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Jeremiah 3

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I was driving past Captain Cook Park on Friday and saw a school cross country event going on. And it was your typical cross country day, you know - cold, overcast and blowing a gale, the keen kids out the front battling against the wind and the rest of the kids dragging their feet at the back in colourful tutus, as you do. And it brought back so many memories.

My high school was set in bushland on the outskirts of Melbourne. It was very, very hilly and the cross country course did a big loop in the bush. If you weren't climbing some Mount Everest of a hill, you were knee-deep in mud trying desperately not to lose a shoe. The only flat section was as you were nearing the end. And by the time you got there, you were exhausted, head to toe in mud like a swamp person, freezing cold and ready for it to be over. The only catch was the finish was uphill – a hill that took 10min to run, longer to crawl, obviously. So that blessed flat section was really like no man's land – there was no way you'd turn back, and really no way you'd want to keep going forward either. And year after year, as you reached that flat section, it was like hope dissolved – no way back, no way forward.

We hit times in life that feel like that too. Like there's no way back, no way forward. It might be our own choices that land us there. It might be circumstances. And we can hit those points in our walk with God too, where we feel like we've gone so far away to ever be able to go back and to ever have hope for the future again. Where is God in times like that? What's he saying to us in those times?

In our passage this morning, we see that even when we turn from God, even when we've gone a very long way down the wrong track, he remains faithful and his love for his people continues, urging us to repent and come home to him.

Jeremiah 3 continues on from where we left things last week. In chapter 2, we saw the faithfulness of God – God, who had saved his chosen people from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness and placed them in the promised land – a land that was rich and fertile. He'd made an enduring covenant with them; they were his people, he was their God. If they remained faithful to the God that loved them, if they obeyed him and walked in his ways, he would bless them in every way – with children, with abundant crops and livestock, with rain in its season and fertile land, with protection from enemies. And they would be an honoured nation, feared by all the peoples of the earth [Deut 28].

But God knew the heart of man. And so he'd warned them before entering the promised land:

*“Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands ...Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God ...If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them...you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God.” [Deut 8:10-20]*

There is blessing on the one hand, destruction on the other. Honour the God who loves you and provides for you in abundance, or turn from him and face his just judgement.

Seems like a fairly straight-forward choice, doesn't it? But the human heart is deceitful above all things [Jer 17:9].

And in Jeremiah 3, we see which way Israel chose to go.

*“You have lived as a prostitute with many lovers...look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness.*

And down in verse 6: *“Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there.”*

God's people chose to turn away. They turned their backs on the one true God. *On every high place, under every spreading tree* – these were places where pagan worship happened and where Israel went to bow down to false gods, who were not gods at all [ch2].

And the language of adultery is adopted here and it's so very fitting. See, marriage is a covenant – before God, a man and a woman committing themselves to each other and each other alone. The promise to love one another – true love, not the feeling. The promise to be faithful, to forsake all others. The promise to honour one another.

Marriage points us to the covenant God has made with his people. Israel were bound to God and God was bound to them. God had committed himself to them as a husband commits to his wife – we see this in v14 - and they were to be committed to him in love, in faithfulness and obedience. To worship him and him alone.

And yet they went up to every high place and to every spreading tree and committed adultery [v6], they sought out other lovers [v2] and prostituted themselves out to false gods, bowing down and worshiping images their own hands had made, burning incense to them, bringing offerings of crops and livestock, even slaughtering their sons and daughters to give as food for these idols [Ez 16].

It is unbelievable perversion on Israel's behalf, unbelievable betrayal of the one true God, and this language of adultery and prostitution helps us to understand this. It's graphic imagery that should shock us and make our stomachs churn – even in this highly sexualised age. God has been faithful. God has been true. God has never failed his people. Yet they have forsaken him and defiled themselves in the most perverse ways.

And yet they felt no shame. They'd gone so deep into sin that they no longer cared about the error of their ways. Look at the second half of v3: *yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame*. And this is so true of sin, isn't it? Our deceitful hearts grow hard and so easily justify evil behaviour – I'm not hurting anyone else; this is something I need to keep going; what's so wrong with a little bit once in a while anyway; it's just a bit of fun; we could go on and on, couldn't we. How we love our sin and cling to it so defiantly sometimes, refusing to feel ashamed, perhaps even celebrating it, taking pride in it, like the culture around us does. Like Israel did.

Yet not only did Israel so brazenly love her sin and her false gods, they also thought they could have a foot in both camps. From v4: *Have you not just called to me: 'my Father, my friend from my youth, will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?' This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can*. See, their sin had consequences, just as God had told them it would. He had warned them that their sin would bring curses upon not only themselves but the land as well. And in v3 we see that *the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen*. God allowed a drought in the land because of their evil ways. And Israel's response is so very telling. *'My Father, my friend from my youth, will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?'* They knew who the true God was. They knew the drought had been allowed by him. They knew it was judgement on their evil. Yet they thought they can pay God lip service while continuing in their wickedness. It's incredibly duplicitous, isn't it. Incredibly two-faced. As though God could be manipulated. As though God had to march to the beat of their drum, blessing them while they defiled themselves. As though God didn't care that they've turned their backs on him and brought dishonour to his name. It's absolute mockery of the God who loves them, calling on him to be merciful toward them & bless them, whilst unashamedly playing the prostitute to false gods.

And so God says [v 6] *have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up to every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me, but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries*.

The northern kingdom, Israel, was taken captive by the Assyrians around 722 BC, its people exiled. They were destroyed because their sin, just as God had warned them.

And you would think that the southern kingdom of Judah, who watched this happening, would have heeded the warning, right? That they would repent of their own sin, turn back to God wholeheartedly and so avoided the same fate, right?! V8: *yet I saw that her [Israel's] unfaithful sister Judah had no fear, she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister [Judah] did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretence.*

The kings of Judah, the people of Judah, saw firsthand what happened to Israel – God's righteous judgment for their sin - but did not care – v9 *because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her*, because she took it so lightly, she defiled the land and committed adultery with idols made of stone and wood. Judah had ample warning of the consequence of worshiping false gods yet she refused to turn back to God wholeheartedly and carried on with her pagan worship.

It's astonishing, isn't it, that though they had seen Israel be completely destroyed, its people swept away and dispersed throughout foreign lands, so much war, so much destruction, so much death because of their sin, Judah loved her idols too much to heed the warning. Even Josiah's sweeping reforms didn't last into the reign of the next king. Judah was about to face judgement for her sin, just as Israel had before her.

The lure of sin is so strong, the shine of sin so bright, it promises us the world, but it is always empty and there is always a price to pay.

Outside of the one true God, nothing fulfils. Nothing brings lasting joy. Nothing brings wholeness. It's the greatest deception of all, that life and fullness and satisfaction can be found in the clutches of sin. But all there is is bitter, bitter emptiness. Sin destroys. It enslaves. It degrades us and breaks us. That's all it does, that's all it ever will do. As someone wise once said to me you don't just break God's commands, you also break yourself on them. And Israel discovered this in exile.

V21 *a cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel, because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the Lord their God.*

V23 *surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception...from our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our ancestors' labour – their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters. Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the Lord our God, both we and our ancestors; from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the Lord our God.*

It's the cry of a broken people who have discovered the bitter emptiness of their sin. They traded the best of everything they had – their crops, their livestock, even their children – precious little kids – they traded for a lie. All gone. It's all been wasted, it's all so very, very empty. When Israel's eyes are finally opened to the reality of their sin, the grief and shame consume them.

How do you come back from those kinds of depths? The depths where you've murdered your kids to appease lumps of wood? Where you've given the very best of your harvests and livestock to gods that don't love, don't protect, don't care, don't even exist? Where you've forsaken the one true God – who *does* love, *does* protect, *does* care?

Do you even deserve to come back from a place like that? Where you've made a mockery of God, an absolute spectacle of his love and grace, of his faithfulness and sovereignty? Where you've so thoroughly rejected him and forged your own way in blatant wickedness?

Our human sense of justice says no. There is no way.

And Jeremiah 3 begins with the same sentiment. *If a man divorces his wife – and in the context, it would be on the grounds of unfaithfulness - and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again?* The answer is no. He should not take her back again. We see this in Deuteronomy 24.

God had taken Israel as his wife. Israel was unfaithful to him with false gods, she wanted to leave him. So he gave her a certificate of divorce, sending her into exile. Should he now take her back? We would expect the answer to be no. That there is no way back. She's chosen her own path and now is receiving what she deserves. And this thought hangs over the first portion of chapter three, as Israel's adultery is portrayed so vividly. We think Israel is lost forever, and rightly so.

Yet our God surprises us.

*V12, return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord, I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful. I will not be angry forever, only acknowledge your guilt – you have rebelled against the Lord your God.*

*Again in v14, return, faithless people, declares the Lord, for I am your husband. I will choose you – one from a town and two from a clan – and bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.*

*And again in v22, return, faithless people, and I will cure you of backsliding - or as some translations put it – I will heal your faithlessness.*

Three times, God calls them back. Should they return, should they turn back to God with genuine hearts, should they repent of their sin, God will forgive them. He will heal them, and he will restore them. Return to me, he says. This is the amazing mercy of our God. Sin does not go unpunished, but there is a way back. God remains faithful. His covenant love continues. His arms are stretched out, urging a broken people to repent and come home to him.

And the same goes for you and me.

Perhaps you've been running from God, chasing everything the world has to offer, caught in that perpetual cycle of thinking sin will satisfy and make you whole and bring you joy and peace, all the while becoming more and more broken, more ashamed, more desperate and hopeless. Perhaps you think you're too far gone. Perhaps you think there's no way back.

Yet God says to you, return. Repent and come back. Let the blood of Jesus wash you clean. Let him restore you. Let him make you whole and give you dignity again. Jesus died for you. Accept him as your Lord and Saviour today, and take hold of the life that he and he alone can give.

Perhaps you've been living with a foot in both camps. You come to church once in a while to tick that box, you ask for God's blessing on your life and your loved ones, you talk the talk and walk the walk when church folk are watching, but you love the world and all it has to offer. The comfort, the wealth, the guilty pleasures when no one else is around. The respect from non-Christian friends and colleagues. What's wrong with having it both ways, anyway?

Let Jeremiah 3 be a warning that following God half-heartedly, in pretence only, does not end well. God is no fool and he will not be mocked. Repent. Turn back with wholehearted devotion. Come to the foot of the cross and ask God to cleanse you, to restore the joy of your salvation, to help you return to Jesus, your first love.

Perhaps you walk with God faithfully. Whether on the mountain tops or in the valleys, you love him and obey him to the best of your ability. You're not perfect, of course not, but you love the Lord your God and seek to walk in his ways. Let Jeremiah 3 be a reminder to stay humble. To continue clinging to the grace and mercy of God. To persist in confession and repentance. To persist in reading God's word and allowing it to shape you, grow you, challenge you. Don't allow pride or self-righteous blind you to fact that each and every one of us are only one step away from falling – there but for the grace of God go I. Cling to the cross. Persist in faithfulness. Press into God, each and every day. And trust that our good and faithful Father will never leave us, never forsake us, and will one day lead us home to our final resting place with him.

Our God is good. Our God remains faithful. His covenant love continues forever. His arms are stretched out, urging a broken people to repent and come home to him.