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**The Prophet Jeremiah**  
**IV. Turning Away, Turning Back**  
**Jeremiah 8:4-7**

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What strikes me most about our passage is not so much what God says to His people, but the tone with which it seems to be expressed. The all-knowing, all-seeing, all-comprehending God looks upon the way His people are behaving – and He finds their behavior mystifying. It almost sounds as if God is struggling to make sense of what of what He is seeing – for Israel’s behavior is both inexplicable:

*Do people fall down and not get up?  
Or take the wrong road and then just keep going?  
So why does this people go backwards,  
and just keep on going—backwards!<sup>1</sup>*

And also it is unnatural:

*Cranes know when it’s time  
to move south for winter.  
And robins, warblers, and bluebirds  
know when it’s time to come back again.  
But my people? My people know nothing,  
not the first thing about God and his rule.<sup>2</sup>*

What Israel is doing, how God’s chosen children are living in Jeremiah’s day, just makes absolutely no sense to God. I wonder if God ever looks down upon us and feels the same way?

After God had delivered His people from their slavery in Egypt, and before He had brought them into His promised land, He had given to them the tremendously precious gift of His Law. The Ten Commandments, and all the other moral laws and social instructions God had given to His people, were an extraordinary gift of light in the midst of darkness, of guidance and direction in the midst of the jungle of this lost and fallen world. Israel, at its best, had understood the Law in just this way – not as a burden, but as a precious gift not only to be received with gratitude, but to be learned with diligence and to be practiced with both joy and zeal. “*Your word,*” exclaims the Psalmist, “*is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*”<sup>3</sup>

In a fallen world where no one knew how to live in a way that would guarantee blessing instead of sorrow, prosperity instead of insecurity, joy instead of tears, God had given to His people

the Law – to bless them, to guide them, to show them the path into the life they longed to live. In fact, the Hebrew word for the Law, “Torah,” literally means “to point the finger.” The Ten Commandments and the rest were nothing less than God pointing His finger in the direction of abundant life. And, at its best, this is how Israel understood the Law.

But rarely was Israel at its best when it came to the things of God. And, in Jeremiah’s day, Israel was very clearly at its very worst. And it wasn’t just that Israel was breaking God’s Law – that was bad enough. It was that Israel no longer even bothered to acknowledge God’s Law, much less to love or even value God’s Law – couldn’t be bothered even to learn God’s Law:

*Even the stork in the heavens  
knows her times,  
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane  
keep the time of their coming,  
but my people know not  
the rules of the Lord.*

Israel was treating God’s gift of light as if it were, in fact, nothing but a restrictive burden keeping them in the dark – and so was choosing to live instead by the truly dark and deadly disobedience of all the other peoples around them.

What about us? What is our attitude towards the teachings of the Word of God about how we are to live, about what we are to value, about what we are to prioritize? Do we treasure them, do we seek after them, do we bother even to learn them? For example, if asked, could we name the Ten Commandments? The Ten Commandments are not difficult – they are God’s moral ABC’s. Could we name them? The Sermon on the Mount – have we deeply read, inwardly digested, and sought to apply its teaching to our daily living? If even the stork in the heavens knows her place and time and way, do we – who are God’s people now – do we know the rules of our Lord and Savior? Do we value them as sweeter than honey and more precious than a big pot of gold?<sup>4</sup> Do we immerse ourselves in what our Savior tells us is the Way and the Truth that alone can bring us into abundant Life here and now, as well as in heaven forever?<sup>5</sup> How perplexed do you think God is over us, and over our attitudes towards His Law, His pointing of the finger for us towards abundant life?

A Seattle pastor named Randy Rowland writes about the channel markers that keep boaters safe amid the treacherous sand bars, shallow reefs, and narrow channels of Puget Sound. But even with the channel markers, he says, every year a number of boaters choose to ignore them – only to end up grounded or wrecked – or worse, seriously injured or even dead. He describes one incident his family personally witnessed:

*We were cruising south from the San Juan Islands . . . The channel [there] is graciously wide, but a line of red buoys cautions thinking boaters to stay to the west . . . As we cruised away, enjoying the sun, a thirty-foot speedboat zoomed across our wake and to the east. The folks aboard the boat were whooping it up and hoisting beer cans . . . When I honked trying to tell them that they were*

*outside the channel, they returned an obscene gesture. They were moving at about 35 mph into a boater's nightmare.*

*About half a mile ahead of us these happy-go-lucky, "I determine my own boundaries and channel markers" folks hit a sand flat, wedging the boat; throwing passengers and other boat contents all over the place . . . No one was hurt . . . [but they] had to wait about nine hours [for rescue].*

*Our creator desires wholeness for us. Warnings and prohibitions against certain negative behaviors are not meant to restrict us, but rather to keep us safe and well.<sup>6</sup>*

So why wouldn't we want to keep to the channel markers of God's Law in our lives – God's love for us expressed in the form of His guidance to us?

So Israel, in Jeremiah's day, was awash in sinful behaviors and habits and values and priorities – despite God having given them the key to life abundant and good. Through His prophet, God describes them chasing after sin like a cavalry charge heedlessly racing towards danger and death: *"Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle."* Or, as Eugene Peterson renders that same verse in his modern translation: *"They just kept at it, blindly and stupidly banging their heads against a brick wall."*<sup>7</sup> But what most perplexes God about Israel's sinning is not so much the fact that they sin, or even how heedlessly they throw themselves into their sinning. God, after all, knows the human heart better even than we humans do. He knows that we all, like sheep, go astray. Sin doesn't surprise God in the least, even when we do it.

No, the thing which most perplexes, frustrates, and infuriates God about Israel's sin – maybe the thing which of all things perplexes God the most in His dealing with us – is that, having sinned, Israel refuses to repent. You see, God had given Israel not one, but two great gifts when it came to the living out of a good, abundant, and God-pleasing life. The Law that they might know right from wrong and so be able to walk in the path of light and abundant living even in this dark and dangerous world. But also, knowing that Israel would struggle to do so – that to do so in a fallen world, with fallen hearts and minds and bodies to boot, would inevitably lead to occasional failures, would inevitably lead to occasional falling down, would inevitably lead to sin and guilt – knowing that, God had given to His people the second moral gift: repentance. His gift to them of a way to deal with their failures – a way in which their guilt could be removed, their failures could be forgiven, their falling down could be turned into rising back up again. Repentance. The opening, the opportunity, the invitation from God that whenever they got it wrong, they could come to Him and tell Him what they had done. And that He would then forgive them, cleanse and restore them, renew them, re-empower them and send them back out into the world again.

An extraordinary gift! Break God's Law, repent – and He will not destroy you but absolve you. Lose your way on God's path in this world, repent – and He will not condemn you to remain lost, but give you the opportunity to get found and to get set off again on the right path and in the right direction. Turn back to God whenever sin has begun to destroy you, and God will not only forgive the sin, but break its power over you, set you free from that sin. God's gift of the Law – that lamp to our feet and light to our path – God's gift of the Law is an extraordinarily kind and

good and gracious gift of God to His people. But this second gift of God's mercy, God's grace, God's willingness to forgive and to restore – how do we even begin to measure that gift? How deep is the ocean, how high is the sky – and still we can't even come close to measuring the gift of God's mercy, God's invitation to repentance.

But what has Israel done in response to God's gift of mercy, to God's offer of repentance and return, of forgiveness and new beginnings?

*Do people fall down and not get up?  
Or take the wrong road and then just keep going?  
So why does this people go backwards  
and just keep on going—backwards!  
They stubbornly hold on to their illusions,  
refuse to change direction.  
I listened carefully  
but heard not so much as a whisper.  
No one expressed one word of regret.  
Not a single "I'm sorry" did I hear.<sup>8</sup>*

"I paid attention and listened" – that picture of God ought to shame us, if not break our hearts. Picture God bending down close to earth, just so He can hear even if but a whisper should His people want to turn back to Him, want to confess to Him, want to repent and return to Him. But not a word He hears. And this is not only what perplexes God the most, but what most wounds the heart of God – He wants so deeply for life to go well for us. But having turned away from His Law, we refuse His invitation to turn back to Him in repentance and so receive His mercy. This is how we wound the heart of our Heavenly Father, the One who loves us beyond all human measures of love.

Philip Yancey tells of a pastor friend who was battling with his fifteen-year-old daughter. He knows she is using birth control, and several nights she has not bothered to come home at all. The parents have tried various forms of punishment, but still she lies to them, deceives them – even has found a way to turn the tables on them: "*It's your fault for being too strict.*"

The friend told Yancey:

*I remember standing before the plate-glass window in my dining room, staring out into the darkness, waiting for her to come home. I felt such rage. I wanted to be like the father of the Prodigal Son, yet I was furious with my daughter for the way she would manipulate us and twist the knife to hurt us. I understood then the passages in the prophets expressing God's anger. The people knew how to wound him, and God cried out in pain.  
And yet I must tell you, when my daughter came home that night, or rather the next morning, I wanted nothing in the world so much as to take her in my arms, to love her, to tell her I wanted the best for her. I was a helpless, lovesick father.<sup>9</sup>*

Yancey concludes that story by stating: “Now, when I think about God . . . I think of my friend standing in front of the plate-glass window gazing achingly into the darkness.”<sup>10</sup>

What does God see when He looks at us this morning? What does He hear as He bends down to hear the deepest whispers of our souls?

I don’t know what brokenness of sin and guilt you are carrying today. I don’t know what might most, at this moment, be standing between you and a closer relationship with God. I don’t know, even your closest family and friends may not know, where shame and guilt and deep regret are to be found within the recesses of your heart. I barely even know any of those things about my own heart.

But this I do know: God is only waiting for us to come to Him and confess. God is, in fact, longing for us to come to Him and let Him wash us clean. Because God deeply desires to give to us, as He so wanted to give to Israel, the gift of a life that works, a life that is better than what we have thought possible – a life that is truly abundant and good. God wants it to go well for us here in this world. And so He gives us His Law to show us the way. But, even better, He gives us His mercy, the gift of repentance, that it should indeed go well with us here.

So, in the words of the 17<sup>th</sup> century French mystic, Francis Fenelon: “*Let us plunge ourselves into [the love of God].*”

*The more we love him, the more we love also all that which he makes us do. It is this love which consoles us in our losses, which softens our crosses for us, which detaches us from all which it is dangerous to love, which preserves us from a thousand poisons, which shows us a benevolent compassion through all the ills which we suffer, which even in death opens for us an eternal glory and happiness. It is this love which changes all our evils to good.*<sup>11</sup>

As a sign of His Fatherly love for us, God has given us the gift of His Law. As a sign of His Fatherly love for us, God has given us the gift of our repentance and His mercy. As a sign of His Father love for us, God has given us the Way and the Truth and the Life which are ours in Christ Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Let us plunge ourselves into the love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1336.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, The Message, p. 1337.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 119:105.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 19:10.

<sup>5</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>6</sup> Randy Rowland, The Sins We Love (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson, The Message, p. 1337.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, The Message, p. 1337.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace? (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), p. 56.

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<sup>10</sup> Yancey, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Francois Fenelon, Christian Perfection, quoted in Gary L. Thomas, Thirsting for God (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2011), p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> John 14:6.