

Jeremiah 2 • Contending with God

Introduction

Jeremiah 2 is characterized by a series of rhetorical questions; that is, questions that are asked not for the sake of seeking an answer, but for the sake of making an obvious point. An example of a rhetorical question parents sometimes ask their kids is, “Well, if all your friends jump off a cliff, are you going to jump off too?” The question really doesn’t require an answer. The obvious answer is “No.”

The theme of this chapter is “contending,” highlighted by 2:9: “Therefore I will yet contend with you...and with your sons, I will contend.” This is followed by v.29: “Why do you contend with Me?” To “contend” means to get in a debate that could lead to a fight. The obvious answer is that Israel has chosen to contend with God and the obvious result is they lose.

¹Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ²“Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD,

“I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.

³Israel was holy to the LORD,
The first of His harvest.
All who ate of it became guilty;
Evil came upon them,” declares the LORD.”

⁴Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the LORD,

“What injustice did your fathers find in Me,
That they went far from Me
And walked after emptiness and became empty?

⁶They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
Who led us through the wilderness,
Through a land of deserts and of pits,
Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,

Through a land that no one crossed
And where no man dwelt?’

⁷I brought you into the fruitful land
To eat its fruit and its good things.
But you came and defiled My land,
And My inheritance you made an abomination.

⁸The priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’
And those who handle the law did not know Me;
The rulers also transgressed against Me,
And the prophets prophesied by Baal

[Read v.1-3]

Q: To what do these verses refer, and what is meant by the latter part of verse 3?

A: The reference is to the calling of the nation out of Egypt (in spite of all their complaints) and the eventual conquest of Palestine. “*You following after Me in the wilderness*” refers to those years between the beginning of the journey out of Egypt and the sin at Peor when one generation died out and another arose purified, obedient and trained for warfare (years 2-40).

[Read v.4-9]

Q: In what verse is the first rhetorical question, and what is its answer?

A: Verse 5. The obvious answer is that there is no injustice in God that they could find, so their reasons for walking “*after emptiness*” are not well founded.

Q: Meaning of verse 6, and how does God answer?

A: They never asked “How did we get here?” thus remembering that it was God who brought them up. God reminds them in verse 7a.

Q: Once in the Promised Land, what did the people and eventually the priesthood do?

A: Forgot about God and began seeking other gods.

Q: What is the results of their having departed from seeking God?

A: He Himself will be against them. He will contend with them.

And walked after things that did not profit.

⁹Therefore I will yet contend with you,” declares the LORD,
“And with your sons’ sons I will contend.

¹⁰For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,
And send to Kedar and observe closely
And see if there has been such a thing as this!

¹¹Has a nation changed gods
When they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory
For that which does not profit.

¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate,” declares the LORD.

¹³For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.

¹⁴Is Israel a slave? Or is he a homeborn servant?

Why has he become a prey?

¹⁵The young lions have roared at him,
They have roared loudly.
And they have made his land a waste;
His cities have been destroyed, without inhabitant.

¹⁶Also the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes
Have shaved the crown of your head.

¹⁷Have you not done this to yourself
By your forsaking the LORD your God
When He led you in the way?

¹⁸But now what are you doing on the road to Egypt,
To drink the waters of the Nile?
Or what are you doing on the road to Assyria,
To drink the waters of the Euphrates?

¹⁹Your own wickedness will correct you,
And your apostasies will reprove you;
Know therefore and see that it is evil and bitter

For you to forsake the LORD your God,
And the dread of Me is not in you,” declares the Lord GOD of hosts.

[Read v.10-19]

Q: How many rhetorical questions are there?

A: Approximately 6

Q: What’s a “cistern”? What is the image/message being conveyed?

A: Not to be confused with a cesspool, it is a storage tank for water dug in bedrock. Instead of being cisterns that hold the spiritual living waters supplied by the One True God, they have become broken cisterns incapable of holding anything spiritual whatsoever.

Q: State the points being made in each of the rest of the rhetorical questions.

- (v.14) Israel was to be free of worldly influence but instead had become both a slave to and victim of same.
- (v.17) This has come about by Israel's own choice to forsake God for false gods.
- (v.18a) They have forsaken the spiritual living waters of God for the false spiritual water of Egyptian culture and religion.
- (v.18b) They have forsake the spiritual living waters of God for the false spiritual water of Assyrian culture and religion.

Q: How is this condition described in v.19? What does it mean?

A: God calls it “*apostasies*”. It’s describes someone, who after having accepted God and followed His ways for a time, in full knowledge leave Him for a false teaching/religion, for another god to take His place. It’s not someone that has always worshipped incorrectly, but has known God and makes the conscience decision to reject Him.

²⁰For long ago I broke your yoke
 And tore off your bonds;
 But you said, 'I will not serve!'
 For on every high hill
 And under every green tree
 You have lain down as a harlot.
²¹Yet I planted you a choice vine,
 A completely faithful seed.
 How then have you turned yourself
 before Me
 Into the degenerate shoots of a foreign
 vine?
²²Although you wash yourself with lye
 And use much soap,
 The stain of your iniquity is before Me,"
 declares the Lord GOD.
²³"How can you say, 'I am not defiled,
 I have not gone after the Baals'?
 Look at your way in the valley!
 Know what you have done!
 You are a swift young camel entangling
 her ways,
²⁴A wild donkey accustomed to the
 wilderness,
 That sniffs the wind in her passion.
 In the time of her heat who can turn her
 away?
 All who seek her will not become weary;
 In her month they will find her.
²⁵Keep your feet from being unshod
 And your throat from thirst;
 But you said, 'It is hopeless!
 No! For I have loved strangers,
 And after them I will walk.'
²⁶As the thief is shamed when he is
 discovered,
 So the house of Israel is shamed;
 They, their kings, their princes
 And their priests and their prophets,
²⁷Who say to a tree, 'You are my father,'
 And to a stone, 'You gave me birth.'
 For they have turned their back to Me,
 And not their face;
 But in the time of their trouble they will
 say,
 'Arise and save us.'
²⁸But where are your gods
 Which you made for yourself?
 Let them arise, if they can save you
 In the time of your trouble;
 For according to the number of your cities
 Are your gods, O Judah.

[Read v.20-28]

Q: Listed are a series of metaphors. Have group members attempt to interpret them.

- "yoke...bonds" (v. 20)--bondage and slavery in Egypt
- "high hill...green tree" (v. 20)--orgiastic fertility rites associated with Baal worship
- "harlot" (v. 20)--idol worship
- "choice vine...seed" (v. 21)--raised up to bear the fruit of the vine (wine)
- "foreign vine" (v. 21)--weeds, representing the influence of the nations around them
- "camel entangling her ways" (23)--a camel in heat
- "wild donkey...sniffs" (24)--a donkey in heat seeking a mate; i.e., however comes along
- "strangers" (25)--the heathen nations around them.
- "say to a tree...father" (27)--Baal worship; fertility cults; phallic symbol (actually, a long pole)
- "stone...mother" (27)--same as above except rock = egg; note male/female components

Q: In verse 27, what will those who have turned away from God say in times of trouble?

A: Rescue us!

Q: How does God answer their cry for help?

A: God answers with a rhetorical question: "So, where are your gods when you need them?" The obvious answer is, "Not to be found."

Q: How might God's reply be different for apostates as opposed to, say, the Prodigal Son or non-believers coming to the Lord?

A: The Prodigal Son is a believer that seeks reconciliation with God by acknowledging his sin and disobedience; a non-believer seeks reconciliation with God in the same way; an apostate only cries to God when it is too late, when they're about to reap the choices sown.

²⁹Why do you contend with Me?
 You have all transgressed against Me,”
 declares the LORD.
³⁰“In vain I have struck your sons;
 They accepted no chastening.
 Your sword has devoured your prophets
 Like a destroying lion.
³¹O generation, heed the word of the
 LORD.
 Have I been a wilderness to Israel,
 Or a land of thick darkness?
 Why do My people say, ‘We are free to
 roam;
 We will no longer come to You’?
³²Can a virgin forget her ornaments,
 Or a bride her attire?
 Yet My people have forgotten Me
 Days without number.
³³How well you prepare your way
 To seek love!
 Therefore even the wicked women
 You have taught your ways.
³⁴Also on your skirts is found
 The lifeblood of the innocent poor;
 You did not find them breaking in.
 But in spite of all these things,
³⁵Yet you said, ‘I am innocent;
 Surely His anger is turned away from
 me.’
 Behold, I will enter into judgment with
 you
 Because you say, ‘I have not sinned.’
³⁶Why do you go around so much
 Changing your way?
 Also, you will be put to shame by Egypt
 As you were put to shame by Assyria.
³⁷From this place also you will go out
 With your hands on your head;
 For the LORD has rejected those in whom
 you trust,
 And you will not prosper with them.”

[Read v.29-37]

Q: According to v.30, what is it that they’ve done that God defines as contending with Him?

A: “...accepted no chastening..” (they’ve become immune to discipline) and “Your sword has devoured your prophets...” (they actually destroy those that bring them God’s truth.)

Q: In v.31-32, how are they acting now and what was their original relationship with God?

A: Originally they were a virginal bride, dedicated and faithful to one husband—God. Now they go to whomever they please like an unfaithful wife. It’s like someone that commits adultery, fully aware of their wedding vows but no longer caring.

Q: According to v.35, what is the chief attitude of the apostate?

A: They actually believe they are innocent of sin. They come to believe that somehow their choices are in line with God’s will and Law, such is their deception.

Application

Summarize the characteristics of the apostate.

1. They become immune to discipline.
2. They don’t just ignore but destroy messengers of God’s Word.
3. They engage in open unfaithfulness in their relationship with God.
4. They are deceived to the point that they don’t believe what they’re doing can be called sin.

¹¹And the LORD said to me, “Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. ¹²Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say,

‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD;

‘I will not look upon you in anger.

For I am gracious,’ declares the Lord;

‘I will not be angry forever.

¹³Only acknowledge your iniquity,

That you have transgressed against the Lord your God

And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree,

And you have not obeyed My voice,’ declares the Lord.

¹⁴‘Return, O faithless sons,’ declares the Lord;

‘For I am a master to you,

And I will take you one from a city and two from a family,

And I will bring you to Zion.’

Now, to make general and personal application...

Q: Is there any relationship between the issues presented here and Christians? The Church? Ourselves?

Q: What is the hope God gives those who have strayed?

A: (Read 3:11-14) What does this say to you personally, or how you should approach those that have forsaken their relationship with God for another?