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Title: Return to Me: Lesson of the Yoke

Scripture: Jeremiah 27

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Good morning. It's great to be together. Let's pray. God, as you've gathered us from different places, experiences in different locations, different moments online, I pray that you would speak in this moment to each of us. God, I ask that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and in emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

A few weeks ago, we started a series that we've called *Return to Me*, and we're looking at some of the pictures that the prophet Jeremiah gives to the people. Jeremiah's one of those long books in the Old Testament. It's called A Major Prophet because it's long and it is full of chapters that are not necessarily pleasant and positive because it's kind of one of these books of judgment.

It's also a book that's hard because it isn't necessarily chronological, and it's not thematically arranged. So, if you ever try to read the book of Jeremiah, what will happen is you'll read it and say what's going on? I have no idea what's going on. What is this talking about? At least that's my experience. If you have a better experience reading that, you're a much better Bible student than I am because when I read it, it's always like I have to try to track what is this? Where is this? What's happening in all of these things?

During this season that is leading up to Easter, what a lot of churches historically have called Lent, we decided that we would look at these object lessons that Jeremiah gives that are a little bit like children's sermons. Cliff Notes for the Book of Jeremiah. You might say, well, if it's not real positive and encouraging, why the subject matter? Well, in part, it's something that's in the Bible, but it's also historically what churches have done during Lent, which is to say, let's consider our sinfulness, our need, a season of repentance that leads to Resurrection Sunday and a time of transformation. And so, that has been our hope here today.

Today's lesson is the lesson of the yoke. And this is not a yoke. I didn't want to work that hard at coming up with the yoke. And so, this is a light switch or stick. But I thought it was long and made the point. We've talked about the lesson of the broken cisterns, the soiled loin cloth, the pottery, and today we're going to talk about the yoke. That's the lesson that he uses. A yoke would have been readily understood by the people of that culture immediately, because what a yoke was, was it was something that you'd put on the shoulders of basically an animal and use them as a beast of burden. But it was also used when people were conquered and vanquished as slaves and taken to a foreign land. And so, they would be put inside their yoke and they would be forced to march because they were captured.

This is the image that Jeremiah uses, and he speaks it to these different nations. He says these are the nations that you're going to hear. And then he speaks it to Israel and Judah as well. And if you were here a couple of weeks ago, we talked a bit about the idea of Israel and Judah and how that all works together. I'm not going to go into all of that, but what is surprising about this is that his message is don't resist the Babylonian enslavement that's basically coming.

The reason this is surprising is because when you read this, you're like, well, wait a second, why would Jeremiah tell the people, why would God say through the Prophet Jeremiah, don't resist this evil empire that is going to enslave you? That's seems almost nonsensical to our modern minds. And this is not anything like this. But to give you a little flavor, it would be like if we were to say that the United States is going to become subservient to Canada and the people in Canada are going to make us all drink Tim Hortons coffee and enjoy hockey. All of a sudden, you'd say, well, I don't want to be Canadian. Well, the word of the Lord says you are to not resist the Canadians. And you'd say, well, I don't want to.

And so, the question is, why is this here? And what is the point? What does it have to do with you or me all of these years later? And how does it even apply to the overall message of the Bible, particularly Lent and Easter? Let me give you three lessons of the yoke today from Jeremiah, and these lessons are in some ways, lessons that build. I think the first and second one give way to the third, and the third is probably where I'll spend most of the time and is probably the most significant.

Here's the first lesson, and that is God uses situations and people to accomplish his purposes that we would not use. This is seen in verses three through eight, the whole idea of Babylon coming and being used by God to chasten his people. The reason I say this is a situation that we wouldn't use is because Babylon was an evil empire. Not only that, but it was also an empire that that in some ways is used symbolically throughout Scripture for what's opposed to God. And so, God says, I'm going to use something that you and I would say God should never use. That's not what God should do.

The reason that this is important is because there's a tendency to say, God only uses good people. God only uses righteous people. God only uses people who have it all together. The correlation to that, the corollary to that is to say if we're successful at something, then somehow God is pleased with us. We see it as validation. If we're unsuccessful at something, then somehow we see it as an indictment. This was the kind of thinking that happened in the book of Job because when Job lost everything, his friends came around and said you have sinned. You need to turn back to God so you can get everything going your way again.

The reason this is an important lesson is to understand that sometimes God uses things that you and I would never want to use to achieve his purposes. Sometimes it's circumstances. Sometimes it's people. In fact, Joni Eareckson Tada who had a diving accident when she was 19, was paralyzed, once said this. She said, "God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves." Sometimes, God will allow brokenness in your home, in your life, in your family, in your health, or in your marriage to accomplish something that you wouldn't have chosen. God not only does that, but sometimes he'll use people that we would not have used.

I know right now probably some of you are saying, well, wait a second. Are you saying that God uses sinful people? Yes, because sinful people are all there are. Are you saying God uses broken people? Yes. Because broken people are all there are. And if you debate this, let me encourage you to do something. Take out your Bible and think through characters in the Old Testament. Just try to think through them chronologically, write their name down, and then without looking, just write down what you think they're best known for. Do you know what you're going to find? The people God uses are not a hall of fame of righteousness.

They're people who are jacked up. And that is ultimately good news because it means that you and I can be people that God chooses to use now.

Now, this doesn't mean that you say I can excuse whatever I'm doing because God uses sinful people. That's not what this means. But it's an important thing to be able to say that God uses people and situations that you and I would not use. And what else is important about this is God uses Babylon, and it's important here to understand something about how God uses nations. God used Babylon. He worked in Israel. And again, if you were here, we talked a little bit about this. But in Bible interpretation, there's this idea of Israel being the people of God, God's chosen people.

You undoubtedly have heard this. And clearly this is taught in the Old Testament. There are two major ways to interpret this in terms of how people think about it. This has a point in a second. But one way is to say that God's chosen people, Israel, will still be his chosen people in the future. These are people who are known as futurists. And so, they say whatever's happening in the Middle East and all of this stuff with Israel is still God's hand. Other people would say, well, God chose the people of Israel. They rejected him. So now His chosen people are the church. And so, what's happening in Israel may have some bearing in Bible prophecy, but the church takes it out.

Now, here's why I tell you this right now. God works in the Bible through nations. There's a lot going on in our country right now, and a lot of people talking about Christian Nationalism. Have you heard this? Especially some people in politics will say Christian Nationalism is the problem in our nation. And to be fair, Christian Nationalism in its classic definition is a problem when people say that God intends a theocracy in the United States of America. Okay? But usually when people use this phrase, what they're doing is they're saying anybody who thinks that there should be morality and that there should be some kind of a natural law or God is part of our equation, they're the danger to the world. But what they're not recognizing is that everybody who says things should be somehow, has a moral basis in which they're making those decisions. And so, Christian Nationalism, in that sense of saying I'm bringing my faith to be part of my moral reasoning, to be part of how I see the world, is not dangerous. It's essential.

Here's where this comes into nationalism. If you're a futurist, in other words, you say Israel is somebody who God is still working in, your Christian Nationalism should be dead for this reason. And by this, I mean the classic definition. There is no mention that I can see of a Western superpower in prophecy for the future. And so, if your version of America is this is God's chosen people, you are mistaken because ultimately it is a nation that is no different than other nations. God will utilize nations in the ways that bring glory to Him.

Here's the second thing. If you're a person who says, oh, you know what? This is the church, and the church has a future, then there's no need for Christian Nationalism either. Because what you're basically saying is God is going to be glorified in his people regardless. Now, don't get me wrong, I do believe that God calls nations to honor him. I do believe that you're moral reasoning bringing natural law, your faith, to bear in public debate matters. And I don't think you should be pushed away from that way of thinking. But what we can affirm from Jeremiah 27 is that God uses situations and people to accomplish his purposes that you and I may not choose to use.

What we see in Jeremiah 30 verse 8 and following is that this yoke is temporary. Here's what he says. "'In that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds; no longer will foreigners enslave them. Instead, they will serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. 'So do not be afraid, Jacob my servant; do not be dismayed, Israel,' declares the LORD. 'I will surely save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid.'"

So again, depending on how you read Old Testament Israel and the promises, but what you have here is you have God saying something, and that is I've used this, but it has achieved my purpose. This also means when things don't make sense to you about how God is working, you can have confidence that God is still at work in your situation.

Here's the second lesson, and that is not everyone who claims to speak for God speaks for God. You see this in verses 9 and following. It says this, "So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon.'" So, what happened is some of the prophets were saying, you know what, you're not going to have to serve Babylon. And he says, don't listen to them because they're wrong.

The reason that this is important is because so often people that you encounter who claim to speak for God, and again, I would say whether somebody uses God, stands in front of a group or not, whenever somebody uses morality as a line of reasoning, they're claiming to speak for God, you have a reason to say is this somebody I should listen to? In First John chapter 4, we see the idea of this whole thing of who can you listen to? Here's what First John 4 verse one says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." So, false prophet, not from God, is somebody who will point you to something that isn't of God. These conversations happen over coffee, over beer, or over a glass of wine all the time. It isn't just who you listen to on a podcast, although that's part of it. But it's who influences your thinking.

And what First John does is it gives us a little bit of of a series of tests in First John 4. Jeremiah doesn't do that. He just says not everyone who speaks for God is actually speaking for God. In First John 4, what we see is that there's a doctrinal test. We see this in verses 2 and following. It says, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

So, what does he say? He says, how do you know who speaks for God? If somebody doesn't acknowledge who Jesus Christ is, doesn't acknowledge what the cross means, that salvation is from Jesus alone, then that person does not have the Word of God in them. And so, there's an importance of saying, what does a person actually teach?

But then there's also a lifestyle test, and this is in verses 4 and following. He says, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." It says the way that you know when somebody is speaking

for God is you see that their life and their values and the way that they live reflects God. Now, we just saw not always perfectly in the Old Testament that the people who followed God got a lot of things wrong, but there was a lifestyle that pointed to a reality of God in their lives.

Then there's an affinity test here, verses 5 and 6. It says they are from the world. "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us." Now, you can't always control who affirms whatever you say, but this is saying pay attention not just to what's sad and to the lifestyle, but to who people are in relationship with or who affirms them.

Now, you know that this isn't perfect in one sense. So, if you were, let's say, to look for dieting advice, health advice, you would probably say, okay, what's the actual advice? Does the person have the kind of lifestyle that leads me to go, oh, they have something to say on this? And then you would say, are there a bunch of people that they affirm and follow or listen to that I would say, oh, that's bad.

Same thing with finance. If you have somebody that you say this is a finance guru, somebody to help me make great financial decisions, chances are you would say, okay, what's the actual advice? Have they actually made good decisions themselves? And where is the affinity? Think about parenting, marriage. I mean, so often people will go and say, how is this, or who has something to say about this in my life? And sometimes you need to hear and say this is actually from God because not everyone who claims to speak from God is actually speaking for God.

But there's one more lesson here, and this is, I believe, the significant lesson of this, and that is true freedom is found in the yoke of Jesus Christ. Now, one of the ways that we interpret the Old Testament is, by the way, the Old Testament is used in the New Testament. And sometimes the Old Testament is used with a direct citation, you know the New Testament will say Isaiah says, sometimes it's used with a quotation and sometimes there's an allusion where the readers would go, oh, I get what that is, or the listeners would say, I get what that is.

Jesus uses this image of a yoke, and here's how Jesus uses this. This is Matthew 11, verses 28 through 30. He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." So, here's what Jesus does. He says, okay, if you're weary, which means to be at the point of exhaustion from what you're doing, and you're heavy laden, meaning you have something on you like a yoke, and it feels like it's crushing, He says come to me. And then He says learn from me because I'm gentle and lowly in spirit, lowly in heart. He says, my yoke is easy, meaning it's well-fitting. It's not going to chafe and be difficult, but instead I will give you rest for your souls. It will rejuvenate you. It will refresh you.

I believe that this is pointing to something that is significant for everybody. And that is this. Whatever is wearing you out in this world has become your master in one way or another. You have it as a yoke. Now, this can be mundane things of life. This can be your marriage, your kids. This can be having success, making enough money to get somewhere, staying fit. I

mean, fill in your blank, this can be that, is what is wearing me out. Therefore, it's my yoke. And Jesus says, come to me and I will give you rest.

But it can also be a religious thing for many of us, because what we can do is we can say, I believe that Jesus is the author of salvation, and then what we do is we bring law back into our life, which is a yoke again, and we start to live as if to say, well, now with this yoke, I'm going to somehow earn my standing with God. This is how Paul speaks about this, again, using the same image Galatians chapter 5 verse 1. He says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." So what the New Testament does is it looks back and says Jeremiah took this image and said you're going to go into slavery. Jesus promised to deliver us. That was Jeremiah 30. And now he says here is the deliverance. Come to me and I will give you rest.

And here's what church people do. And if you're not a church person, you're going to say, yes, well, that's why I don't like church with what I'm about to say, but hang on, I'm going to come back to you in just a minute. Here's what church people often do. They'll say, okay, I get that maybe, you know, trying to get my validation from all these things in the world, whether it be money, looks, happiness in my marriage, whatever, might be a yoke, and so, I'll come to Jesus. And then what we do is we take the law, this is the yoke of freedom, and we say I'm going to put the law back on so that I feel good about myself. And here's how you know that you're weary from the law, heavy burden. And that is when you start to look around at everybody else and say they're not doing it as well as I'm doing it, and if they did it my way, then everything would be better, and you start to get crushed.

Now, you may say really? Come on. I've been around church a long time. And this cuts every direction. There are people who will say, you know, if the church would just, church meaning other Christians, would just care more for the poor like I care for the poor, if the other people would just care about racial equality the way that I care about it, if other people cared about evangelism the way I cared about, if other people worshiped passionately the way that I worship, if other people studied theology and got everything right, the way that I get it right, if everybody practiced church discipline in the way that I practice church discipline, if everybody had modesty as one of their goals, the way that I have modesty, if everybody did life the way I do life.

And what happens is, then you start comparing. And all of a sudden, you have this crushing burden because you're always trying to be slightly better than everybody else. And what you're doing is you're going back to the law, you're taking a burden, and you're saying this is now how I feel good about myself. And, you know, what Jesus is doing, is saying, come to me if you're heavy burdened, you're weary, and I'll give you rest. Learn from me because I'm gentle, I'm lowly of spirit, I'm for you, I want what's good for you. And this is ultimately the gospel message.

I had a friend recently show me a TikTok video, point me to it, and it was about Nick Saban. I'm sorry for using a football analogy. I try to only use them sparingly because I know about half of you don't care but this will make sense even if you don't know who Nick Saban is. So, Nick Saban, legendary coach, won a bunch of national championships at Alabama and before that was coach of the Miami Dolphins, won a national championship I think at LSU,

coached Michigan State, and was an assistant with Bill Belichick for the Cleveland Browns. So, a great career.

When he was at Alabama, he had this player who had violated some team rules and had done something kind of schmucky. And so, everybody in Alabama was like, you got to kick this kid off the team. He didn't kick the kid off the team, and he said, you know what? He has acknowledged what he did. We've got some correctives in place, but I'm keeping him on the team. The media was giving him a hard time. And so, he does a press conference. This is a 65-year-old coach at this point who's won multiple national championships.

He says I'm going to say whatever it is I want to say without any kind of filter moment. He stands up and he's like, okay, so you all want me to kick him off the team? And I'm paraphrasing, but he says let me tell you about something. Back when I was at Michigan State, and he named one of his players, he was on my team and the same situation came up. He had violated the rules. Everybody wanted him out and I kept him on the team. He went on. He had a 15-year NFL career, but not only that, he got married. He has seven kids. He runs a company now, and his kids are contributing to society. So, who is right now? You know, he gets all kind of flustered, like I'm tired of you criticizing me, who is right now. And then he says where else would you want these kids? Do you want them just turned out onto the street or do you want them in my football program? Where else do you want them?

Do you know what? It's football. I get it. Nick Saban is not Jesus. But there's the heart of Jesus in that. I know if you're from Alabama, you're like, are you sure? I'm sure. The heart of Jesus. And here's why. Because what he's saying is come unto me, you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Where else but the church is the place to come and encounter the God who says you can give your yoke to me because I'm the one who wants what is good for you.

I said I'd come back to some of you who say, you know, church, that's why I don't like church. If you're not part of church, you're not a church person. You still have a yoke. Your yoke may not be officially the law of God, but you probably have your own version of a law that you use that you say this is what it means to me to be good, to be legitimate, to be, to be enough. An invitation of Jesus is to say, stop trying to get your validation from something that won't give it to you.

So some of you might be right on the edge right now. You're like a foot in both worlds, kind of saying I kind of believe, but I don't really want the implications of belief. I'm not sure where I want to be in this world. And for you, you need to see this picture of the yoke and of the Babylonian captivity, because it is Jesus' picture to say, come unto me and you don't need to bear that yoke any longer.

I don't know what you're weary about today, but my guess is if you trace that emotion, you will see what has been your master. And if you find out that master, you will see that it is an exacting, demanding master, not one who says come unto me and I will give you rest. And so today, the invitation I think of Jesus during Lent leading to Easter is just to simply say, will you put that burden down, that yoke down?

I mean, what would it look like for you to identify where you're weary, what's been your yoke, and to say, I am going to yoke myself to Jesus Christ instead of to that, because here's what the message of Jesus ultimately is, and that is, you can't perform enough. Jesus has done for you what you can't do. And it is in your acknowledging that and putting your faith in your trust in Jesus Christ that you come to have eternal life, salvation. But not only that, it's in that you come to say, I don't need what that master has for me.

So today, the lesson of the yoke is, yes, God sometimes uses circumstances and things that we wouldn't choose to use. Yes, sometimes people claim to speak for God who don't speak for God. But it's really that true freedom is found in the yoke of Jesus Christ and anything else that you yoke your life to will ultimately beat you into weariness. But Jesus Christ, in his beautiful words, says come to me, learn from me. I am gentle and lowly. Translation, I am for you and my yoke is easy and my burden is light. That's where I want to live.

God, I ask today that you would help each of us just to be able to identify the masters that we take on, the yoke, the burden, and how you will free us from them. God, for some, maybe this is a moment just to say to you, I have trusted myself. Maybe today is a day of trusting Jesus for the first time in God for others. Maybe there's been a return to law. What started out as grace has been a return to slavery. I pray that even in this moment there will be a recognition and freedom of saying I don't have to try to compare and perform more than somebody else, but I can instead live in the freedom of your yoke. Father, we pray all of this today in Jesus' name. Amen.