



## METAPHORS OF APOSTASY

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 Jeremiah 2:14-37  
 Fourth Message  
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The Yad Veshem Memorial in Jerusalem was erected in memory of the six million Jews who were killed in the Holocaust. Its name, which means "a monument and name," is taken from Isaiah 56.5:

**"To them I will give in My house and within My walls  
 a memorial, ...  
 I will give them an everlasting name which will not be  
 cut off."**

Yad Veshem is graced by a number of memorials, exhibits and sculptures. The mosaic floor of the Hall of Remembrance is inscribed with the names of the 22 largest Nazi concentration camps. The Pillar of Heroism recalls the deeds of valor of the resistance fighters. The Avenue of Righteous Gentiles is lined with trees planted in honor of non-Jews, people like Corrie Ten Boom and Oscar Schindler, who risked their lives to save Jews. The Exhibition Hall documents the history of the Holocaust. The memorial to the children who perished is an enclosed structure, utterly dark except for a myriad of tiny lights reflected in panels of mirrors. There is no sound except that of a voice reading aloud the names of the children who died.

I have visited Yad Veshem twice and both times have had the same sobering reaction. The memorial is a place for somber reflection. The terrible evil of the Holocaust really happened. There is no way to explain, justify or rationalize it. The stark reality of the horror of it can't be dismissed. Yad Veshem is a place of mourning. There the words of John Donne resound in the silence, "Every man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

The words of the prophet Jeremiah have the same sobering impact on me. In the pages of this prophecy I am confronted with the evil and the horror of my sin, deeds which I cannot dismiss, explain or justify. Here I sense my deep depravity: a heart that is deceptively wicked and intensely selfish. We tend to live in a fantasy world. We see what we want to see about ourselves; the rest we rationalize and defend. We ignore our own evil but are quick to point out wickedness in others. This is why we need the prophet to keep us on our knees. Jeremiah shatters the fantasy world we so carefully build. It is a time to mourn, yes, but for those who have "ears to hear," it is also a time to heal and be cleansed.

This morning we come to the words of Jeremiah from chapter 2, beginning with verse 14:

**"Is Israel a slave?  
 Or is he a homeborn servant?  
 Why has he become a prey?  
 The young lions have roared at him,  
 They have roared loudly,  
 And they have made his land a waste;**

**His cities have been destroyed, without inhabitant.  
 Also the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes  
 Have shaved the crown of your head.  
 Have you not done this to yourself,  
 By your forsaking the Lord your God,  
 When He led you in the way?  
 But now what are you doing on the road to Egypt,  
 To drink the waters of the Nile?  
 Or what are you doing on the road to Assyria,  
 To drink the waters of the Euphrates?  
 Your own wickedness will correct you,  
 And your apostasies will reprove you;  
 Know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter  
 For you to forsake the Lord your God,  
 And the dread of Me is not in you," declares the Lord  
 God of hosts.**

**"For long ago I broke your yoke  
 And tore off your bonds;  
 But you said, 'I will not serve!'  
 For on every high hill  
 And under every green tree  
 You have lain down as a harlot.  
 Yet I planted you a choice vine,  
 A completely faithful seed.  
 How then have you turned yourself before Me  
 Into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?  
 Although you wash yourself with lye  
 And use much soap,  
 The stain of your iniquity is before Me," declares the  
 Lord God.**

**"How can you say, 'I am not defiled,  
 I have not gone after the Baals'?  
 Look at your way in the valley!  
 Know what you have done!  
 You are a swift young camel entangling her ways,  
 A wild donkey accustomed to the wilderness,  
 That sniffs the wind in her passion.  
 In the time of her heat who can turn her away?  
 All who seek her will not become weary;  
 In her month they will find her.  
 Keep your feet from being unshod  
 And your throat from thirst;  
 But you said, 'It is hopeless! No!  
 For I have loved strangers,  
 And after them I will walk.'  
 As the thief is shamed when he is discovered,  
 So the house of Israel is shamed;  
 They, their kings, their princes,  
 And 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 will say, 'Arise and  
 save us.'  
 But where are your gods  
 Which you made for yourself?**

**Let them arise, if they can save you  
 In the time of your trouble;  
 For according to the number of your cities  
 Are your gods, O Judah.  
 Why do you contend with Me?  
 You have all transgressed against Me,” declares the Lord.  
 “In vain I have struck your sons;  
 They accepted no chastening.  
 Your sword has devoured your prophets  
 Like a destroying lion.  
 O generation, heed the word of the Lord.  
 Have I been a wilderness to Israel,  
 Or a land of thick darkness?  
 Why do My people say, ‘We are free to roam;  
 We will come no more to Thee’?  
 Can a virgin forget her ornaments,  
 Or a bride her attire?  
 Yet My people have forgotten Me  
 Days without number.  
 How well you prepare your way  
 To seek love!  
 Therefore even the wicked women  
 You have taught your ways.  
 Also on your skirts is found  
 The lifeblood of the innocent poor;  
 You did not find them breaking in.  
 But in spite of all these things,  
 Yet you said, ‘I am innocent;  
 Surely His anger is turned away from me.’  
 Behold, I will enter into judgment with you  
 Because you say, ‘I have not sinned.’  
 Why do you go around so much  
 Changing your way?  
 Also, you shall be put to shame by Egypt  
 As you were put to shame by Assyria.  
 “From this place also you shall go out  
 With your hands on your head;  
 For the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust,  
 And you shall not prosper with them.”  
 (Jer 2:14-37, NASB)**

In our earlier studies we learned that Israel had forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water, and had begun to worship idols. They were digging cisterns that leaked and could not satisfy. Now, God speaks to the nation to call them back, using a number of metaphors to describe their behavior. We will look at what I call four metaphors of apostasy.

The first metaphor is that of a slave: “Is Israel a slave? Or is he a homeborn servant?” demands the Lord (verse 14). It was never God’s intention for his people to enter into slavery again. The nation had been freed from that to become a son and an heir. God is astonished and bewildered that Israel would rather be a slave than a son.

Israel became a slave because they forsook the Lord and insisted on placing themselves at the mercy of ruthless foreigners. Throughout this period in their history they had continually been drawn into compromising and dangerous alliances with Egypt and Assyria. They were playing power politics. Memphis and Tahpanhes (verse 16) were cities in Egypt. Notice the reference to the Nile and the Euphrates, a connection with verse 2:13, which speaks of Israel forsaking living water to trust in broken cisterns. They had left their true protector, the One who had led them in the way and provided for them in the wilderness, to trust in changeable political alliances. They even feared those na-

tions more than they feared the Lord. God is astonished at this. He asks, “What are you doing on the road to Egypt? What are you doing on the road to Assyria?” They became the prey of young lions. Egypt and Assyria devoured them. Their land became a waste, their cities destroyed. And they did this to themselves. They were corrected by their own wickedness. The very nations that Israel trusted in became God’s rods of judgment.

As Christians we too forsake the Lord and worship idols: money, sex, power, success, possessions, fame. We do this because we hope these things will bring us security, protect us from enemies and dull our pain. We think, “If I could just get enough money I would not have to fear financial pressures...” “If the right person came along, then I wouldn’t have to feel the pain of loneliness and the ache of dark nights...”

We travel long distances and go to great lengths to secure precarious alliances in spite of the fact that God has freed us from sin and death. He has led us through the wilderness into the promise of Christ. He has called us to be sons and daughters, not slaves. But even as his people we choose idols over him. We put our trust in them only to become slaves—slaves to our idols and slaves to our sin—and these very things end up destroying us. We do this to ourselves only to find, as Israel did, that our own wickedness corrects and reproves us.

A young man shared his spiritual journey at our men’s retreat last weekend. He said that years earlier he had developed a scheme to ease his pain and make him feel secure. His threefold plan was to develop his body, find a girl friend, and become financially independent. But God took away his idols one by one. The man developed a stomach problem and had to give up bodybuilding. He fell into depression and lost his girl friend. His plan for financial success failed when he found there were no positions open to him after he graduated from law school. But his losses became gain to him when he found Christ. How true are the words of Paul, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (Rom 6:16)

The second metaphor is that of a harlot, an unfaithful wife (verses 20, 23, 32, 33), a familiar picture used throughout the Old Testament. Israel was God’s adored bride, but she was unfaithful to her wedding vows. She refused to be loyal, finding the lure of the forbidden to be irresistible. She went up on every high hill and lay down as a harlot in worship of Baal. This type of worship, which involved male and female cult-prostitutes, was preoccupied with fertility.

This image is greatly intensified in verses 23-24. The she-camel is utterly unreliable, ungainly and easily disturbed. The wild donkey is violent when she is in heat. She sniffs out the ground, trying to pick up the scent of the male. He does not have to worry about chasing her. He won’t become tired; she will find him. God compares Israel, his bride, to a wild animal in heat in the way she pursues other lovers. She is fickle and unreliable. So intent is she on pursuing her lusts, the idols do not have to find her; she is out sniffing for them.

Verses 32-33 describe Israel as a bride who has forgotten

her wedding attire, the jewelry and sash that marked her as being married. Yet what was most treasured she had readily abandoned. Consider how precious are wedding rings, yet Israel had thrown hers away—and not for a short time, but for days without number. In fact, Israel had become so accomplished at her harlotry that she taught the wicked woman her ways. Does the world watch the church and become schooled in the ways of idol worship, or does it see the church's devotion to God?

Harlotry is a powerful image. It is no minor thing to offer our love and affection to an idol. God unveils for us the deep significance of our ways. To him, this is a crime of the heart, a crime of lustful passion. The issue is marriage fidelity. We abandon our marriage relationship with God to seek satisfaction for our lustful desires. And we just don't dabble in idolatry. We run full bore towards the ways of the world, like an animal in heat.

In this image we see how much we hurt God with our idolatry. Infidelity in marriage is such a hurtful, painful thing. The world may make light of it, but God abhors it. Marriage is a holy and sacred estate—and so is our relationship with God. It tears him apart when we minimize and trivialize it by fooling around with other gods and following them.

The next metaphor comes from the vineyard (verse 21). Israel was a choice, well-chosen vine, but she became a degenerate, wild vine. This picture is repeated in the book of Isaiah:

**“Let me sing now for my well-beloved  
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.  
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.  
And He dug it all around, removed its stones,  
And planted it with the choicest vine.  
And He built a tower in the middle of it,  
And hewed out a wine vat in it;  
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,  
But it produced only worthless ones.”** (Isa 5:1-2)

God planted a choice vine, Israel, in his vineyard, in Canaan, the most fertile of all places, a land flowing with milk and honey, his garden, the new Eden. But this special vine had become a wild seed, a foreign vine, a degenerate vine, producing only worthless grapes, rotten fruit. Ironically, Delilah came from the Valley of Sorek, the valley of the choice vine. This was where the Nazarite Samson was defeated. God's choice vine had become wild. And this is what happened to Israel.

I take great delight in vineyards. One of my favorite travel memories is of a cruise down the Rhine in Germany years ago. The hills on both sides of the river are home to vineyards that are hundreds of years old. It was obvious that the vines were very carefully cultivated and cared for all those years. I even became a cultivator of vines myself. A couple of years ago I planted some in my back yard and trained them to grow on a trellis. Every morning I would look at them through my kitchen window. They were a delight to my eyes. But last winter's frost killed them, and as I beheld the dead shoots I was greatly saddened.

God's people are his vineyard. He cultivates the soil and plants us and takes great delight in watching his vineyard grow. But when we stray from him, he is saddened. Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes

away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2). God's desire is for his vineyard to produce fruit: good grapes and excellent wine. Fruit is symbolic of godly character, a Spirit-filled life. “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (15:8). We bear fruit by abiding in the vine. We become degenerate seed when we walk after idols. We dry up, and experience God's judgment.

The final metaphor is that of the thief who is exposed (verse 26). Israel is compared to a thief who is shamed when he is found out. The metaphor applies not just to the common people of Israel but also its leaders, the kings, princes, priests and prophets. They too have been sneaking around in the dark, on the high places, worshipping Baal. They have been on a stealth mission to Assyria and Egypt. But they are not as clever as they thought. They are caught red-handed, in the very act. There they are on the high hill, saying to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave me birth.” The ironic thing is that Israel couldn't even get that right. Trees represented female Canaanite deities; stone pillars represented male Canaanite deities. Israel had it the other way around. Having being thus exposed, Israel is shamed, humiliated and embarrassed, just as a thief is when he is caught in the act.

When we run after idols we are acting like thieves, trying to steal what is not ours. Thievery represents discontent, envy, greed, desperation. We are not satisfied with what God gives us. We want more and we try to get it by means of the five-finger discount. We think we will get something for free by means of deception. We repeat the scene involving Adam and Even in the garden (Genesis 3). Instead of being naked and unashamed, we are embarrassed and hide ourselves from God by means of lies and deception.

So Israel is pictured as a slave, a harlot, a degenerate vine, and a thief. These four metaphors unmask and unveil the evil and the horror of the nation's sin and idolatry. They do the same for us. Here we find ourselves exposed. Maybe we think we were getting away with it, but God breaks through our fantasy with his penetrating word.

Next, Israel responds to the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. First, the nation refused to serve her God. “But you said, “I will not serve” (verse 20); “Why do My people say, ‘We are free to roam; We will come no more to Thee?’” (verse 31.) Israel had an arrogant, defiant, in-your-face kind of attitude.

Second, Israel claimed false purity. “Although you wash yourself with lye And use much soap, The stain of your iniquity is before Me,” declares the Lord God” (verse 22). Israel can't cleanse herself. There was no home remedy for her guilt.

Third, Israel was in denial with regard to her sin. She would not accept guilt. “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals” (verse 23). “Yet you said, ‘I am innocent; Surely His anger is turned away from me’” (verse 35). They were living in a land of pretense. They believed their actions would have no outcomes or consequences. They were disconnected from reality.

Fourth, Israel had given up resisting idolatry. “But you said, ‘It is hopeless! No! For I have loved strangers, And after them I will walk’” (verse 25).

Israel could be restored. God did not want her to grow weary or thirsty, but she was acting like an addict, saying she could not be cured. She had resigned herself to serving idols.

Fifth, Israel believed her gods could save here in a time of trouble. "But in the time of their trouble they will say, 'Arise and save us.'" (verse 27). It is utter foolishness to think that an idol can provide security, safety and protection in a time of trouble. No idol has power to do any of these things. It is utter foolishness to think that we can walk after idols and then call on God to save us in our time of trouble.

Finally, Israel did not accept any discipline or correction. "In vain I have struck your sons; They accepted no chastening" (verse 30). Israel was not teachable. The people paid no heed to God's warnings. They refused his correction.

How does God respond to this arrogant, foolish, unteachable attitude? He responds the only way that he can, by promising judgment. Israel will be put to shame by Egypt and Assyria. They will go out with their hands on their heads. Yahweh has tried and tried (verse 30), but without success. The God of high hopes (verse 21) is now the God of pained disillusionment. And what God promises to Israel comes to pass.

How should we respond to these metaphors that unveil the evil of our own hearts? I suggest we should act in the same way as we do when we visit Yad Veshem: in mourning and somber reflection. Listen to these words of James: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you." (Jas 4:6-10)

The apostle John wrote: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9)

When we are confronted with the reality of our sin and idolatry, that is a time to mourn. It is a time to humble ourselves before God, to confess and draw near to him. God doesn't want to punish us. He is not vindictive. It pains him to judge us. But sometimes we leave him with no alternative when we remain prideful, unteachable and unwilling to admit our sin and guilt without excuse or explanation.

God does not want his people to remain in a state of guilt and shame. Shame is to be a precursor to repentance. God wants to love us. He wants us to be his sons and daughters, his bride, his vineyard. He wants to freely give us the grace we could never steal. What allows this to happen is confession and honesty. It is our sin that keeps us from the heart of God. But when we confess our sin, as John says, God is faithful and righteous to forgive and cleanse us. The heart of God is forgiveness. In his love we encounter the streams of living water at the well of forgiveness. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4).

At our retreat, several men spoke of their need to forgive and their hope that others would forgive them. There was a wonderful outpouring of confession and honesty as we prayed and shared together. God became very real to many as the Holy Spirit moved men to repentance. When we confess, he is faithful and righteous to forgive and cleanse us.

But when we try to hold onto both God and this world we end up losing everything. When we let go of this world, not only do we get the kingdom of heaven, we inherit the earth as well. If we want God's Spirit to move in this church we need to begin by falling on our knees before the Lord and dealing with the sin that is in our own hearts. We can talk all we like about all our troubles, our dysfunctional past and our various misfortunes, but that will never heal us. We can talk all we like about singing the right songs and having the right style of music, but that won't heal us either. What will bring healing is offering ourselves and all of our hearts at the altar of confession and forgiveness.

*If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?  
But there is forgiveness with Thee,  
That Thou mayest be feared. (Psa 130:3-4)*

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