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Title: Return to Me: Lesson of the Broken Cisterns

Scripture: Jeremiah 2

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Good morning. It's great to be together. Let's take a moment and pray. God, as we are here, I ask that you would speak to each of us. I ask that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This week begins what's often referred to in the church year as Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday through Good Friday. Resurrection Sunday is Lent. And I guess that a lot of us have a different experience with Lent. Some of us grew up around churches that practiced it, and so maybe we gave something up for Lent every year and tried to go through the whole season of repentance and contemplation of what Christ's sacrifice means. Others of us, maybe our church didn't do it, or we weren't part of a church community. And so, it was just this weird thing where some people gave up meat and could only eat bad fish sticks on Fridays in the school lunch program and that was what Lent was.

But Lent is intended to be a time when you or I or anybody who thinks about who Jesus was, has some time to consider the sacrifice of Jesus and to realize that Jesus gave his life so that we could have life. There are a lot of ways we could address this over these next several weeks. What we're going to do is look at some pictures that appear in the book of Jeremiah.

Now, Jeremiah is an Old Testament prophet. He's called a major prophet. The reason he's called a major prophet is it's a long book. In the Old Testament, the long Old Testament, prophets are major prophets. The short ones at the end of your Old Testament are minor prophets. Jeremiah is a major prophet. Just because it's long, that's all. And it is 50 chapters of doom and gloom. So, we are not going to go through 50 chapters of doom and gloom. Some of you are saying, are we going through six chapters? What are we doing here?

Here's what we're going to do. We are going to look at some pictures that Jeremiah gives us in his theme. If we were to say what is the theme, we would say, I would say, that the theme of Jeremiah is to return to the Lord. Return to Me. Jeremiah speaks in the Lord's voice with these lessons that say give your heart to Jesus. It's worth it.

Here's where we see this, at least in part. Jeremiah chapter three, verse seven. "I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it." Then verse 12. "Go, proclaim this message toward the north: "'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever.'" This is just his theme of saying Return to Me.

So, why just six pictures? There are a lot of pictures in the book of Jeremiah, but there are some that are very striking and better known. So, I chose six of them. This is kind of like, have you ever been in a church that does the children's sermon on a weekend? Do you know what I'm talking about? This is often in smaller churches. You'll have a moment where all the kids come up front, then somebody will come out and they'll do an object lesson for the kids, and then everybody leaves. And they're like, I remember the children's sermon but the other

thing, I don't remember so much because the children's sermon has the object lesson and you go, oh, I can think in pictures.

These are pictures that Jeremiah gives us to say Return to the Lord. That it is worth giving your life to Jesus. Here's my guess, just even as we start this, and that is that some of us are here and we immediately go, well, I am all in with Jesus. And yet I suspect that there are days you say, is that the smart, wise thing for me to do with my one and only life? And then there are some of us who probably believe in Jesus, know intellectually that it's true, but we find ourselves constantly struggling between if I do this, if I give my life fully to Jesus, then it will mean these things for me, and I'm not sure I want my life to mean that. And then there are probably some of us who are gathered who say, I don't know what I believe about Jesus. I don't know if I can really trust him. I don't know if I want to try to entrust my life to him.

In a way, Jeremiah's writing to the people of Israel who would have all of those kinds of faith experiences. And he's saying Return to the heart that the Father has for you, that God has for you. His first object lesson is this object you heard read in Jeremiah two verses 11 through 13. There are probably ten pictures just in Jeremiah two alone. But this is a striking one. He says, here's what it's like. He says God is like a living stream of water, and you've committed two sins. You've hewn for yourself a cistern and your cistern is broken and it leaks water. The way that this would have struck people there in an arid climate, a desert climate, was that water was a precious hard-to-get commodity. That's hard for us to understand because in our modern world, most of us can get water very easily by turning a spicket at any time we want.

But if you want a little thought experiment, just try to go the rest of today without using water. Don't flush anything, turn anything on, or clean any dishes. Go a day without water, and you will say that's gross, like quickly. And these people, what they would do is collect rainwater because it's an arid climate. And when it rained, in the rainy season, in the cisterns, they would try to preserve the water for bathing, cooking, cleaning, and all their necessities. And if you've ever had water that sat outside from rainwater, it gets gross after a little bit. It's not the same as a stream that's flowing. Not only that, Jeremiah says, but even after you've collected all your water in these cisterns, they develop cracks, and they leak. They won't make you satisfied. In a way you could say that it's a little bit like Jeremiah's giving a warning right up front, and he's saying you are putting your hope in something that isn't going to ultimately work.

Have you ever seen one of these commercials for a drug of some kind that says hey, take this drug, it'll have all these positive effects. And then the last two-thirds of the commercial is if you take this drug, you can expect, and then they go through this litany of things that you don't want. You know what I'm talking about? I saw one of these the other day. This was a commercial for a drug that has some effect. And then it said, here's what else could happen in terms of side effects. You could have abdominal or stomach cramps or tenderness, stomach pains, black stools, bleeding gums, blistering or peeling or loosening of the skin, bloating, blood in your urine, bloody nose, chest pain, chills, clay-colored stools, cough, dark urine, diarrhea, watery and severe, which may also be bloody, difficulty with breathing, difficulty with swallowing, dizziness, fast heartbeat, a feeling of discomfort, fever, general body swelling, a headache, heavier menstrual periods, hives or welts, increased thirst, inflammation of the joints, itching, joint or muscle pain, loss of appetite, muscle aches, nausea or vomiting, nosebleeds, pain, pain in the lower back, pain while urinating, difficulty

urinating, pale skin, red spots on the skin, puffiness or swelling of the eyelids or around the face, lips, or tongue, rash, red irritated eyes, redness, soreness or itching skin, shortness of breath, sore throat, sores, ulcers, white spots in the mouth or on the lips, sores, welts or blisters, sudden decrease in the amount of urine, swollen lymph glands, tenderness, tightness in the chest, an unpleasant breath, or odor. Anyone want to sign up?

Now, here's the thing. There's a time with maybe one of these drugs where you say, you know what? I'm going to do the cost-benefit and it's worth it. I'm doing it because whatever I've got going on over here, it's worth the risk. But here's what Jeremiah is saying, you are going to make these cisterns with your one and only life, they're going to leak, they're going to have all these issues, and there isn't any of the benefit. That's what he's saying.

So, here's how this maybe could be conceptualized just to make this applicable to kind of where we live today. If this is your sister and this is you or me, you know, I like to draw stick figures, what happens is we say I want something. So, we have these desires, and these are often healthy, good even, God-honoring desires. We want to be healthy. We want good relationships. We want to be successful and productive, and so we start to say I want this.

But what happens is these desires move to demands where we start to say, not only do I want this, but I need this. I need this thing because if I don't have this thing, then my life can't be ultimately fulfilled. And so, we move from I want to I need, and then what happens is we start to make all of our decisions in life or most of our decisions around how we can meet the demands to fulfill our desires. And so, what happens, just in very natural terms is, we say, this is what I want, this is what I need. Then we start to make all our decisions in life to try to get that thing lined up so that we can have what we think we want. A very natural process.

In the Book of Jeremiah, chapter two, we see how Jeremiah describes this. Like I said, it's full of images. Jeremiah 2, verse 25, he says this. "Do not run until your feet are bare and your throat is dry. But you said, 'It's no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them.'" So, what's that? You have a desire now. It's a must. I must go after them. I have to have this. Without this, I don't have much.

In Jeremiah 2:20, he says this. ""Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said, 'I will not serve you!' Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute." This is nice euphemistic language from the Hebrew, but what he's saying here is that now you're making these choices, and you're selling yourself out in order to get what you think you want. And it's not really a pretty picture.

Then he talks about what I would call the last step. This kind of goes to this broken cistern here. And this is where we get to disappointment. What we do is we end up in a place where we say I thought that this was going to bring me satisfaction. I thought this was going to bring something good into my life, but it didn't. We see this in Jeremiah 2, in verses 36 and 37. He says this. "Why do you go about so much, changing your ways? You will be disappointed by Egypt as you were by Assyria." In other words, you already have tried to turn away from me and put your hope in Assyria and now it's in Egypt. And either way, it's disappointing. And then he says this, "You will also leave that place with your hands on your head, for the LORD

has rejected those you trust; you will not be helped by them." And the hands on the head here is imagery of being a prisoner. He's saying these things that you go after, they will not bring you the satisfaction that you think that they'll bring you.

So, here's how, again, this works maybe in our lives. Take something good, like a desire to say, I want to have somebody to love and somebody who loves me, a good God-given desire. And you say this is what I want. And then you say, I need this. My life will not have meaning if I don't have this. You start to demand it. Then you start to make choices. Sometimes choices that can be outside of what's wise and good for yourself in order to get it. And then, even if it's worked, it can lead to disappointment.

Now, I know if you're sitting next to your spouse, you don't want to admit that there can be a little disappointment in marriage, but there can be and there is for most people, even in the best possible marriages. And what we do is we load into it this idea that says no, that'll be everything. Or maybe if you're a student and you're in middle school, high school, and you think, if I could just be part of this in-group, I want to be popular. And so, this is what I need. This is what I want. Then you start to demand from it. I have to do it. And soon you participate, maybe in belittling some other students so that you can be part of the group. And you find your way into the group and even then you start to get some disappointment and what it can bring.

Or take a desire like health. I want to be healthy. It's a good idea, a good dream for your life. And you say, well, I'll eat healthy. I will exercise. I'll refrain from some habits that are counterproductive. But what happens is, that even as you age, sooner or later, you lose that battle because it can't hold all that you want it to hold. Here's how one well-known philosopher of our day put this, Jim Carrey. He said, "I hope everyone gets rich and famous and does everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see it's not the answer."

Here's how C.S. Lewis wrote about this. C.S. Lewis said this. He said, "Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subjects that excite us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us."

You see, my use of the marriage analogy wasn't just that I was choosing that. That's what C.S. Lewis says. And by the way, when C.S. Lewis, Jim Carey, and the prophet Jeremiah all agree on something, you should probably pay some attention because here's what they're saying. You can get what you think you want, and it will ultimately still leave you a little unsatisfied. Now, I know some of you right now are saying you said Jeremiah was dark and bleak as a book. I'm not sure that this is encouraging. It's not at this moment. But hang in there for a

moment because Jeremiah's point is not that this is hopeless. It's just that when you put your hope in something that doesn't satisfy, that will be the ultimate outcome.

I heard somebody once say that the two worst things that can happen to anybody in this world is to not get what you want and to get what you want. They said to not get what you want is frustrating because you go through life always thinking if you could just get this, then you would be satisfied, then you would be happy, and then everything would be good. And when you get what you want, you realize that getting what it was you thought you wanted didn't actually bring you as much satisfaction as you wanted. Therefore, both of them are frustrating experiences. This is what Jeremiah is talking about.

And so, what is it that we do? Well, some of us what we'll do is we'll say let me just simply try not to be disappointed in life. Let me just simply say, you know what? I'm going to not be disappointed. I'm going to lower my expectations. I'm going to try to live in such a way that I'm just not disappointed with my life. But again, the problem with this is that even the best outcomes leave you a little unsatisfied. C.S. Lewis brought up the idea of marriage.

There's a song that Iron and Wine did a decade or so ago in which they sang about marriage. And the line in the song is one of us will die within these arms. And it's a song where obviously they're talking about the death of a couple that's in love and they're saying one of us will die. And their answer, by the way, is, don't you waste me in the ground. Like, go live your life. Don't let this define you anymore. Enjoy the fact that you have some years I don't have. But you know what they're pointing to? That even the best possible marriages usually end with one person outliving the other. In other words, there's disappointment.

I mentioned health. I mean, you can do your absolute best throughout your entire life. You can eat vegetables, lean meats, and nothing else for your entire life, and yet you will still lose the battle with aging and decay in your body. Now, again, I know this is not encouraging at the moment, but here's what's even more disheartening when you say this is what I need, then you will be disappointed. And until you say this thing, even if it's good, even if it's well conceived, will lead to disappointment. You are not in a place to understand how this actually works because what you will do is you will keep loading into this thing, hopes and dreams and passions that it can't sustain.

Then what happens is some of us will say well if I can't stop the disappointments, maybe I can just make better decisions. You saw this hinted at in Jeremiah two, verse 36, where Jeremiah said that they had been to Assyria and now Egypt. What they were saying was maybe the problem was the last bucket that I had wasn't satisfying. What I really need to do, since this one has a leak, is I actually need a different bucket. And so, I just need this bucket and when I get this bucket, then my life will be better. So, I just need to make a better decision about my bucket. Then that one springs a leak. And so, we say let me do this one. Then that one springs a leak, and we say I guess I need to keep going with my buckets. And we just keep going through life, always thinking it's the next bucket that will bring us satisfaction.

This is why some people will constantly change jobs or careers because they'll say you know what? My job, I thought it would be satisfying and it didn't satisfy. So, I need a better job. This is why some people will move from romantic partner to romantic partner because they'll say you know what? It must be the romantic partner that's not making me satisfied. Or they'll

move from location to location. Now, I'm not suggesting that there isn't a time to change jobs and there isn't a time to move on from a romantic partner or there isn't a time to move. But what I'm saying is, if your mindset is, it's that thing that's broken ultimately and that's why I need something new, you'll always be in search of something new.

This is how life works for some people. They go through life always saying well, when I get to the next phase, then I'll be able to really be happy and content where I'm at. You know, when I graduate, when I get the first job, when we buy a house, when we buy a bigger house, when we have kids, when the kids leave, when the kids come back home, when I can retire, when we can finally afford to, or when I can... What we do is we go through life always saying it's the next bucket.

Jeremiah's saying that is you queuing systems for yourself that won't ultimately satisfy. And so, some of us will try the well, let me just not be disappointed. Some of us will say, well, I'll just make better decisions. Some of us will just say, well, you know what? I just need to not expect anything out of my life.

This is where maybe the object lesson comes in. I said that this was like children's sermons from Jeremiah. So, I've got some objects here. This is the solo cup. And I just learned, by the way, that they're doing away with lines on solo cups. I didn't know that they're all going to be smooth now, but this is water in the pitcher. We try to fill our cistern, the solo cups. And here's again what Jeremiah's simply saying. He's saying that you can fill your cistern all the time, but no matter how you do it, you will spring a leak sooner or later. And so, you can say, I'm not going to demand from my life that it give me these things.

But even when you try to do that, it will in many ways still leave you in a spot where you say, this didn't satisfy. So, that leaves us just to address our desires. C.S. Lewis said this about our desires and finding our satisfaction in our desires and demands. Here's what he said. "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who want to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

What's he saying? He's saying that what we're trying to do is get our satisfaction from things that aren't the source. They aren't the living water. There are these broken cisterns. Jesus addresses this in what's known as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew six. He says this. "Seek first the kingdom of God, and then all of these things will be added unto you." Now, does that mean that if you say, I prioritize God, I get the systems that I want? I don't think that's what he's saying as much as when you make a priority out of the Kingdom of God, that then all these other things will take care of themselves because you will have living water, and you will have satisfaction in your soul.

You see, what happens for some of us is we want to use God to help us get the cistern filled that we want. And so, we said, God, I'll see you as long as you help fill my cistern. And what we're really doing is we're trying to use God to help us get what it is we think we really want. So, God, I'll be good, I'll obey, I'll pray, and I'll go to church. I'll do something as long as you give me something here.

But seeking first the kingdom means that we orient our lives around the things of God. And as we do that, what He's saying is, you will have everything else added, and the reason you'll have it added is not because you'll get exactly what you want, but because you will be able to say this thing that I want, that I desire, that could be a legitimate desire, is an ultimate.

So, if you have a good marriage, you can say this is a taste of what heaven is and it's great. And if it's not great, then it is an ultimate. And if your health is great, you can say it's awesome. I have a long, healthy life. But if your health is devastatingly hard for you, you're able to say, I wasn't just created for time and space here and now, but there's a time when I'll have a resurrected body.

And what this allows you to do is say, God, I can live in the reality of knowing that these systems that I try to do for myself aren't everything. And by not loading too much into them, you can actually pursue them and enjoy them as gifts that point to eternity rather than things that you must have in this life.

Several years ago, my family and I went out west to see some of the national parks. We were kind of at that stage where my kids were hitting that age where it's like if you don't do this trip now, you'll never do it. So, we went out west to see some of the parks and we ended up flying into Las Vegas.

It was the first time I'd spent real money on a vacation with my kids. I'd never been to Vegas either. When you're in Vegas, one of the things that happens is you have to go through casinos to go anywhere because all the hotels are connected. So they make you walk through. I never really had been in a casino. I don't say that because I'm pious. I say that because I'm cheap. I don't go to a casino because the house always wins. That's why the casinos look like they look and why you see the people they're looking like they look.

And so, I'm in this casino for the first time and there's all these people playing these slot machines, these digital slot machines. And it intrigued me. So, I did a little research about what is the psychology of gambling. Why would somebody knowing that the House wins, sit there and play for hours and hours and hours? I learned that it used to be when the slot machines were the kind that you pull, that the slot machines didn't make a lot of money because all the action felt like it was at the tables. And so, the casinos made all their money at the tables. Now they've turned it all digital and the machines go off with all these bells and whistles. And so now, the slot machines make the money. And here's what I found out, they do this with the psychology of making wins or making losses feel like wins.

Here's how this works. You go and you play a digital slot machine and put some money in. Let's say there's five things that have to match. The first one comes up and the second one almost always matches. The third one will match. And then they slow it down so that the fourth one starts turning and turning and turning and you're thinking, well, maybe I'll win. This is the time. I'm close. I can feel it. It's close. And then the fourth one matches a lot of times, and now you're to the fifth one, and they slow it down again so that you're going, this is it. And as you sit there and it goes slower and slower, you're thinking, I'm so close, I'm so close, I'm so close. And then the thing often comes up a loser. Your losses felt like a win.

But here's the other thing. Then sometimes it will match, the bell will go off, and everyone looks and they're like, hey, there's a winner over here. And you know what they often do when you win? Let's say you put \$100 on that round of a slot machine, you're winning is \$80. Did you do the math? Your loss feels like a win.

You see, the broken cistern is your loss feels like a win. And Jeremiah is saying, just pleading really with the people, saying don't let your losses feel like wins and say, well, if I can get this cistern to be filled, then I'll really be happy because it will leak. It will not satisfy. And what he's saying is instead come to Jesus, the source of living water.

Jesus says it this way, seek first my kingdom, and these things will be added unto you. And the reason that you can know that this is true is because God's heart is for you and the way you know this is because God created you. And although humanity walked away from God with sin, and by the way, sin in the Bible isn't just morally stepping outside of God's bounds.

Notice Jeremiah uses the word. He says my people have committed two sins. What did they do? They just tried to get rainwater. They just tried to satisfy themselves outside of God. Sin isn't just a moral affront to God. It is that. But it's also when you and I simply say I'm going to meet my needs apart from God. He says in essence, you do that. But the hope that you have is that Jesus came, and He went to the cross, is a perfect representation, perfect being, and died. And because that is true, you can know that God's heart is for you. And when he says, don't chase these broken cisterns, there's more. That living water is available to you.

So, if you're here and you're saying, you know, I've been trying to follow Jesus with my life, but there are days that it doesn't feel like it's worth it. Jeremiah says to return to the heart of God because anything else you put your hope in, will leak. If you're here and you're saying, I kind of believe, I've kind of tried, and the testimony of scripture of history is that as you give your heart to God, there will be times it'll feel like it's not working. But if you stay the course, you will find your deepest and truest happiness and satisfaction all the way along your life if you will trust in Jesus. And if you're here and you're saying, I don't know if I buy any of this, and what I really want is I want God to help me get the cistern filled, know that God's heart isn't to keep you from your cistern but to say as the one who made you, I know what will bring you heart's satisfaction. So return to me, come to me, turn to me where my heart is for you. And that's where you'll find your real satisfaction.

Beyond that is a group of people, people who are here maybe to worship. What will bring change to our community, and to our world is ultimately not better music, bigger buildings, or better programming but when people in our community experience people who say, I understand what it is to pursue things that don't satisfy. But my ultimate hope, my ultimate satisfaction isn't in this thing. And that is what will bring about change. When our culture begins to say there's something better than just these broken cisterns that we keep making ultimate. And that's the mission ultimately of the church. It's what Jesus did by coming. And in some ways, it's what Lent reminds us to say that God has a heart for us, evidenced in Jesus, and invites you to say, God, all of me is yours.

Father, I ask today that you would help each one of us to see where we're hewing systems for ourselves and see how they leak and turn to you, the source of living water. And then we

would know your heart is for us because we know your heart is in Jesus for us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.