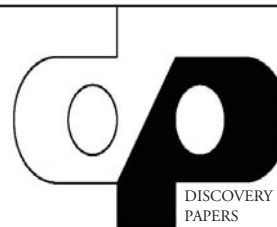


WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 17:1-10

3rd Message

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One thing I love about the Bible is that it doesn't usually talk about deep theological issues using deep theological words. The Bible teaches using images and stories and pictures. A textbook wants to help us understand sin. That's the goal: understanding. And that is important at times. There are reasons to use textbooks. But the Bible wants to help us "get it." Not just understand it, but "get it" on a deep level. Really grasp it. Be changed by the stark picture of what sin looks like.

So today we'll be looking at Jeremiah 17:1-10. Now, you may be wondering why we've jumped from Jeremiah 1 last week to Jeremiah 17 this week. Jeremiah, itself, isn't arranged in chronological order. There are some general divisions in the book, but scholars have a hard time finding a precise outline. Themes show up in different places and often ideas or even stories are repeated throughout the book. So I've tried to pull out 12 different passages from throughout this book and order them thematically. So here we are in Jeremiah 17.

And we're going to be asking the question, "What is wrong with me?" This passage talks about sin. It talks about what is wrong with us on a fundamental level. Last week we looked at how God called Jeremiah and we talked about what that means for our own calling in life, how we understand what God wants from us. But it doesn't take long to find out that it's really hard to live out our calling. Something doesn't seem to work right. Something is wrong with us. And it seems to be wrong at a very deep level. It seems to be wrong with our heart. So today we want to look at that problem. What is it that holds us back? What in the world is wrong with us?

But this passage doesn't list out the abstract definition of sin and walk you through everything you need to know about sin. Instead, this passage gives us three metaphors, three images, by which we can grasp what sin is all about. And I want to be very careful here as we study this text, because these metaphors are powerful. They are images that I think we can all relate to. And so I want to be careful not to explain them away. I don't want you to walk out of this room with a better understanding of sin. I want you to "get" what sin is. I want you to grasp it on more than just an intellectual level. Because that is what the purpose is of these metaphors. To confront us with a picture. That's my hope this morning.

Each of these metaphors has to do with the heart. It begins by describing the heart of Judah - the southern tribes of Israel. And we'll see that our hearts are being described as well. But it's important to realize that the Old Testament picture of heart is different than ours. We tend

to draw a contrast between head and heart. Our head is our intellectual center. Our heart is our emotional center. The ancients didn't have type of distinction. For them, the heart referred to the entire internal life of a person. Their core. Intellectual, emotional, spiritual - all of that combined. So as we talk about the heart, remember that we are talking about the very core of our being.

The diamond-etched heart of stone

Let's start with the first metaphor. Jeremiah 17:1-4:

Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point, on the tablets of their hearts and on the horns of their altars. Even their children remember their altars and Asherah poles beside the spreading trees and on the high hills. My mountain in the land and your wealth and all your treasures I will give away as plunder, together with your high places, because of sin throughout your country. Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you. I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for you have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever.

These verses start out abruptly. In fact, in the Hebrew the first word of this chapter is one of the words for sin, *chatat*. The passage begins by saying that Judah's sin is engraved on their hearts with an iron tool. This is a powerful picture. If there is one descriptive word that comes to mind when I think of this image, it is "hardness." First of all, you have the tablets of their hearts. And this references a tablet, probably made of stone. So their hearts are pictured as a stone tablet. Hard. Impenetrable. But it is penetrated, by a very sharp instrument. An iron tool. Now, iron wasn't all that easy to come by in Israel. It was always Israel's enemies who had an abundance of iron. But here you have an iron tool. And not just any iron tool, but an iron tool with a flint point. Most other translations translate that as a diamond point, not flint. I think that is probably a more likely translation. So you have a tablet of stone, written on by an iron stylus with a diamond tip. And what is written on them? Sin. *Chatat*. Their hard hearts are penetrated only by sin which is chiseled there with what was probably the hardest substance known to them.

Did you ever do those linoleum prints as a kid in school? Do you remember them? I do. We'd take a piece of linoleum, basically a kitchen tile. And we'd have a little tool that was kind of sharp knife, but the point was shaped like a C. And you'd use that knife to carve out the linoleum where you wanted lines. And you'd make kind of a reverse picture on the tile. Then you'd take the tile,

dip it in some ink and use it like a stamp on some paper. I remember making those and I remember how easy the linoleum would just curl up as I cut through the linoleum. I was always good at stuff like that in school.

But this is different. This is an iron tool with a diamond point, cutting away at stone. And what does that make you think of? Do you know of another prominent stone tablet in Scripture that had something chiseled on it? Of course—the tablets which held the 10 commandments. They were stone tablets and they had something written on them. But it wasn't sin. It was the opposite of sin. It was the law. It was how to avoid sin. So here instead of stone tablets with righteousness and justice written on them, you have stone hearts engraved with sin.

Does this ring true to you at all? When you think of your life, when you think of how you approach the world, does this resonate with you? Hard hearts? Engravings of sin deep within your being? Can you tell that something has been etched on your heart? Something ugly? I know I'm familiar with the feeling of having a stone heart. I'm often surprised at how sometimes I just don't care. Sometimes my heart is just impenetrable. Hard.

As we keep reading, we see some details of this sin. We learn that the nature of the sin God is describing is worship of other gods. These Israelites were worshipping false gods on their altars and they were engaging in fertility rites that violated God's command. They had chosen other gods to follow instead of their God, YHWH. And what is God's response? If they want other gods, they can have them. All of their possessions will go to foreign nations who worship those gods. They themselves will be given over to their enemies as slaves. And they will worship the gods of those nations. God's anger is kindled against His people and their punishment is that if they want to worship the gods of other nations, God will let them. Those nations will come into Israel, haul them off, make them slaves, and force them to worship their gods. And that's exactly what happened.

So we see something scary about sin. Sin is a choice we make against God. And when we make that choice repeatedly, God will give us over to it. God will let us have our way. If we constantly choose to turn away from Him, he'll give us our desire. Hard hearts only get harder with time. That's what the Bible means when it says that God hardened someone's heart. It isn't that He caused somebody to do something. It's that he gave them over to what their hearts wanted to do. And it's terrifying to think that God will give us the freedom to actually do what we want. What I want is someone to protect me from doing the things I want to do, but know I shouldn't do. And yet, there comes a point for God when He gives us over to what we want. That's scary.

The withered shrub and the well-watered tree

So our first image is this picture of the heart as a tablet of stone, with sin engraved on it with a sharp tool. Verses

5-8 give us another picture of sin:

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. “But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

This is probably my favorite image in this passage. There are two images here. The first is about the nature of sin. And we see that sin has to do with who you trust in. The second image has to do with what sin looks like when it's lived out. And we see two plants: a tree and a bush.

Let's start by looking at the first image. Verse 5 criticizes the one who trusts in man. This phrase probably has a military sense. It's probably referring to the King of Israel trying to get into agreements with the king of Egypt or others to protect themselves from Babylon. That's trusting in man. And this person's heart is turned away from the Lord, because it is God who is supposed to take care of His people. When things go badly, they aren't supposed to look to the king of Egypt for help, they're supposed to look toward God. Verse 7 shows us the positive side of the picture. “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him.” This guy has it right. He trusts in the Lord. His heart is turned toward God. So this is relational imagery. Sin has to do with your posture toward God. Are you turned toward Him? Or are you turned away from Him?

We tend to think of sinning as doing something wrong. Of violating some rule. But breaking a rule is not what makes something sin. This passage says that sin has to do with your relational orientation toward God. Imagine that I ask my son not to jump on the couch. And one minute later, he climbs up on the couch and starts jumping on the couch. Well, I get upset at him. Why? Am I upset because he broke my rule? No. I don't care about the couch. The couch isn't important. I'm upset because he violated our relationship. As his father, I have the responsibility of establishing some guidelines for behavior. That's one of my roles. And I asked him not to jump on the couch. So when he did, the issue is not that jumping on the couch is wrong. The issue is that he disobeyed me. He broke our relationship. We had a sort of mini covenant going on. And he violated it. For at least a moment, his heart was turned against me and he chose to ignore my request.

So what does this mean for us? What does it look like in our lives to be turned toward God or turned away from Him? I don't know about you, but I know about my heart turning away from God. When I don't feel good, I usually turn to people (usually my wife) to make it better. And

when she can't, I get mad. It's not natural for me to turn toward God. My heart isn't naturally inclined to turn toward God. Mostly because turning toward God often involves waiting. I usually want an answer right away. And people move quickly. God seems to ask us to wait a lot. So what about you? Are you open to God? Is your heart turned toward Him? Or are you closed off? When things aren't going well, do you turn toward God or toward man? And this is a daily thing. Turning toward God is as constant decision for me. Not a one time thing. Because my heart is like a spring – it always seems to pop back to other people. Turning toward God doesn't come naturally.

But this metaphor only begins with whether your heart is turned toward God. The real picture is what your life looks like when your heart is turned toward God or turned toward man. And now we have our two plants. One is a bush. One is a tree. The bush lives in the desert, barely scraping by. The tree lives by a stream, drinking from the flowing water. The bush lives amidst the salt. Not only is the land dry, but it is a land of salt which dries out everything around it as well. The trees leaves are always green. It is full of life, all the time. This is a picture of life and death. The bush is barely alive plant, just managing to keep from dying in a land of death. That's the one who trusts in man. The tree is richly alive, vibrant and delicious, surrounded by water, drinking its fill. That's the one who trusts in God.

In the Hebrew of this passage, there is a very clever pun. The Hebrew words for "see" and "fear" are very close. "See" is *yi-reh* and "fear" is *yi-rah*. So what we see is that the bush doesn't *yi-reh* or "see" good things when they come by. And the tree doesn't *yi-rah* or "fear" bad things when they come by. The bush is so out of touch with life, so focused on eking out a meager existence, that when something good does come along, it doesn't even notice. It is so wrapped up in its world of death that it can't even recognize life. The tree, on the other hand, doesn't even fear when bad things come along. When the heat comes that threatens to dry it out and take away its life, it doesn't even worry because it knows that it is secure. Its roots go deep into the water. Its leaves are green. It doesn't need to be scared when evil passes by. The contrast couldn't be greater.

And there's another wordplay. Up in the first part of the passage we saw God criticizing His people for performing fertility rites at the Asherah poles besides the spreading trees. The word used there is literally "luxuriant" trees. And that's the word that is used to describe this tree's leaves in verse 7 that reads "its leaves are always green." So you have the people of Israel turning to other gods, performing a fertility ritual beside a luxuriant tree, hoping that that other god will them the ability to bring life into this world. And then you have the one who trusts in God, who *is* a luxuriant tree, and who never fails to bear fruit. This tree always brings forth life.

That's our picture of sin and of faith. Sin damages you so much that you can't even recognize life when it's offered to you. Faith gives you so much life that you aren't

even scared when death walks right past you. And this contrast comes down to how you're oriented toward God. When we are oriented away from the one who gave us life, we will not experience life. Not here and not in eternity. That's what sin does. Sin chokes out life. When we are oriented toward God, seeking our relationship with Him, we'll experience life. Life here and life in eternity. But the truth is that our world paints a very different picture. Our culture tries to convince us that being turned away from God leads to life. This is their constant message: if you want to really live, you need to do it on your own. God can't help you experience real life.

And then we get this picture from Jeremiah, telling us what is really true. It stands in the face of the message that our world bombards us with. This picture offers a glimpse into real reality. It's like those smoking commercials that you see, only they aren't trying to get you to smoke, they are warning you of the dangers and health risks of smoking. So you see someone gasping for air and speaking through a breathing tube as a picture of what smoking does to you. I love the irony that these ads have to be paid for by the companies that sell cigarettes as a result of a lawsuit. Because these companies are paying for two different types of advertisements. One shows beautiful people smoking and laughing and having a great time. This kind of ad promises that smoking leads to life. Rich, fun, exciting life. But now they have to pay for these other types of commercials that show that in reality smoking leads to death, sometimes a painful, sickly death.

And that's what our picture is. It's telling us what is really true. Our culture teaches us that sin leads to life. And that is a pervasive message. That's why we find sin so enticing. Deep down, we're convinced that life is found when we turn away from God. Deep down we believe that. But this picture shows us that it just isn't true. Sin leads to death. Faith leads to life.

The diseased heart

So our first image was of a hard heart and described sin as a moral failure. Our second image was of a bush and a tree and described sin as a relational failure. There's one more image. Verses 9-10:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

So now we have another way of saying that sin is an issue of the heart. This third picture shows sin as a disease. It's a virus lodges itself in our hearts. Sin is something that affects us. It's something that infects us. Our hearts are hard. They are turned away from God. And they are diseased.

The most noticeable thing about this picture is that it is a condition that affects us. Here sin isn't pictured as a behavior. It isn't even an attitude. Sin is a disease, not a

crime. Our hearts are sinful. They simply are. It's not that they are acting sinful. It's simply the case that we are sick. We talked before about how we usually think about sin as a behavior, as doing something that violates a rule. But here we see that sin isn't associated with any action. It's associated with who we are. So it's not a matter of sinning here, and not sinning there. Apart from God's work of redemption, everything we do is sin because our hearts are sick with sin. Once you realize that sin is not primarily a behavior, it changes the way you think about everything. It changes your efforts to get rid of sin from your lives. If sin isn't what you do but who you are, then how are you going to get rid of it?

Think about this. If sin is simply a behavior, then this whole deal gets a lot easier. If sin is just about what we are doing, then the solution is to stop doing it. That's not too hard. In the middle of the 19th century in America, there was a huge revival that historians have labeled "The Second Great Awakening." A lot of people in this country were coming back to church and rekindling their love for God. One of the most famous preachers at that time was a man named Charles Finney. He was essentially our country's first professional evangelist, like a predecessor of Billy Graham. He was a passionate preacher and was really effective at getting people to think about God when they had mostly forgotten about him. But he had a bit of a theological problem. He didn't think sin was a condition. He just thought sin was a behavior. So what was his solution? You have to convince people to behave differently. So for Finney, the gospel was about motivation. It was about motivating people to change their lives, because he believed that people had the capability to change. He believed sin was just a choice. And so he believed that what was needed was to help people make better decisions.

But that's not the message of the gospel. You see, when people forget that sin is a condition, bad things happen. People like Charles Finney may have good intentions, but they end up doing harm to the cause of the gospel. A lot of people think that believing in the Bible is the foundation for authentic Christian faith and that losing faith in the Bible is the first thing to go when people or movements slip away. But historically, the first thing to go has been our understanding of sin. The first way that people tend to move away from biblical Christianity is by thinking that people are basically OK, but just keep making bad choices. In theological terms, the first doctrine to go is that of original sin. If people aren't desperately broken, there is no need for a fix. If we're not lost, we don't need to be saved. If all we need to do is get a little better, try a little harder, then Jesus dying on the cross makes no sense.

That's why Christianity is so hard for our culture to accept. It's not because people don't believe the Bible is true. It's because people don't believe in sin. Our culture is incredibly optimistic. Even in the midst of crazy people doing terrible things. In the midst of brutality, genocide, abuse, deceitfulness, scams, terrorism, and all sorts of really bad stuff, we still believe that people are generally good, that they just make bad choices. But that is simply not

true. God tells Jeremiah that the problem is that the heart is sick. This is not something that is going to go away on its own. And when we're honest, most of us admit that we know this about ourselves. When we see a picture of what sin looks like, we resonate with it and say yes, that is true of me.

So we can think about how to help our culture understand sin. Too often we approach our world and try to tell them about sin using words from theological textbooks. But that usually doesn't go so well. People don't believe in sin, but they know they are broken. Some of them know their hearts are hard. Some of them feeling like a bush trying to live in a desert. When you get them away from their activities and their successful jobs and their distractions, they know that something deep down is broken. Something in this world. Something in their hearts. They may not be ready to label it sin. But they just might resonate with these images. And the images paint a picture of a desperate problem. But they also give us a picture of the solution.

Verse 9 ends on a terrible note. The heart is incurable. Who can know it? But verse 10 says that there is One who knows the heart. The point of verse 10 is that God knows our hearts. He knows how hard they are. He knows that they are turned away from Him. And He knows that they are sick. And He is going to do something about it. There is hope for our hard, diseased, and rebellious hearts.

When we get further in Jeremiah, we get a full picture of what that hope is all about. The summary is that He gives us a new one. He comes up with a new covenant. Ezekiel 36:26 reads, "I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Jeremiah 31:33 promises "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." In this new covenant, God allows His son to die so that his people can be born again. When we accept the sacrifice of Jesus, we die along with Him. Our sickly diseased hearts stop beating because there is no way to repair them. But then we are raised up to new life. We are given new hearts. And we experience new life. A work of God is the only solution to a diseased heart. And so he sends His son. And we are given new hearts.

Conclusion

So this is what is wrong with us. At our core, within our very nature, we are turned away from God. I am born with the inherent desire to turn away from this God who created me. It is something that affects me and it is incurable. That's sin. That's what all these pictures in Jeremiah 17 help us to get. I'm turned away from God.

And I resonate with this imagery. I know that my heart is hard. I know my heart is turned toward man rather than toward God. And I know my heart is sick. But what does this mean for us? How does being confronted by these pictures of sin change us? Well, like a lot of the Bible, I think the point is to get us to look for God. Because for a

lot of us, we're still tempted to address sin by trying harder. We still often think that whatever it is that is wrong with us can be fixed if we just try harder. If I just find some way to change my behavior, to get rid of this annoying habit, or somehow manage to find and eradicate all the sin in my life.

But this passage reminds us that we are messed up. Not because of what we do, but because of the state of our hearts. It would be a really discouraging passage. If it ended with verse 9, we wouldn't know what to do. But this is what we've seen throughout Jeremiah. He brings us a difficult message that can seem overwhelming. But at the same time, he brings us a message of hope. And we do have hope. God takes our hard, sickly, obnoxious heart and forgives us. And then He starts His work of redemption. Changing my heart. Allowing me to live out this new heart that He is giving me. And reminding me that my old heart is dead. So for us, my encouragement is to think about sin in terms of these pictures, to really "get" what a desperate situation this is so that we can really "get" the power of the solution God offers us.