THE CHALLENGE OF GOD

Jeremiah 2:4-13

John 4:7-15

February 21, 2021

The words of Jeremiah were spoken at a time in Judah’s life when their young king, Josiah, was trying to reform his nation’s religion. Zeal for the Lord possessed Josiah. He was determined to abolish idolatry, and to restore the people to the ways of God.

Now the king was popular. His people loved him, and they followed him because this was his way and his will; but there was no depth in the national reformation. It was an age when evil was suppressed by legislation, as good was supported, again by legislation. Remember the Plymouth Colony requiring everybody to attend church, every week? Or perhaps it might be similar to legislating that there MUST BE prayer or Bible reading in the schools. You can make laws that try to force those things to happen, and you can have a godly and devout leader attempting to enforce righteousness, but it may not happen.

It didn’t for Josiah. The people followed him superficially. They had to. There were laws. But there was no turning of the heart to God.

So Jeremiah steps up and confronts the people, speaking the words of God.

What wrong did your fathers find in me

that they went far from me,

and went after worthlessness,

and became worthless?

Listen to what God had said of His people just three verses earlier, at 2:2:

I remember the devotion of your youth,

your love as a bride,

how you followed me in the wilderness,

in a land not sown.

And now, hear the contrast:

I remember the devotion of your youth,

your love as a bride . . . .

Your fathers went far from me

and

How you followed me in the wilderness

but now

. . . [they] went after worthlessness,

and became worthless.

God’s people, who once went after Him in the wilderness, are now going after worthlessness. Jeremiah takes the people back in their imagination, back to the beginning of their national history together, when God led them forth out of Egypt, now a people to Himself.

And Moses wanted them to follow God without a thought to advantage or disadvantage. In those days, God’s and Moses’ goal was that the Hebrew people follow God for God’s sake alone and for the love of God, they be content to follow Him even into a barren land, a land not sown.

Now they were seeking advantage, by compromise and policies, hewing out for themselves broken cisterns. Do you know what cisterns are? You probably do, I but I had to be shown. They are catchment tanks, where water from the roof, for instance -- whatever water that may have been -- was directed off the roof into a tank dug into the ground.

I remember seeing one on Suzanne’s property in Casey County, Kentucky where her mother had grown up. The concrete was cracked, and the inside was foul and moldy.

So the people were losing advantage, even while they sought it. “They went after worthlessness, and became worthless.”

Israel was holy to Yahweh, sacred to God, separated to Him and Him only. And therefore Israel was guarded –in that strength of character—against all the forces that could come up against her.

But now she was trusting to the circumstance of the moment, attempting to strengthen her position in the world by intrigue and by political alliances and dalliances with other nations; entering alliance with Egypt on the one hand, and hoping to win the favor of Assyria on the other. And all this because she had lost her strength of character.

Like a wounded lover who finds that his beloved wife has been unfaithful to him, God asks, “What wrong did your fathers find in me?” Why have you gone from this solid, steadfast, upbuilding love after empty worthlessness? What covenant have I broken that I have made with you? What deceit have I practiced in my dealings with you? What promise to you have I forgotten?

We find the heart of the matter at v. 11. “Has any nation ever exchanged its gods . . . even if they weren’t worth calling gods to begin with? Of course not, but my people have changed their God -- their glory, their substance, their love, their possibility, for that which does not profit.”

There’s a paradox here. The very fact of a failure of a people, whether it be Israel, or you and me, the very fact of a failure of a people points to the supremacy of God Almighty. Yeah. The god a person makes for him or herself, according to their own nature, will demand from them that which is according to their own nature. People will be faithful to those gods who make no demands upon them [make no demands] that don’t align with their own personalities.

However, when *God* calls a people, when God calls you and me, it is the call of the God of holiness, the God of purity, the God of steadfastness, the God of mercy, the God of justice, the God of love. And that God calls people to rise up to God’s own height. That God will not accommodate Himself to the sinful cravenness and cruelty of that peoples’ nature. That God won’t consent, abide, or let slide, either, the things within us that are impure, unlovely, or evil. God calls you and me up, and up some more, until Gods’ people approach God’s holiness here on earth. That’s our God’s plan.

And that’s where Israel failed. And you and me, too, I think. Her departure from God was due to the fact that she declined to respond to God’s call to the highest . . . . and exchanged her gods; exchanged her bubbling, wellspring of life, for dry holes in the ground. Cracked ones at that. Israel exchanged what was worthwhile, and substantial, and full of possibilities, for the things that were worthless.

Think about it. Whatever nation, whatever person, has received the special grace of the Almighty God, remains great only as that nation, or that congregation, or that individual walks in step with, and in the paths of that God.

Think about it. We have exchanged the things of God for those which are not God; we have given away what is worthwhile and gone after what is worthless. We’ve exchanged the holiness of God for expediency, and that’s just plain sin.

Where have the morals of the highest and best gone? In the early days of Christianity, Christians made a statement in the profligate and debauched Roman civilization by standing for abstinence from sex until marriage. And that’s just one example. For sobriety, for living simply, they stood over against the general go-along mentality of the age.

Where are Christians standing over against sexual morays by saying “no”? Or having a drink in public, which says “Hey, it’s OK.” Or being silent when a group you’re in starts trashing a coworker, for instance, who is of another race, or from a so-called hostile country? Have you seen the news about abuse people of Chinese descent are suffering nowadays?

And *I’ve* winked at the prevailing practices and loose morals, myself. I think you and I just have to be out front with what’s right for *US*; not scold or tell a person what *they* ought to do. Just be straight and out front and unapologetic about what your decision and practice is, and why.

My God calls me to the highest and purest I can be. And I want what God has planned for me. I feel like I’m going to sabotage that if I give in to my baser instinct. I want to follow the ways of God.

And another way we’ve gone after worthlessness with what’s easy or expedient . . . . We in the United States have the largest prison population in the world. You know, a study has been done (as if it needed a study, but the study proves what we will think is obvious. The study says that girls become unwed mothers, that drug users use drugs, that kids bring guns into their schools and kill other children because of a *lack of self-confidence*. Duh. But friends, it’s sad. It makes you want to cry, just as God wanted to cry when God’s children exchanged Him, their fountain of living water, for cisterns. . . . cracked cisterns that couldn’t hold water anyway.

Self-confidence. How many times do we have to tell ourselves that that belligerent, anti-social, underachiever will begin to do well in school when a teacher believes in him, when his father believes in him, when his church rallies around and believes in him, and shows him that he’s loved and honored, and expected to do well . . . just because of who he is. . . *and* who God is -- a God who wants to build a relationship with him (or her.)

There has in recent times been thought given to setting up metal detectors in schools to keep the kids from binging in guns and shooting other children. I saw a very revealing interview of one kid in one of these schools. He said his friends bring in guns because they want to prevent the other guy from getting the upper hand on them. There’d be an argument, say, and they‘re afraid of the other guy. So they shoot him instead. How much less violence would there be if children knew that they didn’t have to compare themselves to the other, or worry about self-worth in relation to the other, or keep themselves on top of the other to prevent him from being on top of you?

How much less violence would there be in the world—not just our schools—if they knew they were *so loved* that their whole worth was held in the mind of God. . . . And God loved them so much God died for them.

Our value is held in the steadfast love of God, not in the mirage of another’s opinion. Our worth is in the cross of Jesus Christ . . . which then became the Resurrection. The power of God for life for you and me.

Let’s not go chasing after worthlessness. Let’s quit digging holes in the ground that won’t hold water. Let’s instead rejoice and refresh in the fountains of living water: the source of our very life.

Amen.