

Jeremiah: Lessons in Judgment and Grace

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Today, we are beginning a 6 week series from the OT book of Jeremiah. There are several reasons I want to do this. First of all, I love teaching the OT to you. The OT can be hard to read and understand sometimes and I want to give you some help. There is truth and grace to be found in these OT books so let's see if we can find that together. In addition to the sermon series on Sunday mornings, I want to invite you to read the book of Jeremiah with me over these next 6 weeks. In your bulletin I have provided for you a reading plan; if you stick to this plan you'll finish Jeremiah in 6 weeks. And that's no small feat; Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible when you count the words (not chapters or verses). Every Friday I'm going to post some reflections and asks some questions related to the previous weeks readings. I'm hoping some of you will take advantage of that.

Jeremiah isn't a dry read; that doesn't mean it's easy, but there is emotion and passion in Jeremiah. That's mostly due to Jeremiah's personality. This prophet was a very passionate man. If he had a day job, it wouldn't have been as an accountant; he probably would have been a drama teacher. He's often described in modern writings as the *weeping prophet* because you catch Jeremiah at wearing his heart on his sleeve and agonizing over his country and people. Such drama is usually a good show. But Jeremiah is also an inspired author of the scriptures. That means his words (as emotional as they may be at times) are 100% truthful as well; he's a reliable writer. We can trust him. Sometimes when we are emotional, we can lose sight of reality and truth, but Jeremiah brings truth to his emotions and because of that he's a very important read.

I also want to preach Jeremiah because his message presents a unique challenge to us, the church of Jesus Christ. We are not immune from falling away from the Lord. That's what happened to Judah; they fell away from God. They were blessed in so many ways. God gave to them the covenants, the law, the prophets, his promised land and so much more. They watched their sister to the north, Israel, fall away from God giving them an example of what not to do. But Judah didn't take advantage of any of these blessings. In fact, Judah became even worse than Israel as we learn from Jeremiah as he says, "Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah." If it happened to Judah, it can happen to FBC.

There's going to be a temptation to read Jeremiah and point the finger. I can't believe *those people!* How could *they* miss it so badly?! I can see why God would be so angry with *them!* Don't fall into that self-righteous trap, FBC. This for you. Not your neighbor; not your spouse; not for others who come to FBC... You. Paul says in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:6) "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." That's how I think we should read and understand Jeremiah these next 5 weeks: Let's learn the lesson; let's not desire evil like they did. We might if we're not careful. If we fall into the same

traps as Judah we will. So, what can you and I learn from the book of Jeremiah so that we experience God's preserving grace rather than falling away?

There's a passage towards the beginning of Jeremiah that seems to cover a number of recurring themes throughout the book. I want to read this chapter together and show you how those themes provide us with a structure for this 6-sermon series. Now, I need to tell you something about our passage before we begin: There is language in this passage that's pretty impolite. It would be language that we wouldn't use at a dinner party (or at least we shouldn't). You might need to have some delicate conversations at home with your children. You might wonder with that kind of introduction: "Why is it in the Bible? Why would God's word include ugly words or images?" It's because our sin against God and against one another is so vile and ugly that God uses very stark imagery and words so we don't get deceived into thinking our sin isn't a really big deal. When you read and hear the strong words in our passage, let that be the message: these impolite words and images reveal just how ugly my sin really is. So, with that heads up, please turn to Jeremiah 3 (READ vs. 6ff).

As I've read through Jeremiah on multiple occasions, I'm struck by how many major themes throughout the book are found in that passage. This graphic (PIC) summarizes those themes, how they fit together and will be our guide for this entire series. That's our sermon series in a slide. We're going to walk through this slide today so that we have an appetite for what's to come.

The first thing we need to know is that God is in a *covenant relationship* with his people. That's why Judah's sin is so tragic and offensive to God. God is a husband to them; they are his bride. We heard that covenant language in our passage, didn't we? God and the people have entered into this exclusive, covenant relationship of love and obedience; God and his people are bound to one another in a relationship of promise. God says, "I promise to be your God by saving you" and the people say, "We promise to be your people by obeying you." This covenant is the basis, the foundation, of God's relationship with his people yesterday, today and forever (as you can see, we'll talk about this covenant again when we complete the circle.)

But this covenant relationship has been broken by the *sin* of the people. God says in our passage his people have committed adultery, meaning, they've broken their promise to God. They've been faithless. They've betrayed God; they've turned away from him. While God kept his promises the people did not.

I want to pause for a moment and take a closer look at this sin. I want us to feel the weight of their rebellion in such a way where you agree with God and say, "You know, God's judgment is right." The words of Jeremiah lead us to believe that Judah's sins were *pervasive* and *fully grown*. I use the word *pervasive* to mean the entire nation was steeped into sin; it wasn't just a small group of people. Here are just a couple of passages that show us this reality.

- Jer. 6:13 ~ For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from the prophet to the priest, everyone deals falsely.

- Jer. 9:4-6 ~ Let everyone beware of his neighbor; and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity. Heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know me, declares the Lord.

Everyone was given to their sin. No matter your class, your gender or occupation; even religious professionals were given to their sin. Sin had infected the entire nation in such a way where it was a characteristic of everyone. It was pervasive. And it was also fully grown. I get that phrase from James 1 where James says, "Then desire when it is conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown it brings forth death." So, there's this progression with sin. It grows once it's born. It has a course that turns uglier and uglier. And that's what happened in Judah. Listen Jer. 7:30-31 (READ). It's recorded in 2 Chronicles 28 and 2 Chronicles 33 that King Ahaz and King Manasseh both led and promoted child sacrifice. The kings along with others burned their own children as a sacrifice to foreign gods. You can hear the shock of God in his words in vs. 31 when he says, "which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind." Sacrificing others, the most vulnerable, for your own selfish gain is a good example, in my estimation, of sin becoming fully grown and bringing forth death.

This, friends, is just a sample of the sin that God is not going to tolerate. He's waited patiently for centuries; he's sent prophet after prophet, but the people refused to turn. Now he's ready to act. And friends, we are thinking well when we soberly say, "God is right to judge their sin." And if this causes you to look on the inside of your life where you're ashamed at how you worship detestable things and how you sacrifice others for your own purposes where you'd say, "You know, I'm guilty, too," God's working his grace in your life. God is giving us a gift if we can humbly agree with God about our sin.

You might ask yourself, "But, why? Why did God's people break covenant in with the Lord? Like, what is the main reason? What did they miss; what did they do wrong?" This ultimate cause is summed up in our passage when God says he will save them from (vs. 17) "stubbornly follow[ing] their own evil heart." That's why the people sinned. That's why they disobeyed; that's why they turned away. Here's a few other places God mentions his in Jeremiah.

- 7:24 ~ But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.
- 11:8 ~ Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart.
- 13:10 ~ This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after others gods to serve them and worship them....

Over and over again in Jeremiah, the prophet says the reason why the nation is in the mess that it's in is due to the people following their own heart. Since we live in a world where that phrase is a slogan to live by (Follow your heart) we need to hear and understand God's

perspective on that life-strategy. We are going to spend 2 Sundays on this one topic because it's so important.

So, what is God's check on our own evil hearts? What's his way of steering his people away from following their heart? The answer: shepherds. Faithful shepherds and teachers who will lovingly tell God's people the truth about their sin, God's righteousness and the forgiveness God offers those who turn to him. That's why faithful shepherds are a part of God's promise of restoration (3:15), "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." Throughout Jeremiah we find a shocking absence of shepherds and teachers who will tell the people the truth. Instead we find deceitful, dishonest shepherds who lie to the people and pursue their own good. So we see this dual culpability in the book of Jeremiah; these deceitful shepherds will be held accountable to God. They have failed their responsibilities. But the people are responsible, too. They don't want to hear the truth. And this remarkable dynamic is summed up in Jer. 5:30-31, "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?"

This ugly combination between dishonest shepherds and people who followed their own heart led to *half-hearted worship*. Look at vs. 10, "Yet for this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord." There is a subtlety to that verse that is critically important. Look what they did: they turned. They really did, didn't they? Just not with their whole heart. Instead they turned in pretense. What does that mean? It means they came to the Lord only in appearance. They returned to the Lord only for dishonest reasons and motivations. They returned just enough so that everybody around them might be impressed, so that they could check another box off the list ("Gave money in church today... check.") Oh, they returned, but they did so with ugly, insulting motives and reasons that God could see right through. On a personal note: this wakes me up, friends. Any turning to the Lord that is halfway, for appearance, for dishonest gain the Lord can see and he rejects.

This kind of half-hearted worship provokes God to *judgment*. The sin of the people is so great and it's been for so long that God finally says, "Enough!" We see that in chapter 3 where God says, "I sent Israel away with a certificate of divorce for her sins. Judah, you're next." If you join me in the reading plan you'll see all the words and ways God pronounces judgment on the people. It's not pretty. The people are destroyed, the land is conquered. There is suffering that is not easy to read. God judges sin.

But, thankfully, he also has *grace*. So even though God judges, it's only for a time. He promises to forgive, too. I'm struck that the majority of the poetry in chapter 3 is focused on grace; God invites his people to come home and to find grace. Listen to just a few verses.

- Vs. 12 - "I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord; I will not be angry forever."
- Vs. 22 - "Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness."

I certainly hope that you and I learn many lessons in Jeremiah; I pray we learn how serious sin is. I hope that we become much more suspicious of ourselves and refuse to follow our own hearts. We're so tempted to see ourselves as our most reliable God, but we're not. Our hearts lead us astray. I pray we'd be happy to submit to godly shepherding since it's God's give to lead us to his word. I hope that we all become convinced that nothing short of wholehearted devotion and worship is acceptable to God. It would be good for us to know that God judges sin very harshly. But more than anything, above all, my good brothers and sisters, I pray we become convinced that God has grace for those who turn to God. That we would be overwhelmed that God would invite us back into his family even after we act with so little faith. The most important message to hear and to believe is that Jesus came to save sinners and we need that salvation the most.

So, that's 6 sermons in a nutshell; that's what we are going to study. My hope is this series will help us pinpoint the pitfalls that tempt you and me. When we see that our sin is a really big deal and is not to be taken lightly, when we see that we can't trust ourselves and our own heart, that we need godly shepherding to discern what is good and true, when we recognize that we can be tempted to turn to God in pretense we are going to be so much more likely to walk before our God in covenant relations that bring him honor and praise and bring us life and joy.

I'd love for you to go home and prayerfully consider two things. First, consider reading Jeremiah with me and with others. It's going to take some commitment; sacrifice will be required. But it will be worth it. Secondly, ask God to make you open to correction. I'm thinking this might be the heaviest of sermons; we'll need to be honest about the subject matter, but I'd like to diagnose these challenges like a good doctor who is constantly pointing his patient to the help available to all of these of problems. So, ask God this week to make you open to receive his loving correction.

Key verse: Jeremiah 3:22

Questions for the week

- The first step away from covenant relations with God is sin. How were you impacted by examining Judah's sins? How come?
- What topic or theme introduced by Pastor Brian are you most interested to learn more about?
- What will be the biggest obstacle for you in reading through Jeremiah? What routines or patterns do you need to change to read it through?