

Talk 1: Jeremiah 2:1-3:5

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 September 2024

Preacher: Phil Martin

[0 : 00] Okay, we're in Jeremiah 2, starting at verse 1, and then we're going to read right through to chapter 3, verse 5.

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 incurred guilt, disaster came upon them, declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the clans 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? They did not say, Where is the Lord, who bought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through when no man dwells? And I brought you into a plentiful land, to enjoy its fruits and its good things.

But when you came in, you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, Where is the Lord? Those who handle the law did not know me. The shepherds transgressed against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. Therefore, I still contend with you, declares the Lord, and with your children's children, I will contend. For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care, see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this. Be shocked. Be utterly desolate, declares the Lord. 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. Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-born servant? Why then has he become a prey? The lions have roared against him. They've roared loudly. They have made his land a waste. His cities are in ruins without inhabitant.

[2 : 34] Moreover, the men of Memphis and Tarpanese have shaved the crown of your head. Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God when he led you in the way?

And now, what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? Your evil will chastise 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, declares the Lord God of hosts.

For long ago, I broke your yoke and burst your bonds. But you said, I will not serve. Yes, on every high hill and under every green tree, you bowed down like a whore. Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?

Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God. How can you say? I am not unclean. I have not gone after the bales. Look at your way in the valley. Know what you have done. A restless young camel running here and there. A wild donkey used to the wilderness in her heat, sniffing the wind. Who can restrain her lust?

[4 : 08] None who seek her need weary themselves. In her month, they will find her. Keep your feet from going unshod and your throat from thirst. But you said, it is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners and after them I will go. As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed. They, their kings, their officials, their priests and their prophets who say to a tree, you are my father and to a stone you gave me birth. For they have turned their back to me and not their face. But in the time of their trouble, they say, arise and save us.

But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise if they can save you in your time of trouble. For as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah. Why do you contend with me? You have all transgressed against me, declares the Lord. In vain have I struck your children. They took no correction.

Your own sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion. And you, O generation, behold the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness to Israel or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, we are free, we will come no more to you? Can a virgin forget her ornaments or a bride her attire?

Yet my people have forgotten me days without number. How well you direct your course to seek love, so that even to wicked women you have taught your ways. Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. You did not find them breaking in. Yet in spite of all these things you say, I am innocent. Surely his anger has turned from me. Behold, I will bring you to judgment for saying, I have not sinned. How much you go about changing your way. You should be put to shame by Egypt as you were put to shame by Assyria. From it too, you will come away with your hands on your head.

For the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them. If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? Yet you have played the whore with many lovers. And would you return to me, declares the Lord. Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see, where have you not been ravished? By the wayside you have sat awaiting lovers, like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.

[6 : 54] Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come. Yet you have the forehead of a whore. You refuse to be ashamed. Have you not just now called to me, my father, you are the friend of my youth. Will he be angry forever? Will he be indignant to the end?

Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could. Thanks, Anna. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for bringing us here today.

We thank you for this time to gather around your word and to hear you speak. Father, we thank you that your word humbles us and then lifts us up. We do pray, our Father, that you might humble us afresh before you, that we might more deeply love you and see your grace to us in the gospel.

So, Father, we pray for your Spirit's work among us in our hearts today. Please be teaching us and humbling us and encouraging us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay. So, Jeremiah. We...

[8 : 20] It would be great to be able to be here for a long time in Jeremiah. We are just dipping in to a massive book today. I hope we will get to the heart of the message of the whole book today.

Obviously, we're not going to be able to cover anything like all of the book. But I hope we will get to the heart of the message of the whole book. And these two talks, the first talk, our title is The Human Condition Without Christ.

And then our second talk, we're going to go to the New Covenant Promises. And therefore, we're going to be in the problem this morning and the solution this afternoon.

I think there are probably three things we see in Jeremiah above all. Number one is that our sin problem is worse than we think it is in a number of ways.

We talk about sin. We use the word a lot. We grasp it a little bit. But what God has given us in Jeremiah is, I think, the most thorough exploration and exposure of the grim dimensions of our sin in the whole Bible.

[9 : 41] And the reason he does it at this point in Jeremiah, of course, is because it's right at the end of the time of Israel under the law in the land.

So there's 800 years to go to be working from. So that's where we're going to be in the next few minutes.

And then hopefully there'll be a bit of time to chat in twos and threes as well. That's the aim anyway. Has anyone ever been deep sea diving? I thought I might try and find out who's been deepest in the church family.

No one's been deep sea. Has anyone been, sorry, scuba diving. Scuba diving, that's a better term. Right. How deep have we been? How deep? Any to 50. To 50?

Anyone deeper than 50? No clue. No clue. No one. So we reckon maybe the Nelsons have been the deepest. Is that feet or metres? I don't know. Laura doesn't know.

[10:40] I don't know. That's a big difference. Well, they only mean 30 feet. 30 metres. That's really deep. That is deep. OK. That's a slight segue.

Jeremiah. Jeremiah, to bring us back. Jeremiah, I think, does the deepest dive into human nature. Into the human heart in the Bible.

That's what I'm trying to say. It's the deepest dive into the human heart. And he stays there for the longest. If you've ever read Jeremiah, it's 52 chapters, most of which is about sin and judgment. Or to put it another way, like a surgeon, the Lord God takes out the human heart in Jeremiah and puts it on the table.

And then gives us a sinew by sinew, thread by thread tour through the history and behaviour of his people, the Jews. And we can't look away.

[11:47] And in these first chapter and a half, we have the Lord's opening gambit. We're just going to draw out five features of sin that I think are the most prominent in this chapter and a half that God is exposing.

I've put them on your sheets. Now, we'll briefly go through all five. Number one, sin is baffling. Sin is baffling. Because it is a rejection of a good God.

There was something baffling about what they did with God. I wonder if you saw that. It's a major point as we read through. God is saying to them, why would you do this to me?

Do you see that in verse five? What wrong did your fathers find in me? That they went far from me and went after worthlessness and became worthless.

God had been so good to them. Can you hear his heart calling out to them? Verse six, he rescued.

[12:54] He goes on. He rescued them from Egypt and the wilderness. But they did not say, where is this God who rescued us, who protected us and who provided for us in verse seven?

I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. What wrong did you find in me? And yet they went after worthlessness and became worthless.

Verse five, meaning other gods. Worthlessness. Notice verses 10 and 11. It is baffling what they've done.

The same point. God is on in verse 10 and 11. Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and sea or send to Kedar and examine with care these pagans.

See if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods even though they are no gods? No. Pagans stick with their gods even though they are no gods.

[13:54] But my people have changed their glory. The true God. For that which does not profit. It's baffling.

God is saying. I'm the true God and you've rejected me. Not even the nations do that with their gods. The bafflingness is summed up in verse 13.

My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me. The fountain of living waters. And have hewed out cisterns for themselves.

Broken cisterns that can hold no water. They've left the God who overflows with blessing to them. The God who can give them life.

To make their own way. Making jars and pots that are broken that can't hold water. Speaking of the gods that they've chosen. The implication.

[14:54] They've exchanged life. And abundant life. For death. Why have you done this? And the point is. Sin is baffling.

It makes no sense. You see it again in verse 31. O generation. Behold the word of the Lord. Have I been a wilderness to Israel?

Or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say? We are free. We will come to you no more. It makes no sense.

Sin is baffling. Because God has only ever been good to them. And they still walk away from him.

And sin is baffling. Because God has only ever been good to us.

And by nature we still walk away from him. This is not just their heart on the table. It's ours. To bring it to today.

[15:55] Today people walk away from Jesus Christ. The fountain of living waters. It's extraordinary isn't it? The one who's died for them. He's given them eternal life.

He's only ever been good to them. Has promised to be their shepherd forever. Sin is baffling.

Perhaps they've been brought up in a good Christian home.

They've been brought up to know the Lord. And they still walk away. They exchange him, Jesus, for the career or ambition that seems much more attractive.

But as they do that they walk away from the only source of true life. And instead find themselves with nothing but a God that they've made up for themselves that can never satisfy.

Like a broken pot in the desert that can hold no water. Sin is baffling. It makes no sense. How many times people walk away from Jesus.

[16:54] The fountain of living waters. Who overflows with love. And promises an eternity with him. For a romantic relationship in this life.

That more often than not is over within ten years anyway. And never brought satisfaction. But even then. They don't return to him.

Why? Because sin always has been baffling. It makes no sense. And can you see in this chapter God looks down on us.

And can you feel his heart for us coming through, can't you? Verse 31. Have I been a wilderness to you? So firstly sin is baffling.

But secondly sin is evil. And we see that in verse 13. My people have committed two evils. Verse 19.

[17:58] Your evil will chastise you. And your apostasy will approve 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.

And then see where the whole chapter ends. Three verse five. Extraordinary line. This isn't it at the very end. You have done all the evil that you could.

Of course we don't believe it's evil to abandon God. Why was their sin so evil? Well the dominant image God uses to describe what they've done in this chapter.

I wonder if you saw it. Is spiritual adultery. Two verse two. That's where it starts. I remember the devotion of your youth.

Your love as a bride. How you followed me in the wilderness. So Israel was like the bride of God. And God her husband. That's how it started.

[19:05] Now come to two verse 20. For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds. But you have said I will not serve.

Yes on every high hill and under every green tree. You bowed down like a whore. To these gods. Two verse 23.

Look at your way in the valley. Look and know what you've done. A restless young camel running here and there. A wild donkey. Used to the wilderness.

In her heat sniffing wind. Who can restrain her lust? Spiritual adultery. Verse 25. It is hopeless for I've loved foreigners. And after them I will go.

Two verse 32. Can a virgin forget her ornaments? Or a bride her attire?

[20:01] Can a bride forget her wedding dress? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number. She so despised her husband that she's forgotten who he was.

She's treated him as if he didn't exist. And then three verse two. This theme of spiritual adultery continues right to the end. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.

They have behaved like a whore with many lovers. Like a prostitute. But the picture is of a wife wonderfully treated. And provided for by her husband.

Who has nevertheless had adulterous relationship after adulterous relationship. What was most evil about their sin.

Was what they'd done with God. Do you notice that as Anna was reading? There is almost no mention of how they've treated each other or other people.

[21:09] There's one verse in verse 34. How they've treated each other. But in a chapter and a half about them doing all the evil that they could. Isn't it striking that the subject is what they've done with God.

Well that's then. What about us? And I think the point is that as we read this. We realise that we're looking in the mirror.

That we have done. Or we would have done. Given the chance. Exactly the same with God. I don't know about you.

I think most of us. It would be interesting for you to discuss this in a minute. Most of us would hesitate at using the word evil. To describe ourselves. By nature.

And yet of course Jesus does. In Luke doesn't he? If you who are evil. Know how to give good things to your children. Why is evil the right word?

[22 : 14] Well because of what we've done with God. Just as they did. We have done or would have done the same. There may be some of us here. Who perhaps are brought up in Christian homes.

And just think. I've never run after idols like this. I've had the privilege of being a believer since very young. There may be others of us who read this and think.

Yeah I can look back on my life and see this in me. I think for those of us who've been brought up in Christian homes. The point is that this is the stuff you're made of.

This is what you would have done. If God had not been so gracious to you. You would have done all the evil that you could. You're made of the same stuff. To treat our loving creator who has given us everything.

Who has only ever been good to us. As if he were nothing. That is the definition of evil. That is the evil above all evils.

[23 : 17] Verse 19. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God. And we need to grasp that this is us by nature.

Not because. Not to crush us. The Bible shows us ourselves as we are. Not to crush us. But to humble us. And to lead us to the cure. Sin is baffling.

Sin is evil. Thirdly. Sin is made worse by denial. Sin is evil. And that's verse 23. Verse 23. How can you say I'm not unclean?

I've not gone after the Baals. And then verse 35. You say I'm innocent. Surely his anger has turned from me.

Behold I will bring you to judgment for saying I have not sinned. So that is not only were they evil.

[24 : 22] They refused to acknowledge it. And they refused to believe it. Now that is very familiar isn't it? I mean if you know yourself. I know myself. The denial of our sin.

Of our evil. And so therefore part of our sin. Is that we deny our sinfulness. That's what they did.

That's what we do. We refuse to accept that there is much wrong with us.

Instead we're proud. We have the forehead of a whore. Verse 3. Verse 3. Did you see that? The forehead of a whore. And we refuse to be ashamed.

The forehead of a whore. I think the commentators think that was about. Being unashamed. Of who you are. Everything out in the open.

Public and unashamed. Of who we are and who we worship. Our rejection of the living God. Well how perfectly that describes the last 50 years.

[25 : 26] Of the direction in the UK and the West. Unashamed. The point of our rejection. Of Christianity. Of Christianity. And of God. But also how perfectly it describes us.

That is I take it. That is why we find it so hard to accept this diagnosis of ourselves. I know that's true for me. To believe that we are evil and that we deserve hell.

Everything inside us seems to rise up to resist. No. I'm not unclean. Verse 23. I've not sinned. Verse 35.

Because part of our sin is that we refuse to acknowledge that we've done anything wrong. But God says that simply makes the crime all the worse. Verse 35.

Did you see that? It makes the crime all the worse. Behold I will bring you to judgment for saying I have not sinned. So sin is baffling.

[26 : 31] Sin is evil. Part of our sin is that we deny it. Fourthly. Sin cannot be washed away by us or corrected by God.

God isn't finished. There's more. So verse 22. Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap. The stain of your guilt is still before me.

God said to them no matter how much you try to wash yourselves. The stain remains. No amount of cleaning up your lives.

No amount of penitence or animal sacrifice. Or religious acts. Or going to church. No amount of praying. Or no amount of serving. No amount of being on rotas.

No amount of ministry or evangelism. We cannot wash ourselves. The stain remains. When I was younger.

[27 : 28] The only stain I cared about on my clothes. I didn't really care about any stains on my clothes at all. But I do remember getting really upset when one thing happened. Which was when

my cricket whites trousers got stained on the knee with grass.

And I'd try and get these. There were all these sort of things that you could get to sort of rub on and then put them through the wash. And it would never come off. The stain remains.

So God says you cannot wash this stain away. All of your efforts. It's there. You can't remove it. But he also says sin cannot be corrected out of us even by the external discipline of God.

Did you see that in verse 30? In vain I have struck your children. They took no correction. Do you see that? The point there?

Because God in his mercy and goodness over the history of Israel had given multiple warnings. Even judgments. To bring them back to him.

[28 : 33] God says I've done that to no avail. Sin cannot be corrected out of them by external discipline. We're too stubborn.

Like the child who goes to his room. You ever had this? Like the child who goes to his room and comes out completely unchanged and insistent on his innocence.

Never happens in our house but you guys may have. In other words there is an immovability to our sin.

It is obstinate. An obstacle that cannot be removed, washed away or even corrected out of us externally by God.

It runs too deep. Oh for a cure to sin. Is what we should be crying out. And fifthly sin means that we can't just return to God as we are and be accepted.

[29 : 38] That's really striking. That's verses 3 verses 1 to 3. If a man divorces his wife, I think the implication is that she's been unfaithful.

If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes the other man's wife, will he return to her? No.

Would that land not be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers. And would you just come back to me? God says.

Lift up your eyes and see. Verse 2. Where have you not been ravished? The argument, therefore, is from the lesser to the greater.

If this smaller example between a man and his wife wouldn't be right, how much greater the problem if you were to just come back to me and say, can we be friends again?

[30 : 41] There is no way back to a holy God by nature. Simply repentance on its own is no good.

Would you come back to me? Having polluted yourself like that? God is fiercely holy. And after what we've done, he cannot just have us back.

That's what he's saying. After what you've done, would you just return to me like that with no saviour? And yet that is what so many of us think, isn't it?

And many of our friends and colleagues and what we probably used to think by nature, God will have me back. I was chatting to someone just the other day outside St. Botolph's in the city.

And he said, look, I don't know if God does exist, but if he does, I'm sure it'll be fine on judgment day. We'll be all right. It'll be all right in the end. He'll have me back.

[31 : 42] God says, you have played the whore with many lovers. Do you think everything's going to be all right in the end? No, it's impossible. It's a contamination issue.

He cannot because he is holy. Oh, for a cure to sin. And then finally, number six.

And yet. This is just briefly on where it ends. I wonder if you saw this. Verse four. Three, verse four. Have you not just called out to me? My father, you are the friend of my youth. Will he be angry forever? Will he be indignant to the end? Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.

Now, I think this is once you grasp what God is saying here. It opens us up to the incredible character of God. When he says, behold, you have spoken.

[32 : 48] I think he means, yes, I will not be angry with you forever. I am your father and your friend. But you've done all the evil that you could.

So they're saying it from a position of complete entitlement. God, we're your friend. You're our father. Surely you won't be angry with us forever. Come on.

Come on. God says, you're right. I won't. But I want you to realize that you've done all the evil that you could.

Do you understand? Can you see that? You're right. I will love you. I will restore you. And that's where we're going to be in the afternoon. Just pause on that for a second.

