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CHAPTER 1

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GOD FILES  
FOR DIVORCE

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*“If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him  
and marries another man,  
should he return to her again?*

*Would not the land be completely defiled?  
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—  
would you now return to me?”  
declares the LORD.*

**JEREMIAH 3:1**

I walked past the notice board on the street and I was shocked by my own sermon title, chosen some weeks before: “God Files for Divorce.” I ran up to my office and pulled out a Bible to make sure I had it right. God files for *divorce*? Can it be true? Would the God of the eternal covenant end his marriage to his own people?

Yes, he would: “Therefore I bring charges against you again,” declares the LORD” (2:9). The honeymoon is over. God is taking his people to divorce court. Jeremiah 2 is his legal testimony.

THE HONEYMOON

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God remembers what the honeymoon was like. He pages through the photos in his wedding album. As he looks back on

the early days of his marriage, there is an ache in his heart. He can remember how his bride adored him when they were first married. “I remember,” he testifies, “the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me” (2:2).

God is on the witness stand in the agony of love, the kind of agony Sheldon Vanauken describes in his book *A Severe Mercy*:

To hold her in my arms against the twilight and be her comrade for ever—this was all I wanted so long as my life should last. . . . And this, I told myself with a kind of wonder, this was what love was: this consecration, this curious uplifting, this sudden inexplicable joy, and this intolerable pain.<sup>1</sup>

Once Israel loved God like a newlywed. Wives should take careful note of Jeremiah’s picture of the devoted wife. Actually, the word *devotion* is not strong enough! God remembers the *chesed*, or covenant faithfulness of Israel. This is a word for unbroken promises, unshakable loyalty, unceasing devotion, and unfailing lovingkindness. It is the perfect word to describe marriage because marriage is a covenant relationship. It is more than just a legal contract; it is a steadfast love commitment of fidelity and adoration.

Christians sometimes get the idea that being faithful to God’s covenant is simply a matter of obeying God’s law. This is because we are legalists at heart. But God never intended our relationship with him to be mere obedience of the will. God wants our hearts as well as our wills. Redemption is a romance.

The children of Israel gave their hearts to God when they first got married. They reveled in the romance of redemption. Like a newly-married bride, Israel loved her divine husband. The proof of her love was following God wherever he led. “Through the desert, through a land not sown” (2:2), this bride submitted to the guidance of her husband. Israel was young and in love, and all she wanted was to be close to her husband. Barren wilderness was not much of a bridal suite, but that didn’t mat-

ter! Israel followed God out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land (2:6-7).

If Israel was a loving wife, God was a faithful husband. He did not fail to keep any of his wedding vows. Here husbands ought to take careful note of Jeremiah's picture of the perfect husband.

God had *passion* for his bride. "Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest" (2:3a). He took her to love and to cherish. He treated her with honor and respect, setting her apart as holy. Israel was the firstfruits of God's harvest among the nations of the world. She was God's best and most valuable possession, the apple of his eye, dedicated to him alone.

So God *protected* his bride. He would not allow anyone else to taste his fruit. "All who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them" (2:3b). If anyone threatened Israel or encroached on her territory, God treated it as an attack on his own person. Remember what happened to the Egyptians? Or the Philistines? God saved his wife and kept her safe.

Then God *provided* for his bride: "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce" (2:7). God gave Israel a beautiful home. There was plenty of food in the fridge—mostly milk and honey—and fine bone china on the table.

#### THE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

That was then, but this is now. Time to wake up and smell the burnt toast. The honeymoon is over. My wife and I decided our honeymoon was over when the no-stick frying pan we bought when we first got married started to stick. Well, in Jeremiah 2 the frying pan is sticking like the floor of a movie theater.

How could this be happening? If you were there for the nuptials, when Jerusalem was espoused to God, you never would have believed it would all end in divorce. The wedding was so beautiful! The honeymoon was so wonderful! The bride was so

devoted! The husband was so faithful! Where did it all go wrong?

God is on the witness stand in divorce court asking the same question: “What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me?” (2:5; cf. 2:31). God did not leave his people, they dumped him. God’s people are the ones who have walked out on the marriage. They used to love him, but it’s all over now. This is worth remembering whenever God seems distant. As the saying goes, “If God does not seem close, who moved?”

Why would anyone ever move away from God? It makes no sense! Why would a bride leave a perfect husband? Why would she abandon a man who fulfilled all his vows to her? There is no explanation, no excuse. God’s bride separated from her husband without the slightest provocation.

God is the one who has been wronged. He is the plaintiff, and this is his accusation: “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (2:5). This is the only legitimate ground for divorce: adultery (cf. Matt. 5:32). In this case, the adultery is spiritual. God’s people have been having affairs with “worthless” idols. This is the same word used in Ecclesiastes for vanity (*hebel*). It means “mist” or “vapor.” Idolaters grasp at thin air. Actually, they worship nothing at all.

So the marriage is dying of neglect. God’s people no longer seek after God. They no longer say, “Where is the LORD?” (2:6). They no longer recount and recite the mighty acts of salvation. They forget the love that saved them. They suffer from self-induced spiritual amnesia.

This is a reminder for Christians to thank God daily for salvation in Jesus Christ. Recount and recite the saving acts of God in history. Remember what God has done in your life. The road to spiritual adultery begins when you stop reveling in the love of God. Few Christians plan to fall into grievous sin. It is only after falling that they realize they have drifted away from the God of love.

Jeremiah places the blame for Jerusalem's marital difficulties squarely on the shoulders of its spiritual leaders:

*"The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?'  
Those who deal with the law did not know me;  
the leaders rebelled against me.  
The prophets prophesied by Baal,  
following worthless idols." (2:8)*

The prophets, priests, and kings were not part of the solution; they were part of the problem. "As a thief is disgraced when he is caught, so the house of Israel is disgraced—they, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets" (2:26). The leaders got caught with their hands in the cookie jar. They were committing secret sins. Like everyone else, they were sleeping around with idols.

The middle of verse 8 ought to keep ministers and other spiritual leaders awake at night: "Those who deal with the law did not know me." A holy calling does not make a holy man. The priests of Jeremiah's day were handling the Scriptures, studying the Bible, and teaching God's Word, but they did not *know* God himself (cf. John 5:39-40). Their ministry was a dead ritual rather than a living relationship.

#### THE EVIDENCE

Jeremiah 2 does not describe a situation of "irreconcilable differences." This is not a no-fault divorce. God has legitimate grounds for terminating the marriage.

The rest of the chapter gives evidence of the infidelity of God's people. It is like a judicial slide show. As part of his prosecution, God introduces into evidence image after image of spiritual adultery. He lays out his case with the logic of a lawyer and the longing of a lover, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that his people have forsaken their first love.

What is it like when God's people leave their husband?  
Unheard of! Exhibit A: It is like a nation changing its gods.

*“Cross over to the coasts of Kittim  
[Cyprus, in the West] and look,  
send to Kedar [a tribe in the far east]  
and observe closely;  
see if there has ever been anything like this:  
Has a nation ever changed its gods?” (2:10-11a)*

Of course not! Travel the world from east to west, no nation has ever changed its gods. Shoes, maybe, or hairstyles, but not gods.

Even the pagans are loyal to their gods. They cart them around wherever they go. Did the Canaanites ever abandon Baal or Asherah? Never! Did the Babylonians ever forsake Bel or Merodach? Ridiculous!

*“Has a nation ever changed its gods?  
(Yet they are not gods at all.)  
But my people have exchanged their  
Glory for worthless idols.” (2:11)*

It is hard to believe, but God's people have exchanged the glorious effulgence of the divine presence for idols made of wood or stone.

They are so confused they are “cross-worshipping.” “They say to the wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth’” (2:27). That is, they call the feminine goddess (represented by the wood) “Father” and tell the masculine god (represented by the stone) that he gave them birth!

By partner-swapping, Israel has bartered away the living God. It was a religious crime without precedent in the ancient world. The pagans never abandoned their dead gods, but God's people have abandoned the living God. The members of the jury,

namely, “the heavens,” ought to be so appalled at what they hear that they “shudder with great horror” (2:12).

What is it like when God’s people leave their husband?  
Exhibit B: It is like leaving a spring of living water.

*“My people have committed two sins:  
They have forsaken me,  
the spring of living water,  
and have dug their own cisterns,  
broken cisterns that cannot  
hold water.” (2:13)*

Imagine living in the desert. It is always dry. The thing you always need and can never find is water. Then imagine finding a desert spring that continuously bubbles up fresh from the ground. Would you leave a never-ending supply of water behind? Never! Only a lunatic would abandon a desert spring.

Now imagine leaving the spring behind and digging a cistern to catch rainwater. If you went to such trouble, would you leave cracks in the limestone seal? Yet God testifies, “My people . . . have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (2:13). If leaving a spring is dumb, building a cracked cistern is dumber. It would be like shutting off your water supply and then digging a trench to get water from the nearest industrial canal.

What Jerusalem did made even less sense. God’s people were worried about getting squashed by world superpowers. They were afraid of being plundered (2:14-16). So just to be safe, they propositioned their neighbors. They substituted political alliances for their love-covenant with God:

*“Now why go to Egypt  
to drink water from the Shihor?  
And why go to Assyria  
to drink water from the River?” (2:18; cf. v. 36)*

Defense treaties with Egypt and Assyria are like broken cisterns. They cannot hold water the way God can. Worse still, their water turns out to have a bitter aftertaste compared to the sweet living water from God's eternal wellspring. "Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the LORD your God and have no awe of me,' declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty" (2:19b).

This is partly a lesson about the coming Messiah. No water can compare with the living water God pours out in Jesus Christ (John 4:10).

It is also a lesson about God and country. Politics is a broken cistern. When Christians start to trust in political solutions to save the nation, they bring judgment on themselves. One reason for the precipitous decline of the mainline church in America has been its engagement in liberal politics. By aligning itself with the right-wing agenda, the conservative church has fallen into the same trap. The quest for political power destroys the spiritual influence of the church.

Next comes Exhibit C: When God's people leave their husband it is like a beast breaking free from its yoke.

*"Long ago you broke off your yoke  
and tore off your bonds;  
you said, 'I will not serve you!'"* (2:20a)

Jerusalem is like a wild ox that has smashed its yoke against the barn and run off into the fields. On their way into the spiritual wilderness, God's people yell back over their shoulders, "We will not serve you!" Or again, "We are free to roam; we will come to you no more" (2:31).

God's people were made to serve him. To reject servanthood is not freedom, but bondage. Anyone who knows Christ has put his shoulder to the easy yoke (Matt. 11:30). Breaking that yoke to go off and sin is hard slavery.

What is it like when God's people leave their husband? Exhibit D: It is like a prostitute on the street corner waiting for some action.

*"Indeed, on every high hill  
and under every spreading tree  
you lay down as a prostitute." (2:20b)*

God's people are guilty of religious prostitution. They have been shacking up with gods they hardly know.

Very likely this refers to Baal worship, which included ritual prostitution at leafy hilltop shrines. The people of Jerusalem had been seduced by the gods and goddesses of Canaan. They were becoming adept at idol worship. "How skilled you are at pursuing love! Even the worst of women can learn from your ways" (2:33). The Jews knew enough about worshiping idols to give lessons to the most experienced pagan.

This was scandalous, as it always is when religious people turn away from the Lord. A regular churchgoer who does not worship God from the heart is more wicked than an unbeliever who has never heard the Gospel. The pagan has no need to teach the apostate about sin.

MORE EVIDENCE

When God's people forsake him, it is also like a wild vine. This is Exhibit E:

*"I had planted you like a choice vine  
of sound and reliable stock.  
How then did you turn against me  
into a corrupt, wild vine?" (2:21)*

Usually, animals are the ones who turn on their masters; this time it is a plant. Back in the springtime, when God planted his garden, he took some cuttings and planted "a choice vine." He

was expecting to get rich, red grapes from the vine and, as one writer describes it, squeeze them into a nice bottle of Sorek wine from the Wadi al-Sarar.<sup>2</sup> But the vine turned on him. God's people are supposed to be fruitful branches of the true vine, Jesus Christ (John 15:1-8). But when they forsook their first love, they went back to their wild natural state and yielded sour fruit.

What is it like when God's people leave their husband?  
Exhibit F: It is like an indelible stain.

*“Although you wash yourself with soda  
and use an abundance of soap,  
the stain of your guilt is still before me,”  
declares the Sovereign LORD. (2:22)*

Sin is not simply a cosmetic problem. Even after the detergent, the exotic cleansers, the turpentine and the tomato juice, the stain of sin remains. What soap can wash away sin from the soul? There is no home remedy to take away guilt. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can purify us from all sin (cf. 1 John 1:7).

When God's people leave their husband, it is like a young camel running loose in the desert, which is Exhibit G:

*“See how you behaved in the valley;  
consider what you have done.  
You are a swift she-camel  
running here and there.” (2:23)*

Listen to this description of a young camel:

Literally, this camel is criss-crossing her tracks. The young camel is the perfect illustration for all that is “skittery” and unreliable. It is ungainly in the extreme and runs off in any direction at the slightest provocation, much to the fury of the camel-driver. To sit in a village courtyard and watch such a young camel go scooting through, with some alarmed peasant dashing madly after it, is an unforgettable

experience; such a young camel never takes more than about three steps in any direction. To this day the young camel provides a dramatic illustration for anything unreliable. Thus “interlacing her paths” is an accurate description of a young camel—it provides Jeremiah a perfect illustration for the fickleness of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Jeremiah’s point is that God’s people run all over the place to sin. They are unable to decide which god they want to serve. The reference to the valley is particularly ominous, since it probably refers to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, where children were sacrificed to Molech (2:23; cf. 7:30-32). There is a further reference to murder when God says his people have “the lifeblood of the innocent poor” on their skirts (2:34). The people of Jerusalem practiced both child sacrifice and the systematic abuse of the urban poor. When God is forbidden, everything is permissible, as abortion and the lack of concern about poverty in the pagan West now confirm.

For Exhibit H God moves from dromedaries to donkeys. To forsake him is to behave like a donkey in heat,

*“a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,  
sniffing the wind in her craving—  
in her heat who can restrain her?” (2:24a)*

Sin is like the uncontrollable sexual urge of an animal.

The habits of the female [donkey] in heat are dramatic and vulgar. She sniffs the path in front of her, trying to pick up her scent of a male (from his urine). When she finds it, she rubs her nose in the dust and then straightens her neck, and with head high, closes her nostrils and “sniffs the wind.” What she is really doing is *sniffing* the dust which is soaked with the urine of a male [donkey]. With her neck stretched to the utmost, she slowly draws in a long, deep breath, then lets out an earthshaking bray and doubles her pace, racing down the road in search of the male.<sup>4</sup>