

Avoiding Spiritual Adultery

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June 12, 2011

Introduction

Arnold Schwarzenegger. If I had asked you to describe him six months ago, what ideas would have come to your mind? *Bodybuilder. Terminator. Governor.* How would you describe him today? *A man who has brought shame on himself and troubled his marriage by committing adultery and covering the birth of a child.*

Why are the descriptions so starkly different? Because we recognize adultery as a deep betrayal. It's a flaw that's difficult to forgive or forget. Ironically, in some quarters of our society, this sensitivity is waning. I read a couple of years ago about a Canadian business that specialized in arranging adulterous affairs.

Today we're going to look at Jeremiah 2-6, where God uses the vivid imagery of adultery to express spiritual truth. I'll have to confess that I haven't read through the book of Jeremiah in quite some time, but another study I'm engaged in led me to read chapters 2 and 3 just a couple of weeks ago. It's interesting how God was already preparing my mind before I knew I'd be teaching this lesson.

As we launch into the lesson, I'd like to emphasize that I'm not trying to heap guilt or sorrow on anyone in the audience who happens to have been involved in, or affected by, physical adultery. Rather, I'm just trying to shed light on Jeremiah's message: that the grave nature of sin is akin to the seriousness of infidelity.

Judah/Jerusalem Charged with Forsaking the LORD (2:1-37)

Text (NASB)

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ² "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD,

"I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.
³ "Israel was holy to the LORD,
The first of His harvest.
All who ate of it became guilty;
Evil came upon them," declares the LORD."

⁴ Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.
⁵ Thus says the LORD,

"What injustice did your fathers find in Me,
That they went far from Me
And walked after emptiness and became empty?

[. . .]

⁷ "I brought you into the fruitful land
To eat its fruit and its good things.
But you came and defiled My land,
And My inheritance you made an abomination.

⁹ "Therefore I will yet contend with you,"
declares the LORD,

"And with your sons' sons I will contend.

¹⁰ "For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,
And send to Kedar and observe closely
And see if there has been such a *thing* as this!

¹¹ "Has a nation changed gods
When they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory
For that which does not profit.

¹² “Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate,” declares the
LORD.

¹³ “For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.

[. . .]

²² “Although you wash yourself with lye
And use much soap,
The stain of your iniquity is before Me,”
declares the Lord GOD.

[. . .]

³² “Can a virgin forget her ornaments,
Or a bride her attire?
Yet My people have forgotten Me
Days without number.

Comments

Using Jeremiah as a mouthpiece, God reflects on the history of Israel since the nation’s exodus from Egypt. In the early years she had followed the LORD with at least some consistency, and God had given her special protection (vv. 2-3). But now, centuries later, God indicts the nation for departing from him. His attention is focused primarily on the southern kingdom of Judah (the northern kingdom, Samaria, had already fallen to Assyria), and more specifically, its capital, Jerusalem.

God had provided a fertile land for them, yet they had polluted it with their sin (vv. 7-8). As a result, he brings formal charges—that’s the sense of “contend” (v. 9)—against them (Dyer 1132). He points out that they had given up worshiping their God and taken up with others—something that was unprecedented among other nations (vv. 10-11). Not only had they forsaken the true God (“the fountain of living waters”), but they had devoted

themselves to false gods (“broken cisterns”) (vv. 11-13).

As a result of this departure, Judah had stained itself deeply (v. 22). Their forgetfulness was appalling (v. 32).

Judah Guilty of Spiritual Adultery (3:1-4:4)

Text (NASB)

¹ God says, “If a husband divorces his wife
And she goes from him
And belongs to another man,
Will he still return to her?

Will not that land be completely polluted?
But you are a harlot *with* many lovers;
Yet you turn to Me,” declares the LORD.

² “Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see;
Where have you not been violated?
By the roads you have sat for them
Like an Arab in the desert,
And you have polluted a land
With your harlotry and with your wickedness.

³ “Therefore the showers have been withheld,
And there has been no spring rain.
Yet you had a harlot’s forehead;
You refused to be ashamed.

⁴ “Have you not just now called to Me,
‘My Father, You are the friend of my youth?’

⁵ ‘Will He be angry forever?
Will He be indignant to the end?’
Behold, you have spoken
And have done evil things,
And you have had your way.”

⁶ Then the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, “Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. ⁷ I thought, ‘After she has done all these things she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it. ⁸ And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. ⁹ Because of the lightness of her harlotry, she

polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees.¹⁰ Yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception,” declares the LORD.

¹¹ And the LORD said to me, “Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.¹² Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say,

‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD;
‘I will not look upon you in anger.
For I am gracious,’ declares the LORD;
‘I will not be angry forever.
¹³ ‘Only acknowledge your iniquity,
That you have transgressed against the LORD
your God
And have scattered your favors to the strangers
under every green tree,
And you have not obeyed My voice,’ declares
the LORD.

¹⁵ “Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.¹⁶ It shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land,” declares the LORD, “they will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ And it will not come to mind, nor will they remember it, nor will they miss *it*, nor will it be made again.¹⁷ At that time they will call Jerusalem ‘The Throne of the LORD,’ and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the LORD; nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart.¹⁸ In those days the house of Judah will walk with the house of Israel, and they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance.

[. . .]

³ For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem,

“Break up your fallow ground,
And do not sow among thorns.

⁴ “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD
And remove the foreskins of your heart,

Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds.”

Comments

In chapter 2 the LORD had hinted that Judah’s departure was a form of spiritual adultery: “I remember [. . .] the love of your betrothals” (v. 2); “on every high hill and under every green tree you have lain down as a harlot” (v. 20); etc. Chapter 3 establishes that idea with even greater force: “you are a harlot with many lovers” (v. 1). Here are some of the dimensions of the LORD’s message:

- Judah had sought out spiritual infidelity like a prostitute who waits by the side of the road (v. 2).
- The nation was unashamed of its sin (“you refused to be ashamed”) even though it had already led God to execute judgment to a certain extent (“the showers have been withheld”) (v. 3).
- The nation was insincere in the language it expressed toward the LORD: “Have you not just now called to Me, ‘My Father, You are the friend of my youth?’” (v. 4).
- Judah saw that the LORD divorced her sister, Israel (the northern kingdom), yet this didn’t deter her from her unfaithful ways (vv. 6-10). The spatial references, “on every high hill and under every green tree” (v. 6), have to do with the Israelites’ adoption of Canaanite worship practices (cf. 2 Kings 17:7-12, esp. v. 10).

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains the association of idolatry with sexual immorality as follows:

[T]he metaphor reflects a link to, perhaps even an origin in, an idolatry built on many forms of sexual excess.

[. . .] Fertility cults encouraged [. . .] the flaunting of human sexuality as a means of insuring the fecundity of the earth through sympathetic magic.

Historically, idols represented nature gods, fertility gods and goddesses (Baals and Asherahs) and had long associations with fertility cults and their practices—practices believed necessary to ensure successful grain and livestock production. (418)

In the latter half of chapter 3 the LORD issues a call for repentance, focusing particularly on the northern kingdom that had long before been defeated and dispersed by the Assyrian forces. The LORD's mercy is evident: "I will not be angry forever. 'Only acknowledge your iniquity [. . .]'" (vv. 12-13). And it was surely accessible to Judah as well as to Israel. In fact, the passage looks forward to a time when both kingdoms would be one (v. 18), united in submission to spiritual leadership (v. 15) and in faithful worship (vv. 16-17). This prophecy presumably awaits a millennial fulfillment.

The call for Judah's repentance emerges in 4:3-4 through two figures of speech: "Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart." Dyer comments:

Just as a farmer does not sow his seed on unplowed ground, so God does not sow His seed of blessing in unrepentant hearts. [. . .] Circumcision was a sign of being under God's covenant with Israel (cf. Gen. 17:9-14). The men, though circumcised physically, needed to circumcise their hearts so that their inward condition matched their outward profession (cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 9:25-26; Rom. 2:28-29). (1135)

As we shall see, the call to repentance continues in the following verses. However, the emphasis is on the urgent need to repent, given the judgment that was soon to fall on Judah.

Judah's Destruction Sure to Come (4:5-6:30)

Text (NASB)

⁵ Declare in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say,
"Blow the trumpet in the land;
Cry aloud and say,
'Assemble yourselves, and let us go
Into the fortified cities.'

⁶ "Lift up a standard toward Zion!
Seek refuge, do not stand *still*,
For I am bringing evil from the north,
And great destruction.

⁷ "A lion has gone up from his thicket,
And a destroyer of nations has set out;
He has gone out from his place
To make your land a waste.
Your cities will be ruins
Without inhabitant.

⁸ "For this, put on sackcloth,
Lament and wail;
For the fierce anger of the LORD
Has not turned back from us."

[. . .]

¹⁹ My soul, my soul! I am in anguish! Oh, my heart!

My heart is pounding in me;
I cannot be silent,
Because you have heard, O my soul,
The sound of the trumpet,
The alarm of war.

²⁰ Disaster on disaster is proclaimed,
For the whole land is devastated;
Suddenly my tents are devastated,
My curtains in an instant.

²¹ How long must I see the standard
And hear the sound of the trumpet?

²² "For My people are foolish,
They know Me not;
They are stupid children
And have no understanding.
They are shrewd to do evil,
But to do good they do not know."

[. . .]

¹⁵ “Behold, I am bringing a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD.

“It is an enduring nation,
It is an ancient nation,
A nation whose language you do not know,
Nor can you understand what they say.

¹⁶ “Their quiver is like an open grave,
All of them are mighty men.

¹⁷ “They will devour your harvest and your food;
They will devour your sons and your daughters;
They will devour your flocks and your herds;
They will devour your vines and your fig trees;
They will demolish with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.

¹⁸ “Yet even in those days,” declares the LORD, “I will not make you a complete destruction. ¹⁹ It shall come about when they say, ‘Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?’ then you shall say to them, ‘As you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you will serve strangers in a land that is not yours.’

Comments

In the remainder of chapter 4, as well as in chapters 5-6, the LORD predicts the severe destruction that would befall Jerusalem and Judah in the Babylonian attack (4:6-7). The situation called for immediate action (“Blow the trumpet in the land” [4:5]). Some commentators (e.g., Feinberg) believe that it was still possible at this point for Jerusalem to avert disaster (cf. v. 14). In any case, the danger was very real, and judgment ultimately fell on Judah.

Commenting on verses 19-22, Feinberg notes,

These verses have been variously interpreted as (1) the words of the Lord, (2) the words of the nation, or (3) the words of Jeremiah. Undeniably the Lord was affected by the agony of his people. Certainly the nation would

express its agony at their plight. But it appears in keeping with the immediate and broad context of the entire book to understand the words as expressing Jeremiah’s personal involvement with the calamity of his people.

Regardless of who is doing the speaking, it is clear that the people of Judah are spiritually ignorant: “They are stupid children and have no understanding. They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know” (v. 22).

The only positive element in chapters 4-6 is the LORD’s promise to restrain his wrath. Judah’s destruction would be less than complete, and the remnant that would survive the Babylonian assault would learn in their captivity to follow God faithfully (5:18-19).

Application & Conclusion

When Jeremiah spoke of Israel and Judah’s spiritual adultery, he was fundamentally talking about their abandonment of the LORD and their worship of false gods. As we consider how to apply the truths of Jeremiah 2-6 to our own lives, we may be inclined to dismiss them as being somewhat irrelevant. After all, probably none of us have a god-shelf in our home or any idols under a tree in our yard. But the warnings against idolatry are not just the stuff of Old Testament prophecy. They were the concern of Christ’s apostles as well. One New Testament passage, 1 Corinthians 10, expresses this concern quite clearly. It begins by relating the awesome events that the children of the Exodus experienced:

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³ and all ate the same spiritual food; ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

It goes on to state that we're to learn from their example, and specifically refers to the time when they fell into idolatry while waiting for Moses to descend from Mount Sinai.

⁶ Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." [. . .] ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

And lest we think that we are not prone to fall into this sin, Paul advises us to guard against failure in this area:

¹² Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. ¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Other apostolic warnings about idolatry appear in 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5; and 1 John 5:21. These texts make it clear that idolatry is not just a matter of bowing before, or making sacrifices to, visual representations of a divine being. Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 both name covetousness as a form of idolatry. This is much more in the realm of contemporary American culture. And being overtaken by greed is not the only way to commit idolatry.

Idolatry is a perversion of worship. Any time that our affection for something other than God keeps us from relating properly to Him, we end up idolizing that thing. John Calvin stated that "man's nature [. . .] is a perpetual factory of idols" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.xi.8). He explained further that man imagines God to be a certain way—some way that contradicts the teaching of Scripture—and then embodies that belief in a physical way.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* explains that "the idol is not really the deity but only a handle to use in dealing with the spirit, the real power behind the idol. [. . .] The genius of the symbol is that it gives humans a way to manipulate their gods. The presence of a god can be demanded in war, for oracles, at home, or on a journey" (417).

We commit the essence of idolatry when we fashion God after our own desires. Ultimately, we allow other priorities to overreach our love for, trust in, and worship of God. Examples of American idolatry could include the following:

- Believing that our worth resides in how other people view us rather than what God has done for us. This can lead to an overemphasis on physical appearance or strength, acceptance by others, academic or professional achievements, etc.
- Living as if life is defined by the sum of our material possessions rather than subordinating our owning to the lordship of Christ.
- Pursuing pleasures and entertainments at the expense of biblical commands and principles.

If we find ourselves "worshiping" something that is less worthy than God, we need to repent of our idolatry just like Jeremiah called Judah to do. We need to understand the seriousness of our sin. It is essentially adulterous; after all, if we're saved, we're members of Christ's Bride. If we fail to repent,

we can expect God's judgment to fall in one way or another.

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James 4:1-4

¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ² You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.