



JEREMIAH 1:4-20

FORMED, KNOWN, CONSECRATED, AND APPOINTED

Lesson Focus

We are tempted to switch gods when we do not remember and embody the story of God's great love and grace.

Lesson Outcomes

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that God judges Israel because they have failed to recognize God's love and provision for them.
2. Understand that God judges Israel because it was easier to follow the gods around them who did not require much from them.
3. Be encouraged to continually tell, embody, and enact the story of God's grace and love.

Catch up on the Story

After being called by God to proclaim God's word to God's people, Jeremiah begins his ministry. Jeremiah can embark on this difficult journey because he was formed, known, consecrated, and appointed by God. Even though Jeremiah is just a boy when he first hears from God, his age does not keep him from following in obedience. To be sure, God promises to be with and strengthen Jeremiah.

Before we look at this passage, it's important to understand that there is a lot of uncertainty about how these verses came together. Commentators generally agree that this part of chapter two may have been spoken/written at different times and then edited together. Regardless of how and when exactly the text took the shape it has today, the message from God that Jeremiah relays is meant for all of God's people, both the northern nation of Israel and Judah in the south. At the same time, Jeremiah's words have no less weight for us today.

Marriage and the Harvest

Chapter two opens with a formulaic statement often found in

Israel's prophetic literature: "The word of the Lord came to me...Thus says the Lord." From the beginning, these words are meant to remind us that what follows are not Jeremiah's words but God's. The beautiful diversity of biblical literature points to each author's unique literary skill sets and gifts. God is speaking through Jeremiah, who artfully crafts the words and sentences God's people need to hear.

What follows Jeremiah's formulaic opening are two metaphors that set the tone for the rest of the chapter: marriage and the harvest. The first metaphor is used in the second part of verse 2, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown." The marriage metaphor is common in Israel's prophetic literature. In this instance, Jeremiah reflects upon the beginning of Israel's and God's relationship. The reference we are to get here is that of God leading Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The wilderness was indeed a "land not sown," which refers to its barren lifelines. Despite the extreme environment, Israel faithfully follows God and is cared for.

The marriage metaphor also points to the covenantal nature of God's relationship with Israel. Unlike the nations and gods surrounding Israel, Israel's relationship with God is one of covenant faithfulness. God and Israel have entered into a relationship with each other with specific promises of fidelity. What makes God's remembrance of the honeymoon phase of the relationship so stark is the infidelity in which Israel now lives.

The second metaphor concerns the first fruits of the harvest. This metaphor speaks to God's long-term plan for the world. Israel is the first fruit of God's labor of love in the world. As such, they were to be devoted to God and set apart. The second half of verse three makes it clear that anyone who messes with the first fruits of the harvest will face disaster.

These first verses of chapter two highlight Israel's unique place in God's heart and mind. There can be no doubt that God has worked and will continue to work for Israel's well-being.

What Wrong?

With the opening remarks out of the way, God launches into a lawsuit against Israel. The references to the houses of Jacob and Israel make it clear that God is addressing each nation.

Works Cited

Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

The form used in this section of the passage strongly resembles contemporary complaints that a king might lodge against a wayward province or people. The argument generally begins with questioning why the wayward party acted the way they did, followed by recounting all the benefits of being in a relationship with the ruling party. God's case against Israel begins similarly.

God wants to know what wrong God did to Israel that would cause them to "went after worthless things" and ultimately become worthless themselves. God points to the emptiness and impotence of the god Israel now worships. Ultimately, we become what we worship (Bruggemann, 34). This is not to say that God now sees Israel as worthless. Rather, empty is what Israel has become because of their unfaithfulness. When we contrast the emptiness of a worthless god with the abundance that was bestowed upon Israel as they entered the Promised Land, Israel's rejection of God is stark in contrast.

Jeremiah ties Israel's desertion of God to a lack of memory. "They did not say..." is repeated twice in verses 6-8 and indicates everyone in Israel's leadership position. Those who were entrusted with ensuring that Israel did not forget its history with God were the very ones who led the country toward infidelity: the elders, the priests, the kings, and the prophets.

Has a Nation Changed its Gods?

Keeping with the theme of going after other gods, Jeremiah points out the utter shock that comes with a nation changing its gods. Israel is encouraged to look as far west as they can (Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea) and as far to the east as they can (to Kedar) to see if anyone has ever heard of a nation changing their god. God calls on the heavens as well to give testimony to the senselessness of what Israel has done.

The passage wraps up with God stressing the incomprehensibility of what Israel has done. They have rejected the fountain of living water, a water source that will never run dry. In exchange for this limitless water source, Israel has dug cisterns that crack and slowly become empty. One commentator states,

"Yahweh is the living water that originates as gift outside of Israel (cf. John 4:10). Israel need not generate its own water or conjure its own life. It is freely given by this gracious partner of a God who is owner and husband. But Israel has rejected such a free

gift that embodies its very life, and wants to be its own source of life—which of course leads only to death” (Brueggemann, 36).

So What?

The accusations have been made, and there is no doubt that Israel is guilty. The natural consequences of their unfaithfulness will soon be in the form of war, conquest, and exile. As we consider the accusations God has made toward Israel, we are compelled to ask why Israel made such a fatal mistake. To a certain extent, we know that Israel forgot the story of God’s gracious provision for them through exodus, the wilderness, and entry into the Promised Land. Surely Israel’s loss of memory wasn’t so acute that they had no recollection of who they were as a people and the God who loved them so?

It may be that Israel finds it easy to forget because God makes high demands of God’s people. Following God requires a commitment unlike any other: a commitment to justice, righteousness, and self-lessness. It requires self-surrender. It was easy for Israel to abandon the God who gave them so much but required so much because the gods of the nations around them required so little (Bruggemann, 36).

While the world we live in is much different than ancient Israel’s, some things never change. Following God still requires a commitment to selflessness and self-surrender. The false gods around us still claim to offer so much while requiring so little. Our constant temptation is to forget the story of God’s love, faithfulness, and provision for us in order to trade our God for a god that doesn’t require much from us.

Our fate need not be like Israel’s. We must continue to tell the story of God’s goodness and faithfulness to each other. It is not enough to rely on hearing the story from preachers or teachers. We must engage in telling the story ourselves. This doesn’t mean we must recite the entire story of the Bible. It does mean that we should tell the story of God’s faithfulness to us, our family, and our church because our stories are always a part of the larger story of God’s love for creation.

Hearing and telling the story of God’s love for creation is only part of what we must do if we are to escape Israel’s fate. We must embody and enact that story. We must clothe ourselves with the same grace, mercy, faithfulness, and love God has given us. These gifts of God were always meant to be shared with

others. We were always meant to be one of the conduits through which God’s good gifts are given to a world very much in need of love and grace.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. At the beginning of the chapter, Jeremiah uses two metaphors to describe Israel’s relationship with God. What are those metaphors, and why would Jeremiah use them?
2. In verse for, Jeremiah describes Israel as “going after worthless things.” What worthless things might he be referring to? Why would chasing after worthless things make Israel worthless?
3. What does Jeremiah mean when he says, “They did not say, Where is the Lord who...?”
4. Who does Jeremiah find at fault for Israel’s waywardness?
5. Jeremiah’s main charge against Israel is that they have exchanged the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for the gods of their neighbors. Jeremiah points out that a nation trading one god for another was astoundingly unlikely. Why would Israel have exchanged the God who brought them up out of Egypt for a god of their neighbors?
6. One commentator surmises that Israel rejected God and adopted other gods because Israel’s God required much of them in terms of faithfulness, justice, and righteousness. The gods of the surrounding countries were easier to serve because the cost of doing so was not so high. How might we face the same pressure today? What are the gods we might be tempted to serve?
7. How do we keep from suffering the same fate as Israel?
8. What is God calling us to do?
9. Who might God be calling us to become?