

THE WAY BACK

by Ray C. Stedman

Our nation today is very much like the nation of Judah was when Jeremiah appeared to it. It was a nation falling apart at the seams, where everything was going wrong. Enemies were surrounding it, troubles were rife within it, government was corrupt, disasters were looming, degeneracy was everywhere. The nation was suffering from tremendous moral disaster. And in the midst of it God sent a man named Jeremiah to speak a word which would arrest that nation, for this was God's desire.

I want to look with you this morning at the first message of Jeremiah to the nation of Judah. We do not have time to read it, as it covers several chapters, but I want to pick out certain passages which highlight for us what God has to say to someone who has begun to drift away from him. Have you ever had that problem? I have. I find there are times in my life when, without even realizing it, I have begun to lose some of the fervor and the joy and the peace which marks the presence of God in my life, flowing through my life as it ought. And so have you.

The tragic thing about that condition, as so exemplified in the nation of Judah, is that this can happen and then nobody knows what is wrong. That was happening to Judah. They really blamed God for the whole thing. That is what most of us do, too. They said it was God's fault, that he did not keep his promises, did not deliver them when he ought to, did not keep them from their enemies as he promised. They were charging him with gross misconduct and with inability to keep his promises.

So God has something to say to this nation. What does he say? It gathers around four words that Jeremiah uses: remember, realize, return, and beware. (I could not think of a warning word that started with "r", so if you can think of one you can put it in, and then you will have perfect alliteration!) These were four words that God had to say to the nation through his prophet Jeremiah. As we look at them this morning I hope you will take them as a word to your own heart about how to get back to God when you sense somehow that you have begun to drift, or that you have lost some of the flavor and the fervency and the joy of your Christian experience. The first word is found in Chapter 2:

**The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "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.
Israel was holy to the Lord,
the first fruits of his harvest.
All who ate of it became guilty;
evil came upon them, says the Lord." {Jer 2:1-3 RSV}**

The first word is "remember." That is a look back, a call to remember what life was like when you first began a love relationship. God says, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me." In marital counseling I have dealt with couples who have been married twenty-five or thirty years but who are having difficulties. They are tense, angry, upset, and sometimes they will not even speak to one another. One man was so angry with his wife that he got up, spit in her face, and walked out the door! I have had to sit down with couples like that and try to find a way to begin a healing process.

Long ago I learned the best way is simply to say, "You know, before we start, I need to get acquainted with you a little bit. Tell me something about yourselves. How did you meet, and where?" You can feel the atmosphere soften, and their hearts begin to expand a bit, as they think back to the days when they were not angry or upset, but were in love, and as they remember what that meant. Half the battle is won when you can get couples thinking back to what it was like when they first knew each other.

This past week I attended a pastors' conference at Mount Hermon. Rick Cruse, one of our recent interns, was there with his new bride, Debbie. They have been married only a few weeks, and it was fun to watch them, to see how she looked into his eyes every time they were out together, how she followed him, walked with him. Once, because they attended different meetings, they were separated for about an hour. I happened to be there when they came back together. They ran into each other's arms and kissed each other, and didn't care who was watching! That is the way a bride is with her husband when a marriage has first begun.

Do you remember those days in the relationship between you and the Lord -- the wonder of love, and the joy of it? What the prophet is bringing out here is that at such a time, the loved one is the chief priority of life. No other relationship is more important than yours with him, or his with you. He is preeminent in your affection. This is what God is wanting you to recall. This is the first thing God says to a heart which has begun to drift -- "Remember, remember what it was like when you were secure in my affections, separate unto me." Israel was "holy to the Lord", exclusively his. "Remember when you were satisfying -- 'the first fruits of his harvest'. Remember when you were safe -- 'All who ate of it became guilty; evil came upon them, says the Lord.' I protected you. Do you remember those days?

In Dallas, Texas, last week, a young man who was with me told me that he had listened to someone speak on the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. When the speaker got to what the Lord Jesus said to the angel of the church in Ephesus -- "I have this against you, that you have left your first love" -- this young man said, something gripped his heart. It was as though scales dropped from his eyes. And he suddenly realized that he had come to love Bible study about Jesus more than he loved Jesus himself. He saw that he had to return to that "first love," and that Bible study, engaging and exciting as it is, is not what holds the heart. It is Jesus himself. And that is what God says -- "Remember, Judah, those days in the wilderness when you walked as a bride with her husband, how you were safe, and satisfied, and exclusively mine."

Then there is a second word which God uses to try to arrest this people, found in Chapter 2, Verse 19:

**"Your wickedness will chasten 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, says the Lord God of hosts." {Jer 2:19 RSV}**

"Know, and see." That is a word for the present, is it not?" "Look around," God says. "Realize where you are and what has happened to you. What are you like, right now? Remember the past, and realize the present. What has happened to you in your life? This is his way of arresting Judah's attention, of helping them to see how needy they were and how much they needed him. So he says, "Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God," Around this word there gather several passages, several pages of text, which I haven't time to expound this morning. But I do want to capture two vivid illustrations which God holds up to us. God is a master illustrator who uses wonderful visual aids to help us understand truth. He holds up before Israel now two pictures which will help them to see themselves, and will help us to see ourselves as well. The first is in Chapter 2, Verse 13, and I mentioned it briefly in the previous message. God says,

**" 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." {Jer 2:13 RSV}**

You see the picture -- the incredible folly of somebody who has forsaken a living stream of water, with its freshness and its healing, refreshing quality, and has dug a cistern to catch the rain as it runs down the hillside laden with dirt and leaves and bugs and debris, and then stagnates in a broken cistern which leaks and will not hold the water. God says that is what Judah has been doing, and he details it for them in Verse 4:

**Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.
Thus says the Lord:**

**"What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" {Jer 2:4 RSV}**

That is the folly of somebody who forsakes the Lord. This past week at Mount Hermon we heard messages on the theme, "God as the river of life". Remember how many times in the Scriptures he is depicted as a river of living water, refreshing, rushing, bringing cleansing and healing and fruit. Jesus spoke of the rivers of healing water that flow from our life when the Spirit of God is ruling. And you know those times, don't you? Most of you have experienced this already -- that inner sense of gladness, of joy, that God is present. But to forsake that, to turn from it and try to be satisfied with a lot of cheap things -- why would anyone do that? It would be like forsaking the sunshine and huddling in a cave somewhere around the light of a candle, trying to satisfy yourself that way. Or worse, perhaps, giving up eating and trying to satisfy yourself by drooling and slavering over all the food ads in the magazines. That is what God says it is like when you turn from the living God, who can satisfy the heart, to these empty things.

Why would anyone do it? It is because they lose their sense of the worth of God, the greatness of his being, the power which is at his disposal, the ability he has to fill the heart with joy. We sang in the opening hymn this morning, "Thou, the wellspring of joy of living..." That is what God is. And to turn from that to all kinds of other things and attitudes and philosophies and relationships to try to satisfy yourself, is to drink from broken cisterns which will not hold water. God says, "That is what you have done. But worse than that," he says in Verses 20-21,

**"For long ago you broke your yoke
and burst your bonds;
and you said, 'I will not serve.'
Yea, upon every high hill
and under every green tree
you bowed down as a harlot.
Yet I planted you a choice vine,
wholly of pure seed.
How then have you turned degenerate ... ?" {Jer 2:20-21 RSV}**

That is what happens when you forsake the living God. It is not very long before deterioration sets in, degeneracy, and you become available to any and every drive and force around you. And God calls that harlotry, spiritual harlotry. He asks a searching question in Verses 23-24:

**How can you say, 'I am not defiled,
I have not gone after the Baals'?
Look at your way in the valley;
know what you have done
a restive young camel interlacing her tracks,
a wild ass 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.'" {Jer 2:23-24 RSV}**

Do you see the picture? If you have ever worked among horses you know what he is talking about. Here is a mare in heat, lusting. A little later on, in Chapter 5, he speaks of lusty stallions who keep neighing after their neighbors' wives. God uses these vivid figures to awaken people to where they are. There is a wonderful frankness about the Scriptures which sometimes rebukes the Victorian prudishness we have fallen heir to and often exhibit in talking about some of these things. God intended us to learn from the animal kingdom. He gave animals a different kind of sexuality than he gave us, in order that we might learn from them, might have a vivid picture of how we look when we start lusting after everything that comes along, and being available for any kick, any thrill, any drive, other than God himself. So God holds up this vivid picture.

It must have meant a great deal to the people of Judah. They understood what an animal looks like in heat, how eager it is to be satisfied.

I remember a scene from my high school days in Montana, when I was working on a ranch up there. One day a group of people came out from town to go horseback riding. Among them were some school teachers, and one was my English teacher, who was somewhat of an old maid. I remember that she was given a stallion to ride. When we were saddling up, the stallion got tremendously excited about a mare nearby. To this day I can vividly recall the bright crimson of her face as she sat on that horse and tried to restrain it, while everybody else tried to pretend nothing was happening!

This is the kind of figure God holds up and says, "That is what you're like. That is you, lusting after everything that comes by, living for kicks, wanting to be satisfied some way. That covers everything from continuous, non-stop television, or endless golf, to the fleshpots of North Beach, to heroin, to hate and violence. That is what happens when the heart begins to drift from God into degeneracy.

There is another word here, a wonderful word, spoken several times in this account. Jeremiah's third word is found, for one example, in Chapter 3, Verses 11-12:

And the Lord said to me, "Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah. Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, 'Return, 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 for ever.'" {Jer 3:11-12 RSV}

"Return." He says it again in Verse 22:

"Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness." {Jer 3:22a RSV}

And in Chapter 4:

"If you return, O Israel, says the Lord, to me you should return." {Jer 4:1a RSV}

Now, what else should they do? Obviously, if you are going down a road, and you find you are on the wrong road heading for the wrong destination, the only logical thing to do is to turn around and return. And that is what we find so hard to do. Do you know why? Because of the first step, which is clearly described in Chapter 3, Verse 13,

"Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favors among strangers under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord." {Jer 3:13 RSV}

That is the tough part, is it not? "Only acknowledge your guilt." God sees the heart, and we cannot fool him. We can justify ourselves, excuse ourselves to those around us, but we cannot fool God, the living God who is waiting to refresh us and heal us, waiting until we have acknowledged our guilt. I am concerned when Christians sometimes take the beautiful promises of forgiveness in the New Testament and treat them as though they are automatic, as though you never have to see what it is you have done, or say it, as though God is so ready to forgive that the minute you do something wrong he just instantly forgives you, and it does not matter whether you acknowledge your guilt or not. I do not think that is biblical. I do not think it is right to take I John 1:9 -- "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" -- and say that simply happens automatically whenever you do anything wrong. You see, God does not want us to confess and acknowledge our guilt for his sake; it is for our sake that we are to do it, so that we might see what was wrong and learn from it. So God says that the way to return is to acknowledge your guilt.

Stuart Briscoe was telling me this past week of an incident in his church. A young boy had come to Christ

through some of the people in the church who had reached out to him while he was on drugs. They were so loving and so gracious to him as they led him to Christ that he was eager to come to church. He did come, and later asked to be a member of the church. On the morning he was to be accepted into membership, he asked if he could say a few words to the congregation. Stuart Briscoe said yes, he could. So the young man stood up and said,

"I just want to tell you something about myself. I was on drugs; I was all fouled up; I was a mess. I hated myself. Then some people from this church met me, and they loved me as I've never been loved before. They told me about Jesus, and I found Jesus. I was so eager to come to this church, because these people were from here. I wanted to see a church that could put out people like that, so I came.

"But I was so disappointed! You didn't like my long hair, and I could feel it in your glances. I could sense your hostility when you pointedly ignored me. I could see that some of you were downright angry because I was present among you. It made me very resentful. I got bitter and angry at you because you were like that. I just want to tell you that God has dealt with my heart, and I realize that it is wrong for me to be bitter and angry at you. Now, your hostility toward me -- that is your own problem before God. You will have to settle that. But I just want to say that I was wrong in being angry with you. God has forgiven me, and I ask you to forgive me, and to receive me into membership here."

That is what God is after, that we acknowledge our guilt.

God goes on to say, in Verse 15,

**"And I will give you shepherds after my own heart,
who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." {Jer 3:15 RSV}**

Do you see how he is reaching after these people? "Return," he says. "Come back. It is not too late. I will restore you, I will feed you, I will open your eyes. You will not have to walk in ignorance and darkness again. I will heal your faithlessness."

But there is one more word here, and it is necessary that we add it, because Jeremiah found it so. The word is "Beware." In Chapter 5, Verse 29, God says,

**"Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord,
and shall I not avenge myself
on a nation such as this?"**

**An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: [What is it that would make God speak so strongly?]
the prophets prophesy falsely [The preachers tell you the wrong thing],
and the priests rule at their direction; [The priests correspond to the people of God in our day. They run their own lives the way they please.]
my people love to have it so, [and then comes this word]
but what will you do when the end comes?" {Jer 5:29-31 RSV}**

Jesus said that life is like building a house. You can build it two ways: you can build on the rock, as do those who hear his words, and love and obey him; or you can build it on the sand, i.e., any system of thought or philosophy other than Jesus. You can erect a beautiful house on either place, one that looks attractive and adequate to others around you. But a testing time is coming. And when the winds come and the waves beat against the house, the house which is built on the rock will stand; the house which is built on the sand will fall, no matter how useful it has been, nor how apparently comfortable and livable it was.

This is the question God is asking you and me now: What about the end? Some of you have been coming to Peninsula Bible Church for years, and you have never really come to Christ. Some of you have come to Christ, but you have drifted back. God says that he has made a way back, but only one way: acknowledge your guilt. God will heal your faithlessness. But if you do not, there is nothing else but to go on to worse conditions, until there comes an end. I do not know what the end would be for you. I do not know where you

are. I do know this: my heart says to me this morning, "I don't want any more of that end; I want to come back to the God who loves me, the God who can heal me, the God who opens the fountains of living water to refresh my heart and spirit, and I want to walk with him."

(Dr. Lyle Hillegas, President of Westmont College, led in the closing prayer:)

Prayer:

Our good Father, we bow before you now. We have recognized your identification of us in your word as it has been opened this morning. We rejoice in the fact that you have called us to yourself. We do not understand that, but we are grateful that you have called us your own. And so we pray that, wherever we found ourselves in your description in this hour, all of us would come to that place where we would want to return to you. And we ask that this would not be merely a sensation for this moment, but that as we understand your revelation, your word to us, we would be faithful in carrying it out in the living of our lives, and that the demonstration would be pleasing to you, and one which touches others and changes others' lives as well. We pray that we might give your Holy Spirit freedom to work in our lives, and we thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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