

The Miracle of the Temple Tax

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- [0:00] I'll turn back with me to Jeremiah chapter 2. Find that on page 6 to 7 of your church Bibles.
- I want to consider with you the first eight verses and if you like the central verse, very much crucial to this passage where we read in verse 4 here, 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.
- Unless we look around even at our nation, even to this day we can see it's so very much like the nation of Judah when Jeremiah first came on the scene to prophesy God's word to the people.
- Jeremiah came to pronounce judgment against the people of Judah. Judah, remember with its capital Jerusalem, you might say Judah was falling apart at the seams.
- [1:18] Everything was going wrong as a result of the people's failure to follow God and to worship Him wholly, fully. Enemies were surrounding Judah.
- And inside even the nation itself, trouble after trouble, government was unstable. Disaster. There was disaster upon disaster that was being faced by the people.
- Immorality was everywhere. False gods worshipped instead of true worship of the one true God. This is a people we're talking about.
- The people of Judah that had known so much blessing from God and they've been throwing it away to worship these idols, the idols of their neighbours, the idols of man's creation.
- They were doing it to satisfy their own perverse desires rather than give wholehearted worship and devotion to God, to the one true God.
- [2:25] God, the covenant God of His people. And yet the people so unfaithful towards Him. And that spiritual decline that you read often, the book of Judges for example, which we'll come back to again actually, that nation's decline, a spiritual decline, a moral decline, the leaders had brought that upon the nation, the people followed in that decline.
- They knew the truth, but they didn't practice it. And in the midst of that decline, that spiritual decline, God sends His prophet.
- God sends Jeremiah. God sends Jeremiah to confront the nation. And as we read there at the end of chapter 1, God promises to be with Jeremiah, to strengthen him, to be like a fortified city, to be strong, to stand strong against the assaults of the enemy.
- Yes, God promises He will face opposition. He will face those who will fight against Him. But as we read at the end of chapter 1, those who would oppose Jeremiah for speaking God's word, these people wouldn't prevail against Him.
- Why? Because as God says, I am with you. And with God being with Jeremiah, Jeremiah sent out to proclaim God's word of judgment against the people.
- [3:48] It was going to be truth that Jeremiah would proclaim. It was going to be God's word to a people that had strayed far, far from God.

And the message that Jeremiah was going to give wasn't going to be very nice. It wasn't a very nice sounding. It wasn't a message to flatter, or somehow pretend that there was nothing wrong in Judah.

Jeremiah was to give what we call the whole counsel of God. And that involves telling the truth about sin, about the sin in Judah's society, in Judah's people.

And, you know, when we think even of today in our own responsibilities, as those who would proclaim God's word, you're a Christian. You have a message to give.

And none of us can shirk from giving that message, the message of the gospel, the message of God's word. Even when the message offends, and it will offend.

[4:51] It will offend in a society that's truly offended by the word of truth. And we give the message of the good news of the gospel, even when that message hurts, even when it creates an adverse reaction.

Because the message that the Christian has given to proclaim will tell of what's wrong in the world, will tell of the sin in the hearts of the people.

We give what we give to point others to the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus. And if you truly love the Savior, if you love them, you have a message to give.

That message of peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus. That message that speaks of sin, and that message that speaks of sin as an offense to a holy God.

That message that tells that sinners can come to a Lord God Almighty. And no salvation through the finished work of Jesus.

[5:57] That message offends, that message hurts, that message brings about a reaction. That message speaks of sin within the human heart. There's a message that has to be told. And as we're following on, I pray from our thoughts on New Year's Day, on really the initial call of Jeremiah to speak God's word to the whole of Judah, to Judean society.

Well, I think we can just logically follow on from the end of chapter 1 into chapter 2. And then, God willing, we'll see how it goes, but we'll see how we proceed in the book of Jeremiah.

I mean, in the past, I've looked at certain passages in Jeremiah, but never really followed through the theme of the book. So we'll see how it goes. To show the urgency of the warnings that God gave to the people then, as God gives to us now.

Warnings to repent. Warnings to examine ourselves. Warnings to test their hearts. Warnings to look at our hearts, to see truly, are we fully following our Lord and Saviour?

Are we truly being faithful faithful as Christians? As Christians? As faithful as a church of the living Lord Jesus? So, it will be difficult.

[7:23] I mean, what we find here in this passage, these are hard words to proclaim, because they're telling of a downward decline of the people there in Jeremiah's day, as we see, don't we, in our own day.

But, you know, as we were thinking even this morning with the children, you know, God is giving us His Word as a warning, as a restorative warning. The warnings that God gives us in His Word are there to restore you to Himself, to bring you back to Himself, to rest the backslider, as it were, to restore even that joy to your heart.

And yes, you realize the sin that lies within, that you realize that we have a God who forgives us our sins, who cleanses us, who redeems us, brings us back to Himself, and uses us, uses you in His service.

So, we're going to spend some time in some of the first eight verses. See, what's God saying to the people of Judah then? What application does this have for us now in 2020?

What is it saying for the good of our souls, even in this difficult passage? Well, let's look at the first three verses, initially anyway. God's remembering.

- [8 : 46] I remember, God says to the people, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, and 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. So, God's speaking to the people, to certainly the people of Jerusalem, the capital.

He's speaking through Jeremiah the prophet. And he's telling of their descendants, the descendants of these people, the Israelites. Israelites who left the oppression of Egypt, remember, and wandered in the desert for 40 years.

And God's telling the people in Jeremiah's day, he's telling, you know, what it was like before the Israelites stumbled and fell in unfaithfulness, before they rejected God.

And yes, when the Israelites left Egypt at first, God the Lord was their first love. And God's reminding the people there of the security that the Israelites had in their early existence as a nation.

- [9 : 58] You read in Exodus 14 verse 31, for example, at the very start of their escape from Egypt, were told these words, that the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord.

The people were devoted to God. They feared the Lord. They believed in the Lord. They loved God as a bride loves her husband. And the language you see there in verse 2, this is the language that, you know, that tells of a, it's like a marriage relationship.

You know, a new bride that's utterly in love with her husband. And there's a loyalty, a love, a forsaking all others. And, you know, speaking of faithfulness, faithfulness to God, certainly in the early days of the Israelites and their escape from Egypt.

And it's that relationship in love that the Lord's people know, the Lord's people, and you who are in Christ, when you first came to know Jesus as your Saviour, that first love, that love that was so strong.

And it was shown, it was evident in your close walk with the Saviour. You had a deepening prayer and a continuing prayer line. You were active in leaving behind all that had once snared you in sin.

- [11 : 21] You were faithfully following the Lord and reading His Word and applying His Word. Jesus had the first call on your life.

This is the first priority, your chief priority in life. It was like that marriage example, the devotion and love that you had to your Lord and Saviour.

And the loyalty here that God tells the people of Jerusalem, that He tells them that once characterized their ancestors, when they followed Him, God's saying, well, look at what it was once like.

God led the people through the wilderness. Remember when we followed God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. I mean, as you see there, again, just looking at the first, certainly verse 2 and 3, this picture that God gives of how God was utterly faithful to His people.

God led His people through the wilderness. The people were His special people. They were holy to God. They were His precious possession. We're told here they were the first fruits of His harvest.

- [12 : 33] In other words, just like the best crops were given to God and sacrificed where the people were considered special to God. The people were God's special possession.

They were so different to the nations around them. And you see in this poetic language at the end of verse, see, these nations, these enemies, they didn't succeed in overcoming God's people.

and God's saying, I remember. I remember these days. I remember these days of devotion. I remember. And when you see the concept of remembering in the Bible, whether it's the Old Testament, the New Testament, remembering has the sense of calling to mind with a view to action.

In two weeks' time, we're going to be once more celebrating the Lord's Supper. We'll be remembering the Lord's death till He comes. And in that remembering, yes, calling to mind what Jesus has done for us, He's done by His sacrifice, and His love, and His giving of Himself, we'll be remembering that with a view to action, with a view to living lives more faithfully, witnessing for Him, being strengthened through the Lord's Supper.

And God's saying here, I remember what you were like in the former days, before you wandered from me. God's saying, I remember. I remember.

[14:05] So that you're, so that you know that you're still my people, and I'm going to act on that remembering. I'm going to do it for your good, for your instruction, and in that acting upon my remembering, justice will be given, judgment given upon you, placed upon you, to teach you, to restore you, to bring you back to myself.

And it's that discipline that the Lord does and continues and will continue to show to His erring people. Yes, to me, to you.

You know, when we stumble, when we fall, when we fall back into sin, and we dishonor God, and we contradict the profession that we make in our Saviour, we do it by our words, we do it by our actions, we do it by a lifestyle that denies the Lord.

And God will discipline. God will discipline. You read what the writer to the Hebrews said in the New Testament when he said, the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom He receives.

Or you go to another part of Revelation, chapter we didn't read, Revelation 3, 19, those whom I love I reprove and discipline. Or in Proverbs 3, in the Old Testament, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves Him whom He loves as a father, the son, and whom He delights.

[15:36] So, none of us can ever accuse God of some kind of injustice when God disciplines His people, when He disciplines His church.

Yes, even when our nation is disciplined for our turning away from Him. Let's never despise the discipline of God as somehow being unfair or, you know, without any purpose.

But in humility and love for God, then give Him the glory, give Him thanks for that restorative discipline because God disciplines in order to bring us back to Himself.

and as we see here, God would discipline His people and will come to discipline His people to bring them back to Himself, to restore His people to Himself.

The people needed restoring. Why? Because they'd rejected God as we see in verses 4 to 8. The people who had left Egypt, they believed God, they feared God, but then something changed.

[16:44] something changed. And what was that? The people forgot God. They'd abandoned their first love. The love of the bride to the Lord, the devotion of the people, that devotion waned, it grew cold.

And that's why we read there in Revelation 2 the church in Ephesus that had abandoned its first love. This against you. You've abandoned the love you had at first.

Remember from where you fall and repent and do the works you did at first. And whether it's Judah in Jeremiah's day, or Ephesus in the Apostle John's day, or whether indeed it's in our own day, there is that abandoning of our first love, the love that we had at first when Jesus became our Saviour.

When you had that heart that was on fire for the Lord. As we said, that first love, you know, the newly married bride for her husband. And now we see in our own lives how much that first love has withered other places of other people, other loves have taken the place of our love of the Saviour.

And there are many reasons. There are many reasons why the first love, that first love for Christ is certainly abandoned or certainly withered.

[18:17] And we see reasons here in this passage why, certainly why the people of Judah abandoned their first love and we can bring that to our own application ourselves.

And what do we see then? We see, first of all, worthlessness instead of worthiness. worthlessness. You see that in verse 5, what wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me and went after worthlessness and became worthless.

I mean, obviously this is a rhetorical question. You know, this has got a question with an obvious answer. What wrong, what fault did the people's ancestors, what fault did the Israelites find in God that they had to stray from him?

And of course the answer is none. There was nothing wrong. There was no fault in God because there's no wrong or fault in God. God is altogether righteous.

He's altogether holy. So God's giving this question to the people so that the present generation that he's speaking to realize that they realize that the fault and strain from God was in their forefathers and not in God.

[19:29] And it's the same fault that these people were guilty of. So God will discipline them for their good. So what did the people do that, you know, incurred God's righteous discipline?

Well, we're told they went after or they exchanged worthlessness and became worthless. They exchanged following God who's all worthy.

They exchanged that for following, we're told here, worthlessness. But then you say, well, what does this worthlessness mean? What is this worthlessness? Well, it's one word in the original language.

It's a word for idols. It's a word that's used in Scripture for a number of things. Vanity is another use of that word, or emptiness. Worthless idols.

Yep. Ecclesiastes, you know, vanity of vanity, says the preacher, all is vanity. It's the same word there. Or occasionally it's used to speak of breath that just sort of passes fleetingly very quickly, that's got no substance to it.

[20:37] In other words, emptiness. God's saying that the forefathers, the forefathers who exchanged following me for worthless idols, for vanities, for emptiness, he's saying they became worthless themselves, they became empty.

And isn't that, you know, bring that even to our own application, isn't that the feature of somebody that exchanges the worthiness of God for the worthlessness of idols, the emptiness of idols?

You know, when your love for God, your firm, sure love for God is exchanged for a love and a worship of anything that's not God. And as we said, we truly need to examine our hearts in that respect.

I mean, are we losing that first love for that which is not God, which replaces God in the affections of our heart?

The emptiness, yes, that we see all clearly, and yet so often we see it in others and not in ourselves. When I'm so quick to judge others for their emptiness, for living lives, you might see locked in so many empty values, you know, the emptiness of the celebrity status that others will crave for, but in reality, I'm just as empty, just if not more empty when I'm condemning others, when I'm judging others through my own spiritual arrogance.

[22 : 20] you know, that emptiness, that worthlessness of spiritual pride that condemns the fault in others but ignores the sin in itself.

When you see the speck of dust in your brother's eye that offends you so much, and yet you don't even notice the beam or the log in your own eye, that's what happens when you're acting in all worthlessness.

that's an evidence of losing your first love when self becomes your God. But what other evidence is there for abandoning God, for losing that first love?

Well, what else are we told here? We're told that the future of that is not living by faith. In fact, twice in the space of a few verses, God's calling to mind the same fault in the people.

that fault being not seeking God, not seeking God in every area of life, not exercising faith in the one true God.

[23 : 26] You see that in verse 6, they did not say, where is the Lord? And then you come later to the priests who did not say, where is the Lord?

In other words, God's condemning the people because they're not inquiring after him, they're not seeking him. they're not asking, where is the Lord?

Where are you Lord? I mean, the priests, the priests who ought to be, if you like, at the forefront of seeking the Lord were told they have no heart for seeking God.

They forgot God. God wasn't at the forefront of their lives. God wasn't at the centre of every aspect of the lives of the priests, of the people, of the leaders.

the first love for God had gone. I mean, the people, obviously, as we see here, the people had forgotten God, God who delivered them from Egypt.

[24 : 25] They'd forgotten the God who'd led them through the wilderness. They'd forgotten God who'd led them through that difficult terrain. You see there in verse 6, again, the language that's used to show just how difficult the terrain was, the circumstances were, the desert land, the inhospitable land, the land of drought and darkness and danger and deprivation.

And to make matters worse, the people had forgotten God who'd brought them into the land of plenty, from the wilderness to the promised land that you see there in verse 7.

And that same sin of forgetting God, obviously, well, evidently, was in the people whom Jeremiah was addressing. that sin of not acknowledging God our helper, not acknowledging that God is a very present help in time of trouble, the sin of forgetting God and for not seeking His faith in times of difficulty when there are yes issues to face, problems to deal with, maybe suffering, loss, bewilderment.

God is there and we don't call upon Him. Is that any of you? Have you forgotten to call on God in good times as well as in difficult times?

Is God simply an idea rather than your Lord and Saviour? You claim to follow Him but in an actual truth you're serving self rather than serving the one true God.

[26 : 04] Think back to the time that you were converted. Let's think back to that time of your first love when as we said when your love was so intense for your Saviour and now compare that with now.

When you first became a Christian, your constancy in the Word, that was so regular. You read and studied your Bible so devoutly. Your morning passages, the notes that you had were there before you, where are they now?

The diary that you kept of God's dealings with you, now just blank pages. You're still crying out, where are you Lord? I need you every moment of every day.

But now just trying to work things out by your own wisdom, not calling on God for His mercy and grace. And we see all this not to condemn, not at all, not to accuse, but again coming back to this sense of restoration.

God is saying what He's saying through Jeremiah to, yes, to confront the people, to show them the enormity of their sin, so that they might turn back to Him.

[27:18] As we said, God's discipline is restorative. Should every one of us need to hear the words of God here, yes, to show us ourselves and to bring us to that point of return?

Her loving Savior. But one more thing, there's one more thing, that the people showed as evidence of not following Him, of losing their first love.

You see it in verses 7 and 8, defiling what's pure. But when you came in, we're told, in verse 7, when you came in to the promised land, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.

Look at how God puts this. see the contrast between you and God. When you came in, you defiled my land.

See the contrast. And made my heritage an abomination. People had entered the promised land. It's God that had given them the victory, the victory over the pagan tribes.

[28:23] God had given them a strong leader, Joshua. Joshua had led the people. The people were able to settle in the land to build homes, to settle down. You read in Judges chapter 2, the very early part after Joshua dies, we're told that there arose another generation who did not know the Lord or the work that he'd done for Israel.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and were told and they abandoned the Lord. And the passage tells us in abandoning the Lord, they went after other gods, the gods of the people around them.

That's what happened when the people defiled the land, when they polluted the land by forgetting God. And in forgetting God they tried to replace God with the idols of their neighbours, things that they could see physically, touch physically, handle physically, idols made by man, idols, if you like, constructed in the mind of man.

And the people were told preferred all these repugnant things, these disgusting things instead of worshipping the one true God of his people.

You see the people in Jeremiah's time they've been confronted, they've been shown the wickedness of their forefathers. But this is what was happening in their time too.

[29:54] And God wasn't going to stand by and allow that downward trend of idolatry and spiritual backsliding to continue and continue and continue. God would step in and exercise his justice.

What about today? What about you? What about me today? Are we defiling what's pure in the presence of God? I mean even now we're in a place of worship.

worship? Is worship actually far from your heart? Far from my heart? Is my heart far from God when we might have all the head knowledge that there is to know about God and yet my heart far from him?

That's defiling this place. Have I lost my first love in worshipping him? You know as the psalmist said I joined when to the house of God go up they said to me is that joy in your heart when you come into this place of worship?

I mean it's just cold before God and before one another. Have I lost my first love even in worshipping him? You see the defiling that Jeremiah speaks of here wasn't just the leaders of the people.

[31:12] We're told we've mentioned this I know but let's stress it again we're mentioned the priests who didn't inquire after God. I mean these people who were in positions of leadership, the religious leadership, they didn't even know God the Lord we're told.

They ought to have been shepherds of the people. They ought to have led the people, guided the people. They ought to have been examples to the people but they didn't even know God to show a godly example.

Or the prophets, the people who claimed to be prophets but in fact were false prophets, they weren't proclaiming the word of God, they were proclaiming the worthless word of the pagan idols around them.

And the frightening reality of a land, well it's even there here with us today. Somebody once wrote, someone sang, that the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency.

All non-believers and men-stealers talking in the name of religion. and isn't it a symptom of a society where true religion, true worship of God's neglected, where we have such false teachers today.

[32 : 25] Yes, we can point that out but again, let's be very aware of our own culpability in all this because you can lose your first love, I can lose my first love, when even you give a hint of respect to those that are false teachers, when you give credibility to a word that is utterly contrary to scripture, you might even applaud such people that are so contrary to the gospel.

I mean, I have nothing to do with these false teachers who peddle a false gospel. And there's so many false gospel forms around. I have nothing to do with that which sounds so plausible.

Christians can be taken in by such false teaching, such, we might even say disgusting theology that's no theology at all. And so, what do we find here?

We're seeing here that God is speaking the way he does to warn us, to bring us back to our senses. Remember what he said to the church in Ephesus, the church that had lost their first love?

He said, repent and do the works that you did at first. first love can be restored. I mean, if you know in your heart that that first love is, you might even say, is a fading memory, well, repent and truly repent.

[33 : 51] Repent of that forgetting of God. And know that our God is gracious. Our God is, he will forgive, he will cleanse, and he will restore.

We find in Joel chapter 2, return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God's not a God who will turn away the repentant sinner.

He's not going to turn you away when you come to him through repentance of heart and confess that you have abandoned your first love. But when you do repent and you'll know that joy in the returning to your first love, and you'll serve him the more and be strengthened the more and worship him the more and rejoice in him the more in all the days that God gives you on this side of eternity.

So may God bless to us his word. Amen. Let us pray. Our Lord, we have much to confess in our falling far from you, even in abandoning our first love of Christ.

And so, Lord, we pray that you will bring your people to that point of restoration, that you will restore us to yourself, and that we will know, and all here who know the wonder of Christ's love, will know that love and be restored in it.

[35 : 20] And for any Lord even here tonight who as yet don't know the love of Christ, may they turn to him, may they be turned to him and drawn by faith in the living Lord Jesus.

So hear us, Lord, as we continue in worship before you now. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's sing in closing in Psalm 85.

Psalm 85 on page 113. In times past, Lord, you showed favor to your own beloved land. The prosperity of Jacob you restored by your strong hand.

You forgave your people's trespass. You were pleased their sins to hide. You withdrew all your displeasure from your wrath. You turned aside. Then these words, God our Savior, now restore us.

From us turn away your rage. And so on. Psalm 85 to God's praise. God save the God
save you, God save you, God save you. And so on.