

# Jeremiah's First Prophetic Word (Jer 2:1-3:5)



## A. Introduction

Jeremiah 2-6 is probably a summary of his early messages. It can be divided into three main parts:

- I. Indictment against Judah (2:1-3:5)
- II. Call for Repentance (3:6-4:4)
- III. Pronouncement of Divine Judgment (4:5-6:30)

Imagine a shy young man, a teenager, boldly preaching his very first message on the streets of Jerusalem to an unsympathetic crowd, who didn't want to hear. Jeremiah's message was not well received by most people because he charged the whole nation with spiritual infidelity to God in graphic language. Jeremiah spoke in direct speech in the first person as God's mouthpiece. It was not an accusation of a hot-headed young man, but the direct indictment of God against His people, 'Therefore, I will yet bring charges against you, and against your children's children I will bring charges...' (2:9) The whole message was a series of searching questions which exposed the heart of the nation and angered the crowd.

## B. The Twelve Questions

1. *What injustice have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from me? (1:5)*
2. *Has a nation changed its gods? But My people have changed their Glory for what does not profit. (1:11)*
3. *Is Israel a servant? Is he a homeborn slave? Why is he plundered? (2:14)*
4. *Have you not brought this on yourself in that you have forsaken the LORD your God when He led you this way? (2:17)*
5. *And now why take the road to Egypt, to drink the waters of Sihor? Or why take the road to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River? (1:18)*
6. *Yet I have planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine? (2:21)*
7. *How can you say, 'I am not polluted, 'I have not gone after the Baals? (2:23)*
8. *But where are you gods that you have made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble. (2:28)*
9. *Why will you plead with Me? You all have transgressed against Me. In vain I have chastened your children. They received no correction. (2:29-30)*
10. *O generation, see the word of the LORD! Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of darkness? (2:31)*
11. *Can a virgin forget her ornaments? Or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number. Why do you beautify your way to seek love? Therefore, you have also taught the wicked women your ways. (2:32-33)*
12. *If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again? (3:1)*

Jeremiah's message was delivered in a 'poetic form', conveying God's feelings, depicting the heartbreak of a betrayed lover in a marriage breakup. It wasn't a polite message. If you were listening to this young man on the street, would you have received him as a true prophet from God?

## C. Seven Thought Progressions in Jeremiah's First Message

1. **What Israel was to God in the past – a holy bride (2:1-3)** – *'Do you remember the 'holy honeymoon'?*
  - a. God starts with nostalgic longing for the loving, faithful relationship between Him and Israel at Sinai in the beginning. *'Israel was holiness to the LORD.'* (v3) The nature of our relationship with God is much like the marriage covenant between husband and wife. God was saying to Israel, *you didn't have much in those days in the wilderness, in a land not sown (v2), but we were so happy just to have each other. You were willing to follow Me anywhere to an unknown future. You loved me with the 'love of your betrothal', i.e. 'hesed' - 'loyal love', 'devotion'. (C.f. Hos 1-3.)*
  - b. *You were the first fruits of My harvest and therefore if anyone who touched you, I personally dealt with them because you were very precious to me.* E.g. Egypt, Amalekites, Canaanite, etc. *You had My full protection because you had My full attention on you.* But now the full harvest of the earth, that was to follow the first fruit harvest, has been miscarried because the first fruit has been defiled (C.f. Lev 23:10, 17; Deut 26:1-11).
2. **What Israel did to God in the past and present (2:4-13)** – It was a very bad business deal.
  - a. The Forefathers' Backsliding - *'What injustice have your fathers found in Me? ...they have followed idols and have become idolaters? They went after worthless 'Baal' (v5).* There is a pun, a wordplay between 'worthless' and 'Baal' in Hebrew. *'Who brought them out of Egypt? Who brought them through the wilderness? Who brought them into the bountiful country? But they did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'* Once they were in the land of plenty, they were distracted by things - profit, entertainment, and blessing, and they defiled the land and made God's heritage an abomination (v6-7). They trashed God's holy land.
  - b. Current Leaders' Backsliding - following the fathers: (1) the priests did not say, *'Where is the LORD?'* (v8); (2) those who handled the law *did not know God* (v8); (3) the rulers *transgressed against God* (v8); (4) and the prophets *prophesied by Baal* (v8), and *'they walked after what does not profit.'* If you follow 'worthless things', soon you make 'worthless deals.'
  - c. Israel Committed Two Sins – The most valuable commodity in the middle east is water supply. There are two ways of securing water supply. (1) If you have a living spring on your property, you have solved the problem once and for all. The more water you draw out, the more water you have. (2) The other alternative is to hollow out a cistern in the ground and fill it up with water from above. The limestone in the region didn't hold water well, resulting in a slow leakage. Earthquake tremors caused hairline cracks in the cistern, making it leak faster. It was a race between filling up and leaking out.

God was saying to Judah, *that's exactly what you have done when you have traded in the living God for the empty mixture of the Canaanite religion. You have exchanged the 'bubbling living spring' with a 'hollow cracked cistern' that leaks.* The hollow cistern was the picture of the people hollow and empty on the inside. The trade they have made wasn't only sinful, but also foolish.
  - d. Other nations' sin was just one – idolatry, but Israel's sin was double because *'they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns – broken cisterns that can hold no water.'* (v13) We draw deeply from the fountain of living water by giving the highest worth to God our Saviour in a costly way. Worship comes from 'worth-ship.'
3. **Why is Israel now cursed? (2:14-19)** - *'You have become a non-entity in the international scene.'*
  - a. Israel was once a force to be reckoned with when she was under God's blessing and protection, but now Israel was a just weak vassal nation to Egypt, back in political slavery. 'Why?' God asks,

'Were you born a slave? Weren't you redeemed from slavery? Why then are you back in slavery again? Why are you being plundered by Assyria and Egypt again?'

(1) 'Young lion roared at him and growled.' (v15) Lion was the symbol of Assyria and Babylon. Assyria had carried away the ten northern tribes already. Now the lions were literally roaming in the Jordan wilderness, threatening Judah's safety also. The exile decimated the northern kingdom's population so the wild animal population could not be controlled. Over 80% of Israel's land was now laying waste literally at the lions' mouth. *'They did not fear the LORD; therefore, the LORD sent lions among them, which killed some of them.'* (2 Kings 17:25; C.f. Rev 6:8 – 'to be killed....by the beasts of the earth.)

(2) 'People of Noph and Tahpanhes have broken the crown of your head' (v16), i.e. 'fractured your skull'. Noph, today's Memphis, was the ancient capital of northern Egypt, about 13 miles south of Cairo. Tahpanhes was the first significant Egyptian town between Judah and Egypt, 150 miles across the desert from Gaza. Later Jeremiah and other refugees settled there (43:7-9). This verse may refer to Pharaoh's invasion of Judah in 925BC. *'Shishak took away all the treasures from the temple.'* (1 Kings 14:25-26)

- b. God gives a direct answer to Israel why this has happened. 'Have you not brought this upon yourself in that you have forsaken the LORD your God' (v17). *'Why take the road to Egypt to drink the waters of Sihor? It was blackened water from the muddy Nile river... Or why take the road to Assyria to drink the waters of the River [Euphrates]?' (v18).* What do you gain by playing the political game when your need is so much greater? You are wasting your time and making things worse.
  - c. Conclusion: *'Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing that you have forsaken the LORD your God. and the fear of Me is not in you.'* (v19) No one was seeking the Lord, asking, 'Where is the Lord?' No one was asking the searching question, 'How did we get here?' They were only asking the shallow question of 'how to get out this mess' by making choices out of expediency. This would not change the trajectory the nation was on.
4. **How Israel backslid (2:20-25)** – the picture now changes with sexual overtones. God is addressing the mixed Canaanite religion which has infiltrated Judah.
- a. Plant world - I sowed you as a noble vine, with quality red grapes and seeds of the highest quality, but what came up was just a degenerate plant, an alien vine, and the bad seeds were polluting the land. Thus, you need to be pulled out (v21). 'But you say, I am not polluted. I have not gone after Baal.' (v23)
  - b. Animal world - You are like a she-camel or a wild donkey in heat, impossible to restrain with words or even with chains like a dog. How she gets out, no one knows. She sniffs the smell of male urine in the wind and she bolts out to find the male donkey she is looking for. The male donkey doesn't even have to search for a female donkey because she will find him all on her own. What's gotten to you that you go after other gods like a wild animal in heat! (v23-25) 'But you said, 'There is no hope. No! For I have loved aliens, and after them I will go.' (v25)
5. **What will happen to Israel in the future: 'Trouble' and 'Shame' (2:26-30)**
- a. *'As the thief is ashamed when he is found out, so is the house of Israel ashamed.'* (v26) Just like a thief getting 'caught in the act', you too will be caught red-handed and openly shamed. So, your dignity will be destroyed because you say to a tree, *'You are my father',* and to a stone, *'You gave birth to me.'* These depict Baal and Ashtaroth, the gods of wealth and fertility. They were sexualised fertility gods, often represented by phallic symbols. So, the princes, priests, and prophets will be red-faced in open shame on that day because 'they have turned their back to Me, and not their face.' (v27).

- b. God taunts them to cry out to their 'gods' on the day of trouble. The test of reality for your religion is this. When the time of trouble comes, can 'your god' help you through the trouble? Only the true God can help you. But you have multiplied your gods like the multitude of your cities. So why don't you cry out to them to help you? When you come to die will your gods save you? *'For it is appointed for every man to die and after that comes the judgment.'* (Heb 9:26)
  - c. Now God tells them why He will not help them (v29-30) - 'Why will you plead with Me? (1) You all have transgressed against Me. (2) In vain I have chastened your children. They received no correction. How did they resist God's correction? (3) Your swords have devoured your prophets like destroying lion.
6. **God's bitter indictment against Israel challenges their warped mind (2:31-37)** - when we are in trouble, we feel God is to be blamed, not our decisions.

- a. God's heartbreak can be seen here, 'Can a virgin forget her ornaments (wedding ring) or a bride her attire? (wedding gown). Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number.' (v32)

This helps us to look at life from God's point of view. We only think about the pain we suffer when we get away from God. But through Jeremiah, we need to see how deeply our unfaithfulness wounds God.

- b. 'Not only have you forgotten Me, but you have also been at the forefront of teaching evil to the wicked people while you plead total innocence. Do you want the proof? The trail of the blood of the poor is all over your skirts. There is not even any need for an enquiry. The bloodstain is in plain sight for all to see. Yet incredibly you say you are innocent, and you are confident that My anger against you will subside soon. You think your political alliance with Egypt and Assyria will deliver you from My anger. But I have rejected them both and they will only turn on you to harm you.' (v33-37)

7. **What God wants from Israel – 'Beautiful Bride vs Hardened Harlot' (3:1-5)**

- a. *'They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, may he return to her again? Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; 'Yet return to Me' says the LORD.'* (3:1 C.f. Deut 24:1-4).

Israel has played the harlot in every corner of the land, like the Arabian gypsy harlotry tent on the side of the road, and she got caught out. But she doesn't even blush. Now she has the harlot's hardened forehead. God is saying, *'The real reason why you now come to Me at all is because you are not getting any rain. You are trying to fill your broken cistern with water, now that you found out 'Baal and Ashtaroth' cult doesn't work. You are now calling Me 'my Father' and 'my Guide', i.e. 'intimate friend'. But you have already left me, and you are now but a divorced wife.'* (v2-3)

- b. It is like a divorced wife is saying, *'I know you are not really angry at me, are you? Come on, I know you. You are my 'forgiving Father' and my 'intimate friend'. Why can't we just have this kind of free and open relationship with each other? I don't want the husband-wife relationship. It is too restrictive for me. Come on, I know you. You can't stay angry for too long.'* (v4-5)
- c. What is God saying to her? 'You come back to Me as a holy wife or don't come back to Me at all.' I am tired of hearing what you are saying and seeing what you do.' (v5)

The only relationship God wants with us is the exclusive, loyal, love relationship - 'hesed' love between husband and wife. You can't have God as your Father and Friend if you don't want Him as your Husband. Jesus too said, *'These people worship Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.'* (Matt 15:8) Jesus is coming for a holy bride, not a harlot. In Jeremiah's days, this was a painful longing in God's heart - 'Israel was holiness to the Lord.' May this be a reality in you and in me.