Broken Covenant, Suffering God
Jeremiah 11-12

We're looking at the book of Jeremiah, one of the great Old Testament prophets. And this morning we're going to look at God's covenant with his people, at what happens when that covenant is broken, and how God picks up the pieces.

Reading: Jeremiah 11:1-8; 10b-11; 18-23; 12:1-6; 14-17.

Broken Covenant
Think, for a moment, about the nation you're from. What are some of those things that identify your nation as your nation? It could be the flag couldn't it? The star spangled banner! It could be the food - eating a pot of melted cheese. It could be a colour… like orange.

But for the nation of Judah it should have been the covenant. Their covenant relationship with God: this is what makes us, us.

And God wants Jeremiah to talk to the people about the state of the covenant: v2, "Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Now, you and I know about covenants because marriage is a covenant, not a contract. A contract says, you sell me what I want, and if someone else comes on the market and they're willing to sell me what I want cheaper, or for less hassle, then I can end our relationship and go get it from them. That's a consumer, contractual arrangement.

And some people view marriage like that. I'm in this for as long as I'm getting what I want, at the cost to me that I want. But, if a younger, newer model comes along, or one that doesn't require so much of me, then I can break this relationship and move over to them.

But not if you're in a covenant. Because in a covenant it's the relationship that's central. And you pledge yourself, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to this other person. That's a covenant.

And it was into a covenant relationship that God had called the people of Israel. And look how he sees that relationship: v4, "So shall you be my people, and I will be your God." Then in v15 he calls them, 'My beloved', and 12:7, 'the beloved of my soul.' Now, imagine if God were to say those words about you - that you are his beloved. And think how that could shape you as a person, or as a people, if you knew as your defining characteristic: 'I am loved by God.' And in Christ that is exactly what he does say.

Now when a couple falls in love, what do they see in each other? 'He's so cute' or 'She's so beautiful'. But the Bible tells us that when God set his love upon Israel there was nothing attractive about them. Look at v4, "I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace." I mean, they were slaves, sweating under forced labour, with nothing to bring to the table. Listen to what he says in Deut 7 'It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the Lord loves you' (7:7-8). It wasn't because they were really religious, or strong, or wealthy. It had nothing to do with their performance at all. It was because God is gracious and saw them suffering and loved them.

So, imagine not just being loved by God, but being loved by God *unconditionally*. That you're not loved because of what you have or what you do, but simply because he loves you, even when you fail.

Ok, but, if you were listening carefully to the text, you know there's a tension here, isn't there? You see if God setting his love on them, and rescuing them from slavery, was unconditional, their ongoing enjoyment of the Promised Land - v5, 'a land flowing with milk and honey', wasn't.

Look at v3, "Cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant." Verse 4, "Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you." Verse 7, "Obey my voice."

Now, in the Ancient Near East, when a king conquered another nation, that nation became a vassal state, and the conquering king would draw up a covenant with them. And the king would promise to defend them, and the people would promise to be loyal to the king. And to safeguard that covenant curses would be listed: this is what will happen if the nation breaks the covenant and starts looking to some one else as their king.

And when God entered into covenant with Israel he added curses to the covenant: look, this is what will happen, this will be the inevitable consequence, if you begin to live as if I am not your king. And those curses culminated in the threat of the people being thrown out of the Promised Land, and sent into exile, and cut off from the presence of God. It's the same curses the apostle Paul talks about in Galatians 3:10, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

And it was this failure to keep the covenant that was leading to the death of the nation. You see, think what happens when you forget that you are loved unconditionally. Or think what happens when you forget that your enjoyment of abundant life comes from living in right relationship with God, with him as your king. Then you start thinking that God's love for you depends on your performance, and you either become proud or you despair, both of which bring a kind of death; but you also start to think that you can still enjoy the good life, regardless of how you treat others.

And that's not just a problem for ancient Judah, is it? You see, today we live in a post-christian world, and we've forgotten that being loved and accepted by God is unconditional, so we think we have to earn acceptance and love, so we work harder and harder on our performance or our image to get that. But that either makes us proud or insecure. But also, remove the foundation that we're accountable to a sovereign God as king and judge and the building - things like justice, and integrity and truthfulness and loyalty - begins to crumble. In other words, you can't have the Promised Land without the God who gives it to you.

But Judah *had* abandoned the covenant and Jeremiah tells us why.

Stubborn Hearts

Now, my mother had an aunt, my great aunt, who would occasionally take us out on day trips. And I remember thinking how strange it was that sometimes her hearing seemed totally fine, and at others she seemed deaf as a post. And when I asked my mother she said, 'ah that's your aunt's selective deafness.' Ask her if she could come and help with the washing up and she wouldn't hear a thing. But say, 'Aunt there's some chocolate here', and she'd be there quick as a flash.

And God tells Jeremiah that he had repeatedly been calling the people back to the covenant and relationship with him, but they had refused to listen. Verse 7, "I solemnly warned your fathers… warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear."

In his book Atheist Overreach, the American sociologist, Christian Smith, asks the question, how good without God are atheists justified in being? Because there's this idea gaining ground that you can preserve all the good things of our Judaeo-Christian heritage, like justice and universal rights, without having the Judaeo-Christian bit that gave them to us. And Smith's question is, is that correct? And one of the things he points out is that proponents of an atheistic moral goodness have, in his words, 'A naive credulity about human goodness.' They think humanity is much better than it actually is.

But the Bible is much more realistic - and it explains why people refuse to listen. Verse 8, 'Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart.' Now, when you hear the word 'stubborn' what do you think of? A donkey is stubborn! You want them to move and they just won't budge. Or maybe your two-year old toddler!

But it doesn't have to be donkeys or two-year olds, does it. Because this is the problem of the human heart. We're happy with the idea of being in relationship with God, until things start to cut across the way I want to live; until God being the king means I'm not.

And that stubbornness results in a selective deafness. You see, the people hadn't abandoned religion altogether, had they? They were still very spiritual: v10, 'They have gone after *other* gods to serve them.' So, it wasn't that they weren't listening to anything, it was that they had changed the gods they were listening to. And those gods were much less morally demanding, than *the* God. In fact, idols let you stay in charge, and promise you the good life, provided you make some occasional costly sacrifice.

And in such a culture, it can be hard to stay faithful, can't it? I mean, if everyone else, including your friends, is walking in one direction, it's hard to walk against the flow, isn't it? It's even worse if they start attacking you.

Hurting Prophet

And God lets Jeremiah in on some secret intelligence. He tells him in v18-21 that the 'men of Anathoth', Jeremiah's home town, are threatening to kill him. Verse 19, "Let us cut him off from the land of the living." Verse 21, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hand."

You see, Anathoth was a village of priests, and if Jeremiah persuaded people to give up their idols, then it's these priests, with their own little shrines, who will be out of business. You see, then and now, it's when the word of God challenges people's lives and behaviours that they begin to criticise and attack. And when that happens it's hard to be popular *and* faithful.

And Jeremiah feels that. He feels vulnerable and in a minority of one. Verse 19, 'I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.' 'I'm trying to save their lives, and, as thanks, they threaten mine.' And in response Jeremiah wants God to take them out: v20, "Let me see your vengeance upon them." Now, maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe someone's stabbed you in the back at work, or you've

been unfairly criticised, or people have mocked you because of your faith. And it hurts. And when it does, there can be this desire to get even.

And God tells Jeremiah that he *will* act with justice against them: v22, "Behold, I *will* punish them." That in the coming invasion, at some point in the future, the men of Anathoth will not escape.

Now, would that have satisfied you? Maybe you've been hurt by someone, or have been on the receiving end of injustice. Is knowing that God will deal with it at some point in the distant future enough for you? Well, not for Jeremiah. For Jeremiah it was too little too late. And in his hurt he wants justice *now*. He wants a word with the judge. Chapter 12:1, "Yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the treacherous thrive?" 'I mean, sure God you might deal with this sometime, but how come you let it happen in the first place?' And if you've ever thought deeply about the problem of evil, you know that Jeremiah's speaking for you. God, if you are all powerful and righteous, why do you let this happen? Verse 3, "Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter."

So, how does God reply to him? Well, that's what's so shocking. Verse 5, "If you have raced men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?"

Now, there have been times when I've made the mistake of going running with Lukas, my son-in-law. And as I've been gasping for breath it's occurred to me that maybe this is all a ploy to kill me and inherit my book collection! But if running with Lukas is bad, imagine being dragged behind a horse and stampeded in a horse race. Or last year on holiday our van got stuck in the sand - and we all had to jump out and push. And you might think, so what, you got stuck on the beach? Except it wasn't the beach, it was the Khalahari desert, and the Khalahari desert has lions. And believe me, the thought that you might be being eyed up by a lion adds a whole new dimension to car pushing. And God says, 'Cheer up, Jeremiah, so far you've just been racing men, you're going to have to race horses. So far this has been like a picnic on the beach, well, it's like a jungle out there; things are going to get much worse. Verse 6, "For even your brothers and the house of your father, even they have dealt treacherously with you; they are in full cry after you." Jeremiah, it's not just your village, it's your family who are after you. And if things are bad now, when the war comes and Jerusalem is besieged they will get a whole lot worse.

And yet, Jeremiah does keep going over decades of faithful ministry, despite being virtually all alone. So, where did he get that kind of counter-cultural endurance from? What does God say to him that creates the kind of persistence that keeps going when you are under persistent attack?

Suffering God

And in chapter 12:7-13 God explains to Jeremiah that Jeremiah's suffering is really just a reflection of God's. That just as Jeremiah's family and friends had rejected him, so God's family, his beloved, his people, had rejected God. And so, Jeremiah discovers, again, that the pain he feels is just a taster of the pain God feels.

And God says in v14-16 that, because of their rejection of him, he will send foreign nations against the people, and they will be plucked up out of the land; that the curses of the covenant are going to kick into gear.

And that could have been it, couldn't it? 'Jeremiah I know your pain, you just need to be patient, they will get what they deserve in the end.' But that's not how it ends.

Verse 15, "And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his heritage and each to his land." And God promises that he will have compassion, but not just on his people, but on the pagan nations who introduced Israel to idols in the first place and who will invade and cause so much devastation in the future. That if these nations turn to God, v16, "they shall be built up in the midst of my people."

So the end of the story is not - the people have broken the covenant, let the curses fall. It's that all these other nations are going to be brought into and added to God's people as well.

So how is that going to work?

Well, when God first told Abraham that he was going to enter into a covenant with him, and that he would be his God and that from Abraham would come a people as numerous as the stars in the sky, God told him, in Genesis 15, to take some animals, cut them in half and lay them out: half opposite half. It's classic ancient covenant making. You see, when you made a covenant that's what you'd do. You would cut animals in half, and then the two of you would walk through the animals and say, may this be done to me if I don't keep this covenant. But when God had Abraham cut those animals in half he didn't then invite Abraham to walk with him through the middle of the pieces. Instead he had a deep sleep come over Abraham, and Abraham saw a vision of a burning fire pot passing through the pieces. In other words, God was saying, 'Abraham, I will take all the curses of the covenant upon myself. Abraham, let this be done to me if you and your people break the covenant.'

And Paul says in Galatians 3:13-14, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" - so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.'

You see, here, Jeremiah experiences what it is to be rejected by his family and his home town, and so did Jesus. And Jeremiah *feels* like a lamb being taken to the slaughter, but Christ *was* the lamb led to the slaughter: the perfect lamb - the one man ever to live a life of perfect obedience to the Father, whose heart was never stubborn. And when he was attacked, instead of asking for God's retribution as Jeremiah does, and as we're tempted to do, Jesus called out, 'Father, forgive them.'

And at the cross, all the curses of the covenant fell on him. And he experienced that God-forsakenness, that being cast out from God's presence that Israel, and you and I deserve, as God turned his face away from him, as he prayed 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'

But he was forsaken and abandoned that we might know the undeserved love of God poured out upon us. He took our curse that we might have his blessing. And it was knowing that Christ had died for the sins of the world, and risen again, that propelled the first disciples out into the world with the good news - to the very nations that God tells Jeremiah, 'they are going to be added to my people.'

You see, it's at the cross that God's unconditional love and the requirement for perfect obedience meet. And they meet in Jesus. And it's in him that we can find the courage to keep going, and live faithfully when everyone else says otherwise.

You see, firstly, when you know that Christ died for you, you know you are loved unconditionally, regardless of your performance, by the only one whose opinion really matters. And that blunts the sting of criticism and attack.

Secondly, Peter says, you can endure sorrow and unjust suffering, because,'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps' (1 Peter 2:21). When you see him suffering unjustly for you, you can suffer unjustly for him. And instead of fighting back, you can forgive because you know what it is to be forgiven.

But thirdly, you can keep going when you feel like you're being stampeded by horses or the law of the jungle is against you, because you know who you're looking at. As Hebrews says, 'Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.' (Heb 12:1-2).

You see it's in Jesus that you can know a deep, unconditional love; and it's in him that you'll find a perfect obedience. And as you look to him, you'll become more like him, and you'll keep running - whatever everyone else is doing.