

How would you respond if your wife became a prostitute?

Jeremiah 3:1-5 makes it clear that God expects us to say

that any man who would take this woman back is crazy.

Deuteronomy 24 said that a man should *not* take a woman back in this situation.

Truly that would defile the land.

So does this mean that God is crazy?

Will God himself take back his prostitute wife?

As we go through this first part of Jeremiah,

we will see how crazy God is.

Over the next few weeks, we’ll see what it means for God to love –
for God to be angry – to be jealous – and to have mercy.

Our passage is bracketed with the language of the bride and the whore.

Because it wasn’t always this way.

Do you remember the good ol’ days?

When Yahweh and his bride were in love?

In the wilderness – after the Exodus?!

Introduction: The Honeymoon in the Wilderness (2:1-3)

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ² “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 sown.*

Wait!

Doesn’t Jeremiah know that the wilderness generation rebelled?

Israel in the wilderness was like a child in the terrible twos!

Always throwing tantrums and fits.

Grumbling and moaning about the food.

“Are we there yet?!”

How can God say “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness...”

Well, compared to how Israel and Judah have treated God recently,
the wilderness was a honeymoon!

Sure, Israel would grumble and throw tantrums and fits!

But when the pillar of cloud and fire arose and led Israel through the wilderness –
Israel followed!

They *said* that they wanted to go back to Egypt –
but when push came to shove, the LORD led them – *and they followed!*
Compared to what came later, that's devotion!

And verse 3 describes the result:

³ *Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest.
All who ate of it incurred guilt;
disaster came upon them,
declares the LORD.*"

Because Israel was holy to the LORD, "the firstfruits of his harvest."

The principle of the firstfruits is that you give the LORD the first portion of the harvest
in recognition that *all the harvest* belongs to God.

You can hear in Jeremiah's language the echo of the promise to Abraham
that in his seed, all the nations would be blessed.

Israel's holiness is as the firstfruits to the harvest.

It's what Paul says repeatedly in Romans:

"to the Jew first – and also to the Greek..."

And the firstfruits are holy to the LORD.

All who ate of it incurred guilt –
in other words, if someone devoured Israel –
disaster (evil) came upon them.

This is the standard covenant theology that all Israel would recognize and approve.

We are God's people,
therefore when people do bad things to us,
God will bring bad things on them.

Chapter 2 consists of two recountings of Israel's story –
from the Exodus to Jeremiah's present.

Each of these two retellings contains four parallel parts:

- 1) God's faithfulness in the Exodus
- 2) the failure of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings
- 3) the covenant lawsuit – as God and Israel "contend" with one another
- 4) There is no gain in trusting Assyria and Egypt for help

What is the point of the repetition?

It helps to hear the same basic point twice.

But also, there is movement in the repetition.

The "A" sequence focuses on idolatry and apostasy:

Israel has exchanged the glory of God for idols.

The "B" sequence starts to apply where idolatry and apostasy goes:

Israel has exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

The first point for you – the point of verses 4-19 – is simply this:
do not forget – do not forsake – the LORD.

A. What Did I Do Wrong, That You Forsook Me for Assyria and Egypt? (2:4-19)

⁴ *Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the clans of the house of Israel.* ⁵ *Thus says the LORD:*

God starts by asking (verse 5):

1. What Did I, the God of the Exodus, Do to Deserve This? (2:5-7a)

*“What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?”*

Incidentally, the word translated “worthless” is the word *hebel* –
the same word used in Ecclesiastes:
they went after *vapor* and became *vapor* –
they went after *vanity* and became *vanity*.

Here is an example of how ‘*hebel*’ – vanity – is used in the context of idolatry.

You seek *hebel* – you will become *hebel*.

You become what you worship.

Whatever you set your heart on – that is what you will become!

And so, if you want to know what you worship,
just ask yourself, what am I becoming?

It’s a dangerous question to ask yourself.

It’s not always a pretty answer.

And sometimes the best way to get at the answer is to ask other people.

How have I changed?

What do you see in my life over the months and years?

Clearly, time has revealed that Israel has changed for the worse.

⁶ *They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us in the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and pits,
in a land of drought and deep darkness,
in a land that none passes through,
where no man dwells?’*

⁷ *And I brought you into a plentiful land
to enjoy its fruits and its good things.*

At the heart of verses 4-19 is the question:

“What are you drinking?”

Water is rare and precious in the middle east

and so your source of water is your source of life.

The LORD brought Israel out of Egypt – through the wilderness,
a land of desert and pits, a land of drought and deep darkness,
a land that none passes through, where no man dwells.
If the LORD had not provided water from the rock –
Israel would have died of thirst.

I brought you out of Egypt – to a land exceedingly good –
I led you through the wilderness –
and provided for you in every situation.
So what are you drinking?
What is your source of life?

2. The Priests, Shepherds, and Prophets Did Not Ask ‘Where Is the LORD?’ (2:7b-8)

*But when you came in, you defiled my land
and made my heritage an abomination.*

Jeremiah might have been speaking about the church today:

⁸*The priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the shepherds^[a] transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.*

Notice the four things that Jeremiah highlights:

First, the priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’

It’s so easy for religious leaders to confuse their agenda with God’s agenda.

Where is the LORD?

If you lose sight of where *he* is, then you will be in the wrong place!

Second, those who handle (or *wield*) the law did not know me.

If you know the Bible inside and out – but you do not know *God* –
then you won’t know how to *use* the Bible.

Third, the shepherds transgressed against me.

David was the shepherd-king.

But the sons of David – the shepherds of Israel –
have forgotten that power is a trust.

They should not be using their authority for their own benefit.

Fourth, the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit.

What do all of these failures have in common?

They have displaced God.

The leaders in Jerusalem are preoccupied with keeping people alive.

That’s a good thing – right?

No, it’s not.

I think of a man I dearly love who is so obsessed with staying alive

that he is destroying his life!
I think of a woman I know who is so obsessed with how her children turn out
that she is destroying her children!
I even think of a pastor who is so obsessed with preaching Bible content
that he is destroying his church!

There is *nothing* so good and so holy that it can displace God!
And this is the heart of God's contention with Judah:

3. The LORD Will Contend with Covenant Breakers: the Lawsuit (2:9-13)

⁹ *"Therefore I still contend with you,
declares the LORD,
and with your children's children I will contend.*

¹⁰ *For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see,
or send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has been such a thing.*

In verses 9-13, the LORD brings his charge against Israel.

"I still contend with you" – I am bringing my lawsuit against you and your grandchildren
And why?

i. Charge – Forsaking the LORD (Exchanging the Truth for a Lie)

¹¹ *Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.*

It would be shocking to find any nation changing its gods –
even if they are not really gods!

Verse 11 is the root of what Paul teaches in Romans 1 –
when he says that people exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images –
and thus they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.
(And part 1 of Jeremiah 2 is all about exchanging the glory of God for idols –
and part 2 of Jeremiah 2 is all about exchanging the truth of God for a lie!)
But this is not just a pagan problem!

All through history this keeps on happening!
medieval Christians exchanging the glory of Jesus for Islam –
modern Christians exchanging the glory of Jesus for Mormonism or Modernism!

Verse 12 calls the heavens as witness.
The heavens are often called as witness by the prophets –
since the heavens declare the glory of God.
The heavens know well the faithfulness of God,
because they have seen all that the LORD does on the earth.
That great dome above your head –

with the sun, moon, and stars fixed in the heavens –
bears witness that in all generations God has been faithful –
and therefore the heavens are *shocked* at our fickleness!

ii. Witnesses – the Nations and the Heavens

¹² *Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
declares the LORD,
¹³ for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

The two evils are closely related:

- 1) they have forsaken the spring of living water,
- and 2) dug out for themselves broken cisterns

I want you to think about the ludicrous situation that God describes:

There is a spring – a fountain of living waters –
that is plentifully available to you;
A spring provides the best, freshest sort of water available!
which further, requires no work on your part to obtain the water,
other than to avail yourself of it!

So what are you drinking?

But instead, you say, “No, I’d rather dig a cistern.”
So you spend all your time and energy digging a cistern –
a deep, big hole in the ground, designed to trap and hold rainwater.
Cisterns provide the worst sort of water –
and further, since the water in a cistern is stagnant,
they attract insects and frogs.

(When I was in Eritrea, my water supply came from a cistern –
I had to go every morning and fill my bucket with water from the cistern.
As you lower the bucket into the cistern,
you try to avoid the dead frogs that are floating on the surface,
it’s harder to avoid the living frogs that leap into your bucket...
I came to appreciate those frogs.
After all, those frogs were a great reminder to *always boil your water!!*)

But Israel wasn’t very good at digging cisterns –
so when you are sealing the bottom of the cistern,
you leave a big crack in the ground.
And so all the water that flows into your cistern,
simply seeps into the ground and is gone.

Do you hear what Jeremiah is saying?

God graciously and freely provides living water

You don't have to do anything to get it – no digging, no plastering –
no buckets, no frogs...

Only one thing is required.

You must go to the spring and drink.

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest!

And yet, we did not come.

We have forsaken the LORD...

So what are you drinking?

4. What Do You Gain? Forsaking the LORD to Seek Egypt or Assyria Is Evil and Bitter (2:14-19)

¹⁴ *“Is Israel a slave? Is he a homeborn servant?*

Why then has he become a prey?

¹⁵ *The lions have roared against him;
they have roared loudly.*

*They have made his land a waste;
his cities are in ruins, without inhabitant.*

¹⁶ *Moreover, the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes
have shaved^[b] the crown of your head.*

¹⁷ *Have you not brought this upon yourself
by forsaking the LORD your God,
when he led you in the way?*

¹⁸ *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?^[c]*

¹⁹ *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,
declares the Lord GOD of hosts.*

The key to verses 14-19 is the repetition of the work “to forsake” in verses 17 and 19 –
the same word used in verse 13 –

they have forsaken me – they have forsaken the LORD their God.

This is the heart of the LORD charge against Israel.

And this what has brought destruction upon themselves.

And Jeremiah continues with the water theme.
Water, after all, is necessary for life.
Your source of water is your source of life.

But rather than drink of the living water that flows from the LORD their God,
they are going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile –
just as Manasseh had gone to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates.

What are you drinking?
There is a river of living water that flows from the heart of Jesus to his people.
If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink!

B. How Did It Happen? The Consequences of Forsaking the LORD (2:20-37)

But when you exchange the glory of God for idols,
it is not surprising that you exchange the truth of God for a lie!

Part two – in verses 20-37 –
consists of an imagined dialogue between the LORD and his people,
starting, once more, with the Exodus.

Judah makes seven assertions in these verses:

“I will not serve” (verse 20)
“I am not unclean, I have not gone after the Baals” (verse 23)
“It is hopeless...” – essentially “I can’t help it!” (verse 25)
they say to a tree, “You are my father” and to a stone “You gave me birth” (verse 27)
they say to their new gods, “Arise and save us” (verse 27)
but to the LORD they say, “We are free, we will come no more to you” (verse 31)
“I am innocent; surely God’s anger has turned from me” (verse 35)

Everything Judah says is false.

When you exchange the glory of God for idols,
you will also exchange the truth of God for a lie.

Sin is always rooted in lies.

Which lies are you tempted to believe?

1. I Broke Your Yoke/Planted a Choice Vine, But You Have Loved Foreigners (2:20-25)

²⁰ *“For long ago I broke your yoke
and burst your bonds;
but you said, ‘I will not serve.’*

God has set us free in Christ Jesus!
You are no longer the old sinner that you used to be!
You are free!

And we are tempted in the same way.

We are tempted to use our freedom to pursue our own selfish pleasures.

When God set Israel free from Egypt,

the response he often got was, “No one’s gonna tell me what to do!”

But in the immortal words of Bob Dylan,

“You gotta serve somebody” –

and if you refuse to serve the Lord Jesus Christ

you *will* serve something or someone else.

Yes, on every high hill

and under every green tree

you bowed down like a whore.

But it is for freedom that Christ has set you free!

[read]

²¹ *Yet I planted you a choice vine,
wholly of pure seed.*

*How then have you turned degenerate
and become a wild vine?*

²² *Though you wash yourself with lye
and use much soap,
the stain of your guilt is still before me,
declares the Lord GOD.*

²³ *How can you say, ‘I am not unclean,
I have not gone after the Baals’?
Look at your way in the valley;
know what you have done—*

and then the LORD goes on to describe Israel as an animal in heat.

[no need to read again]

a restless young camel running here and there,

²⁴ *a wild donkey used to the wilderness,*

in her heat sniffing the wind!

Who can restrain her lust?

None who seek her need weary themselves;

in her month they will find her.

²⁵ *Keep your feet from going unshod
and your throat from thirst.*

The third lie – in verse 25 – is one of the most dangerous:

*But you said, ‘It is hopeless,
for I have loved foreigners,
and after them I will go.’*

I can't help it.
I love sin too much.
It's too late for me...

Do not believe the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil.
Okay, fine, so you have loved foreigners.
You have not loved the LORD your God with all your heart.
Repent!

Because if you don't – if you turn to other gods – then you will be put to shame. [don't read]

2. If You – and Your Priests, Kings, Officials, Prophets – Want Other Gods, Then Let Them Arise and Save You (2:26-28)

²⁶ *“As a thief is shamed when caught,
so the house of Israel shall be shamed:
they, their kings, their officials,
their priests, and their prophets,
²⁷ who say to a tree, ‘You are my father,’
and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth.’
For they have turned their back to me,
and not their face.
But in the time of their trouble they say,
‘Arise and save us!’
²⁸ But where are your gods
that you made for yourself?
Let them arise, if they can save you,
in your time of trouble;
for as many as your cities
are your gods, O Judah.*

We return to the kings, the officials, the priests, and the prophets.

We heard these leaders of God's people in part one –
as they forgot and forsook the LORD.
They have turned to the gods of the nations.
Manasseh swore allegiance to the gods of Assyria.
But will the gods of the nations ‘arise and save’ you?!

3. Why Do You Contend with Me? What Is Your Lawsuit? (2:29-32)

²⁹ *“Why do you contend with me?
You have all transgressed against me,
declares the LORD.*

The LORD contended with Israel in part 1.
Now the LORD asks, “Why do you contend with me?
You have all transgressed against me!”

You broke the covenant – but then you blame me when bad stuff happens to you!

³⁰ *In vain have I struck your children;
they took no correction;
your own sword devoured your prophets
like a ravaging lion.*
³¹ *And you, O generation, behold the word of the LORD.
Have I been a wilderness to Israel,
or a land of thick darkness?*

Again, the LORD asks, what have I done?
What is your charge against me?
How have I failed?

*Why then do my people say, 'We are free,
we will come no more to you'?*

You say that you are free – that you will no longer be a slave –
as though being the bride of the one true God was slavery!

“I would rather be the whore of the nations
than the bride of the living and true God.”

This makes no sense!

³² *Can a virgin forget her ornaments,
or a bride her attire?
Yet my people have forgotten me
days without number.*

It's like a bride who forgets to wear her wedding dress!

Revelation 19 says that the Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure –
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (19:7-8)

The glorious heavenly Zion is a sight for sore eyes
after beholding her earthly counterpart!

As Jeremiah says in verse 33

**4. You Will Not Prosper: Because You Have Shed the Blood of the Innocent,
You Shall Be Shamed by Egypt as You Were by Assyria (2:33-37)**

³³ *“How well you direct your course
to seek love!*

*So that even to wicked women
you have taught your ways.
³⁴ Also on your skirts is found
the lifeblood of the guiltless poor;
you did not find them breaking in.*

While we are perhaps most familiar with the connection between idolatry and adultery
(a connection found throughout this passage!),
it is important to see the connection between idolatry and murder as well!

If you serve other gods,
then you are not loving the LORD your God with all your heart.
And if you are not loving God with all your heart,
then you will not love those who are made in the image of God.

*Yet in spite of all these things
³⁵ you say, 'I am innocent;
surely his anger has turned from me.'*

Here is the seventh and final lie:
when the guilty declare themselves innocent!
I'm a good person!
I do my best.

The LORD replies:

*Behold, I will bring you to judgment
for saying, 'I have not sinned.'*

John builds on this in 1 John 1:10 –
“If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”
The only way to avoid judgment
is if we *confess* our sins – if we acknowledge that we *have sinned* –
we have not loved God with all our heart –
we have not loved one another as Christ commanded.

Notice the contrast between the lie of verse 25 –
“It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go” –
and the lie of verse 35 – “I am innocent...I have not sinned.”

So which is it?
Are you innocent?
Or are you a hopeless sinner who cannot help sinning?

That's why Jeremiah says:

³⁶ *How much you go about,
changing your way!*

You can't even make up your mind as to whether you are innocent or guilty!

*You shall be put to shame by Egypt
as you were put to shame by Assyria.
³⁷ From it too you will come away
with your hands on your head,
for the LORD has rejected those in whom you trust,
and you will not prosper by them.*

The very lies that you trusted will put you to shame.
Just as Assyria put you to shame in the days of Hezekiah and Manasseh,
so now, Egypt will put you to shame.

The beginning of ch 3 concludes our text by returning to the theme of the bride and the whore:
[just read verse 1]

Conclusion: Would a Man Return to a Whore? (3:1-5)

³ *“If^d a man divorces his wife
and she goes from him
and becomes another man's wife,
will he return to her?
Would not that land be greatly polluted?
You have played the whore with many lovers;
and would you return to me?
declares the LORD.
² Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see!
Where have you not been ravished?
By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers
like an Arab in the wilderness.
You have polluted the land
with your vile whoredom.
³ Therefore the showers have been withheld,
and the spring rain has not come;
yet you have the forehead of a whore;
you refuse to be ashamed.
⁴ Have you not just now called to me,
'My father, you are the friend of my youth—
⁵ will he be angry forever,
will he be indignant to the end?’
Behold, you have spoken,
but you have done all the evil that you could.”*

The tone of these verses suggests that the answer is *no*.

No man in his right mind would return to a woman who had played the whore.

The tone of these verses suggests that God would have to be crazy to take Jerusalem back.

That's kind of the point.

God is a little nuts.

Such is his love for you!

He just might be crazy enough to take you back!

Notice – this is not the stupid craziness of star-crossed lovers

who don't really understand what they are doing!

God understands *exactly* what he is doing.

He knows *exactly* what it will cost him.

But then again, when God says that Israel's "devotion" in the wilderness

was the *high point* in their relationship –

you know that it's going to take something crazy

to make things right.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son of the Father,

full of grace and truth.