



The Prophet's Corruption of the Best
Jeremiah 13

January 13, 2019
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If you're watching this on video, that means that church was cancelled for snow Sunday morning. Hope you're enjoying the snow, so whether you're watching this in your pajamas or your snowsuit, enjoy.

Intro: Pride Goes Before a Fall

John Sedgwick was a Union Major General during the Civil War. On May 9, 1864, he led his troops at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, south of Fredericksburg, a mere 80 miles south of here. As he was examining the line of his soldiers, he was repeatedly warned not to stand in that location because he could be shot by Confederate sharpshooters. His response was: "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." Those would be his famous last words, as he was shot in the face by a sharpshooter's bullet, becoming the highest-ranking Union soldier killed in the war.¹

That story greatly illustrates Proverb 16:18 that, "*pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" We see boasting and ego in the sports world all the time. For every Joe Namath who boasts that his team is going to win and then does it, there's a 1994 Pittsburgh Steelers team who recorded a video rap to be released when they reached the Super Bowl, but then they didn't actually win the AFC championship to make it to the Super Bowl. Or several years ago when Bryce Harper declared in Spring Training that the Nationals could go ahead and prepare for World Series rings; which also never happened.

Sometimes the fall or the punishment for pride comes very quickly, like when Gail Spence and I thought we were so good at the game "Encore" (do you know that game? Where you go back and forth singing songs that contain a given word or theme?); we thought we were so good at it that we challenged the whole Bahamas Mission Team a couple years ago; us against them. 2 on 10 or something. And we lost bad. Humiliated would probably be the right word. Jed Faroe and I like to

¹ J. Daniel Hays, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), p. 92, and the Wikipedia entry for John Sedgwick.

think of ourselves as pretty good ping-pong players; after all it's usually he and I in the finals of the Men's Retreat ping-pong championship. Until we were down in my parents' retirement community, the Villages, and played doubles with a couple of under 5 foot 80 year old sweet grandmas. Who beat us like 3 games straight, totally schooled us. True story.

So being humbled for our pride can come quickly, but other times it comes gradually. Today's passage is going to show God punishing His people for their pride and sin after being patient for a very long time.

It's time to study Jeremiah 13 on January 13th. But first, let's pray for our study:

Prayer: "Almighty, eternal and merciful God, whose Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly understand your Word and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood, that in nothing we may be displeasing to your majesty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." –Ulrich Zwingli

I tried breaking this chapter down a couple different ways, but what made the most sense to me was just splitting it roughly into two halves. The first half is a living parable, symbolic action that communicates to the people that

I. What Was Once Valuable Is Now Useless (vv.1-11)

Thus says the Lord to me, "Go and buy a linen loincloth and put it around your waist, and do not dip it in water." ² So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the Lord, and put it around my waist. ³ And the word of the Lord came to me a second time, ⁴ "Take the loincloth that you have bought, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." ⁵ So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. ⁶ And after many days the Lord said to me, "Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there." ⁷ Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. And behold, the loincloth was spoiled; it was good for nothing. ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁹ "Thus says the Lord: Even so will I spoil the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. ¹⁰ This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. ¹¹ For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.

What the ESV calls a loincloth is translated as a belt in the NIV, a girdle in the King James, a sash in the New King James, and a waistcloth in the Revised Standard Version. There's a real difference of opinion - this item is either an undergarment that is worn around the waist perhaps down to the knees, and therefore symbolizing how close God was with His people; or it's a decorative sash that would be shown off and worn with pride - symbolizing how proud God was of His people. It's hard to tell from the context which one it is, but either way, the point will eventually be the same.

Can you imagine being Jeremiah? God says, "Go buy this sash/loincloth and wear it and don't get it wet." "OK, Lord, done. I'm wearing it." Couple days later: "Take that sash that I had you buy and bury it." "Um, OK, will do, Lord. Don't know why, but I'll do it." Many days later: "Hey, go dig that nasty thing up." "I'm going, but in my head I'm waiting for an explanation."

This is just a really unique way for God to drive home to Jeremiah how He sees the people of Judah: that they used to cling to Him intimately, but now have run after other gods, which has soiled them and made them useless. If the people had stayed faithful to God and pure, resisting the other gods,

God would still be able to use them. But just like Jeremiah digging a hole and spoiling the loincloth, so the people's actions completely ruined them and made them filthy. God's great desire for His people is in verse 11: That they be His people, bear His name, bringing Him praise and glory. But they've ruined it.

Pride and arrogance are a huge part of this section, and are mentioned again later in the chapter. Pride trusts human ways and ideas rather than God's word. Arrogance makes people think that they don't need God, so they run after false gods. And pride keeps them from turning their back and admitting that it's not working.

No one can make much spiritual progress unless they can admit the level of their pride and ask the Lord to help them work on that pride. Have you seen very proud Christians? I have, and it's not only harmful for their witness, as outsiders and unbelievers think, "What a bunch of arrogant, holier-than-thou nonsense," but it's also a barrier to them making true spiritual growth. Growth comes from identifying where you fall short and where there is still sin in your life, bringing those areas to the foot of the cross, thanking Jesus for dying for those sins, and asking the Holy Spirit's help to change and stop sinning in those areas. A proud person either can't admit that they have problems, or they rationalize their issues away as not that big a deal, or they hide them in fear that people will reject them or not respect them. They misunderstand that God wants us to live truthful lives more than projecting perfect images over secret sins.

Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14 should hit proud people (and that's all of us) hard: two men go to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee thanks God that he's not as bad as other men, especially the tax collector next to him, and then he brags to God about his tithing and fasting. The tax collector can only say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus commends the tax collector, and promises that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

That was one of Jesus' biggest and constant critique of the religious elite of his day - they were proud of themselves and looked down on everyone else. They had no heart to rebuke themselves, take the logs out of their own eyes first, and offering love and compassion to those who were "lesser" in their eyes.

I actually know a pastor who does not like the song "Amazing Grace" - not because it's old or he doesn't like the tune or anything. He objects to the line "that saved a wretch like me." He doesn't believe that he's a wretch, he's actually a pretty good guy. Maybe he's never read the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector? He may be a good guy in the world's eyes, but without Christ, his heart is just as deceitful and desperately wicked as mine and yours. I came to grips with understanding myself as a wretch a long time ago. The bigger our view of our sin, the bigger the cross can be!

Our speaker for the Officer's Retreat this year is a friend of ours who pastors a PCA church in Blacksburg, Chris Hutchinson. He has just written a book called *Rediscovering Humility*. It's an excellent book, Dr. Dave has bought a copy for every officer; we would highly recommend it to you as well. One of his main points in the book is, "The Bible does not mention humility as just one of many good things, but actually places humility at the center of its whole system of thought, the glue which makes redemption stick."²

² Christopher Hutchinson, *Rediscovering Humility*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2018), p. 31.

Well, Judah had lost its humility, and her pride had led her far from God into gross sin that God was about to punish her for. The second half of the chapter is a lot of different images and ideas thrown together. I'm going to read them and quickly explain them, but there are some important things we'll pull out of them to spend more time on.

II. Four Pictures Of Judgment

All of these sections have the common theme that the people of Judah have strayed from the Lord and His ways, and while He has been patient with them and sent prophets to correct them, they have not changed and returned to Him. Yes, the reforms of King Josiah were a start (you can read about them in 2 Kings chapter 23), but as Jeremiah 3:10 had said, "*Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense.*" Israel, the northern kingdom had already been judged - conquered and scattered by the Assyrians; we know the date - 722 BC. Judah, the southern kingdom, had all the motivation in the world to listen to the prophets, clean up their act, get right with God, and avoid a similar judgment. But we also know the date when they will be judged is coming -586 BC when Babylon takes Judah into exile, God's judgment on centuries of sinful behavior.

And so the first picture God gives is His filling the people of Judah with drunkenness that will dull them right before He destroys them.

A. Wineskins (vv. 12-14)

¹² *"You shall speak to them this word: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Every jar shall be filled with wine." And they will say to you, 'Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine?' ¹³ Then you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land: the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord. I will not pity or spare or have compassion, that I should not destroy them."*

God's judgment of His people would be on everyone, from kings to priests to commoners. The picture of drunkenness is that they will be in a fog when it happens; they won't be working hard or trying to repent; they'll be drunk in their sin.

Verses 15-16 give the second picture:

B. Darkness (vv. 15-16)

¹⁵ *Hear and give ear; be not proud, for the Lord has spoken. ¹⁶ Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains, and while you look for light he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness.*

If the people don't repent while there is still light and time, God will put them in darkness and gloom. Imagine hiking at night on a mountain. You have lanterns, flashlights, or at least the light of the moon to illuminate your path. But if all of that is taken away, you are in total confusion. And now imagine that your entire life is like that. Jeremiah tells Judah that they have a chance to turn back to God before the darkness of punishment overtakes them.

The next four verses tell us that both the leaders and the people, the shepherds and the sheep of the flock, will be judged for their great sin.

C. Scattered Flock (vv. 17-20)

¹⁷ *But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive. ¹⁸ Say to the king and the queen mother: "Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head." ¹⁹ The cities of the Negeb are shut up, with none to open them; all Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile. ²⁰ "Lift up your eyes and see those who come from the north. Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock?"*

And finally, the last 7 verses are a big summary: the people's lies, their great sins, their abominations will be punished. The Lord will lay them bare, exposed, and shameful to their enemies. They will be victims of violence and great shame. Only then can they begin the journey to being made clean.

D. Violence and Pain (vv. 21-27)

21 What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you yourself have taught to be friends to you? Will not pangs take hold of you like those of a woman in labor? 22 And if you say in your heart, 'Why have these things come upon me?' it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up and you suffer violence. 23 Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil. 24 I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert. 25 This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies. 26 I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. 27 I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd whorings, on the hills in the field. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean?"

(Can The Leopard Change His Spots?)

I want to pull one verse out of that last section:

Verse 23 - *"Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil."*

In context, verse 23 is telling the people of Judah that they are so thoroughly stained with sin that they are incapable of changing at this point. Just like animals and human beings cannot change their skin, they cannot become something that they are not, so Judah is stuck in its sin. Evil has become your nature, skin that you can't change or shed. The implication by the end of the chapter is that judgment is the only thing that will break through and perhaps turn things around, maybe after judgment, healing and change will be possible.

There is a deeper, New Covenant way that we can understand this idea. All people are born in sin, each is born as a fallen human being in a fallen world, and as long as he or she stays fallen, he or she cannot truly do good and follow God. Romans 3:12 says that, *"All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."* Natural man is in bondage to sin, Romans 8:8 - *"Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."* And the penalty of sin is spiritual death and separation from God.

But God offers the ability to change our natures, to go from being those who are dead in sin and whose minds and spirits desire only the things of the flesh - to being those who have new hearts and natures that are alive to spiritual things. We can be born again into a new hope. Leopards can change their spots! But it's not by willing it to happen, it's not by anything we can do. Someone else, God's law would require a perfect person to take the penalty for our sin. This was accomplished in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross - where He died and God poured the penalty of our sins on His own Son. So the penalty of our sin is taken away, but more than that, when God brings us to understand His love, He works a miracle in us so that we have new hearts. The Holy Spirit changes us so that we can desire godly things; we are new creations in Christ - the old has passed away, the new has come - we are fit to be His people and to spend eternity with Him.

If you have never experienced this miracle in your life, God is calling you to believe His truth for your life. The Gospel and the message of the Bible is not that if you learn how to cope with your sin, or figure out how to manage it and lessen its impact, that you might eventually be good enough for God and heaven. You can't, because you're like the leopard who can't change his spots. No, God

says, "I'll work the miracle inside you, totally changing your life and heart and affections." Repent and believe that He can work that miracle inside you.

Conclusion

And now a question and a challenge for those who are already new creations in Christ:

Are You A Jeremiah or a Jonah?

When you see someone who is being judged for their sin, or someone who is ruining their life and bearing the consequences, how do you feel? Are you secretly pleased or are you upset? You may have chances to talk to people about their sins, urging them to turn from their sins. Do you mean it and plead with them outwardly and grieve inwardly when they don't change?

Remember Jonah who was the prophet sent to Ninevah to tell the people there to repent? Not only does he run away at first because he doesn't want them to repent, but later (after the big fish spits him up on their shore) when they actually do repent, he's not happy about it. He mopes and tells God he's angry that God is going to spare them.

Contrast that with Jeremiah, who says in verse ¹⁷ *But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive.*" Judah's behavior, her unwillingness to repent, and Jeremiah's knowledge that they're going to be taken captive brings Jeremiah to tears, to weep bitterly. That's not just a little tear down the cheek or getting a bit choked up, that's immense grief. But notice that they're secret tears. Why? Back in chapter 11:14-15 God tells Jeremiah, *"Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer in their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble. What right has my beloved to my house, when she has done many vile deeds?"*

So I ask again: Are you a Jeremiah or a Jonah?

I know that Jesus wept like Jeremiah - Luke 19:41-42 - *"And when He (Jesus) drew near and saw the city (Jerusalem), he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"*

I know that the Apostle Paul was in the mold of Jeremiah as well - Romans 9:2-3 records his sorrow that most of the Jews of his day had rejected Christ - *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."*

Does it bring us anguish that people are going to hell? Or is there a little part of us that says, "Well, you get what deserve." Because no one should know better than a Reformed Christian that those of us who are saved aren't getting what we deserve - because we deserve hell and punishment just as much as anyone does. For God's mysterious plan and purpose, He spared us. We thank Him and we rejoice. But our hearts should be heavy when those around us have not heard the good news and had their sins forgiven and been saved in Christ.

Benediction

Matthew 18:3-4

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."