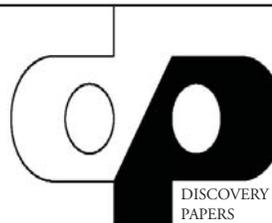


WHY IS GOD SO HARD TO BELIEVE IN?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 2:9-13

5th Message

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We are here this morning to worship a God that we claim to believe in. We cannot see Him, and, in most cases, we cannot hear Him speaking directly to us, yet we claim to believe. Last week we talked about what is wrong with religion, and we saw that religion can keep us from having to relate to the living God, Creator of the universe. Our invitation was to turn to God, to believe in Him and engage with Him.

However, believing in this God isn't always easy. It's easier to believe in *belief* in God, to think that believing in God might be a good thing. But actually believing in and engaging with this God whom we worship can be really difficult. Many of the people we work with and interact with on a regular basis believe that, if there is a God, He is not anything like we claim to believe He is. And most of us at some point, many of us even right now, have our own doubts about God, about who He is, about whether He is really real, and about whether this whole thing is true. So why does God sometimes seem to play hard to get? I've been asked this very question by several students lately. If God is real and He wants us to know Him, then why does He make it so hard to believe in Him? Why isn't it just more obvious?

Jeremiah 2:9-13 addresses the question of why God's people had a hard time believing in Him, why they turned from Him, and why they could so easily follow other gods. This question is important for us as well because if there is an answer, if we can make sense out of why this faith thing is so tricky, maybe we can support each other in it and help each other live in faith.

The Courtroom

Jeremiah 2, verse 9:

“Therefore I bring charges against you again,” declares the LORD. “And I will bring charges against your children’s children.”

This passage begins as a courtroom scene. It's a picture of God hauling His people into court and accusing them of a crime. The word translated “charges” is a legal term indicating that these are formal charges to be analyzed in a court of law. And as the passage progresses, we'll see various aspects of the court emerge.

But this isn't just any type of court. This is divorce court. The language used here is not just of criminal activity; it is of betrayal and broken relationship. This is not an issue of violating some legal statute. What is at stake here is a marriage.

So we have to start there. God's people didn't lose faith

in their religion; they deserted God. They abandoned their husband, cheated on their lover. This is a story about broken relationship with God.

The Witnesses

So let's see how this courtroom drama plays out. First, witnesses are called. Jeremiah 2:10-11a:

“Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.)”

God sends messengers to two different cities looking for a witness that He can call to the stand. Kittim refers to the Greek islands that lay to the West of Israel. Kedar refers to a region of Arabia that lies to the east of Israel. This is a common biblical way of saying “look everywhere.” Go east and west and everywhere in between and see if you can find someone. And who are they looking for? They are looking at the nations around them and trying to find a nation that has changed its gods.

The implication is that it will be impossible to find a witness who has seen any of the nations change its god for a different god. The nations around Israel are more faithful to their false gods than Israel is to her God, the one true God who created the universe and all that is in it.

Do we see this in our culture at all? Look around. We follow the gods of money, success, education, and pleasure, and we are incredibly faithful to these gods. We as a culture live our lives centered around money. Our lives are roughly split up into work and recreation. We pursue education and work so that we can earn money, and then we spend money on our recreation. Of course, most of us don't really think money will get us what we want out of life.

Yet as a culture we display an incredible loyalty to this god of money that nobody really thinks will bring us happiness. Now we're in the midst of an economic crisis and people are losing money. But instead of thinking, “Wow, maybe we shouldn't trust the economy,” we search desperately for a way to fix the economy. We're like passengers on a sinking ship, trying desperately to plug the holes with chewing gum instead of realizing we need a new boat.

So why are people so loyal to money and other false gods? *Because we want control.* You see, worshipping money is not the crazy, do-anything-for-money greediness that we see caricatured in stories, TV, or movies. We're not talking about Ebenezer Scrooge here. Worshipping something means looking to that thing for life. Most people want

their lives to look a certain way, to live nicely, eat well, stay healthy, and have time for friendships and recreation and entertainment. None of those desires is wrong. It's natural to want a full life. But what do you worship as the *source* of life? What gets you those things? Our economy is structured in such a way that, for most of us, it's money. For some it might be power or professional position. But people everywhere look to false gods for life, and they are stubbornly loyal to them.

This is the reason that the nations were loyal to their gods. They promised to give them control over what they wanted out of life. Amazingly, even when idols don't deliver, we stick with them, because the promise of control can be more appealing than what God offers. The promise of an economy that recovers and makes everyone wealthy keeps people focused on that as a goal. The promise of a day when I won't have to worry about money and I can do the things I want to do, or the promise of a time when I'll have enough authority in my job so that things happen the way I want them to, keeps me motivated.. We want control.

But God doesn't give us control. Instead he offers us provision.

The Prosecution

Next, the prosecution leveled charges against Israel. This is the indictment. Jeremiah 2:11b-12:

“But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD.

The prosecutor has made his charge: God's people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. They have left their God, cheated on their lover. And not just any lover, but a glorious lover who treated them well and cared for their needs. The phrase “exchanged their Glory” is an interesting one that shows up elsewhere in Scripture. In Psalm 106:20, the psalmist refers to God's people as they are being released from Egypt and says that they exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull which eats grass.

And I don't know about you, but sometimes I've read that story and just been amazed. I mean, here's a group of people that have seen God send plagues to torture the king of Egypt. They've seen one final plague that left all of the first-born sons of Egyptians dead with their own sons untouched. They've been led out of slavery by a pillar of fire. They saw the sea split before them so they could walk over dry land. They saw their enemies destroyed by the sea collapsing on them. They are led to the base of a mountain where they hear God's thundering voice. And after God takes a little longer than they expect giving instructions to Moses, they lose faith and create an idol of a calf. Really? After all that, their faith is gone so quickly? I look at those people and think, what kind of people are they? Are they really that fickle? Can their faith really be that weak?

And yet, am I really that different? Do I really have

such a strong faith that I can look at those Israelites in the desert and criticize them? I think to myself, if I had seen what they saw, I'd be convinced. If I had seen half of the demonstration of God's reality that they had seen then I'd have a rock solid faith. But I have to remind myself that I have. I've seen God at work in my personal life, I've seen Him change my heart, I've seen Him change my marriage, and I've seen Him answer my prayers. But my faith is weak because my culture has alternative explanations for each of those. Maybe I've just grown up. Maybe we just settled into being married. Maybe things just fell into place and I thought it was answered prayer. But the ancient Israelites lived in a culture too and their culture had just as many alternative explanations for the things they experienced. In fact, the magicians of Egypt's court replicated many of the miracles of God. For them to see the waters split in two could have any number of explanations. Theirs wouldn't be scientific ones like ours, but to them, Baal could have done that, or maybe Moses was a magician, or maybe they wouldn't even need an explanation.

Why is God hard to believe in? *Because we explain Him away.* God's people have always had the opportunity to explain away God's presence in their lives and to attribute it to something else. Those explanations change with different cultures, but they are always there. And so these people living in Jerusalem near the end of the 7th century BC are being hauled into court and accused of exchanging their Glory for worthless idols. It's a familiar picture. As appalling as this is, it's nothing new.

I'd like to ask you to stop for a second and think about how you might have seen God work in your life. Think about your childhood. There may be painful memories, but there might be some way that you were protected as well. Think about your experience with God. When did you first hear about God? Did you believe in Him at first? What's it been like? Have you seen Him answer prayer in your life? Have you seen your life change? Have you seen your heart toward other people change and grow and develop? Have you had your doubts? Have you found God hard to believe in at times? Have you found yourself tempted to exchange your Glory for some other god? Have you not only been tempted but have you followed through? We are just like these Israelites, aren't we?

We explain God away, but He continues to work in our lives. Even though we attribute his work to other things, He continues to faithfully demonstrate Himself to us—showing up in our lives, calling out to us, wooing us back into relationship with Him. If I were Him, I'd get tired of doing something over and over again and never getting credit for it. But God is faithful. He continues to act and initiate with us, even when we explain Him away.

The Verdict

We've seen the court scene set up, we've seen witnesses called, the prosecutor has leveled his charge and now the climax of this passage comes as the verdict is pronounced. And it isn't a good conclusion. Jeremiah 2:13:

“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

So here's the verdict. God's people are found guilty. They are guilty of two sins. They have forsaken God, and they have taken another lover. They've abandoned their husband and hooked up with someone else. Have you ever been in a relationship where the other person broke up with you? The first thing most people ask is, “Is there someone else?” It hurts when someone decides he or she no longer wants to be with us, but the pain is even deeper if we've been left for someone else. It's like putting salt on an open wound. It just makes it hurt that much more.

This is what God's people did to Him. The image of living water is a common one throughout Scripture. What this literally refers to is running water, water that is moving, not stagnant. And if you've ever needed to drink water from an outside source, you know to look for water that is moving—there's less opportunity for bacteria or other harmful things to grow. I like to go backpacking and when you're collecting water from rivers and streams, you have to be extremely careful because there are all sorts of problems you can get from drinking bad water. I got giardia once from drinking bad water and it's no fun. As an agrarian culture, the Israelites knew that running water was always the best bet.

But instead, they had dug out cisterns. Now, a cistern is basically a huge hole dug in the ground that is meant to collect rainwater. So you dig out a big hole and then you usually line it with something—rocks or cement or some type of primitive tar or something like that. You make it watertight so that it will hold water when it rains. It can also be more like a storage tank or large pot that holds water above ground. And then it collects water and you can use it later when you need it. But you can imagine that this isn't the best way to get good usable water. After it rains, the water might sit there for a long time and get pretty disgusting. And these cisterns aren't just holding old, dirty rainwater, they aren't even doing that well. They are leaking it all out.

And so you have this vivid contrast between God as the living water, able to sustain His people, and the broken cisterns that they would prefer using to provide their water. And you have to ask, “What is going on here? Why would anyone prefer a broken cistern to a spring of living water?” Well, I can think of at least one reason. The cistern is a known quantity. It's great to have a spring of fresh water, but springs can be unpredictable. Sometimes they dry up. Sometimes they give lots of water. And they can be hard to find. You might have to look for a long time before you find a good dependable spring. But you can dig a cistern anywhere. It's under your control. You dig it. If it's broken, then you can fix it. You can't fix a broken spring. And what God is saying is that His people would prefer a cistern that is broken than a spring that works. They understand the cistern; they can manage it. And that's what they want

from a god. They want something they can understand. And that's what we want too. *We want answers.* We want a god who makes sense, a god who doesn't surprise us.

You see, for these Israelites, worshipping Baal made sense. It answered all their questions. It promised to give them what they wanted. YHWH was less predictable. He may provide for all their needs, but He also seemed to ask for a lot. Baal was just a business partner. If you worship me, I'll give you what you want. YHWH seemed to want something more. He wanted a lover. He wanted loyalty, devotion, and passion, and that was just too much for these people. Bottom line: Baal was predictable. YHWH was unpredictable.

And isn't that what makes God hard to believe in for all of us? Ask anyone why God is hard to believe in and they have questions that aren't answered. They want to know why Christians have done such terrible things in the world. They want to know why science says things happened a certain way and the Bible says they happened a different way. And often, their questions are personal: “Why did this happen to *my* loved one?” “Why did this happen to *me*?”

There is a series on NPR called *This I Believe*. But recently, they did a variation of this show, called *This I Used to Believe*, about people who had lost or changed significant beliefs in their lives. One young woman talked of losing her faith in God after a friend of hers died from cancer. She said that after her friend died, she desperately wanted to know why, but she lost her faith because it was easier to believe that it happened for no reason at all than to think that God might have allowed it to happen. An answer of meaninglessness was better than no answer at all. Something that she could understand and categorize gave her more comfort than someone who was loving but didn't explain all His decisions. She preferred a broken cistern to a spring of living water.

And so we realize that one of the reasons that God is so hard to believe in is that He is complicated. He is unexplainable at times. He doesn't always make sense. We can't always guess what He is going to do. Believing in Him is going to leave with us with unanswered questions. We might not know why certain things happen. We might not be able to fully reconcile God's love for the world with the fact that some people don't know Him. Believing in God is going to leave us with questions. He asked the Israelites to wait for Him for forty days at the base of a mountain. And they gave up. He asks us to look around, to see the evidence of Him, and to believe. And many of us give up.

So we want answers to the questions in our lives, but God offers Himself. He doesn't usually tell us why things happen, but He is there in the midst of it with us. He gives us His presence. And that becomes our answer. It's not the type of answer that we initially wanted, but His presence comforts us in the midst of our questions.

But what amazes me is that the very thing that so often

makes us give up hope on God and lose our faith is one of the strongest evidences that He is real. Think about it. If I sat down tomorrow to create a religion, if I wanted to come up with a God who I could follow and worship and be comfortable with, do you think I'd come up with the God of the Bible? If people came up with this whole thing, do you really think it would look like this? If Christianity were made up by people and this God that you have come here this morning to worship turns out to be a product of our overactive imaginations and a projection of our emotional desires, then don't you think He'd be a little easier to believe in? Don't you think we'd have answers to all of our questions? Don't you think everything would make sense? Don't you think that we'd know exactly what this God requires of us?

You see, the very fact that this God, the God of the Bible, is still somewhat shrouded in mystery is evidence to me that He is real. The very fact that I find it hard to believe in Him at times is evidence that He is worth believing in. The very fact that I ask Him to give me what I want and sometimes He withholds it from me gives me hope and comfort. Because that might just mean that He knows what He's doing.

So we choose cisterns because we want answers, and we can understand broken cisterns. But why are we so afraid of living water? Why do God's people reject what our hearts really desire? I think it's because living water sounds too good to be true. We'd rather content ourselves with water from a broken cistern because we know it's a sure thing. But living water just sounds like a fairy tale, and we're afraid to hope that it could be true.

In John 4, we get a story of Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman. This is a woman who had been rejected by her community, who had been disloyal to many husbands, who had questions about what she was supposed to do and how she was supposed to relate to this God. When she realized that they were talking about religion, she wanted answers. But Jesus didn't give them to her. He gave her this offer of living water. He gave her the offer of a relationship with God that would meet her needs, often in surprising ways, and with all of the demands that any relationship of love involves. He invited her to something deeper than religion. And she jumped at the chance. She had the courage to hope because she had nothing to lose.

But most of us aren't like her. We have a lot to lose. If we put too much hope in this new work that God is doing, then we might be really disappointed. So we play it safe. We believe in belief in God because that's less risky. It doesn't offer as much hope, but that way there is less of a chance of being disappointed. I'm convinced that when we are honest, we all struggle with believing that God is going to let us down. Jeremiah 15:18 says, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" Even Jeremiah, after writing the words that God is the spring of living water, says later on that he worries that God will disappoint him, that God will be a

spring that fails. The truth is that it is hard to hope because we're all so afraid of being disappointed. We talked about this last week and saw that God often works through our disappointments. He uses our disappointment to invite us closer to Him. But what if He turns out to be the biggest disappointment of all? Haven't you found yourself wondering that at times?

And yet, Scripture invites us to hope. Even in Jeremiah, in the midst of God judging the Israelites and completely ending life as they know it, there is the invitation to hope, to trust that God is a spring of living water, that He will meet our deepest desires and provide for us. We can hope. We can believe. Our God will not disappoint us. We may be disappointed along the way because of false things that we've set our hearts on. But He will not disappoint. He is living water. And He is at work in this world, moving things toward the end of His plan of redemption so that we can experience Him in all His fullness. Zechariah 14 describes the New Jerusalem as having a spring of living water in the center of the city that runs out into the rest of the world. In the age to come, our desires will be met. Do we dare to hope for that? Could it be real? Maybe we should just satisfy ourselves with dirty water from a broken cistern. It's so much safer.

Conclusion

So here we are, struggling to believe in this God who calls Himself the living water. It's not always an easy business. We feel like these Israelites. We know that God could call us out, haul us into court and accuse us of trading Him in. This is really true for me. I'm so quick to trade in my relationship with God for cheap imitations, to question that God will provide me with the full life that I desire. I was kind of overcome by this last night and realized that I'm preaching to myself here as much as to you, because I need to remember that, even though I turn away from God, that is not the end of the story.

But even though we are faithless to our lover, even though He could divorce us and send us away, He doesn't. Why? Because He forgives us. His son, whom He loved, who was completely faithful to His Father, was the one that God rejected. He hung on a cross and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When I was true to you, when I was faithful to you in everything, when I never questioned your love, why have you sent me away? And yet, Jesus knew the answer. He was suffering the divorce that we deserve. And through that sacrifice, our relationship with God is restored.

And we are joined with God under a new covenant, one that doesn't rely on our obedience to ensure our relationship. It is a marriage that is founded on the faithfulness of Christ. And thank God for that, because we are fickle. Why is God so hard to believe in? Well, is He? Is He really that hard to believe in? Is He the problem? Or are we? The truth is that it is our hearts that are fickle. It is us that have a hard time believing in God. It's us who want control. We want answers. We are afraid to hope. But the

great news of the gospel is that it is God who solves that problem. He gives us faith. He calls out to us. He suffers the consequences of our weak faith.

And so even though we find it difficult to believe in God, He remains faithful to us. He gives us faith. He works in our lives. He comforts us with His presence. And He invites us to hope in Him. He knows that we're scared, but He gently calls us forward. That doesn't mean that it is easy to believe in God. So let's not try to make it easy. Our hearts are fickle, but He is faithful. He is the source of living water. Thank God for that.

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