The Lord’s Dispute with Israel (Jer 2-3)

Review

In our previous sections we’ve taken some time to look at Jeremiah 1 and 2 and I do believe these are formative chapters for our study of the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah and the call of the prophet, actually introduces the themes that are going to work their way through the book. Then we have the opening message of Jeremiah chapter two, verse one all the way to chapter four, verse four. This message is going to introduce the plot of the book. Judah is God’s unfaithful wife and the stories of Jeremiah’s life, the narratives that are there, the sermons, the poetry, the prose, all of these things are working us through the complicated story of how the Lord is going to take his people through the exile and then ultimately restore them and repair this broken relationship.

We looked at the metaphor and the figure of Israel as God’s unfaithful wife and how important that is to the book. The prophets are speaking primarily to our emotions not just to inform us of facts, they want us to feel the message. They want us to sense the pain, the anger the betrayal the Lord feels. They want us to also understand the depravity of Israel’s sins and the significance of their betrayal of the Lord.

Introduction to Literary Genres

Now along with metaphor and images which the prophets are very effective at using one of the other things that has helped me is to better understand it is the literary genres that appear in the prophets. The literary forms are the way that they communicate their message. We're going to take a look at some of those in chapter two here.

Every day that our morning newspaper arrives whether we look it up online or read the hard copy we are actually practicing genre criticism because we
understand the literary forms that are in the headline. When I see a headline that says “Lions Invade Cincinnati” I realize that I don’t need to call the police in Ohio to warn them about this. If I’m a movie buff or a TV guy, I know how to read the movie listings or the TV guide because I know it’s something that’s important to me. If I see a story in the center of the paper that says the “presidents policies are a failure” I understand that it’s an opinion, it’s an editorial, and it may or may not be accurate. I’m able to read the paper and be informed in a sensitive way because I understand the literary forms and the genres.

The way that the writers of that newspaper communicate their message is the same way we need to understand the literary forms of the prophets so we can understand the ways they communicate their message. As a teacher, as a pastor, understanding the literary genres often will provide for me the outline of the passage and the way that I want to break this down as I teach it to others. But a literary form or a literary genre helps us know what to expect as we’re going into a passage. It also helps to convey for us what the writer is trying to say.

**Judgment Genre**

Now scholars who have studied the prophet, basically divide the genres of the prophets into two categories. There are genres of judgment and genres that are related to salvation. These are two aspects of their message. The most basic prophetic judgment speech is simply referred to as a judgment oracle. A judgment speech in the prophets contains two primary elements: there is an accusation and there is an announcement. The accusation, the specific list of the crimes Israel has committed, the sins that the target of the judgment speech has committed against God. The announcement, often introduced by *laken*, “therefore” here’s what God’s going to do; the specific things that God is going to do to bring punishment on them for their sin.

We obviously have a genre of judgment speech in Jeremiah chapter two. Judah has been the Lord’s unfaithful wife. Therefore, as a result of this, here are the judgments that he has brought against them to get their attention. Here are the
judgments that he’s going to bring against them in the future if they do not pay attention now.

The prophets can take that basic judgment speech and develop it in several ways. Some of the prophets will add the word “woe” to the beginning of a prophetic judgment speech. The Hebrew word is *oi* and it’s translated “woe.” In the King James it’s “alas.” The Net Bible will translate these oracles: “Israel is as good as dead” and the reason for that it is that a woe oracle. The word “woe” is associated with death and with a funeral. When a person had died often the lament of the person that was left behind they would say “alas” or “woe” for this person. Expressing the sadness and the grief of the death when Jeremiah announces the death of Jehoiakim one of the things he says is that there will not be someone to pronounce a woe for him. This guy is dead. So when a prophet introduced his judgment speech by saying to the people “woe,” he was announcing their coming funeral. He was, in effect, saying to them Israel is as good dead if they do not change their ways.

You can imagine having a dream at night where you have a funeral. You want to see who’s in the casket. Who is it? You walk to the front and you see your own image there. The prophets, in a sense, were calling Israel to their own funeral and reminding them: this is what is going to happen to you if you do not change your ways.

**Covenant Lawsuit**

Now another type of prophetic judgment speech that I think we definitely see here in Jeremiah 2 and several of the genres are going to collect together in this chapter. We see a civil lawsuit in Jeremiah 2:9. The Lord says, “Therefore, I still contend with you declares the Lord.” The word there for “contend,” in the ESV is the Hebrew word *rib* which means “dispute.” So what we can imagine is the prophet bringing the people into the courtroom. The prophet is the prosecuting attorney. The Lord is the judge. The people are the defendants and they are working, in a sense, through a criminal trial.
In the covenant lawsuits several things are going to happen. Many times the prophet will call the witnesses into the courtroom as in Isaiah 1, “Hear, O heavens; and listen, O earth.” This is a formal courtroom setting so let’s bring the witnesses in and see how Israel has done.

There’s a rehearsal of the past relationship between God and Israel and in Jeremiah 2:5 the Lord is going to say, “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they have gone so far away from me?” There’s a rehearsal of the past covenant. The Lord’s faithfulness is contrasted with the people’s unfaithfulness. In Isaiah 1 the Lord says, “I have raised up children but they have rebelled against me,” and so has the history of the people of God and their covenant with the Lord.

As that is being rehearsed there’s a reminder of God’s faithfulness to people’s unfaithfulness. The specific list of crimes that they’ve committed, the accusations, the indictment has brought out in the trial setting.

Then the Lord is finally going to pass sentence and it will either be a judgment or a call for Israel to change their ways and repent before the judgment falls upon them. So I want you to try and imagine a courtroom scene where you’re going into the courtroom.

I’ve only had to do this one time where I was the defendant. I was involved in a traffic accident, and it happened on State Road 666. So there may have been some significance to this, but I was charged by the state police for driving on the wrong side of the road. There was a reason for that. I had to go into the courtroom; I had to answer the judge. It's an intimidating thing to do.

But imagine what it’s like to go into the courtroom and to face God as the judge. In a sense, that's what Jeremiah 2 is doing to the people. God is bringing them into the courtroom. I don't know a lot about legal proceedings. I have not gone to law school, but I know that when the judge and the defendant, or the judge and the prosecuting attorney are on the same team when the prosecuting attorney is working for the judge, the defendant is in big trouble. So in a sense we have this courtroom setting in Jeremiah chapter 2 where the prophet is formally
charging them with their disobedience to the Lord.

Later in the chapter, the Lord is going to say to the people, "Why are you contending with me?" And so the Lord is bringing them into the courtroom. The Lord has a rib against them, but the people are protesting and they say that they have a rib against the Lord.

**Disputation Genre**

Now another prophetic genre related to the message of judgment, is that I believe we also have in Jeremiah 2 is a disputation. Obviously, whenever we go into a courtroom there's going to be the back and forth of trying to prove the case. So, the Lord is using the prophet to prove his case, and to convince the people that they truly are guilty.

I believe that a good example of a prophetic disputation is found for us in Ezekiel chapter 18. There's a proverb that the people have been using during the time of judgment to explain their situation, and they say, "The fathers have eaten the sour grapes, but it's the children whose teeth are set on edge." In other words, what that proverb meant is, our fathers have eaten the sour fruit, but the bitter taste and the edginess on our teeth, we're the ones that are experiencing that. Our fathers committed the sin, they broke the covenant, and we're experiencing the consequences of that. So what the prophet is going to have to do in the middle of the situation is to convince them that their understanding of the situation is absolutely wrong. The prophet is going to take them through several scenarios where he explains to them a wicked father does not bring punishment on a righteous son or a righteous father cannot save a wicked son from God's punishment. Ultimately to say that your fathers were wicked and so are you. He takes that proverb that says, "The fathers eat the sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge," and instead he says, "A man will die or live based on his own behavior and his own actions." It's taking a message that the people disagree with, and ultimately convincing them that the prophet is right.

In Jeremiah chapter 2 we definitely have a disputation because the Lord
says, "Israel/Judah has been an unfaithful bride; they have committed serial infidelity against the Lord, and the people are going to come back and say, "How have we sinned against the Lord?"

The prophetic book of Malachi is built around a series of disputations between God and the people. The Lord will say, "I have loved Israel," and the people will answer back, "How have you loved us?" So the prophet is going to say, "Israel/Judah is an unfaithful wife." And the people are going to say, "How are we an unfaithful wife?" Jeremiah chapter 2 is going to try to explain that and try to convince the people of the prophet's argument.

When I think of a disputation, I imagine sometimes what I do when I prepare a sermon. If I am preaching on a difficult topic or controversial issue, I imagine three or four people sitting in my audience. Over here on the right side, there's a hardened skeptic who's not going to buy what I'm saying. Or maybe over here, I think of a member of my family who struggles with something, and they're going to say, "Yeah, but what about this, or what about that." To really be effective in our preaching sometimes we have to anticipate how people are going to object to what we are saying.

So the prophet comes in, and is going to say to Judah, "You're an unfaithful wife, and on top of that you have prostituted yourself; you have committed adultery; you have spread your legs and advertised yourself under every green hill, and on every high place in the city." There's a good possibility that the people are not going to be terribly receptive to that message.

Think about this in the New Testament as well. In James chapter 4, verses 8 and 9, listen to the message that James gives to Christian people. This is in a New Testament context: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, your double minds. Be wretched, mourn, and weep." We might say, "Is he talking to us?" So, I can imagine if on a Sunday morning I said, “You people have prostituted yourself against the Lord,” my congregation may not take that very well. In fact, I was doing a presentation at
an academic conference talking about prophetic imagery and this whole idea of Israel as an unfaithful prostitute, and one of the professors there said, "Why do you think that pastors don't use these kinds of images when they talk to people today?" I did not have a good scholarly answer. My pragmatic answer from being a pastor was, "Because they want to keep their jobs." So the people are not going to be terribly receptive to being charged with prostitution and being convicted and put in prison.

There will be times when the prophets will compare the city of Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah which is the ultimate city of wickedness in the Old Testament, and I can imagine they were not terribly receptive to that message. The prophet Amos speaking to the wealthy women of Samaria refers to them as "the fat cows of Bashan." He had courage because I would never say that on a Sunday morning, but how do you convince people of things that they don't want to hear?

**Jeremiah 2: Lawsuit and Disputation**

So in Jeremiah chapter 2 let's look at the elements of a covenant lawsuit and disputation. What does the prophet do to convince the people that they are guilty as charged? As we've already talked about one of the things that the prophet does is there's the extensive use of figures of speech and metaphor. We looked at several of those in our previous session. I don't want to go through all those again, but let me remind you of some of those that we just briefly touched on. Chapter 2 verse 3: Israel has been God's first fruits; they belong to him, and they were devoted to him. When they were, God protected them, and watched over them. No one was allowed to eat or to devour God's first fruits. When they turned away from him, God sent these enemy armies to devour them. Chapter 2 verse 24: They are like a wild donkey in heat. They have debased themselves by their idolatry. Chapter 2 verse 34: They are covered with bloodstains. Chapter 2 verse 20 and 33: The image of a prostitute that we have already talked about quite a bit. Israel being an animal in heat is going to be something that carries over into chapter 5 verses 8 and 9. The prophet describes the people there, “They were well fed, lusty
stallions, each neighing for his neighbor’s wife. Shall I not punish them for these things?’ declares the Lord.” So, here’s God's chosen people being basically described as animals who have lost their sense and are totally consumed by their passions.

Again one of the images and metaphors that stand out the most for me in Jeremiah chapter 2 is the one in verse 13. I think it's one of the key verses that I want anyone to remember about Jeremiah. It says, "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters." God gives living water; he can satisfy your soul; he can meet your needs; he can provide the security that you're looking for. “But they have hewn out for themselves cisterns that are broken and can hold no water.”

From May to September in the land of Israel there is very little rain. It’s a dry season and they would need cisterns in the ground to provide water. Sometimes they use natural rock formations. Over time these cisterns would often crack and the water would leak out so imagine going months without rain and loosing your water supply. That’s what idolatry is, trusting in anything other than God to take care of you and to meet your needs. The prophet helps you understand life it’s a cracked cistern.

In this metaphor of marriage infidelity and unfaithfulness the Lord and the prophet in chapter 2 is even going to compare the alliances and the military coalitions that they made with other nations. The Lord is going to compare that to adultery as well. That’s just politics; that’s just real world stuff. You make alliances, you join your army with this army, but in God’s perspective, Israel by joining alliances was committing adultery with these other nations because they were surrendering away God’s exclusive prerogative as their king to be their protector. They ended up in the process of making alliances with these other nations giving loyalty to those nations and to their gods that belonged exclusively to God.

When Jehoshaphat, earlier in Jewish history, made an alliance with the
Syria, it says that he copied the worship practice of the Assyrians, he brought an Assyrian altar into the temple in Jerusalem. So trusting in other nations was as much a form of idolatry as worshipping their gods. That image in that metaphor creeps into the text in chapter 2 verse 18. The Lord says to the people. “What do you gain by going down to Egypt and drinking the waters of the Nile, or what you gain in by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates?” Now I am not sure exactly if anyone will really want to drink that river water, but the image here is that trusting in these others nations and political alliances was like drinking the waters of those nations.

As I was thinking about that in light of marriage and in light of the whole issue of idolatry here I was drawn back to Proverbs 5:15. When the father is warning the son about the adulterous woman, he says, “Drink the waters from your own fountain.” So in a sense there’s a charge of adultery in this passage because instead of drinking the water that the Lord provided for them in their relationship, they were going to other places. So the image of water comes up in chapter 2, verse 13, “You have forsaken the living waters for cracked cisterns.”

Then in chapter 2, verse 18 like an adulterous man or an adulterous woman “instead of drinking the water provided by your spouse you have gone and drank other fountains.” So the prophet is using these images. He wants people to see their betrayal of God and it’s an effective way of communicating that message.

**Jeremiah’s Use of Rhetorical Questions**

There’s a second thing that the prophet is going to do again to convince the people that they are guilty. This is a courtroom setting we have to make our case here. The second thing that the prophet is going to do is that he very effectively uses a series of rhetorical questions. Walter Brueggemann has talked about the fact that throughout the book of Jeremiah rhetorical questions are an effective way again where as the prophet is preaching his message it causes the audience to stop and think. He’s not expecting them to verbally answer, but he is expecting them to take this to heart. So listen to some of the rhetorical questions that are in chapter 2,
the Lord in the beginning of verse 5 says: what wrong did your fathers find with me that they went far from me? I’d like to know. What exactly was it that led your fathers to turn away from me. As they really think about this they are going to have to answer there’s nothing because God was absolutely faithful to us. Chapter 2 verses 10 and 11 the people of Israel I’m sure offered viewed themselves superior to the pagan nations around them, but listen to what the prophet does here. He says, “cross over to the coast of Cyprus and see.” or send to – examine with care. “See if there’s ever been such thing.” You think you’re better than these other nations, go see what they do. And here’s the question: “has a nation ever changed its gods even though they are not gods?” What nation in the ancient Middle East would give up their loyalty to their national deity who provided protection and blessing in their geographical area and begin to worship of the gods? He says, “but my people have changed their glory for that which is not profit.” I mean no nation that worships idols and false gods would change their gods. My people who know the only true God have exchanged there glory the glory of the Lord for gods who do not profit.

Chapter 2 verse 17: all the disasters that happened to Judea, all the things that they have experienced the exile of the Northern Kingdom, before the time of Jeremiah. Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the Lord your God, when he led you in the way? God hasn’t abandoned you, you’ve abandoned God and you’ve brought these disastrous situations upon yourself.

Chapter 2 verse 28, “Where are your gods? That you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can, and save you in your time of trouble. For as many as your cities so are your gods of Judea.” Again these other nations often would have gods that were associated with, very specifically with death and cities and geographical areas. Judea sort of bought into that lie and they have as many gods as they have cities, but where are they? What kind of protection have they provided? Let’s do a cost effective analysis, and ask: Has worshipping these gods really helped us?
Chapter 2 verse 32: “Can a virgin forget her ornaments or a bride her attire?” As I read that I have two daughters that are teenagers or young adults and they love these reality shows, *Say Yes to the Dress* where brides give all of this attention, they spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on their bridal dresses. Would a bride on her wedding day forget her wedding dress? Would she show up in blue jeans, instead of in this beautiful dress she’s bought? Obviously not. But there’s the punch line, “yet my people have forgotten me for days without number.”

So through all of these rhetorical questions a good prosecuting attorney keeps coming back and pressing his case again and again and everywhere. We know that sometimes they can get pretty aggressive and in your face, and Jeremiah is getting aggressive but he wants the people to think and reflect: Yes, we really are guilty, we really have turned away from the Lord. So the prophet is going to use images, metaphors, he’s also going to use rhetorical questions.

**Reflecting the People’s Self-Confessions**

A third device that Jeremiah as prosecuting attorney as he’s making his disputation, as he’s pressing his case, he’s going to use quotations from the people of Judea themselves. Now in an American courtroom, the testimony of the defendant can be so damming, that they are protected from being required to testify against themselves.

What the prophet is going to do, however, is that he is going to let the people testify for themselves, and by their very own words, by their own testimony, they are going to convict themselves. Now what we look at, though, when we see their testimony, and as we look at the transcripts here, what we are going to see is that they often say some very conflicting things about themselves.

Let’s look at verse twenty-three, here’s an audience quotation, “How can you say I am not unclean. I have not gone after the Baals.” The prophet is charging them. Look you have, back in verse twenty, “under every green tree you have bowed down like a whore.” In verse twenty-three, “We have not! I am not
unclean! I have not gone after the Baals!” They are protesting their innocence.

Let’s go down two verses, verse twenty-five, in the middle of the verse, “But you have said, ‘It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners and after them I will go.’” Here they portray themselves as helpless nymphomaniacs. They can’t help it! They are addicted to going after foreigners and foreign gods. Verse twenty-three, “I haven’t gone after the Baals.” Verse twenty-five, “I can’t help myself. We have to do it.”

Verse twenty-seven, two verses later, “You say to a tree, ‘You are my father’, and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth,’” speaking of their worship of idols, and the relationship they have there. But then finally in verse thirty-five, we are back to the protests, “Yet you say I am innocent, and surely his anger that has turned away from me.” What do you mean we are guilty? I am innocent. Why would God be angry at us?

So the Lord says, “Behold I will bring you to judgment for saying ‘I have not sinned.’” So throughout the book of Jeremiah, one of the things that we are going to see is that the people are going to say all kinds wrong things to Lord. “We have not sinned,” “We will not repent.”

Chapter 44 in the last words of Judah to the prophet Jeremiah, “We will go on keeping our vows to the foreign gods.” But imagine as your working your way through the book of Jeremiah the plot is the Lord is repairing this relationship and, ultimately in chapter 31-33 and the restoration section, they are going to come to the Lord weeping and they will confess to him, “We have sinned. We have broken the covenant.” and God is going to ultimately lead them to that place. But as we’re in chapter 2, what they are saying is: “We don’t understand what you’re talking about. We are innocent. We have not chased after the Baals.” But there is still this conflicting evidence. They say to a tree “You’re my father,” to a stone “you have given birth to me,” and “we can’t help ourselves we have to go after other gods.” So there is the conflicting quotations from the people themselves that ultimately
damn them and convict them.

**Word Plays**

Finally, one of the other devices the prophet is going to use in this passage to convince Israel of their guilt is that, he is going to use word plays, and often remember as the prophets were preaching, they were preaching these messages orally. They often using poetry and parallel lines and so to make the message vivid they would often use subtle plays of words. Sometimes we do this with puns or that kind of thing.

There are actually a couple of word plays in this chapter in Jeremiah chapter 2 that I wanted to call attention to. In chapter 2:5 it says, and again we’ve looked at this verse already but here’s another element, “What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far away from me,” and the last line says, “And they went after worthlessness,” the Hebrew word there is *hevel*, “vanity.” It’s the word in Ecclesiastes for “vanity of vanities,”--futility. “They went after futility in chasing these other gods, and they became worthless themselves.” “They became *hevel.*” So they chased *hevel*, the wind, cotton candy that evaporates immediately, and in the process they became like what they worshiped. They became *hevel* themselves.

Again, another word play that basically builds on the same idea is found in chapter 2:8, “The priest did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who handle the law did not know me.” The problem with their spiritual leaders, “The shepherds transgressed against me,” and here comes the word play, “The prophets prophesied by *ba’al* (*ba’al* in the Hebrew), and they went after things that did not profit—*ya’al* (The verb that’s used there).” The word play that’s used between *ba’al* and *ya’al*. The very close similar sound there reminds them of what Baal really is. He is a worthless god. They believe, “He is the storm god. He is the god who is going to bless us. He is the god who is going to bring us prosperity.” No, he is the god who is going to bring you to worthlessness.” That idea, and that word, is so important that it’s repeated again in chapter 2:11, “Has a nation
changed its gods even though they are no gods, but my people have changed their glory (kavod, the glory of God) for that which does not profit ya’al.

So word play between ba’al and ya’al. They worshiped hevel; they became hevel. I think that’s really what the essence of this message is. Idolatry, for Israel, as for us, is not just wrong. It’s not just morally evil. It’s stupid. It’s a counter-effective way of living your life because you put your trust, you give your service, you give your love, you give your devotion to anything other than God, at the end, it’s going to end in disappointment.

Now, there is another example of prophetic word play, just to bring in another prophetic book. We have one of these in the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5. This is one of my favorite ones. The Lord compares Israel there to an unfaithful or an unfruitful vineyard. It says the prophet says in this song, “the Lord was looking for good grapes, or anuvim, but instead what he got were hard and sour wild grapes, beusim, that were worthless. The Lord was looking from his people for mishpat, for “justice,” and instead what he got from them was mishpak, which is “bloodshed and violence.” The Lord expected that his people, because of all that he invested in them, that they would produce righteousness, sedeqah, but instead what he got from his people was se’eqah, which were “cries of distress” because of the way that the rich were oppressing the poor. The point is made through the wordplay very effectively. You can hear it. The Lord did not receive what he expected from his investment. When the Lord makes an investment in his people, he expects a return and instead of getting what he produced, after all of this time an effort, he’s gotten exactly the opposite.

The point in Jeremiah 2 is very similar, the Lord blessed Israel, “And I brought them into a fruitful land, gave them everything they could have possibly imagined.” What wrong could they ever find with God? Yet what the people have done is that they have taken all of that and they have turned to worthlessness. I think this ultimately leads us to what this part of the book of Jeremiah is all about. The message here, the conclusion to the lawsuit, is that Judah, absolutely is guilty.
They can protest. They can say all that they want: “I’m innocent,” and “I’ve not changed.” They have flagrantly violated the covenant and they have flagrantly cheated on the Lord as their spouse. I mean their guilt is beyond doubt. We see that right at the very beginning, and throughout the book of Jeremiah. God will judge them. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has accomplished what he has said that he is going to do. But what the Lord is also trying to do before this judgment ever comes is that he wants the people to understand the futility of their choices. If they will come to understand the emptiness of worshipping idols, if they come to understand that—look idolatry isn’t just wrong—God didn’t just tell you not worship Baal because he wanted to keep you from that: idolatry is stupid; it’s foolish. Trusting in anything as your ultimate source of security is not going to work. So, throughout this chapter, the rhetoric of the chapter, the point of the chapter is, idolatry is futile. Turning away from God and trusting in anything else ultimately is not going to work for you. Chapter two, verse thirteen, again, they have hued out broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

**Condemnation of Idolatry**

The two halves of Jeremiah chapter two, the first half ends at verse 18, and again that passage about how they’ve chased after foreign alliances along with foreign gods, and chapter two, verse 18 says, “And now what do you gain by going down to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going down to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? What value is there in this?” We conclude with the same idea at the end of the second half of chapter two, where it says this, at the end of the chapter, in verse 36: “How much do you go about, changing your way.” You make an alliance one day with this people; you make an alliance the other day with this people. It says, “You shall be put to shame by Egypt, as you were put to shame by Assyria. For from it, too, you will come away with your hands on your head, for the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust, and you will not prosper by them.”
So within this passage there’s a condemnation of their idolatry, and the futility of that. It’s bracketed by statements about the futility of their political alliances, where they have joined in with the nations that worship these gods. The first section of the chapter ends with, “Why are you going to Egypt? Why are you going down to Assyria?” And then, at the end of the chapter, “you’re going to be put to shame by Egypt and Assyria, these nations that you’re making alliances with, they’re actually the ones who are going to execute your punishment. So don’t do this, don’t turn away from God.” In chapter two, verse three, again the idea of futility, “The Lord treated Israel as his first fruits.” They belonged exclusively to him and it says that anyone who devoured those crops, anyone that touched Israel, God would devour them. But the problem was that when they turned away from the Lord, the Lord took his hands off. He no longer protected them as their first fruits, and as a result of that they became a slave that was subjugated by their enemies to bondage and oppression.

Chapter two, verse seven, the Lord says, “I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and good things.” This is a land flowing with milk and honey! God wanted them to enjoy all the abundance of that, but then the verse says, “But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.” They ruined this good place that he gave to them. So verse 15 says, “The lions have roared against him, they have roared loudly, they have made his land a waste, his cities are in ruins without inhabitants.” So, imagine the contrasting picture here, the picture of a land that is filled with milk and honey. The Lord says, “I want you to come in and enjoy cities and houses and vineyards and crops, and all these things that you didn’t even build or plant, and I’m just going to give them to you as a gift.” But by turning to Baal, and thinking Baal was going to be there source of security, they’ve ultimately turned the land into a wasteland.

Chapter 2, verse 2 is going to say that they followed the Lord in the wilderness. Verse 6 is going to say that the Lord led them in the wilderness. But then in chapter 2, verse 31, the Lord is going to ask them, “How is it that I have
become the wilderness to Israel, or a land of the darkness?” So the beginning of the chapter is rehearsing God’s covenant faithfulness, the Lord brought them out of the wilderness, the Lord brought them out of a land of deep darkness where they were dependent on manna to be the thing that would feed them. Yes, they turned away from God and God became a wilderness in a land of deep darkness to them. All throughout this chapter God is trying to help the people to see the futility of the choices they have made.

Chapter 2, verse 27, goes back to the issue of idolatry, “you say to a tree ‘you are my father,’ to a stone, ‘you gave me birth,’ but where are your gods, how are they going to save you?” As a result of this, we come to understand that the Lord did not just bring his people into the courtroom to pronounce a sentence on them, the Lord brought the people into the courtroom so that ultimately they would change their ways. It gives them the opportunity to repent, the Lord is still working with his people and I think that that's often what the Lord does, he brings his people into the courtroom.

In Micah, chapter 6, "What does the Lord require of us?" Is it all of these lavish sacrifices that we could give the Lord? Is it even the first fruit of our own bodies? No, what the Lord requires of you, is that you “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” If you will do those things, the Lord will protect you. Isaiah calls the people into the courtroom, Isaiah chapter one, he says: "Hear, O heaven; listen, O earth, the Lord has raised and has reared rebellious children.” He raised them, he was faithful to them, but they rebelled against him." What should the Lord do about that? The law said that a rebellious son was to be put to death. But in the end of that judgment speech in Isaiah and at the end of that trial scene, what the Lord says is, "Come now and let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet, I am willing to make you white as snow." You're covered with blood. You're guilty, the judge says, "I'm going pass sentence on you, but before I do that, let's meet in my chambers. Let's reason together, and if you will change your ways, I will allow you to live and I will bless you.”
The prophet Jeremiah is doing exactly the same thing here, he says, "Without doubt Israel is guilty, they are an unfaithful wife, they have committed adultery against the Lord, but if they will recognize the futility of their ways and turn back to me, I will spare them from judgment." The courtroom scene in Jeremiah chapter two is really introducing for us, the struggle that the entire book of Jeremiah is about, the plot of the entire book. When Judah will not repent, when Judah will not admit its guilt, when they will not change their ways, ultimately judgment is going to fall, but here at the beginning is a chance for them to come into the courtroom and meet with the judge in his chambers and ultimately to change their ways and to be spared from judgment.