Where Boasting Gets You
Jeremiah 8-10

We're looking at the book of Jeremiah, and today we're going to look at excerpts from chapters 8,9,10. And we're going to see how a society can die, what that tells us about ourselves, and where we can find real life.

Reading: Jeremiah 8:4-9; 9:17-10:7

A Dying Society
Now, there have been a number of articles in the press recently about how civilisations crumble and die, and why. And the question behind the interest in that is, could that happen to our western civilisation?

And once such article was in BBC Future. And they quoted an expert who had studied the rise and fall of 28 different civilisations, and his conclusion was that great civilisations aren't murdered. Instead, they take their own lives.

And that's Jeremiah's diagnosis of Judah. Look at 9:17, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Consider, and call for the mourning women to come."' Now, today, you and I don't think it at all odd to hire a band, or a DJ to help us celebrate a wedding, do we. Well, in Jeremiah's day, it wasn't odd to hire women to help people mourn at a funeral. And God is saying, go hire those mourning women, because Judah's dying, and her funeral's approaching, so better start planning it.

And Jeremiah describes what the death of Judah's society will look like: v19, 'We are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings.' In other words, this civilisation's death will consist of national ruin and shame and exile from the land and destruction of their cities. Which is exactly what did happen when the Babylonians finally invaded.

But it's what Jeremiah says next that is so chilling: v21, 'For death has come up into our windows; it has entered our palaces, cutting off children from the streets and the young men from the squares.' Death is going to be like a robber climbing in through the windows. And neither society's elite in their palaces, nor the young in the street will be spared. In fact, this creeping death of society will specifically target the next generation.

But then Jeremiah adds another image: v22, 'The dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none shall gather them.' So death is the grim reaper, slicing through the wheat field of society, and Judah's killed fighting men will fall like natural fertiliser on the fields. It is a grim picture.

Now, sometimes, tragically, a fit young guy can drop down dead whilst playing sport, and it's come out of nowhere. But more often, before someone dies, there are signs and symptoms that things aren't right. And it starts with chest pains, or the patient finds a lump. And what Jeremiah does in chapter 8 is he gives us some of these early symptoms and signs that tell us Judah is seriously unwell.

Look at 8:4, 'Thus says the Lord: when men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return.' Now, when you fall over, what do you do? You get back up. Or if you take a wrong

turn,? You turn around. It's obvious, Jeremiah says. But not Judah: v5, 'Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?… they refuse to return.' But even the birds, he says, know that when spring and summer come it's time to migrate and turn back home. Verse 7, 'Even the stork… and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord.'

In fact, rather than turn back home to God, they'd done the opposite. Verse 6, 'Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle.'

So, the first sign of this society being sick unto death was that rather than turn back to God, they threw themselves headlong into an 'every man be true to himself, live as you want to live' way of life.

But the second sign that things were wrong was how they handled God's word. Firstly, the religious leaders tried to make it say things it didn't say: v8, "How can you say, we are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.' But secondly others ignored God's word all together, v9, 'behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord.'

Ok, so, if you could have stood alongside Jeremiah and asked him, why are you so sure this nation, this culture is going to die? He would have replied, because they're pursuing this headlong derive for individualism, and they're abandoning God's word as their moral authority. Which sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it?

In a recent edition of Public Discourse there was an article that compared the writings of Philip Rieff, the American sociologist of the 20th Century, to where we find ourselves today. And in his book *Sacred Order/Social Order* Rieff categorised cultures into First, Second and Third world cultures. And very simply, First Worlds are marked by a variety of myths that ground their cultures - like the Vikings, or North American Indians. Second Worlds are characterised by faith, and the codes of a culture are based on the belief in a specific God to whom people are accountable: like Judaism or Christianity. But Third Worlds are characterised by an overturning of that sacred order. And such cultures always collapse, Rieff says - because there's nothing outside of itself to sustain it. Throw God out and you have no basis to say, 'it's got to be this way.'

But here's what I found fascinating. Rieff argues that these Third World cultures actually become *anti-cultures* - they try to destroy what went before. They deliberately set out to shatter past values. And they produce what he calls *'deathworks':* pieces of art, or literature, that insults or undermines the values that Second World cultures like Christianity or Judaism are built on.

And we see that happening in our time, but it was in Judah's too. And Judah is moving from a Second to a Third World, and driven-individualism, and the casting aside of God's word, are working death in the society.

Ok, but what drives this individualism, and this casting aside of God as their moral authority? Well, Jeremiah tells us.

The Need for Applause

Look at 9:23, 'Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches."' Now when someone starts

boasting about something, what are they doing? They're taking too much pride, they're getting too much self-satisfication from something, aren't they? And other translations might use the word 'glory' here in place of 'boast'. And to boast is to try and get some self-glory from something. : But do you know what the Hebrew word that boast or glory is translating here? I didn't either! It's the verb Hallelu. It's probably one of the only Hebrew words we know! Hallelu-Yah - Hallelu-YHWH, Glory be to God.

Except here, the hallelu is not hallelu-yah, it's hallelu-you. Let's talk about me. Let me have some glory. Let me tell you about my wisdom, or my power, or my wealth.

Now, why would someone do that? Why would someone boast about something to someone else, or to themselves? It's so that get some positive feedback, some applause, some glory coming our way, isn't it? So that we can feel good about ourselves. 'Let's just hallelu me for a moment, shall we?'

And you know you're doing it to feel good about yourself because of what happens when they don't applaud you, when the opposite happens. The other day I was telling a friend how I've started cycling from home to the office most days. And he goes, 'Really?' And I go, 'yes really, I mean it's only 15km there and and 15km back, uphill, but when you're an athlete like me, it's nothing, and I stay humble about it.' And he looked impressed, and made all the right noises. And I felt good, because there was this applause, this glory coming my way. Until I heard this little voice whispering to me, 'tell him about the engine, Martin.' 'No, I don't want to tell him' 'tell him' 'no' 'yes' 'grrrr…. well, it's actually an electric bike and it does all the work for me, and I don't really cycle uphill.' And instead of thinking of me as an athlete, he laughs and says, 'o that doesn't count!' And that inner clap-ometer, that inner craving to be hallelu-ed, plunged.

And God is saying it's that hunger for affirmation, that desire to be praised, that we all have, that's underneath this approaching death. It's that that's corroding the nation, because they were looking for it in their performance, or their position, or their possessions.

'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom.' Now to someone else, the number of papers you've had published, or what journals they're in, might mean nothing. But to you, maybe they're everything. Because this is how you know you're ok - that you're up there with the brightest. Or maybe people come to you for advice, and you're known for being a sage, and you like that - it makes you feel good about yourself, and you can give yourself an inner hallelu-you. Or maybe it's your grades at school, or the fact that you're right and your wife or husband is wrong, and that feels *so* good. And you're getting your inner satisfaction from your wisdom.

But if as individuals, or as a society we think wisdom, learning, or intelligence, is what makes us worthy of praise, or defines a life-worth-living, then it's no wonder that the mentally disabled, or the elderly, or the vulnerable, are trampled on. Which was what was happening in Judah.

Then, 'Let not the mighty man boast in his might.' Now, when you're doing well as a leader, and you're getting to exercise some power, that can be a real source of feel-good about yourself, can't it? And you can pat yourself on the back and look others in the face. Or if you get that job, or that position you want, there's this feeling of satisfaction and self-applause. Or maybe for you strength and might are less about power and position, and more about *strength and might*! And you can hallelu-you because your race times are coming down, or you can look at yourself in the mirror and

see the weight you've lost, or the muscle you've put on, and it feels good, and your inner clap-clap-meter goes up.

But again, if we think that power and position are what defines our or others values, and that takes root in a society, then the weak will be walked over. And again, that's what was happening in Judah.

And then the final of the three: 'Let not the rich man boast in his riches.' And if the other two are about generating that inner applause through our performance or our position, this is about getting it through our possessions.

Now, years back there was a comedy show on UK TV, and one of the characters was a woman who kept all the price tags attached to her furniture, so her visitors knew just how much it cost. So they'd go 'oooh!' And she'd go 'aahh!' Now that's one form of glorying in your riches. But it can also be much more subtle, can't it. It's that inner feeling of 'I'm doing ok' because of what I have, or earn. Because I'm wearing branded stuff, or my car is better than his. It's that feeling of satisfaction because you're moving up the pay grades, or the places you holiday at are better. And you get this inner affirmation, that inner halellu-you from it.

But again, if we think wealth is what makes us worthy, then it will breed covetousness and greed in a society, and the poor will be left behind. All of which was happening in Judah.

Now, when a patient goes to see a doctor, she wants to know two things - she wants a diagnosis and a prognosis. She wants to know, what's wrong with me and how is this going to work out. And in v25-26 God gives Judah both: 'Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh - Egypt, Judah, Edom… for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.'

So God says to Judah, your problem is that as a nation you're no different from anyone else. I gave you circumcision as a sign of our covenant together, but what you value, how you live, what you think makes a life worth living, what deserves a hallelu, is no different from everyone else. In fact, Judah doesn't even top the list of other nations who practised circumcision. She's just one among many - sandwiched between Egypt and Edom. And the reality was that she was just as uncircumcised, where it really mattered, in the heart, as everyone else. In Paul's words from Romans 12, they had been conformed to the pattern of the world. That's the diagnosis. And the prognosis? This sickness is fatal, God says.

But… then what Jeremiah does in chapter 10 is to talk directly about the idols that lay behind their pursuit of wisdom, wealth and power, and listen to what he says, 10:5, 'Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.' Now, I don't think I've ever been in a cucumber field, but I've seen plenty of scarecrows, and generally they have birds sitting on them. And Jeremiah's point is - look, these idols are useless, they don't work and they can't give you what you're looking for: they can't speak or walk, they can't do evil or good. So you'd don't have to fear them, but neither can you trust them.

You see, the danger of getting your affirmation from your wisdom is, what happens when your papers don't get accepted, when you're considered only an average scientist, when people stop coming to you for advice, when you make decisions and they turn out to be wrong? Then your

identity crumbles. Or if you get your hallelu-me's from power, from your job, or your physical abilities, what happens when you get laid off, or you don't get that job, or you injure yourself - then your sense of self-worth comes crashing down. And if your identity is built on what you own, what happens to your identity when the money runs out?

Now, in some of our countries, there's a culture that every child has to get a prize, isn't there. There can't be any losers, every competitor has to be a winner, or else we'll crush a child's self-esteem - everyone needs to be hallelu-you'd. And you could react to that by saying that's exactly what's wrong with society, what we really need is to become more British, and develop stiff upper lips, and never tell anyone, ever that they're good.

But that's not what Jeremiah says. God's answer to our boasting and getting hallelu's is not 'you don't need that' - it's that you're looking for it in the wrong place.

Boasting in God

Look at 9:24, "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth." So it's not that inner glorying is wrong. It's what you're glorying in. Where you're getting your self-worth from. That instead of getting that from your performance, or your position, or your possessions, you get it in God.

You see, God doesn't say 'boast that you *know* me' - because that could just be about your theological knowledge, and it's all in your head. He says, boast, glory, hear those inner hallelu's in the fact that you know and *understand* me. That deep inside you know, you understand who God is and what he is like.

You see, in place of these three scarecrows in a cucumber field of wisdom, power and wealth, God gives a much better three: 'know and understand that I am the Lord who practices *steadfast love, justice and righteousness*.' Know, understand deep inside that that's who I am to you and in place of hallelu-me's you'll have hallelujahs ringing in your heart. And as John Calvin wrote - knowing God like that will be 'enough for obtaining perfect happiness.'

You see, Paul takes these words of Jeremiah and in 1 Corinthians 1 quotes them. And he says it's not through wisdom that you're saved, but through the foolishness of the cross of Christ; that it's not through power and might, but the weakness of the cross; that it's not through riches and nobility, but through the nothingness and shame of the cross. That it's in the cross that these three things, God's steadfast love, his justice and his righteousness meet. It's there that we see the judgment of death on our own headlong rush to live life our way and turn away from God. But it's also there that we see God's love poured out, as Jesus takes the justice we deserve, that we might receive the love he deserves. As Paul says, 'Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' (1 Cor 1:30-31). That it's in Christ that you can find an acceptance and a deep inner happiness, that's not based on your performance or position or possessions but on Christ's. And that can never be taken from you. That can never go up and down with your circumstances.

It's why Paul finishes his letter to the Galatians by saying, 'Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal

6:14). I don't need to get my inner applause from where the world tries to get it - in money or power or wisdom - I get it from Christ. That at the cross God sees me as I really am, and declares his judgment, but then Jesus steps into my place to take it, so I can step into his and know the steadfast love of the Father poured over me.

So let me finish by reading Jeremiah 10:6-7, 'There is none like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you.' There is no wisdom, no power, no wealth that compare to this God of steadfast love and justice and righteousness - the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we understand that, our hallelu-me's will go strangely quiet, but our hallelu-yahs will grow in volume, and we will be much happier as they do.