

The Source of Our Strength

Jeremiah 2: 9-19; John 7: 37-38; Revelation 7: 15-20

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Jeremiah prophesied at a troubled time in Israel's history. His prophecies began in 627 B.C., under King Josiah. Through Jeremiah, God pleaded his case against his people and warned them to repent or he would send Babylon, as he had sent the Assyrian empire, against them. Since no one listened, eventually there were three deportations of the people of God as they were overcome by Babylon, Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C., and Israel as a nation state ceased to exist. Jeremiah held forth as God's spokesperson for over forty years and through the reign of three different kings.

These days, more than at any other time in my life, I have sensed that we who are Christians in this nation have an uncanny resemblance to the people of God at the time of Jeremiah. More than at any other time in my life, I believe we could learn today from what happened in Jeremiah's lifetime lest we repeat history in some most unfortunate ways. More than at any other time in my life, I believe God's warning then is also a word of warning for today.

At a time when Israel was secure, Jeremiah began to warn that God was angry with his people, and if they did not repent, if they did not turn back, disaster would overtake them. People at first laughed at Jeremiah, the same way they had laughed at Hosea before him, because life was good and they arrogantly believed it always would be. If someone had told us, prior to September 11, that fewer than two dozen people could orchestrate a plot to attack symbols of our prestige and power, sending our economy into a tailspin, and derailing our sense of national security, we probably would have laughed. Even on September 11, no one thought the towers would fall, until they did. How could the strongest and wealthiest nation in the world be brought to a standstill? How could a few greedy, dishonest people undo so many businesses in which we put our trust? How could our portfolios fail to profit? And now, how can we be so close to war? What does God have to say about all of this? I think we can find some answers to this question in Jeremiah. But I don't think we want to hear the truth now any more than the people of Israel wanted to hear the truth then. Nevertheless, I hope we will not be as foolish as God's people were in Jeremiah's time, because if we are, we will find, I believe, that it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. And that just may be God's Word for us today. If we don't heed his warnings and obey his Word, it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better.

The Book of Jeremiah does not flow chronologically as much as it ebbs and flows around certain themes. In the second chapter of Jeremiah, from which we just read, God is making a case against his people. Imagine a court of law. God is initiating a lawsuit against Israel for breach of covenant. Through Jeremiah, as through the prophets before him, God uses a variety of images and metaphors to communicate how he sees the situation. The images are not positive, but they are powerful and on target.

Where our scripture reading this morning ended, Jeremiah continued accusing God's people of sprawling on the ground and playing the whore under every green tree on every high hill. God says, "I planted you as a choice vine, of the purest stock. How

then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?"

God said of his people, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me into the wilderness, in a land not sown. You were holy to me, the first fruits of my harvest."

William Watley (*Teaching Sermons on Crucial Questions in the Bible: Are You the One?*) has said, "No other nation could claim a heritage like the covenant people of God." Moreover, he says, no other nation could trace their deliverance from slavery to the direct, verifiable, miraculous intervention of God. Who else could boast that the water of their oppressors was turned to blood, and the firstborn sons of their captors were slain while death passed over their own homes? What other nation could boast of the sea opening up so they could cross over into a new land and then closing over on their enemies? Who else could tell of being led by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day, could say that God fed them with manna from heaven in the morning and quail in the evening, while quenching their thirst with water flowing right out of rocks? Even their law was etched in stone by the very finger of God. What other nation could boast of military conquests as the result of marching around the walls of a great city until it fell? They were given a land flowing with milk and honey; how had such a choice vine planted in such a fertile place become degenerate?

Before answering that question, let's look at the similarities in our own time. Our nation began over two hundred years ago as a result of people coming to a new land in search of freedom. Many of them were leaving religious oppression and seeking the freedom to worship Almighty God as they saw fit. They founded this nation on Christian principles. They were thankful to God for all they were given. God blessed them with abundance. They profited and became prolific. Our coins read, "In God We Trust." Our national leaders declare God's name and seek God's blessing. But like the nation of Israel, our nation, a choice vine, has become wild.

God is clear about the cause of this wildness in his indictment of Israel. He says his people have committed two evils. First, they have forsaken him, the fountain of living water. Second, they have dug out cisterns, or vessels, for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water.

Blessed by God, the people of Israel began to distance themselves from the source of their blessings. Jeremiah says they followed after worthless things and became worthless. As their success grew, so did their confidence, which became a kind of self-reliant arrogance. They sought to profit more and more, not by staying close to God, but by following after gods of their own making and gods of their neighboring cultures. Israel was surrounded by pagan people who worshiped Ba'al. It was thought that Ba'al was responsible for all forms of riches and abundance, and so fertility cults existed to make offerings to the god of fruitfulness. When Jeremiah compared God's people to a young bride who has been playing fast and loose with many lovers, he was not exaggerating. Ba'al worshippers had fertility rituals in the high places. So when Jeremiah accused God's people of sprawling on every high hill and under every green tree, he was referring to the way Israel and Judah had become sexually depraved by adopting the customs of the pagans around them. Jeremiah also indicted God's people for seeking security through foreign alliances, when their security should have come from following the Lord their God. He said, "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 wickedness will punish you and your apostasies will

convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord of Hosts" (Jer. 2:18-19).

We, as a nation, have forsaken God. In a nation where the Bible outsells every other book, most of those Bibles collect dust rather than being read. We water down the importance and relevance of such things as the Ten Commandments at our own peril. God's law has been given to us for the building of a strong and healthy society. As we disregard God and God's law, we begin to tolerate the intolerable and accept the unacceptable. Are we people who take delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night? Or are we like those who follow the advice of the wicked, who take the path that sinners tread, who sit in the seat of scoffers (Psalm 1: 1)?

If we do not put our trust in God and obey his word, we will inevitably put our trust in something else and obey it. Jeremiah rails against the folly of following gods of our own making. He warns against adopting gods of the culture around us and following after anything we think could profit us, anything we think would add to our success.

If you think we are not like the people of Israel, fornicating themselves on every high hill, think again. I rarely watch TV. I really don't have time and I find most television programming less than entertaining and not at all edifying. Recently, however, I turned on "Extra" as the host was interviewing Joe Millionaire just a week before he chose his final contestant. The host asked Joe Millionaire—Evan is his real name—if he thought his admission that he, Evan, regularly watched pornographic movies would negatively affect his popularity. (Evan had admitted he liked one of his final contestants because she was kinky, and he thought she would do anything he wanted.) Evan responded, saying something like, "No, I don't think admitting I like porn will hurt my popularity—if anything it will help it. Show me any red-blooded American man who doesn't watch pornographic movies and I'll show you a liar."

In a subtle way, Evan and our national media were normalizing his behavior. The subliminal message was permission giving: pornography is okay and every man in America who is a real man is into it. As a society we have become completely desensitized to what is wrong and what is immoral. I believe Evan did, ultimately, choose his final contestant because he thought she was willing to do anything he wanted, and because he thought she would not care that he had deceived her in telling her he was a millionaire. The fact that the conversation I just described could air on national television with no negative repercussions whatever is appalling to me. Now Evan is saying so called "reality" TV has nothing to do with reality, it's all about entertainment and ratings. I agree, Evan. Our media engages in anything that profits, no matter how violent, how sexually explicit, or how voyeuristic. Only none of this ultimately profits anyone; it just eats away at the foundations of our society by normalizing what is abnormal, teaching us to accept what is unacceptable, and to tolerate what is intolerable.

We have become desensitized to what should offend us and outrage us. As Jeremiah said, we are a people who have forgotten how to blush. We no longer even feel a sense of shame. We have lowered the bar to the point that we are a society out of control. Our values have eroded so far; we have become morally depraved. People marveled at how AOL merged with Time-Warner a few years ago when AOL was such a young upstart of a company. The dirty little secret of AOL, and most internet success, is the profitability of pornography. And what is our nation doing to stop it, or to limit it? Precious little, because it profits. But as a pastor and marriage and family therapist,

I can tell you lives are being ruined, homes are being wrecked, and marriages are being lost to the epidemic levels of pornographic sexual addiction since the internet made porn affordable, accessible, and anonymous. We continue to go after things that do not profit us. Like Jeremiah's society, our society does whatever it takes to add to our success because we equate success with security. We don't heed God's call to care for those who are less fortunate; we just keep building bigger and bigger barns. Financial advisors in the late nineties were saying, "invest, invest, invest." And people were making a fortune. But then the bottom fell out, the economy went south, and our portfolios, which promised to profit us, didn't. Corporations in which we trusted betrayed us. As Jeremiah said, "they have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water."

Many of us have trusted in various forms of security our whole lives. With our Stars Wars Defense Missile System, we thought we were invincible to the kind of terrorism we hear about in other parts of the world—until September 11. Now we are obsessed with enhancing our sense of security. Carol Clarke shared an article with me this week about a new addiction, certainly an obsession, with security. Not a day goes by that we do not hear about national security, homeland security, and economic security. Our government tells us we are on an "orange alert," and I suppose there are other colors as well, and we are told to buy duct tape and bottled water. In our fear we are turning to all kinds of things that will not profit us if we are in a catastrophic chemical or biological attack. Do we really think duct tape will save us?

Some trust in our ability to wage war as the source of our strength. But initiating a war in a Muslim country could justify the declaration of a holy war on us, which could come with some unintended consequences that could take decades to undo. Some put their security in our ability to build foreign alliances. To date we are counting on Great Britain, Spain, and Bulgaria to support us if we wage war against Iraq, but we don't have the support of China, Russia, France, Germany, or Syria. Remember, Israel tried to build foreign alliances in Jeremiah's time, to enhance their strength, and those with whom they sought alliances ate them alive. Instead of drinking of the fountain of living water, they drank of the waters of the Nile and the waters of the Euphrates, watering down their beliefs and their moral standards as they did so.

Some who are going on peace marches seem to think that by avoiding war we will have security. Do you know what Jeremiah had to say about that? "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They have acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not even know how to blush. Therefore they will fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord" (Jer. 6: 13-15).

The towers have fallen, and we still put our trust in broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Last summer I heard Calvin Butts, the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, preach about the impact of September 11 on New York. Speaking of the World Trade Center towers, he said we built two giant phallic symbols to effectively say to the world, "ours are bigger than yours." Our monuments to our success fell, and our tributes to our prestige and power became tombs. If you are offended that Calvin Butts would say that, if you are offended by Jeremiah, then I ask you: are you offended at the state of moral decline in our country? Are you equally offended when you watch prime time television? We, the American people, have trusted in our success as the source of our strength, and our success has become a

broken cistern that cannot hold water. We have trusted in that which is worthless, and we are becoming worthless.

So what hope is there? There is hope in recognizing the true source of our strength, in turning to the fountain of living water. Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" There is hope in putting our trust in God and living in obedience to God's word. Then no matter what threatens us or causes us to be afraid, we have a future hope. We know someday, as it says in Revelation (7: 15-20), "they will hunger and thirst no more, the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

There is hope in taking seriously our need to repent of the evil around us and within us. II Chronicles tells us: "If my people, who are called by my name, humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land"(7:14).

Since we are in a troubled time in our nation's history, I invite you to spend some time on your knees in prayer: pray for our leaders to have wisdom born of God; pray for our nation; pray for our people. Attend our Ash Wednesday service this Wednesday, which is focused on offering our sins to God, being self-reflective and going through a spiritual purification as we begin the season of Lent. If you know you have done wrong and have been passive about the wrongs in our world, if you know there are areas of your life where you tolerate the intolerable and accept the unacceptable, then get right with God. Do whatever it takes to make amends for your wrongs. We may yet avert God's anger if we become faithful as he is faithful.

But, my beloved friends, if we continue as we have been, it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. The greatest threat to our society is not foreign-based terrorist attacks but rather the spiritual terrorism of selling out to anything and everything we think will profit us. Our society is unraveling, and God will only help us if we turn to him with all our hearts. For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

Hear now the words of Jeremiah the prophet to the exiles after the fall, after their worst nightmare came upon them:

Thus says the Lord...I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! (31:3-4a)...the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." (31:31-34)