a yoke. Then Jeremiah calls us a vine that is out of whack. It’s not operational. A vine that is all leaf and no fruit—what a waste! Then again in verse 22, we are the *shmutzik* religionist who is trying to clean up but cannot, no matter what ritual we attempt.

Jeremiah goes on, saying that Israel is like an animal in heat, unable to stay away from the affections and lures of the enemy. The idols you worship will fail you, but you are stuck. He uses the image of a captured criminal who alleges his innocence, insisting on it even though he’s caught red-handed.

In verse 27 we will try prayer as a last resort, but what’s the point of that? You turned your back to God and then you want God to welcome you back. What relationship do you have with others that informs you in this regard? This is presumption and not faith. This is outrageous selfishness and smug pride. Where are your real gods, you know, the ones you really believe in? Go to them, if you think they will help.

You Are Not Innocent — Verses 29–37

God begs the answer: Please, tell me, why are you fighting me? Verse 29. I think of a high school group of kids whose first football practice is this week, and they are going up against the Tennessee Titans—or the premiers and Grand Final champions in League or AFL. It’s a useless proposition. You aren’t going to win. Why are you fighting?

God says that we have all sinned. No one has escaped this judgment. Israel replies by declaring her innocence even though there is a stack of evidence against her. It’s a continual shake-my-head moment. God has disciplined his people. He has sent warnings, but they refuse to listen.

We are like children who refuse discipline, even when we need it. Another shake-my-head situation, you know? Verse 35 says you claim innocence, but reality bites. Egypt won’t help. Assyria will not be available to you. By verse 37 we have our hands on our heads like prisoners of war, marching in an attempt to gain international recognition and security, but in the end we are walking contrary to the plans of God.

What Are We Learning? (Key Takeaways)

What is God saying through all this? There are consequences throughout this chapter, and we are a long way from done. So live in truth. Live in harmony with the Almighty. Live righteous lives. When you are wrong, quickly admit wrong. When God brings things to light in your life which

are out of bounds, agree with God. Don't turn your face from him or your back towards him. Agree with the Almighty. One, that's smart. Two, that's his advice. Three—it works!

What will you do with this information today?

Conclusion and Invitation

God is calling each of us to know him and to walk with him, today and throughout our days. Have you received Yeshua as your Messiah and Lord? Have you renounced your sin, your idolatry, your forsaking God and given him first place in your life? If not, please do so now. Use your own words, if you want, but yield, surrender, to the Lord of life.

The Lord calls. He knows. He blesses and builds us up.

What's Next? (Jeremiah 3)

Jeremiah 2 exposed the terrible exchange Israel had made: abandoning the fountain of living water for broken cisterns. But where does that leave a people who have walked away from God? Is there any way back?

In Jeremiah 3, the language becomes intensely personal. Israel and Judah are pictured as members of a broken family, with faithlessness, treachery and adultery describing what has happened between God and his people. Yet judgment is not the only thing on offer. Again and again comes God's invitation: Return. Acknowledge your sin. I am gracious. I will give you shepherds. I will bring you to Zion.

In *Jeremiah 3: What's on Offer for Jewish People Today?*, we'll discover that after all the failure of chapter 2, repentance, forgiveness and restoration are still on offer.

¹ Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley and Joel F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 26 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991).

Bibliography

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