

Jeremiah 8:4-10:25 I/II

Catching up:

Well, friends.

It's been a LONG TIME since we've talked about Jeremiah. I don't want to rehash what we've seen, really. God called Jeremiah to a difficult task: To tell the Southern Kingdom of God's People, Judea and Jerusalem that if they didn't change, the exile and destruction that fell upon Israel, the Northern Kingdom, would fall on them. And we've seen prophets and priests and everyone decide that Jeremiah should just be ignored, as Good King Josiah tries and tries to reform the people, but they continually reject his return to Yahweh.

Today's Message:

As we enter back into the book, we enter into a long section, Jeremiah 8 through 10, that we don't have much context for. Jeremiah is prophesying judgment, and then, in turn, grieving, lamenting, the very judgment he's being forced to share. He knows that no one is going to listen to him. At one point he says something like, "If only I had an inn out on some remote road and could just move there to get away

from everyone.” And I thought, “We’ve all been there, Jer.” We’ll talk about this long section twice, because there’s enough stuff to do it.

But also because there is so little context given in today’s passage, I want to talk in particular about the way the New Testament picks up what Jeremiah says today. And honestly, today we’re talking theology, obedience, looking at Paul’s arguments and the early Church’s questions. It’s not as inspiring as hope, peace, joy, or love...but it is important, and I hope that our “minds can be kindled” as we consider the things we’re going to talk about. Let’s pray for that.

Prayer:

Introduction:

As far as “flow” goes, Jeremiah 8 begins as God points out how ridiculous it is that Israel isn’t responding to Him in repentance, but trying to find whatever they can to justify ignoring God. Those who are leading everyone astray--“the wise”--will reap the loss their wisdom actually leads to.

Jeremiah, who loves his people, breaks down:

***Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?***

Jeremiah wants Israel to listen; they don't. As we move into Chapter 9 God describes how everyone's nice to each other's faces, and then stabs them in the back when they're out of the room. The fall of Jerusalem is so certain, so definite, that God tells Jeremiah to call in some ritual mourners who can wail as if Judea has already died. And we pick up at the end of Jeremiah 9 this statement:

***“Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches,
24 but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that they have the understanding to know
me,
that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,***

***for in these I delight,”
declares the Lord.***

***25 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will punish all who are circumcised only
in the flesh— 26 Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon,
Moab and all who live in the wilderness in
distant places.[e] For all these nations are really
uncircumcised, and even the whole house of
Israelis uncircumcised in heart.”***

The New Testament references this passage twice, or rather, Paul does.

Paul quotes when he writes to the Corinthians.

Two References In Today’s passage: A Quote:

In his first letter to the Corinthians he makes the point that the Corinthian Church is not all that impressive, but that’s okay, because “as it is written,” Paul says, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” In his second letter to the church, Paul talks about his own status, and how little he regards what people think of him, because, again, he wants “the one who boasts to boast in the Lord.” He continues, “For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one

whom the Lord commends.” So Paul draws on this passage in a way that really matches what Jeremiah was trying to do with it: There are all sorts of things to be impressed by, and ways to be impressive, but what matters is knowing God. For the Corinthians, this should encourage them, because they weren’t the popular, rich kids--and Paul himself should be a reminder of it, because no matter how impressive he might have been to them, all that mattered to him was trusting God. Boasting in the Lord is, in the final analysis, simply a way to talk about understanding our place in humanity’s relationship with God, and honoring God in that relationship.

Onto Romans:

And it is no surprise AT ALL that Paul draws on this passage in his incredibly complex argument when he writes to the church at Rome. The first Chapter of Romans is honestly about just how bad Gentiles can be.

And by the end of chapter one, we Jewish Christians would probably be pretty smug. We may go further. We may pity the Gentile Christians in church with us. We may forget, for a moment, about Christ, about what God’s done to gather us together with Gentiles.

We may wonder what we're doing in this church with people who are like this--or at least, came from people like this. We may wonder how they could even be redeemed, how God could be in relationship with them after what they've done. We may wonder if we should go back to the Synagogue and the Law.

And any of these responses, and any of the many other responses we might have, probably all fall under the umbrella act of "judging others." Which is why Romans 2 starts with this:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

It's a phrase that pretty much means the same thing now that it meant then, and with it, Paul calls us Jewish Christians--or even the few really smug Gentile Christians among us--out.

But we know that Paul often thinks about Jeremiah's proverb that we ought to "boast in the Lord." Boasting in yourself, giving into pridefulness, is a shortcut to

faithlessness, to sin.

The Scene:

And imagine, with me, that Paul's sitting there writing Romans. In his mind he's imagining his Jewish Christian readers thinking "Thank God I'm not like these terrible Gentiles Paul just described!" And Paul remembers that favorite passage of his from Jeremiah, the one with the rule that Paul lives by and shares with others. "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." Paul doesn't write that down right now. But he's got this favorite passage from Jeremiah in mind. He has it memorized. He knows it goes like this:

***"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches,
but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that they have the understanding to know
me,
that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,"
declares the Lord.***

"The days are coming," declares the Lord,

“when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh— 26 Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places.[e] For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.”

Paul is going to follow the flow of this passage for the rest of Romans 2. He’s going to remind them that they can’t boast--without quoting Jeremiah. He’s going to remind them that “the Lord...exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth” and takes pleasure in these things. He’s going to point out that they may be Jewish, with a physical genital circumcision, but that physical circumcision has not been the thing that’s marked God’s people, so if his Jewish Christian audience thinks they are great, and are taking pleasure in their special status instead of in kindness, justice, and righteousness, well...they’re wrong.

If we were to read through Jeremiah 9, we’d almost certainly miss that this part of Jeremiah 9 is a script for Paul as he’s writing Romans and thinking about his Jewish Christian audience reading it. Jeremiah 9 is Paul’s script for Romans 2. Look: We may not realize

it, but this is awesome. It's cool. Pity me here, and believe it!

Paul will go on in Romans 2 to talk about final judgment. He'll remind us that just hearing the Law isn't enough to make you "righteous," to make you a faithful partner in God's covenant relationship; you've got to obey the law, too. Faithfulness in a marriage isn't just hearing the wedding vows, it's making them and then living them out, right?

And Paul begins to talk to the Jewish Christians in Rome about the Law, that thing which ordered their lives as people in God's covenant relationships. Almost as aside, he points out one question that his Jewish Christian audience may have, which is simply how the Law--this incredibly important relationship guide--fits with Gentiles, who didn't have it.

How can any Gentile be considered a faithful covenant partner to God when they weren't at the ceremony, you know, didn't get to make the marriage vows that the Law is. And Paul will say, which is a novel thing, as far as I know, that, basically, the Gentiles' consciences function as a law for them, but function no differently than the "real Law" did for Jews: sometimes standing against, sometimes standing in advocacy.

After just tossing out this pretty incredible aside, Paul

goes on to sort, hmm, body slam any sense of superiority that's left in his Jewish Christian readers by pointing out just how unfaithful these covenant partners of God really were. And I should point this out: It's hard to say if any Jewish Christian would still think the ways Paul is describing here. One scholar suggests that he's talking to the pre-Christian version of himself (NIB vol. x, Wright, 445). It's not a bad idea to keep that image in our minds: Paul, Jesus' man, talking to Saul, educated Judean.

But let's read as Paul takes this perspective to task:

Hypocrisy: 2:17-24

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles

because of you.”[b]

All the things Paul is saying challenge, in so many ways, the core identity of what it means to be Jewish. To be Jewish means to be God’s special covenant partner, it means to live your life ordered by the Law, and for Paul to say what he’s saying is to challenge something that his Jewish Christians in Rome have built their lives around, something that most of us probably can’t even understand.

But he goes even further, in case any in his Jewish Christian audience do want to point out that they are, after all, the ones God entrusted with the Law, not the Gentiles: He goes after circumcision. He goes after circumcision, which was the sign, the literal mark of the covenant that God made with Abraham. And Paul can’t take that away from them, can he? But he says this, because again, he’s following that Jeremiah 9 passage in his head:

Regarding Circumcision: 2:25-29

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the[c] written code and circumcision, are a

lawbreaker.

28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

“A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.”

It is revolutionary for Paul to claim this in light of what Jesus has done. It was revolutionary for God to say it to Jeremiah, but a faithful Israelite could have gotten behind it, then. “Yeah! Get our enemies! And get those unfaithful Israelites, too! Woot! God Forever!” But Paul is lumping all Israel into this group, now. Paul is saying that circumcision of the heart is all there is.

Paul is in one stroke taking away all the sense of superiority that his Jewish Christian audience can cling to. Being a “Jew” is more than being born into the right ethnic family tree; that's not the way God's people are made anymore; God's people are made through the Spirit, which marks our hearts, sets us apart so that we're marked inwardly.

Really listen to Paul, here: God's people are as different on the inside, in their hearts, through the Spirit's work, as a circumcised penis is different from an uncircumcised penis. But if this is revolutionary, it's also devastating, because when something you cling to in order to make you feel special and unique is taken from you, it is a devastating thing. And although Paul wants to correct the pride and superiority and bad theology of these Jewish Christians, if it is there, he doesn't want to break them, you know. So he'll continue in talk about just how impressive it is that the Jewish people were "entrusted with the very words of God." They've had an importance in the world that no one can take from them, ever. He'll continue on to note that being ethnically Jewish hasn't kept the Jewish people, or Jewish individuals, from sinning.

And that is what matters.

Sin isn't just bad stuff, you know. Maybe we could say bad stuff is God's wrath getting played out among us, "bad stuff" is what we see when we humans follow our broken hearts down whatever paths of unhealthy desire and sad lusts they lead us. Sin, though, is a particular thing: it's the stuff that isn't appropriate for those in covenant relationship with God to do.

I'll say that again: Sin is the stuff that isn't appropriate to do for those in covenant relationship with God. It's unrighteous stuff. Stuff outside the bounds.

And the Law did one very important thing, because when the Law helped Israel to live in the covenant relationship with God that he made with them, it pointed out all the behaviors that were inappropriate within that covenant relationship. Again: The Law pointed out all the behaviors that were appropriate and inappropriate within that covenant relationship God made with Israel.

Following Up:

After this, in Romans 3, Paul says “through the Law we became conscious of sin.” The Law reveals both just how rotten Gentile behavior can be, and also points out, as Israel tries to live lawfully, just how impossible it is to live up to the Law’s demands. It couldn’t be done, and all fell short who tried.

The Jewish Christians wanted to boast in their status. They wanted to revel in the Law as something that made them God’s preferred covenant partners in Rome, over and above the Gentile Christians who hadn’t ever lived by it. But Paul’s point is that all the Law has done is proven that “Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin.” The law could never keep Israel faithful to God’s covenant. God was the one at work, working tirelessly and faithfully to nurture Israel along, so that he could free Jews and Gentiles alike from the sin that entrapped them. God’s commitment to stay faithful to Israel was the only thing that kept that relationship going. God wanted to circumcise the hearts, by the Spirit, of both Gentile and Jewish

People.

Transition:

So, look. This tiny chunk of Jeremiah 9 becomes Paul's behind-the-scenes script for one of the most famous arguments he makes in his most theologically dense and community-centered book.

I mean, one thing we could say about today's passage is just, like, it actually does matter? You know? We're going to read so much of Jeremiah we're going to forget most of it. I don't want us to forget Jeremiah 9 and Romans 2's intimate connection. But these passages that we easily flip or swipe past were critical in the shaping of the New Testament.

But we could talk about other things, here, of course. Things drawn both from Jeremiah and from Paul's argument.

Conclusion: Judging

We need to avoid judging people. And this is standard-Christian-virtue fare, you know. It is. Don't be judgmental. Right. But, to my mind, the clearest lines we can draw for ourselves between characters in this first few chapters of Romans isn't between us and the Gentile Christians, but between us and the Jewish Christians.

We're the insiders, now, right? We're God's People now, right? We're the ones tempted to create barriers,

tempted to create walls, tempted to avoid those outside the sanctity of the church, and tempted to forget that there is nothing intrinsic about us that makes us automatically ready for resurrection, prepared automatically for .

Most of us have a fairly high view of ourselves. And there's something good about that, but it's a tricky sort of good. Some of us, you know, walk around guilty and aware of our shortcomings nearly all the time, and so this moment isn't for you: you need to remember the pleasure God has over you, and the love of the Lord.

But for the rest of us, who are self-assured in our conviction that we are in the right, and others are wrong and incorrect: we must be very cautious. We must not take up as creatures, that thing that only the Creator is called to do, which is judge people.

We who boast must, with Paul and with Jeremiah and with any faithful person of God, "boast in the Lord." Our confidence cannot be in what we have done, what we think we have earned, or what people say about us. Our confidence, our deep strong center, is in the God who we serve who will see us through whatever present situation we're in. There are all sorts of things to be impressed by, and ways to be impressive, but what matters is knowing God, trusting God, and living for God. God's praise is what matters to us, and God's faithfulness is our boast. "To God alone be the glory."

Conclusion: Judgment

And both Jeremiah and Romans remind us that we don't want to boast because, you know, judgment is waiting. This is a second thing for us to remember. We will be judged. There is a collective fallenness to humanity, a "wrath" that's being played out in the world, which has taken the form of us getting what we wanted. But there is, also, for each of us, a judgment that is coming, a personal sort of "wrath" in which we'll be "given over" all at once to what we wanted all along, which will be either God, or not God.

Some things to say here: If you want the Lord, that's what you'll get. And if the Spirit lives in us, we don't need to worry about a thing, because when we stand before the Lord and give an account for every idle word, as Jesus says, and every deed done in the body, as Paul says, we'll stand there as God's People, as people God is in relationship with, ones who have the "circumcised hearts" that mark us out as God's People.

And we don't serve a vindictive God, we serve a God who has never broken faith to humanity, never broken faith to Israel, and never given up on getting us back. There is not going to be a trick, a "gotcha;" instead, we "will be given over," all at once, in one lump sum, to that thing which God desires most for us, and which we, when we are at our best and most dependent upon the Spirit, desire as well: Love, Joy, Peace,

Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness, Self-Control. The hope of nations and joy that creation is groaning for.

Conclusion:

So, look. Jeremiah 9 matters. It matters because for Paul it became a proverb about how one of God's People ought to live: boasting only in God and neither longing for or being dependent on the praise of others. It matters because it reminds us that to be God's People is a gift and always has been, and that we whose hearts have been circumcised, who have been set into a right relationship with God by the Spirit of God, we can rest in the praise that comes from God.

Because, here's the miracle: If we can keep from boasting in anything other than the Lord, we can actually hear something amazing. It's that God, who made all things, who holds all creation together, is boasting in us. And I hope we can listen to that voice until Christ returns and we hear the "Well done" we've been longing for.