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.

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).

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 got 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.

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

10 For 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!

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

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

13 For 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.

14 Is Israel a slave? Or is he a homeborn servant? Why has he become a prey?

15 The 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.

16 Also the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes Have shaved the crown of your head. Have you not done this to yourself By your forsaking the LORD your God When He led you in the way?

18 But 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?

19 Your 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 forsaken 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.
20 For 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.
21 Yet 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?

22 Although 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,
24 A 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.

25 Keep 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.'

26 As 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,
27 Who 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.'
28 But 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.
29 Why 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.
31 O 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’?
32 Can a virgin forget her ornaments, Or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me Days without number.
33 How well you prepare your way To seek love! Therefore even the wicked women You have taught your ways.
34 Also 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,
35 Yet 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.’
36 Why 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.
37 From 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?