

# When God Asks "What Did I Do Wrong?"

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[0:00] Hello. Good to see you. My name's Anthony. I get to be one of the preachers and pastors here.! And we are in a series on the book of Jeremiah. If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn to the book of Jeremiah chapter 2.

We are focusing our attention on this concept in Jeremiah about hearts of stone being turned into hearts of flesh, about becoming tender and becoming whole.

And Jeremiah is preaching to a nation that has just gone through revival. That revival very quickly descends into idolatry and chaos. And by the end of Jeremiah's ministry, his people have been exiled.

Many of them have been killed. They've been sent away from their land, their temple, their city has been destroyed. And we're using all of this as sort of a, I mean, it's historical, but it's a metaphor for us about the chaos that we experience in our own life, the things in our own lives that have been destroyed.

And we're at Lent this season that leads up to Easter. And so we're talking about repentance and asking ourselves honest questions, both individually and collectively as a church, as a nation.

[1:13] Are there things that we need to repent of and turn back to the Lord? Now, what we're doing today, today's sermon is going to be relatively brief because we're also doing some vision casting.

So me and Tanetta will be up here in a bit. The couple of elders will be up here in a bit. So I won't get to say all the things that I want to say, but I imagine that's probably a relief for you.

So with that, we are in Jeremiah chapter 2. And we've talked about the pottery metaphors in Jeremiah, the idea of a potter messing up a pot and shaping it into something new.

Last week, we talked about the shattered pot in it, meaning that we can't go back to where we are before. And now we're going deeper into the pain of the relationship between God and Israel.

And Jeremiah reaches for the metaphor of a marriage. So this is Jeremiah chapter 2, verse 1. Jeremiah writes, So, uncultivated, unfarmed land.

[2:29] So this is the beginnings of like a love poem.

This is God remembering the beginning, the honeymoon of the relationship between Israel and Adonai, between God. The devotion and the trust, the following of one another into a wilderness, into a land not yet sown.

That wild thing that couples do when they get together and they move away. And the older folks look at them and say, how could you leave us? How could you do something so nuts? But they're so in love with each other, they do it anyway.

And then, five verses later, Jeremiah says, Thus says the Lord, what wrong did your ancestors find in me?

But they went far from me and went after worthless things and became worthless themselves. So, this is the spouse talking, saying, what did I do?

[3:37] Where did this go wrong? What did you find in me that wasn't enough? And the passage keeps going for the better part of three chapters, Jeremiah 2, 3, and 4. God cycles between grief and rage, between anguist questions and devastating accusations.

There are 27 rhetorical questions in chapter 2 alone. So, skip ahead to verse 20, Jeremiah 2, verse 20. God, through Jeremiah, says this, For long ago, you broke your bond, burst your yoke, and you said, I will not serve.

On every high hill and under every green tree, you sprawled and prostituted yourself. And then, skipping ahead to verses 23 and 24. Look at your way in the valley, what you have done. You're like a restive young camel, interlacing her tracks, a wild ass at home in the wilderness, in her heat, sniffing the wind. Who can restrain her lust?

Now, let's be clear. This is sexually degrading language. Unsolicited marriage advice? Do not call your spouse a wild ass. Not a great idea. The text is comparing Israel to an animal in heat.

[4:56] And I want us to sit with that fact before we move on, that in our Bibles, there's this marriage metaphor, happens throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and it can sort of raise up in us some discomfort.

Because there's a power dynamic, a power differential, differential between God and creation, creator, creation. This spouse and wife. And it can make us a little cringery when we remember the patriarchy inherent in the era and the culture that the Bible is written in.

Now, hold on to all that discomfort. We'll go even further. Jeremiah chapter 4, verse 31. And this is sort of the end of this particular section, where Jeremiah says, I heard a cry like a woman in labor, anguish like one bringing forth her first child.

That's the cry of daughter Zion. Zion is this metaphor for Jerusalem and all of Judah. Gasping for breath, stretching out her hands. Woe is me.

I am fainting before killers. So chapter 2 opens up with a bride. And chapter 4 closes with a woman screaming. A bride to a scream.

[6:12] That's the arc of this passage. That's the trajectory of this family that falls apart. Now, you've heard me and Teneda and a few of the other preachers continue to reference the Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor.

And her primary lens in her career is studying Jeremiah and the Old Testament prophets through the lens of trauma and disaster. And she names two sides of what's going on here.

On the one hand, Jeremiah actually seems to have some deep intimate knowledge of the pain and trauma particular to women and the violence against them.

And he uses feminine pain, the vulnerability, the grief, labor, scream, assault, abuse, to express the trauma of exile and national collapse.

And in a patriarchal world, Jeremiah is actually making a fairly remarkable literary choice. He's saying if you want to understand what has happened to this nation, you need to listen to women and what they already know about suffering.

[7:17] Cool. On the other hand, and Dr. O'Connor is unflinching about this, Jeremiah is also using women in not so great ways. They are the symbols of wickedness.

He blames them for the fall of the nation. He exploits their experience by applying it onto men.

Because look at who's actually doing the sinning. This is Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 8.

So he goes through this list. The priests did not say, where is God? The lawyers, those who handle the Torah, the law, they don't even know me.

And the shepherds, which is the biblical metaphor for the rulers, they transgressed against me. The prophets who are supposed to speak the word of the Lord, they prophesied for foreign gods, for Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

So the priests, and the lawyers, and the rulers, and the prophets, the political decisions of male elites, those are all now sort of put up, the blame is put on women.

[8:17] These shepherds, rulers, lawyers, prophets, they make alliances with Egypt and Assyria. They engage in idolatry and rank in justice. But the metaphor takes all of that and puts it in a feminized body.

Israel as woman gets called the prostitute or the whore. Israel as woman gets degraded. And God as husband gets to be this righteous accuser. And as you go deeper into the text, even abuser.

Now, if you've done any work in family systems, and we've talked about this as a congregation, you can recognize some dynamics here. God in this metaphor is the relentless pursuer. He asks question after question after question.

He's like a sea lion in your comments, saying, what about, what about, what about? And the accusations escalate. Israel is the withdrawer. We will come to you no more, they say in verse 31.

So God's pursuit intensifies. The withdrawal from Israel deepens. And that's the cycle. God pursues, Israel flees. And so God pursues all the harder, and Israel leaves all the harder.

[9:23] And from chapter 3, verse 6 forward, we get this multi-generational piece that Judah watches Israel get destroyed, their northern neighbors and family, for these same choices.

And Judah decides to repeat the same mistakes. And this dysfunction replicates across generations, even when the consequences are visible and obvious. And everyone in this room has probably seen this happen to a family, if not your family.

Mistakes repeating over and over again. So Jeremiah presents God like a spouse with devastating vulnerability. God is presented as being in pain, as being brokenhearted.

This is not a God who is distant and far off and invulnerable. This is a God who is close and near and pursuing and in pain. And Jeremiah is also giving us a marriage metaphor that is rife with violence and blame shifting of patriarchal marriage.

God as husband has both beauty and horror to it. And it's in our text. We, at the table, we never pretend that it's not there. But the text, the Bible is not done with this metaphor.

[10:35] Neither is God. There's a word in Jeremiah chapter 3 in particular that shows up over and over. It's the word shuv. Let me hear you say shuv. And it means to turn, and it can mean in either direction, to turn away as well as to turn towards, to return.

Which is how it's used when God pleads with Israel to come back, to return. The capacity to turn away from God is the same capacity that can turn us back to God.

And if you look at the structure of chapter 3, all of that accusation, the prostitution language, the degrading imagery, the multigenerational blame, all of it builds to a center point in verse 12.

This is chapter 3, verse 12. Return, shuv, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord.

I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against Adonai, your God, and scattered your favors among strangers under every tree.

[11:44] So the center of the passage between chapters 2 through 4, right here in the middle, chapter 3, verse 12, is not accusation, it's invitation. Return, for I am merciful.

And the condition that God has is not fix what you broke, it's not earn your way back, it's acknowledge. Acknowledge your guilt. That's it.

Turn around, admit. The same turning that took you away from home can bring you back home.

Now, as I love to do, I want to compare this metaphor to a New Testament passage.

So if you want to join me, you can join me in Ephesians chapter 5. Ephesians chapter 5, verse 25.

And this is Paul's household code for households in the church of Ephesus.

And this letter got passed around to lots of churches. And it begins in verse 21, be subject to one another. So it's underneath this idea of mutual submission within the Christian household and the church family.

[12:49] And we get to verse 25, and it says, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Now, the Greek word here, translated give himself up, is the word paradidomai.

Let me hear you say paradidomai. Paradidomai. And this is the same word for Judas when he betrays Jesus. Judas paradidomized Jesus.

He hands Jesus over to the authorities to eventually be crucified. He delivers Jesus unto death. It's the word that you use when either somebody hands you over to the authorities or, if you so choose, when you hand yourself over to give yourself up to someone else's power.

And in this verse, in Ephesians 5, it's the word for what the husband is meant to do with their power. And the way that we know that is that it's what Christ has done for his bride, the church.

So in Jeremiah, the husband accuses, the husband exposes, the husband punishes. And that's what husbands did in the ancient world. They had that right to treat their wives as property.

[14:08] But in Ephesians, the husband paradidomized himself. He gives himself over. He hands himself over for the sake of the bride. And so the cost moves.

In Jeremiah, the cost falls on the unfaithful partner. But in Ephesians, the cost falls on the faithful one. The husband does not punish the bride. The husband dies for the bride.

And that's the trajectory of the marriage metaphor across scripture. The metaphor doesn't disappear. But what happens is that the husband, what the husband does with their power is completely inverted.

God goes from the one who accuses to the one who absorbs the cost. And by the way, just a little parenthetical here, I think there's nothing more queer than this.

We've got a room full of men and women and non-binary people. All of us are called the bride of Jesus. A Jesus who has two dads who may not have all their chromosomes.

[15:09] And Jesus who never once refers to himself in the Greek word for adult male, *aner*, but only refers to himself as the more generic *anthropos*, the human being. This is the God who gives birth into new life because how else are we born again if the spirit is not a birthing person?

The gender of this God has never been what we've been told it was. And the family that God is building has never looked like the, you know, leave it to beaver NBC families that we were taught to expect.

Close parenthetical. So today's main idea today is not complicated. It's Lent. I said it already. It's the oldest message in the book. We have to be willing to admit when we've turned away.

And we have to be willing to turn back because God, God themselves, is willing to give themselves over for our sake, to shove, to turn every day if we have to.

And that's what Lent is, a season of turning, not a one-time event, not a dramatic conversion moment, but the daily discipline of noticing when I have turned direction and I need to turn again.

[16:21] Some of us have turned away and we know it. We've turned away from God or from this community or from the version of ourselves that was tender enough to feel things.

And I don't mean any of that as an accusation. That's just the fact that we all do it. We harden to protect ourselves from political climate, from grief, from the exhaustion of being targeted or standing in solidarity with folks who are targeted.

The heart calcifies. And that's understandable. But a heart that hardens to protect itself becomes the very thing that shatters at the next blow. Some of us, we've already made some shoves, some turns.

We're here right now. You're watching right now. You've been turning back Sunday after Sunday and Monday through Saturday. And you're tired. And you're not sure what you're turning towards anymore.

And when you think of God, you think of the accusing God. But I want you to hear is that the God you're turning toward is not the God of Jeremiah's worst metaphorical tendencies.

[17:33] The God you're turning toward is the one who paradidimizes, who hands himself over, not in punishment, but in love. The cost is not on you. The cost is on God.

And the cost has been paid for. Can I have an amen? What we need to do is turn and keep on turning. It's a simple message.

When we, I don't preach enough on, I feel. God loves you. And not in some abstracted theological sense, but somewhere in there, that devastated, what did you find wrong with me, can't stop asking questions, refuses to let it be over since.

The God who uses the language of a wrecked spouse because that's how much the relationship matters, but also, and this is the trajectory, the God who takes the cost of the broken relationship onto themselves rather than putting it on the one they love.

The trajectory of that marriage metaphor is real, but it's not finished, which means our work, the work of this community and this church, is to continue that work.

[18:44] The trajectory from Jeremiah to Ephesians tells us that the marriage metaphor is still being redeemed and still being healed and still moving. And if it's still moving, then we get to be part of where it goes next.

Jeremiah 3.14 gives us this image of what God builds after the family falls apart. Verse 14. Return, O faithless children, says the Lord, for I am your husband.

I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. One from a city, two from a family. Not the old household restored, not the shattered pot glued back together, but something brand new.

Things are not going to be the way they were before. The fragments will be gathered from the ruins of multiple broken families and built into something new. And that's this room.

Last week, we named the shatterings. The pandemic, the merger, the people who left, the people who stayed. What sits in this room is not the original family.

[19:53] It's the pieces of many families run from here and two from there. And Jeremiah says, that's not the consolation prize. That's the plan. It's what God always does.

God is always making new things out of the shattered things. And so this is where we set the table for what's coming. If our work is to continue the trajectory to be a community where the marriage metaphor keeps getting healed, where power gets used for self-giving instead of punishment, where the family, where a building doesn't look like anything anyone expected, then we need to say out loud what that looks like.

Let's go.