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Day 207 - July 26

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## **Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)**

### ***Jeremiah Rebukes an Unfaithful Nation***

**Readings: *Jeremiah 3:6-25; 4:1-31; 5:1-13***

#### ***Reflections:***

- The opening contrast between Judah and Israel in this section is fascinating. Here we see God actually say that he was divorcing Israel. Although he remains committed to restore the true remnant of Israel, these are powerful words of broken covenant. It makes sense that one day Israel as a national identity will no longer be categorically called "the people of God" but that God will see that covenant relationship as broken and having suffered a divorce. We see in his judgment of Judah that "Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense." God is not interested in appearances but in the true condition of the heart. God isn't looking to be placated with outward actions that "look good" but he is looking for a true heart of love and deep devotion.
- As God gives a specific message for Israel in the north, we see God's consistent requirements spelt out again: "Return for I am merciful. Only acknowledge your guilt." The way back to God is always the way of humility and honesty. God is not looking for our perfection or grand statements of loyalty. He is looking for humility and submission as the starting point for his lavish forgiveness and mercy to be poured out on our lives. In his promise of restoration, he continues to offer himself as Israel's husband and his desire to provide "shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding." Leading with a true understanding of God's mind (knowledge) and wisdom (understanding) begins with and is grounded in knowing God's love (heart). Until we truly know his love, we can't grasp his thoughts or his wisdom fully.
- God's desire to bless his children is again explained clearly, "How gladly would I treat you like sons (and daughters) and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation." This blessing Israel always understood in very pragmatic terms contained within their tribal identity and territory called the "Promised Land." As we will see through Jesus, he offers the fullness of these promises within his new community. He offers us full adoption as God's children, a new community to be our home and family, and the spiritual riches of his Spirit and kingdom as our inheritance (See Ephesians 1:3 and following).

- In Jeremiah 4 we see Jeremiah outline for the people what God is asking of them in their repentance and return to God. Obviously there is direction about cleaning house of all idols and seeking true justice and righteousness. There is a key statement though about the heart: “Circumcise your hearts” God declares. Circumcision as an outer sign for men set them physically apart as men devoted to God. It reminded them that their entire being, the core of who they were, was to be fully submitted to God. The cutting away of the foreskin was a symbol of cutting away everything that needed to be removed to be fully intimate with God. Now, this idea of circumcision of the heart was God challenging the people to go beyond the simple, physical interpretation of what he had commanded to dig deeper into the spiritual meaning behind the sign. It was not men’s bodies that ultimately needed to be set apart, it was all people’s hearts. It is our hearts that must be transformed, not simply some outer symbolic ritual that we need to follow. This image of “circumcised hearts” will be picked up by Paul and the first Christ-followers to help all people understand the concept of God changing us from the inside out.
- The warning of God’s judgment is very fierce. Any notion of God treating our prideful rebellion lightly is again erased as Jeremiah declares God’s wrath.
- In this section of warning, we see the basic leadership roles of Israel outlined by Jeremiah. Jeremiah 4:9 states, “The king and officials will lose heart, the priests will be horrified, and the prophets will be appalled.” King, Priest and Prophet represented the basic three-fold leadership of Israel. Prior to these three positions you only had apostles (sent ones) like Moses and prophets like Aaron. Later God adds Priests and the people ask for God to add Kings to replace the apostle position. With the coming of Christ, this leadership vision is expanded into four overarching forms of leadership (see Ephesians 4) – 1) apostles (sent ones who give overarching leadership to the church); 2) prophets (those who speak for God); 3) evangelists (those who proclaim the good news) and 4) shepherds (or pastors) and teachers (those who nurture and grow people within community). The main thing we should notice is that God always works to diversify leadership and sees a more community approach to leadership rather than trying to empower one solo great leader to do it all for everyone.
- In Jeremiah 4:10 we see the freedom Jeremiah has to ask God hard and honest questions directly. He doesn’t pull any punches but basically asks God exactly what is on his heart and mind. God is not afraid of our honest questions; he already knows what they are. He is just looking for our openness to dialogue with him. We see Jeremiah model this as he asks his question and then also records God direct answer.
- As we see more very clear and harsh judgment spelled out, we also see how radical God’s grace is. “If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city...” This offer of grace reminds us of Abraham’s dialogue with God where God is simply looking for some small group of people that he could actually work with. God can work in virtually any situation if he has someone he can partner with. If there is no one who loves him or has any interest in a relationship with God, then the

entire group is left under judgment with no hope of redemption. But if there is even one person, then God's grace and power can be channeled through that person. This should give us hope for every business, every school, every neighborhood. It only takes one person surrendered to God to open the way for God to possibly turn everything around.

- As we see that Judah is unwilling to repent, we see again how God uses nature to bring about judgment: lion, wolf, and leopard are all instruments of his wrath.
- God has reason for being frustrated and angry. "I supplied all of their needs." God had provided the most beautiful land and an abundance of provision. God is not harshly judgmental when a starving man steals something to eat. He is judgmental when a wealthy, lazy, fat man steals the bit of bread the starving man is trying to eat. And not only have they abused all of God's blessings and grace, they boast about their untouchable status: "The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them." Talk about a good way to anger God! You can't mock God. This warning is for all people, all times. Again we see here in Israel, the unfolding story of "what doesn't work" and what a powerful lesson this is for us today.