

Return of a Deceitful Heart

27th October 2019

Readings: Jeremiah 2:1-13; 26-30; Romans 7:17-21

In my last message before India we started a series in Jeremiah. We looked at Jeremiah's commissioning as found in chapter one of the book named after him. This message is on our website if you missed it. Now that Jeremiah's commissioned today, we'll look at his first message that begins in chapter 2. But before we dive in let's orientate ourselves with Jeremiah - what's his context and his purpose - and then we'll look at what he has to say.



I. Jeremiah's Context

Jeremiah was a priest who started his prophetic ministry during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah began his reign well with a major revival that brought blessings to God's people. However, by the time Jeremiah was called the rot had set in. The people were worshiping idols alongside the Living God. This is important to understand. We're not talking outright rejection of God by his people, but a blatant compromise - worshiping idols in conjunction with Yahweh.

And here lies a key relevance of Jeremiah for us. You see, for many modern Christians it's not rejecting God outright that's our biggest problem - though for some it is. No, it's our placing modern day idols such as wealth or relationships, careers or addictions - whatever - alongside our churchgoing. This is by far our biggest spiritual danger.

You see, the offence of the Gospel is "Worship Christ alone" while the seduction of the devil is "You can have your cake and eat it. You can worship Jesus and whatever..." Satan would rather not have us coming to church to worship. Far from it. But if we do, he's happy to sneak in all manner of modern-day idols. So, the book of Jeremiah speaks into our 21st century lives by warning us of the peril of idols and calling us back to an exclusive, heart relationship with the Living God.

II. Jeremiah's Purpose

So, if Jeremiah's context is a drifting away from "God only" worship to "compromised worship", what's his purpose? What did God want him to do? Well, Jeremiah's commissioning in chapter 1 makes it clear. God said to Jeremiah - verses 9-10...

Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant. Jeremiah 1:9–10

So, Jeremiah's purpose is clear. He will be given words - God's words - to uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow all that opposes God. But also, Jeremiah will be given words - God's words - to build up and plant. To call back to God his wayward people. Now, on balance, the book of Jeremiah is very much weighted toward uprooting and tearing down. In fact, you have to look hard to find any building up and planting. It's this way but because of the listeners ever hardening hearts Jeremiah spends more time uprooting and tearing down than building up and planting.

III. Jeremiah's First Message

And it's this heart attitude that's key to understanding the book of Jeremiah. God's Word, through Jeremiah and the prophets, is repeated often and made clear. Yet, God's people refuse to listen. Why? Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9

Now, if there's one verse in Jeremiah that sums up this book the people he's sent to it's this – their hearts are deceitful above all things. Jeremiah spends a lot of time cutting through this deceit, laying bare the heart condition of God's people. And not only do they refuse to listen, but they attack - verbally and physically - the prophet.

And Jesus recognised that dealing with our heart condition as core to his ministry. In Matthew 13:15 Jesus said...

"For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes." Matthew 13:15

Deceitful hearts, calloused hearts - this is what Jeremiah's ministry exposes and why he gets in so much trouble.

So, let's turn to his first sermon - his first prophetic message - and see what he has to say. As we turn to Jeremiah 2 a brief word. In this chapter we have a summary of Jeremiah's core message. It's a summary of all that's wrong with the people and what a deceitful heart looks like. The rest of the book develops what we see here in different contexts. So, by the time we look at chapter 2 through to the beginning of chapter 3 we'll have a clear idea of what a deceitful heart looks like and what to guard against. Jeremiah 2:1-3

The word of the Lord came to me: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem. 'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them, "' declares the LORD. Jeremiah 2:1-3

Jeremiah's starts his first message starts by painting a picture of the ideal. Here God reminds his people of their first love. Of how when God first rescued them from Egypt out of slavery they were devoted to God. Of how they loved him as a bride her groom. God's people followed him gladly even through the dry and harsh desert. For God made them his beautiful as a bride. They were like the choicest of fruits from a bumper harvest. God happily protected them as groom his bride. Yes, this is a lovey description of the way's things should be. God's people devoted, even besotted by him and also God's protection and blessings over them. This is how it used to be with Israel - and in Christ and through Christ, is our ideal as well.

However, because the heart is deceitful above all things God's people in Jeremiah's day are a million miles away from this wonderful, mutually beneficial and blessed relationship. Vs 5 starts the sad portrayal...

This is what the Lord says: "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness... Jeremiah 2:5-6

Three things to note here. First of all, God's people have **strayed**. The listeners fathers, and the listeners themselves, have strayed far from the living God. As sheep can stray from the flock and a faithful wife can stray into unfaithfulness - so God's people have straying from their God. And why? Have they found **fault** with God? Has he let them down? Has God broken any promises? Has he left them for another nation?... On none of these counts is God guilty - not one. This is the second point to note. The fault that the people have strayed does not lie with God. In fact, God is 100 percent without fault. No, it's the opposite. It's Judah who's at fault. They are the ones who've strayed. And not only that this they've become as

worthless as the idols they've strayed after. This is the third point to note. Not only have the people strayed, not only is God without fault but God's people have become as worthless as the idols they chase after. Following idols has caused God's people, who were cherished as a loved bride, to become worthless. Jeremiah 2:11...

Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Jeremiah 2:11

Imagine a bride entering the church and walking down the aisle. The groom turns to the sweetest, vision of beauty he could possibly imagine - the dress, the smile through the veil, the flowers, the bridesmaids: the wonder, the glory, of it all. However, imagine instead a bride who exchanges all this for an outfit shoddy, ill fitting, dirty and torn while the bride herself is unkept, dirty and disheveled - all by her choice. This is why the cry of God's heart is, "Why have you have exchanged your glory for the dirt and grime of worthless idols?"

And how this is a reminder to us all! Firstly, a reminder not to **stray**. Now, this was certainly our state before conversion.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:6

Isaiah makes it clear that before Christ was made real to us, we each had turned from God's way and to our way. But - and this is a wonderful thing - instead of been afflicted as we deserved, all our punishment was laid upon Christ. Christ, who leaves the ninety-nine in the sheepfold, has searched us out and carries us joyfully on his shoulders. But he does so with a back scared and smarting because of our sin. Indeed, he who takes us by our hand does so with his nail pieced hand. O, the joy that comes with the Gospel as Christ willing takes on our punishment for our straying even while he brings us to himself.

But even after our conversion - and especially after our conversion - we must be cautious not to stray, not to turn away from the Christ who gave his all. Hebrews 2:1

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. Hebrews 2:1

Yes, we must be careful not to drift away. And again, Hebrews 3:12

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. Hebrews 3:12-13

“Drift away”, “turn away”, this is how we can stray. This is what the writer of Hebrews is warning us against - just like Jeremiah. Notice the root cause here in Hebrews is the same as in Jeremiah - an “unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God”. A deceitful heart, a callous heart an unbelieving heart. Listen, today, God’s Word for you and I is this: if we have strayed from our first love, turn back to Christ. He has promised to welcome all who come with humble and repentant hearts. If you have put careers, family or money before Christ you will become as worthless and unfulfilled as they are. In contrast, there is no fault with our Heavenly Father - he will welcome us home. However, be warned - if we do not return to God, if we allow any idol to push Christ aside - the consequences that Jeremiah declares is at our door. Let us not test the patience of the Living God.

And here in Jeremiah there’s also a reminder for us that there is no **fault** with God. If we feel distant from God - guess who moved? It’s certainly not him, who is faithful in every way. Listen to Hebrews 13:5

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” Hebrews 13:5

As I said, if we feel distant from God guess who moved. The second half of this verse makes it clear. “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”, says the Lord

And in the first half of this verse we see a warning against the idol of money. It’s the love of God that must be our priority not the love of money. And Jeremiah reminds us that whatever idol our heart sets above God – eventually makes us as **worthless** as the idol itself.

So, God’s Word from Jeremiah to us is clear: do not stray, there’s no fault with God and we become as worthless as the idols we pursue

These are some take homes, but I’m not done yet. I want to pull today’s message together with some positives as well as these warnings.

1. Our ideal

Firstly, we’ve seen the ideal for you and I. Using the image of a bride and groom, we see that we’re to be devoted to Christ as a bride to her husband-to-be, to follow him wherever he leads whether it’s in green, restful ways or in dry and desert ways. In fact, this devotion to Christ was the main thrust of my first message in Jeremiah. When we looked at Jeremiah’s commissioning and then the Great Commission of Matthew 28, we saw there was an even Greater Commission summed up in this challenge by Jeremiah 30:21...

“For who is he who will devote himself to be close to me?” declares the Lord.
Jeremiah 30:21

It's in our devotion to Christ that all our deepest longings and God's richest blessings are fulfilled in our lives. So, this is our first take home – our ideal is a devotion to Christ.

2. Guard our heart

The second take home is to guard our heart. And we've seen clearly in Jeremiah that the “heart is deceitful above all else, who can understand it?” And we've been warned not to stray, and that if we do it's certainly not due to any fault with God but because of our deceitful heart. On top of this, we become as worthless as whatever idol we set up before God.

Jesus summed it up so well in Luke 12:34 when he said...

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Luke 12:34

If our greatest treasure is anything but Christ it is an idol that will eat away at us until both we and it are worthless. However, if Christ is our greatest treasure then his worth becomes our worth. His worthiness is our worthiness - as all things come together for his glory and our good. This is why we take the words of Proverbs 4:23 so seriously...

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4:23

3. Seed of Revival

And finally, I want to plant this seed with you. As I've been thinking, praying and pondering about revival and what it would look like here in Central, time and time again I come back to the great revivals in history. And one of the keys has always been repentance - repentance in preparation for revival and ongoing repentance that sustains revival. Repentance that starts and continues with God's people. Today, and as we continue through Jeremiah, time and time again we'll hear the call to repent - to turn from our straying and get right with God. So, as you hear this challenge don't dismiss it as something for the person sitting next to you, or your neighbour or colleague at work. Realise the challenge is for you and I. And that as each of us asks God to show us what our deceitful hearts are hiding and as we repent from this - not only will times of refreshing be ours but only repentance from the heart will lead to a revival and outpouring of God's Spirit in ways we can only begin to imagine.

Let's pray.