

This Week's Scripture passage is drawn from Jeremiah 5. As their world crumbles around them, the people ask this question:

"Why has the Lord God done all these things to us?" (5:18) The answer follows.

Jeremiah 5:20-25 (NRSV)

²⁰Declare this in the house of Jacob,
proclaim it in Judah:

²¹Hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
who have eyes, but do not see,
who have ears, but do not hear.

²²Do you not fear me? says the LORD;
Do you not tremble before me?
I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
though they roar, they cannot pass over it.

²³But this people has a stubborn and rebellious
heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.

²⁴They do not say in their hearts,
"Let us fear the LORD our God,
who gives the rain in its season,
the autumn rain and the spring rain,
and keeps for us
the weeks appointed for the harvest."

²⁵Your iniquities have turned these away,
and your sins have deprived you of good.

Jeremiah 5:20-25 (The Message)

"Tell the house of Jacob this,
put out this bulletin in Judah:
Listen to this,
you scatterbrains, airheads,
With eyes that see but don't really look,
and ears that hear but don't really listen.
Why don't you honor me?
Why aren't you in awe before me?
Yes, *me*, who made the shorelines
to contain the ocean waters.
I drew a line in the sand
that cannot be crossed.
Waves roll in but cannot get through;
breakers crash but that's the end of them.
But this people—what a people!
Uncontrollable, untameable runaways.
It never occurs to them to say,
'How can we honor our GOD with our lives,
The God who gives rain in both spring and autumn
and maintains the rhythm of the seasons,
Who sets aside time each year for harvest
and keeps everything running smoothly for us?'
Of course you don't! Your bad behavior blinds you to all this.
Your sins keep my blessings at a distance.

The Fear of the Lord

The phrase "fear-of-the-Lord" is much misunderstood. It is a phrase that occurs nearly 140 times in the Old Testament alone. As in this passage, the fear-of-the-Lord is to be sought by God's people. Eugene Peterson writes, "[The fear-of-the-Lord refers] to the way we live the spiritual life – not just what we do and say but the way we act, the way we speak. . . . It is the stock biblical phrase for the way of life that is lived responsively and appropriately before who God is, who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."¹

Despite its biblical prominence, we don't often speak of the fear-of-the-Lord because we tend to unpack it into four words, "fear + of + the + Lord," concluding that we are to be scared of God. But that is way off track. As Peterson notes, these four words in English are a traditional way of translating a single two-word Hebrew "bound phrase," two words that have a single meaning like "mass transit." The problem is that no single English word does justice to the Hebrew phrase. Awe and reverence are close but they lack the punch intended by "the fear-of-the-Lord." Peterson again: "The moment we find ourselves unexpectedly in the presence of the sacred, our first response is to stop in silence. We do nothing. We say nothing. We fear to trespass inadvertently; we are afraid of saying something inappropriate. Plunged into mystery we become still, we fall silent, all our senses alert. This is the fear-of-the-Lord."

I've never included as part of a weekly study, the same passage as rendered in two English versions. I hope you'll take the time to read both. The NRSV preserves certain words and phrases, such as "fear of the Lord," that are important and Peterson's paraphrase brings an immediacy and power that is diminished in an actual translation.

Once you've read both, Jeremiah's main theme in this passage, and the larger section from which it is drawn, should be pretty clear. As the NRSV renders it, "your sins have deprived you of good" (v. 25). When the Jews are trying to survive in exile after the Babylonians have destroyed Jerusalem, they want to understand how such a terrible tragedy could have befallen them. They are God's people, the descendants of Samson and David. How could this be? How could they have fallen so low? This passage from Jeremiah, like so many others, strives to provide them with answers. The truth is that such questions are often not far from our lips as well.

"A stubborn and rebellious heart"

One of the sadnesses in the four gospels is the inability of the disciples to grasp what is happening right in their face as they follow Jesus from place to place, listen to his teaching, and observe his actions. One day, on yet another occasion of their incomprehension, Jesus turns to them and says, "Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (Mark 8:18). In this, Jesus not only echoes Isaiah (6:10) but also the prophet Jeremiah, who brings this word from God: "O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear . . . this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart" (5:21, 23).

But why were the disciples blind and deaf when it came to God's work? Why were Jeremiah's contemporaries stubborn and rebellious? The simple answer, the straight answer, is Sin – upper-case, life-destroying Sin.

The nature of Sin

Talking about "sin" and "judgment" is always difficult, but we Christians are realists. Rose-colored glasses have no place in our pockets. Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about us and our world. The problem when we begin to talk about sin is that it is commonly misunderstood.

We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. But this is not the best way to go about understanding what we can call the upper-case "Sin."

Sin is like some sort of monster within us. When Cain's anger rages at his brother, Abel, God tells him, "Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). What powerful imagery. The truth is that this beast lies in wait within us all, ready to pounce, to drive us to selfish decisions. It nurtures our desire to be like God's ourselves, to rebel against the one who made us, to stubbornly go our own way in this world.

The truth of such a beast within ought to be evident to all. But, sadly, too many now deny its existence, believing only that some more education or therapy or exhortation will bring the world to one big hug. But Sin and all the consequences that result from it is as real now as it was real in Jeremiah's day.

Fundamentally, sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we chase after false gods or dishonor our parents or covet our neighbor's house or commit adultery, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather

than God's way. God has created the cosmos with a moral order, like a piece of loosely woven fabric. Their sins were like rips in this fabric.

In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve's choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity, the basis of the moral order. And it is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. This flaw in our moral DNA is a way of thinking of the beast called Sin. We too tear rips in the fabric of God's moral order.

Jeremiah tells the people that Sin has mastered their hearts. Their hearts are now stubborn and rebellious. Their eyes are blind. Their ears are deaf. They have allowed Sin to reduce them to little more than living corpses – zombies of sorts. And now they are going to go over the waterfall and crash at the bottom. They will survive, because God will restore them afterwards, but it will still be horrible and tragic beyond words.

"Your sins have deprived you of good"

This phrase from Jeremiah (5:25) sums up well the biblical perspective on judgment. Next week's study will focus on this question, but let's touch on it here as well.

Many Christians come to the Old Testament and find very little of value. Worse, too many find writings that seem in direct opposition to Jesus and the New Testament. Much of this problem stems from the understandable observation that God looks much like the Almighty Smiter, waiting to pounce on wrongdoers, punishing them and their children and their children's children.

Reading Jeremiah Well

In his commentary on Jeremiah, R.E. Clements reminds us that the book of Jeremiah was not a complete moral theology, but was a proclamation brought to a specific people at a specific time, from which we can learn more about God and the people of God:

"Most probably the concern of modern interpreters to find in Jeremiah's prophecies a simple, complete, and self-contained system of morality and spirituality is itself mistaken. He was a figure of a particular time who proclaimed his prophetic message with great poetic skill and intensity to a profoundly hostile and unsympathetic audience. His words were remembered and preserved for posterity because his interpretation of Israel's greatest crisis in the Old Testament period proved itself to be a surer and more convincing guide to the nature of historical reality than did the complacent insensitivity to truth of his hearers. As a 'true' prophet he had to do battle with many 'false' ones whose words could more easily be attuned to what the men and women of Jerusalem were eager to hear. Moreover there are firm signs that the past two centuries of history had bred in Judah a complacent feeling of assurance that whatever may have been the fate of the sister kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians Judah would remain secure."

This reading of the Old Testament, God as Smiter, has such power with people because it has a kernel of truth – these ancient writings come from a time when virtually everything that happened, good and bad, was ascribed to the gods, by Jews and Gentiles alike. They lacked many of the scientific explanations we have to make sense of the world around us.

In such a worldview, it is natural that people come to see God as the ultimate and direct dispenser of rewards (blessings) and punishments. But the Bible takes us in a different direction.

Re-read verses 24 and 25 above. The people are blessed with rain for their crops and warm days for the growing season. It is God who created all this and who sustains it. Yet, like stubborn children the people of God have insisted on their own way and have found it easier and easier to say no to God.

The consequence of forsaking God for our own path of prideful independence is the loss of good – "you sins have deprived you of good." There is so much that God wants for us – so much good. But ignoring God deprives us of all this. And the really sad part is that so many people don't even know what they are missing. This is the tragedy that Jeremiah wants God's people to see.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Sin. Not something we talk about very much. Why is that? Does it make us uncomfortable? Does it make us feel guilty? Perhaps we feel that talking about sin only reinforces the prevalent notion that God is The Great Rule-maker, always devising ingenious ways to catch us doing something wrong. If we see God as this rule-maker, we will naturally see something like the Ten Commandments as a list of rules that we are to keep. But this is not how to understand the Ten Commandments.

Adam and Eve forgot that they were creatures, not gods; that they were dependent upon God, not independent of God. Like them, we are created to be in loving relationship with God and one another. The Ten Commandments articulate what it means to be in loving relationship. We are not in loving relationship with our neighbors when we covet their stuff, or with our parents when we dishonor them, or with our spouses when we commit adultery. We are in loving relationship when we pursue justice and mercy, when we clothe the naked and feed the hungry. From the Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible is filled with God's teachings about what it really means to live so as to reflect the image of God within us.

Sin, then, is far more than rule-breaking. It is a distortion of our relationship with God and others and it has dire consequences, so dire that in the end God himself must put things right.

How would seeing sin as the distortion of relationship and seeing God's Law as teachings about relationship change your reading of the Bible? Knowing that the Holy Spirit helps us to overcome sin and separation, what are some concrete steps we could to diminish the grip of sin in our lives?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 6 Take warning, Jerusalem	Tuesday, Jeremiah 7:1-8:3 The temple sermon
Wednesday, Jeremiah 8:4-9:1 Is there no balm in Gilead?	Thursday, Jeremiah 9:2-26 The laments intensify
Friday, Jeremiah 10 A universal frame of reference	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The current series:

The Culture Soup: hidden stories that shape our lives

July 24 - "My Nation, Under God"

July 31 - "The Absolute Truth about Relativism"

Aug 7 - "Only Matter Matters"

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Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We will not meet on August 9 and 16

We will begin a new study of the gospel of John on August 23.

Join us whenever you can. Bring a study Bible.