This is Dr. Gary Yates and his instruction on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 8. Jeremiah two and three. “The Marriage Metaphor: God and Israel.”

Review

Our focus in the lesson today is Jeremiah chapter two, and we are going to be looking at the topic of Jeremiah’s indictment of God’s unfaithful wife. In our lesson in chapter one last time, we saw that the passage there is not just the call of Jeremiah in the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry. In many ways, it is a programmatic introduction to the book as a whole. We have Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. He is a messenger of judgment and salvation. He is tearing down and building up. He becomes a living expression of God’s word. God has put his words into his mouth. There is an enemy from the north, that theme of the Babylonians and what God is doing through them. The Lord is going to make Jeremiah like bronze walls of a fortified city because there is going to be conflict throughout his ministry, and Jeremiah is presented in that opening chapter as a prophet like Moses. Moses says, “Lord, send someone else. I don’t know how to speak.” Jeremiah says, “Ah, Lord God, you are calling me to be a prophet. I am but a child, I don’t know how to speak.” So the themes that are going to work themselves through the book of Jeremiah are found in chapter one.

In a sense, Jeremiah chapter two, verse one through four gives us the first unit of Jeremiah’s actual messages, and in many ways they are going to introduce themes that again, work themselves through the entire book. Jeremiah chapter two is going to look at the fragmenting of God’s relationship with Israel. That relationship is like a marriage. The covenant is like a marriage but in this case that relationship is broken. The remainder of the book of Jeremiah, particularly the message of hope that is in chapter 30-33 is going to express for us how that relationship is going to be restored.
It’s hard for us at times to read the book of Jerimiah. Again it’s different from the kind of books we’re used to reading. It’s not like the ones that we have in our Kindles, or even reading the New Testament, the apostles of Paul or the Gospels. It’s difficult, but I believe, in a sense, that if we understand the book of Jerimiah as a story that goes along with all these messages.

There are two things that are working themselves out in the story. Number one, as Andrew Shead reminds us, the book of Jerimiah is the story of the word of God. It’s the story of the word of God. How it looks, how it’s presented, and how it’s responded to in the life and times of Jerimiah. It’s the story of what the word of God accomplishes. The word of God is powerful and the word of God brings down the nation of Judea because of their disobedience. But the word of the Lord also gives hope to them for the future. So that’s part of the plot. What happens to the word God? What is it like? What does it look like? And what does it accomplish?

Introduction

But another theme of Jeremiah where we can imagine almost a plot unfolding throughout the book is that the book of Jeremiah is about Judea as God’s unfaithful wife and ultimately, how the Lord is going to restore that broken relationship. Now as we begin looking at chapter two and chapter three in Jerimiah, this passage has many of the prose and has the poetry of the Old Testament in general. This is true as there are a number of very powerful metaphors and word images. The prophets do not want to just feed us information. The prophets want us to feel the message that they are conveying to us. They want us to capture the emotion. One of the things I love about Jerimiah is the passion of his preaching, but we don’t simply get the information that the Babylonians are coming and they are going to be here in 586 BC. We get the impression that the Babylonians are coming and they are going to become an ancient nation that you can’t even identify and they are going to wipe you out. They are going to be like locusts that consume your land. They are going to be like lions, wolves, and leopards; and all these images come crashing down on us.

In chapter two, we have a number of figures of speech and a number of images
where Jerimiah is really doing the job as God’s prosecuting attorney of announcing God’s indictment against them. Here is the accusation. Here are the sins that you have committed.

**Key Metaphors of Jeremiah 2**

I just want to go through and point out some of the key metaphors that stand out to me as I read this chapter, but then there is one central metaphor that I think ties all these together. In chapter two, verse three, the Lord is going to say that that Israel as a people was like the first fruits of the harvest. It says in verse three, “Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of the harvest, all who aid it incurred guilt, disaster came upon them, declares the Lord.” In the Old Testament law, the first fruits of the harvest belong to the Lord; that was God’s portion. The Lord says of Israel, “they are my portion. They are my chosen selected people.” As a result of that, if anyone tried to harm them or eat them or consume them, then the Lord would destroy them for doing that. They were touching God’s portion. What is going to work out in the rest of the book is the fact that the Lord has allowed these nations to come in and ravage Israel because they have defiled their position as God’s chosen people. So that is an image, a very powerful one, at the beginning. Chapter two, verse three, “they are the first fruits of the harvest.”

In chapter two, verse fourteen, the image that is given there is that Israel has become a slave and there is a rhetorical question in chapter 2 verse 14: “Is Israel a slave? Is he a home born servant? Why then has he become prey to these other nations?” So the image there is that Israel has become a slave, they have become in bondage to these other nations, that is not the position that God had designed for them in the first place. The Lord had rescued them out of bondage so the sad thing was by their idolatry, Israel was putting themselves back in bondage.

Chapter 2 verse 21, the Lord compares Israel to a choice vine. “I planted you in the promise land.” The Lord is saying, “like a choice vine, holy of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine.” So the Lord initially planted his people in the land. He wanted them to be fruitful; he wanted them to bear fruit in their lives. Instead, they have become a wild vine like poison oak or poison ivy, and they’re
useless. They’re weeds that should be cut down, and that image of Israel as a vine is used other places in the Old Testament. In Psalms 80, the Lord pictures Israel as a vine that he planted in the land but that again becomes unfaithful to him. Isaiah chapter five, Isaiah presents Israel as a vineyard and the prophet says that the Lord wanted good grapes, but instead they’ve produced wild and sour grapes. In the sense that’s the same image here. The Lord planted Israel and did everything that he could to make sure that they would become a productive vine, but instead they have become a wild and corrupt vine.

Chapter 2:22 and 2:34 is going to picture Judea as a criminal who is covered with blood stains. So we read in Jeremiah 2:22, “though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me declares the Lord God.” Verse 34, “also on your skirts is found the life blood of the guiltless poor. You did not find him breaking in, yet in spite of these things you say, ‘I am innocent.’” And so they are pictured as having bloodstains and the investigators without even having to turn on the purple light that shows the presence of blood, you can see the blood all over Israel. It reminds us of what the prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 1:10-15, the people of Judea are lifting up their hands to God and they’re petitioning him and praying to him, but as they are praying to God, the Lord looks down and sees the stains of blood. Now Jeremiah’s audience might have protested we are not murderers. We are not criminals in that sense, but by the way they had treated the poor, the way that they had oppressed them and the way they had deprived them of their livelihood, in a sense, in God’s eyes, all of them whether they were violent criminals or not, they were covered with the guilt of their sin. That is a very powerful image.

Chapter 2 verse 23, describes Israel’s tendency to wander away from God. It says, “How can you say I am not unclean? I have not gone after the Baals? Look at your way in the valley and know what you have done. You are a restless, young camel, running here and there.” So the Lord charges them with idolatry. “They say we have not gone after the Baals. We haven’t pursued these other gods.” The Lord says, “Look at yourselves. You are like a restless, young camel, just an animal going back and forth. You lack sense. What you have done has reduced you basically to nothing more than a
beast. That’s what you are.”

Now the image gets a little more offensive in verse 24. There is another metaphor here. He says, “You are a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust?” You are like a donkey in heat. And in the same way that a donkey in heat sniffs the urine trail looking for his mate you’re like a wild animal in heat chasing after these gods. Their idolatry had reduced them to that level. The Lord wanted them to see that. And so Jeremiah uses this powerful image of what that’s like.

Chapter 2 verse 26, “They are like a thief that has been caught in the act.” Chapter 2 verse 26, “As a thief is shamed when caught so the house of Israel shall be shamed.” They were caught in the very act of robbing and thieving and yet throughout this chapter and one of the things we’re going to see the people say is, “We’re innocent; we haven’t defiled ourselves with these other gods the way that you’ve claimed.”

So these metaphors, these images, they collide on us and they crash down on us in many ways, trying to help us to see the guilt of Israel. J Andrew Dearman, as he describes the section, says this is likely an anthology of Jeremiah’s messages; things that he’s preached over the long course of his ministry. They are setting the stage for what we see in the rest of the book as Jeremiah is going to charge them with covenant infidelity. But the prophet doesn’t just convey information; he wants the people to see the depravity of their sin. The Lord looks at them like an animal in heat. The Lord pictures them as a slave; they have enslaved themselves. The Lord views them as a corrupt vine that is not producing the fruit that it should. The Lord views them as criminals who have bloodstains on their hands; who have been caught in the act. All of these images are there to convince the people of their sin.

**Judah as an Unfaithful Wife Metaphor**

But the unifying metaphor and the unifying image that works itself out I believe in chapter 2 verse 1 on into chapter 3 is that Judah is an unfaithful wife and by their failure in their covenant to the Lord, in their failure to be obedient to him-- more importantly in the issue of loyalty; in their failure to worship him exclusively and serve him exclusively,
they have become like an unfaithful wife who has prostituted herself and has committed adultery.

So we have this idea that appears throughout the Old Testament that idolatry is not just a sin, idolatry is a form of spiritual adultery where the people of Israel have been unfaithful to God as their husband. Now there are a number of places in chapter 2 and 3 where we see specific references to this marriage relationship. Back in chapter 2 at the very beginning of this message the prophet is going to say, “Thus says the Lord, ‘I remember the devotion of your youth and how you loved me as a bride and how you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown.’”

So let’s think about the marriage relationship between God and Israel when the Lord brought them out of Egypt and when he was taking them through the wilderness. The prophet says that was like the honeymoon time in the marriage. You followed the Lord, you were obedient to him and we begin to think about other parts of the Old Testament and our response to that might be: Are you kidding? Remember what life in the wilderness between God and Israel. They are worshipping the golden calf in Exodus 32 before the details on the covenant between God and Israel had even been brought down from the mountain. They confirm and they state to the Lord that they will live under that covenant in Exodus 20 to 24 but they are basically cheating on God before the honeymoon is even over. This passage says, well actually though when you compare it to the present the way that Israel responded to God in the wilderness that was like the honeymoon. That might reflect something of how unfaithful they have become during the time of Jeremiah’s ministry. They were a stiff-necked, hard-hearted, rebellious people. They constantly disobeyed the Lord. They end up wandering through the wilderness for forty years because of their disobedience.

Yet the Lord says, “I remember the devotion of your youth.” Now the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 20 of his book is going to give us a more realistic assessment of Israel’s history and he’s going to say basically, “You have worshipped idols throughout your entire lifetime. You were worshipping idols in Egypt; you continue to worship idols in the wilderness” and basically that’s their history. But in Jeremiah 2 as part of the
picture, “I remember at one time you loved me the way that a bride loved her husband.” I always imagine the story of the husband and the wife and the wife who always sat beside her husband in the car and now they’ve become distant and apart but the husband reminds her, “Look, I’m not the one who’s moved, you have.” In a sense that’s what the Lord is saying to Israel.

**God as Israel’s Bride**

Now there are other passages, other verses that are going to directly use this metaphor of God and Israel as a bride. The primary thing that these verses are going to say is that Israel has become a prostitute—they have been unfaithful, they have committed adultery. It may not necessarily convey that they have sold themselves for sex but it is conveying the idea of spiritual unfaithfulness to God. Verse 20: “Yet on every hill and under every green tree you have bowed down like a whore.” Verse 33 says this, taking the imagery a little bit further. “How well you direct your course to seek love so that even to wicked women you have taught your ways.” Alright, you’re not just a prostitute, you aren’t just unfaithful to the Lord, you could actually give classes on this because you’re really good at it. Chapter 3 verse 1, “You have played the whore with many lovers and would you then return to me? Declares the Lord.” Israel was not just guilty of infidelity. They were guilty of serial infidelity.

Chapter 3 verses 6-10: Israel and Judah are unfaithful sisters. The Lord has already written a certificate of divorce for Israel and, in a sense, because Judah has not learned the lesson of what God did with Israel, Judah is worse than the apostate Northern Kingdom. Chapter 3 verses 19-21 Judah has become unfaithful sons and unfaithful wives. Both are images of the closest possible family relationships, the relationship of a husband and a wife and the relationship of a father and his children. It’s strange to us at times the way the Old Testament is going to join those things together but its emphasizing the Lord has the closest possible relationship to his people and they have not been faithful to that relationship.

**Israel as an Unfaithful Wife in the Other Prophets**

Now as we look at the Old Testament prophets this idea of Israel, as an unfaithful
wife is not just something that we find in the book of Jeremiah it is also part of the message of two other Old Testament prophets in a very prominent way. It’s very prominent in the story and the message and the preaching of the prophet Hosea. Hosea’s own life represents and pictures the history of Israel with God. He marries an unfaithful wife named Gomer. Whether she is unfaithful to him before the marriage or after the marriage is something that scholars dispute but ultimately that relationship is fractured. The children that are born to that marriage reflect the severing of the relationship with God. The names that are given to the children are, “not my people,” “I will not have compassion on them.” But Hosea ultimately loves his wife, takes her back and restores the relationship. That’s the story of Israel and God.

Ezekiel chapter 16 and Ezekiel chapter 23 are also going to use very powerful images of Jerusalem and Judah and Israel as God’s bride and then ultimately how they have been promiscuous and unfaithful against him, again, in a spiritual way by their worship of idols. Sometimes the shocking metaphors and language that Jeremiah uses, you’re like an animal in heat; or chapter 2 verse 33, “Even the worst of women could learn from your ways.” The prophet Ezekiel uses imagery that is just as graphic and just as vivid. He says to the people that were living exile; the people of Israel originally, they were like a baby that had been abandoned in a field. The umbilical cord had not been cut. The baby was covered in its blood from its birth. It was abandoned by its parents and God found this baby girl and loved her and raised her and lavished every possible gift that he could upon her. Then he took her as his bride. And then after all of the things that he had lavished upon her, after all the ways that in his splendor he had made her beautiful, this woman turned against him and used her beauty and used all of the things that the husband had given to her, the Lord had given to Israel, to become unfaithful. She became promiscuous in every way, at every street corner, every high place she advertised herself.

Ezekiel says, “The difference between my people and a prostitute is that a prostitute gets paid for her services, my people have actually paid the lovers that they have pursued.” In the normal course of business there are those who seek out a prostitute. Israel as a prostitute sought out her lovers. The prophet Ezekiel is even going to compare
Israel or Samaria and Jerusalem to Sodom as three sisters that were promiscuous and unfaithful. He’s going to say Judah is worse, Jerusalem is worse than any of her sisters.

**Facets of the Marriage Metaphor**

So, this same kind of graphic imagery that appears in Jeremiah is the heart of the story of Hosea. It’s part of the preaching of Ezekiel and so in chapter two I think it’s very important for us to understand: what exactly is the purpose of the marriage metaphor in the book of Jeremiah? What does it convey and what can we learn from this image? This is the foundational message in the book of Jeremiah. This is the first thing that we're going to read that the prophet says. So here are some things that I think the marriage metaphor conveys. Number 1 the marriage metaphor stresses the depth of God’s love for Israel. Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 2 “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” This is one of my favorite verses in the book of Jeremiah. We see the depth of that everlasting love in the fact that God uses the closest possible human relationship: marriage itself, the relationship between a man and a women to talk about his love for the people of Israel. In the New Testament how does God picture his love for us? Christ as our husband and as our groom, gave himself up for his bride and the command given to us in Ephesians chapter 5: “Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the church.” The marriage metaphor in Scripture between God and his people expresses the depth and degree of God’s love for us.

Whenever I do a marriage ceremony, one of the passages that I like to read as part of the ceremony is found in Song of Solomon chapter 8, verse 7. I think we realize Song of Solomon has a few things to say about love and marriage and the beauty of all that, but there is an expression about marital love in Song of Solomon chapter 8 verse 7 it says this, “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it out. If a man offered for love all of the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised for it.” I tell couples as I’m marrying them. “I pray that you will know in your home and your life that kind of love, that it’s more valuable to you than any wealth or any possessions. Nothing could ever extinguish this kind of love. That’s what real marital love is about.” I pray that as a couple they will experience that, but if that’s what marital love is like and the Bible is
using the metaphor of God being married to his people or Christ, we’re his bride and he died on the cross so that he could wash us, cleanse us, and purify us. It’s speaking in a very powerful way of the depth of God’s love.

The second thing that it reminds us of is that the marriage metaphor in the covenant in Israel reminds us of the exclusivity of the covenant relationship. God is expecting Israel to be absolutely, exclusively devoted to him. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 and 5 what's the convent standard that the Lord puts in front of the people of Israel, “you are to love the Lord with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of your strength.” Every fiber of your being is to be devoted exclusively to God. That does not allow for the possibility of something else or someone else coming into that relationship. Deuteronomy chapter 13, “You are to have no other gods before me.” There is nothing that is to compete with God as a rival. And so the whole marriage metaphor is stressing the exclusivity of the relationship.

Sometimes I ask my students to think about this, “Would you ever think about taking your best friend on a honeymoon?” That’s generally not accepted because that’s a time when you’re exclusively devoted/given to your husband given to your bride and enjoying that new relationship that you’ve entered into. The relationship that God had with Israel, they were to be exclusively devoted to him. What we see constantly happening in the Old Testament, the Israelites by worshipping idols are typically not throwing away their relationship to the Lord, in a syncretistic way they are trying to bring these other gods in. “Hey, let’s make sure that we’re covered with all of our bases.” God is saying that he wants his people to be exclusively devoted to him.

Now even though polygamy was a reality in the Old Testament, it was something in that culture that God tolerates and puts up with and regulates in the Mosaic Law. We remember that going back to Genesis chapter 2. God’s original design for marriage is that one man and one woman would be joined together as one flesh and that relationship would exist for their entire life. That’s God’s design for marriage at the human level and at the spiritual level God’s design is that there is nothing else in life that should ever take the place of the Lord. There is nothing in our lives in terms of either something that we
give ourselves to or that we trust in or that we love or that we serve that would ever compete or provide a rival to him. The sin of idolatry of all of the covenant disobedience that Israel could offer to God, the sin of idolatry, was the most severe because it was a sin of violating loyalty and of disloyalty that gave rise to these other sins. So number one the marriage metaphor stresses the depth of God’s love. Number two the exclusivity of the relationship.

Number three in the context of the ancient Near East the marriage metaphor conveys the dependence of Israel on the Lord as their husband. Now marriage in our culture versus what it was like in the days of the Old Testament is quite different. Now there is egalitarian type of relationship that we enter into as husband and wife. But in the culture of the ancient Near East the wife in almost every way was dependent on the husband. He was her livelihood; he was her life. In the culture in the Old Testament at large the husband had rights and privileges in that marriage that were not necessarily true of the wife. Now that particular aspect of marriage is not necessarily being endorsed by the Bible but as the prophets used this metaphor of God as the husband of Israel it’s a reminder in that particular culture there is an unequal relationship in some sense. Israel is dependent on God and they need him in the same way that a wife would need her husband in the context of the ancient Near East.

Number four the marriage metaphor is going to stress for us the seriousness and the shamefulfulness of Israel’s sin. That’s part of this graphic imagery. Why would the prophet charge them with being like an animal in heat? Why would the prophet say these shocking things, “you have spread your legs under every tree or at every high place in the city.” I can imagine that if we walked into a church as a pastor and made these kind of statements in church today it might not be received really well. So what were they trying to do? They were trying to help these people understand the severity of their sin. They have violated this special sacred relationship and the amazing thing is that instead of God only feeling anger about that, which obviously he does, the Lord also feels the grief of a husband who has been betrayed by his partner. I know as a pastor the most painful moments that I’ve ever spent with people are the times when someone in a marriage
relationship whether its husband or a wife, when they’ve broken that trust whatever the circumstances or however they love each other or want to restore that relationship. There is pain in that kind of thing that no other experience in life is like. So the idea of Israel as a prostitute conveys that sin isn’t just breaking God’s law, in a sense, sin is breaking God’s heart. The Lord feels this pain and this grief over what his wife has done to him, what his partner has done to him. Hosea chapter 2 verses 5-7 and I read this, God in Israel but I think about as a husband how I feel as I read this passage.

Hosea says that Israel received the good gifts that the Lord had given to them: the land, the wine, the grain, all of those blessings and what they ended up doing was they attributed those gifts not to God but to Baal. And they gave their love and their devotion to Baal and said, look at how Baal, as our husband, has blessed us. Now as a husband, that’s like if I take my wife out for dinner and buy her roses and she invites our next door neighbor over for dinner to thank him for that. That’s exactly what the people of Israel had done to the Lord. I think that every husband who was in that audience and heard that message would feel the pain that the Lord felt. In a culture of honor and shame, the women would have felt the shame that would have been attributed to the label of prostitute. That was not just something that God was saying about the women in that culture that was something that all of the people had to place themselves in that position. As every husband, and remember they’re primarily the ones that the prophet is speaking too because they are the ones who will make the decisions that decide the direction of the nation. Every husband in that society needs to not just put themselves in place of God, but to put themselves in place of the wanton woman that has been unfaithful to the Lord. This would be a painful thing.

I think the idea of adultery, prostitution, and promiscuity was also a very effective image and picture for the sins of Israel because their idolatry is that they worship the Canaanite gods that often involve fertility rights that involved sexual immorality and promiscuity. There were practices that God had never designed to be part of the worship of Israel. Things in fact that that as God was setting up the tabernacle and the temple that God took steps to make sure would not occur as part of their worship. The sexual fertility
rights, this perversion that had come into play and so the use of the image of prostitution very effectively signifies literally what Judah was doing on every green hill on these high places as they worshiped these pagan gods as they were committing sexual immorality.

A fifth thing that the marriage metaphor conveys to us is that it reminds us of the severity of the judgment that the Lord is going to bring as a result to this sin. God is angered in the book of Jeremiah by the sin of his people. In chapter 23 verse 20: “the wrath of God will not abate until it accomplishes everything that it desires.” Jeremiah 13:22 “the fierce anger of the Lord is going to break out against the people” and Jeremiah says, “I’m filled with the wrath and indignation of God because God is angered over the sin of his people.” His response is justifiable when we understand the severity of the sin. God’s reaction, God’s broken heart, God’s anger and then the specific ways that he is going to judge the people is absolutely justified in light of what they have done and the sin that they have committed. Every husband who heard this message would have understand that.

In the Old Testament law and in ancient Near Eastern law, adultery was often a capital crime. It could be punished by those that were found guilty of this being put to death. It was a capital offence. On the other hand, there were times when the husband might actually punish the wife with some form of physical punishment.

This metaphor and image of Israel as an unfaithful wife and God as an angry husband who has been betrayed and God responding in anger as a result of that is not just at the beginning of the book it’s going to work itself through the entire book. We turn over to chapter 13. We look at verses 24-27 and this is one of the most disturbing passages in all the book of Jeremiah. To be honest in our culture and in our context it’s even kind of uncomfortable to even read these verses but here’s what the Lord says. Verse 24 “I will scatter you like chaff, driven by the wind from the desert. This is your lot, the portion that I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies”. Remember the Lord is a betrayed husband in this case and he says in verse 26: “I myself will lift up your skirts over your face and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adultery and neighings, your lewd
whorings, on the hills and fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean?” So in the culture of the ancient Near East, God is punishing their adultery in a very appropriate way. He is taking them to a public place, he is stripping his wife naked and he is exposing her so that all can see her shame. Again to be honest as I read this, in our culture and our context, it’s painful to read this. As a pastor and even here teaching this session, I have to be sensitive to how we reflect that in light of the problem of spousal abuse that we have in our culture. As feminist critics have read this part of the Bible they have often been deeply troubled by it and again understandably so.

**Strong Imagery**

There are studies that focus specifically on passages like Jeremiah 2, Jeremiah 13, Ezekiel 16, Ezekiel 23, the book of Nahum where the city of Nineveh is described as a woman that the Lord is going to strip naked and punish. They have referred to the imagery that’s there as porno-prophetic language. There have been studies that have labeled God as a divine rapist. He is a sexual predator. He is an abusive husband. And in light of the ongoing as I’ve said the problem of abuse of women and how that’s an issue in our society, again, I think we have to be careful how we teach this and how we express this idea about God from the Old Testament. We have to remember that the prophets are speaking in an ancient Near Eastern culture in an ancient Near Eastern context. There are aspects of the Bible that are time conditioned. Again this doesn’t just drop out of heaven. It is reflective of the culture of that day where the punishment of women in a physical way, even capital punishment at times was carried out. So we understand that, but at the same time I also want us to understand that we are dealing with metaphorical language and I think sometimes in the responses and reactions of feminist critics to these passages, I think sometimes they minimize that idea. The imagery is definitely troubling to us, but I don’t believe it’s our job here to redeem the Bible. I believe our job here to listen to what that metaphor has to say.

In this context of portraying God as a husband who is going to punish his wife, we are reminded of the purpose why Jeremiah is expressing this in the first place. God is telling the people these things so that they repent and change their ways. Yes, the Bible
uses some very graphic, horrible, violent imagery to express that but ultimately God’s purpose was not to carry out this kind punishment. The purpose of this language was hopefully to turn Judah from their sins so that they would be spared from it. In a real sense I think that the prophets are simply being realistic as well as they use this imagery related to the treatment of women. In war, as the Babylonians are going to invade the land, women would be the ones who would be deprived of their children. They would be the ones who would lose their husbands. They would be the ones that would be raped and physically abused. They would be the ones often taken away as captive prisoners to marry their enemies. So as the prophet is using this graphic imagery, these metaphors are designed to say: “This is what judgment is going to look like.” The Lord doesn’t revel in this. The Lord doesn’t take joy in this. The Lord is using this powerful imagery to get the people to respond, to turn from their sins, to make the judgment seem as awful as it could possibly be so that ultimately they might respond to the warnings.

So I believe we need to understand the metaphorical nature, we need to take into consideration the rhetorical reasons that this is being used. We need to balance that with the fact that as we look at the other parts of the Old Testament we are reminded that God has a special concern for the oppressed and the needy especially when that comes to the idea of women who are oppressed or abused or not taken care of, God responds to those situations. Genesis chapter 21 is just a beautiful passage; just touching in the compassion that’s showed there. The Lord hears the cry of Hagar when Abraham and Sarah have driven her away, and he’s aware of Hagar and her son Ishmael. In Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 18 we are reminded that the Lord executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and throughout the ancient Near East that was an ideal. A just king takes care of the poor and the needy and if the Lord is a just king he is going to do that. Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 15-18 reminds us that in the normal practice of war, Israel was not to commit violent acts against non-combatants and that would include women.

Then finally in Deuteronomy 21 verses 14-18 what someone has referred to as what Israel is to do when they take prisoners of war, Israel was reminded that women
taken as captives in war, even they were to be treated with dignity and to be given time to allow them to warm up to their husbands and those kinds of things. So, the metaphors that we see in the book of Jeremiah are never designed to validate, to justify, to excuse, or to rationalize a husband ever abusing his wife or mistreating her in any kind of physical way. We are reminded as well, that as God is judging people in the context of warfare, that God may use these enemies to carry out his judgment, but at the human level these judgments are never going to be completely just.

Divine Wrath

There’s an ultimate justice that God will ultimately have to meet out, and God is using very unjust situations, and the metaphor of these women who are going to be abused, hurt, and injured, and all the things that are going to happen to them conveys the reality and the horrors of that judgment. Divine wrath is a difficult thing. So in our culture, this is a difficult part of the book of Jeremiah to deal with and I felt like it’s important that we address that, but beyond this, I think there is a more pressing issue in our culture that we need to think about as we look at this. I think part of our resistance is not just to the idea of spousal abuse of a wife, but I think one of the reasons why these images bother us is that overall we are resistant to the idea of a holy God who hates sin. The fact that our sin, our disobedience, our infidelity, and our idolatry, and remember Calvin said our hearts are idol factories, all of us are idol worshipers and that brings us under God’s wrath and Gods judgment.

I was reading a very popular Christian blog this week and the comments on the blog were discussing the abusiveness of any kind of idea or how degrading it was for theologians to say that we are not deserving of God’s love, but the Bible is going to remind us that we are not deserving of God’s love that God commended his love toward us, not because of what we deserve, but because of his mercy and his grace. When we understand the wrath of a holy God, and the fact that God in his anger would allow these things to happen, he would use the Babylonians to bring this kind of degradation to the people of Israel, when we understand the intensity of divine wrath then we can begin to understand the greatness of God’s love, God’s mercy, and God’s compassion. We don’t
make God a greater God of love by taking away his wrath and his anger; in a sense I think we undermine his love.

**Marriage Metaphor as God’s Love and Commitment**

Now, finally, the last thing that I think we are reminded of from the marriage metaphor, we’ve looked at some pretty negative things here, but as we come to a close the marriage metaphor in the prophets reminds us of the abiding love and commitment of God to his people.

When you see the wrath and hatred of God for sin then you can also come to a place where you truly appreciate his mercy and grace. The same God who is going to punish his wayward wife is also the God who would ultimately restore her. Remember God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love. My love and my commitment to you is forever.” On the basis of that, God cannot give Israel up, God cannot stop loving her, if God’s love is an eternal love, there’s nothing that can cause us, or nothing that can cause God to love us more. There’s also nothing that can cause God to love us less.

So there’s this abiding commitment in the book of Hosea, which is a book about God’s punishment of his unfaithful wife, the Lord says in Hosea chapter 11 verses 8 and 9 “how can I give you up on Ephraim” you know it’s like I have to carry out my justice and my anger and my wrath against you, I have to execute this judgment, the justice side of my character demands that, but I also I love you. How can I give you up?” Then he says in verse 9, “because of that, I will not carry out the full fury of my anger against you, I’m not going to completely consume you or destroy you” and we’re driven to this place where we ask the question, why? How could God love his people this much in light of hundreds and hundreds of years of unfaithfulness? There have been times where couples have come to me as a pastor to be married, and I will ask in my mind or ask them directly, “what has ever led you to want to marry this person?” Well, we can definitely ask that about God and Israel or about Christ and the church, but the Lord says, “I have an abiding commitment to my people.”

So, in the Old Testament there is the reality of God divorcing his wife. Jeremiah chapter 3, “I’m going to give her a certificate of divorce, I’ve already written that out,
I’ve already given it to the people of Israel; the same thing is about to happen to Judah, but there is also the promise that that divorce is only temporary.” The severing of the relationship has a time limit. So when we come to the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah says, “where is the certificate of divorce that I gave your mother? It’s no longer there because God is going to take his people back. In Isaiah 54 the barren woman who is alone, a widow, and childless is going to become God’s pure bride all over again. She is going to have so many children that the city of Jerusalem will not be able to contain her. In Isaiah 62, Israel is given a new name because God is going to take her as his bride. The relationship in Hosea as he goes and he takes his wife back is a picture of how God is ultimately going to restore Israel.

**Restoration of the Relationship**

I want to close this lesson by a verse in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 22, remember the plot of the book is that it’s not just about an unfaithful wife, it’s not just about a broken marriage, it’s about God restoring that relationship. In chapter 31 verse 22 it says this, “the Lord has created a new thing on the earth, a woman encircles a man.” There’s been all kinds of discussions about what that verse means. The early church interpreted this as a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus. I believe what it’s taking about is in some ways, God does his work of recreating and restoring the woman. Israel, is going to encircle, she’s going to embrace, she’s going to hold onto her husband. As God changes her and transforms her, she is going to be absolutely faithful to him, and that marriage between God and his people is ultimately going to be everything that God designed it to be.

There’s a story in the book of Jeremiah that begins in chapter 2. It’s the story of a broken marriage, but the book of Jeremiah as a whole is ultimately about how God will restore that marriage and bring his people back to himself.