

With or Without God

by Matthew Little

The sermon challenges listeners to prioritize a genuine relationship with God over mere religious practices.

Duration: 30:55

Scripture: Jeremiah 2:2-3, Jeremiah 2:5-6, Jeremiah 2:12, Jeremiah 2:15, Jeremiah 2:32

Topics: "Ministry"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the devotion and departure of Israel. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining a genuine and passionate relationship with God, rather than just going through the motions. The preacher warns against viewing religious activities as mere chores or obligations, as this can lead to a loss of power and victory in one's spiritual life. He also references a story from 1 Samuel chapter 4, where the nation of Israel fails to seek God's guidance in the midst of their defeat, highlighting the danger of leaving God behind while serving Him.

Transcript

I'm going to get you back there. Well, looking out at the freshmen 16 years ago, I stepped foot in the campus of MBBI as a freshman, not knowing what God was going to do and where he was going to lead me. It just seems like yesterday that happened and here I am these years later before you as you begin that same journey as freshmen here.

And I'm going to be praying that God will make this just a wonderful time of growing in your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. And you're all at different places. Some of you have been saved a long time.

Some of you have just come to know the Lord in recent years and some of you maybe just in recent months. And so we're excited to, as staff, to grow along with you and to learn along with you. We're not here to just teach but to learn as well.

Every single year I think that every staff member can say, faculty member can say that it's a growing process as well for them as we teach the classes and we grow together as we journey along in this relationship that we have with the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's just bow in a word of prayer and then I'm going to invite you to turn to Jeremiah chapter 2. So let's pray together and then we'll turn to Jeremiah 2. Father, we thank you for the word of God that Lord, as our guidebook for this life, we thank you for the Holy Spirit that guides us and leads us into truth. We thank you, Lord, for these students and we thank you for each one that is here that you would help us, Lord, through your spirit to understand your word, that you would

lead us into truth, that you would help us to leave this place having conformed our lives a little more to the image of your dear Son, the Lord Jesus.

If we do that, then we have succeeded here tonight and so we commit these next few moments to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Jeremiah chapter 2 just follow along as I read verse number 1 through to verse number 6. Jeremiah 2, 1-6.

It says, moreover the word of the Lord came to me saying, go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem saying, thus saith the Lord, I remember thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals when thou wentest after me in the wilderness in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the Lord. And the first fruits of his increase, all that devour him shall offend.

Evil shall come upon them, saith the Lord. Hear ye the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus saith the Lord, what iniquity have your fathers found in me that they are gone far from me and have walked after vanity and are become vain? Neither said they, where is the Lord? We're going to be focusing in on that phrase there.

Where is the Lord? Where is the Lord that brought us up out of the land of Egypt that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of droughts and of the shadow of death through a land that no man passed through and where no man dwelt. That verse, as I was reading through Jeremiah, struck me. God said to the nation of Israel, never once did you say where is the Lord? You see, they were going through all of the functions that they should be going through.

They had the tabernacle set up in the wilderness and they were carrying out the priestly functions and the divine institutes that God had given to them to practice and to carry out and yet there came a place in their life where the Bible says all of a sudden they were carrying out all of these things and yet they left God behind. So here is God behind in the distance saying never once did you ever say, by the way where is the Lord in all of this? Coming to New Brunswick Bible Institute and learning all kinds of things that you're definitely going to learn in classes it's possible for you to even come three, even four years to New Brunswick Bible Institute and leave God behind for four years. It was just an exercise in academics.

You went through the motions, you did the assignments you carried out your responsibilities that the school had given you you went to your practical Christian service, you did all the things that you were supposed to do and yet you could be guilty of doing exactly what the nation of Israel did when God looked at them and said, hello, you forgot somebody behind. It's me. And that struck me as we look at verse 6, it says God says, neither did you say where is the Lord? I hope this year, and that's really the purpose of this message because that really spoke to my heart, I hope that this year you don't come to the end of this year at New Brunswick Bible Institute and have God knock on the door of your heart and say, never once did you say where was the Lord in this whole journey that you're about to partake in at New Brunswick Bible Institute.

Well let's begin as we look at our text Jeremiah chapter 2, in particular verse number 1-3 as we think of Jeremiah, without going into much detail, he had a task that I think none of us would relish Jeremiah had a task, he was chosen to be God's prophet, God's spokesman to the house of Judah He ministered for 41 years from the reign of Josiah during the kings of the divided kingdom he reigned during the reign of Josiah, which was Judah's last righteous king, down to the reign of Zedekiah God had drawn up charges and the charges that he had for his people were charges of unfaithfulness, charges of idolatry, charges of forgetting and forsaking the true God, and Jeremiah had the task of delivering those charges, how would

you like that? for a task, Jeremiah was to warn the people to repent, to keep themselves from judgment and ruin.

Well let's look in verse number 1-3 and there's really just two points to this message, we see Israel's devotion in the first three verses, and then we see Israel's departure and really I just want to make the link between what happened between their devotion and their departure, because that's the very thing that can happen to you and to me. First of all, Israel's devotion, it says moreover the word of the Lord came to me saying go cry in the ears of Jerusalem and say I remember thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of your spousal when you went after me in the wilderness in a land that was not sown, Israel was holiness unto the Lord the first fruits of his increase look at the devotion of Israel even though Israel had now forgotten God, here is God remembering their once faithful devotion to him he remembers how they loved him, the Bible says here, he remembers their intimate relationship with him, he remembers how they followed him in the wilderness he remembers how he had set them apart to be holy unto himself in fact he says in Exodus 19, and you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation God remembers those things, and yet Israel had long since forgotten God, but God recounts the day when Israel was devoted to him let me ask you this question, what devotion and kindness did Israel show to God?

When I was reading through that verse I thought that's not the same nation that I see in the Old Testament, how about you? I'm thinking, God is saying here, it seems like it's almost flattery, he's saying, listen I remember when you went after me, and I remember your kindness, and all I'm thinking about is, my mind went back to Egypt, and the first thing they did is they wanted to reject Moses as God's leader, then when they got into the wilderness they complained and they longed for Egypt and then they complained that there was no food, and then when they got to the border of Canaan they didn't want to go in because they couldn't defeat the enemies, and here is God with all of these things that are coming to my mind, I'm thinking that's not very much devotion, and here is God saying, I remember the kindness of your youth and as I was sitting there contemplating and flipping back through my Bible looking at some of the events in Israel, I'm thinking, I don't see it I'm not seeing what seems to be so clear to God, I'm seeing all of these things that the nation of Israel had done and yet there are two areas in which we see that Israel followed God that were the most important things, first of all, they did follow God because the pillar of cloud and fire became the symbol of God's presence and leading, and they followed that very faithfully, they may have complained, they may have went kicking and screaming, they may have lagged behind, they may have questioned, they may have wandered, but for 40 years they leaned upon God and followed Him to provide, secondly not only did they follow God through that pillar of cloud and fire, but second of all, I noticed as well that they accepted the divine institutes that God handed down to them they set up the tabernacle, they attended to it they joined themselves in covenant with God to seek Him and to honor Him, so even though there were times in their life when we look at it, and I think the application is clear, God remembers the devotion that Israel had for Him, was it imperfect? Absolutely.

Was it inconsistent? You better believe it. Was it full of murmuring and complaining? It sure was. And yet as you look at Jeremiah chapter 2, God says this in verse number 2, He says I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth Here is God looking with kindness upon the nation of Israel, even though they were inconsistent even though they lived a life that was often full of murmuring and complaining, and yet God looked with kindness.

Why? They weren't perfect you and I aren't perfect, and the fact of the matter is that each and every one of you have had a different journey that has brought you to the campus of the New Brunswick Bible Institute to sit in the seat that you're sitting in here tonight. Some of you have had a rough road, some of you have,

you might think in your own mind it's been pretty uneventful, you've grown up in a Christian home and it was just a natural progression and here you are, it's the result of serving God and being brought up in a godly home so all of us have had different experiences that have brought us to the place that we're at right here. Sometimes we've been like the nation of Israel, we've stumbled, we've faltered sometimes we've been inconsistent, sometimes we have lagged behind, sometimes we have disappointed God, and yet here at the beginning of this 2010-11 school year, God looks out over this chapel full of students that have come to seek Him in a deeper way, and as He looks out over this chapel, just like He looked out over the nation of Israel He sees your imperfections, He sees your shortcomings He sees the fact that you may have stumbled and that you may have faltered, and yet for whatever reason God looks upon you with kindness.

The word kindness there, it means loving kindness or mercy. Even though I look at the nation of Israel and I say, that doesn't make any sense that God would look upon the nation of Israel with kindness but it doesn't make any sense that God would look out over this audience and He would see people on whom He wants to shower His blessings upon them and He looks upon you with kindness, not because you're perfect, but because you have made yourself available to God. By coming here, you have said, God, I am going to be available.

That's Israel's devotion. It's much the same as our devotion, it's not perfect and yet God looks at the efforts that you have made to follow Him and to make the appropriate decisions even though you've stumbled and He looks out at you with kindness, just as He says, I remember the nation of Israel. Israel was holding us unto the Lord.

Now let's look at their departure in verse number 4 Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. What iniquity have your fathers found in me that they're gone far from me, and have walked after vanity and are become vain. Let me suggest to you that when you choose not to follow God, when you make a mess of your life, when things go wrong, you can't blame God.

There are students of MBBi that have long since graduated that have made a mess of their life and have turned from God. It's not God's fault. In fact, as you look at the nation of Israel, God anticipates such a question or response for them and He says, He answers the question before it's even given.

He says, what iniquity have you found in me that you have gone far away from me? What was wrong with God that Israel would not follow Him? Let me put it this way. What is wrong with God that you would not take this year to pursue after Him with every fiber of your being? What is wrong with God? If you don't do it, is there something wrong with God? If you do not take this year to cultivate that love relationship that you have begun with God, it will not be because there was something wrong with God. It will be because there was something wrong with you.

Verse 5 very clearly says that. What iniquity have your fathers found in me that they're gone from me? And they followed vanity and have become vain. Their departure from God, as you come down to verse 6, here's the key, and this is what I want to focus on, and I want to ring home in your ear here tonight.

Verse 6, neither said they, where is the Lord? That's the problem. That's where the departure began. Somewhere along the line, the nation of Israel began to continue as they always had, carrying out their responsibilities that God had given them.

And initially, God was along in the process, and they tried to honor Him and seek Him and please Him, but then there came a point when they just left God behind and they kept the institutes, but they left Him out of them. And God says in verse 6, never once did you say, where is the Lord that brought us up out of the land of Egypt that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought and the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through and where no man dwelt. At one time they had devotion for God.

They began with God, they carried on their service to Him and for Him, and yet they squeezed God into the equation. And they kept the religious exercises and rituals while pushing God aside. Keep your finger in Jeremiah and come with me to 1 Samuel chapter 4. Probably one of the greatest examples of that is in 1 Samuel 4. We look at Samuel, the prophet of God.

We look at the place of Shiloh, which is where the Ark of the Covenant rested before it eventually came to Jerusalem. And we find here in this passage of Scripture here that in Samuel's day, 1 Samuel chapter 4, there's a war with the Philistines. An ongoing war, on and off again with the Philistines.

And in this particular story here, we find that the nation of Israel has lost, in verse number 2 of chapter 4, they've lost 4,000 men. And as we look at the passage, the Bible doesn't say that they turned and said, well we ought to cry out to God. In fact, I find it interesting that in verse number 3, it says, when the people were coming to the camp, the elders of Israel said, wherefore hath the Lord smitten us? I find it interesting that in a conversation that begins with why is God doing this, and they don't invite Samuel to that meeting.

Chapter 3 says in verse 21, the Lord appeared again in Shiloh, for the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel. When a conversation begins why is God smiting us? And you don't reach out to the prophet of God in whom the Lord is speaking. Something's wrong.

And here they turn around and they said, okay, we're getting our heads together here, they have a military meeting, they've lost 4,000 men. So they said, what is the solution to the problem? Now let's remind ourselves, here are people here that have come to the place where they have empty religious ritual. Void of the presence and power of God.

So what do they do? The Bible tells us the people, it says in verse number 3, it says, let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us. When it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. You know what? They have turned the presence of God into an it.

Just a piece of furniture. The ark of the covenant has become the shrine of God's presence. The terminologies that they use, let us bring it into the camp that it may save us.

They weren't looking to God. They had long since left God behind, they're looking to a shrine that represented the presence of God, the ark of the covenant. Let's go get it! Let's bring it into the camp.

And so they went and they grabbed it and they brought it into the camp and here's what it says in verse number 5, when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all of Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. I mean they were downhearted and all of a sudden the ark of the covenant comes into the battlefield and Israel begins to shout as if their victory was going to be determined by a piece of furniture and not by the presence of God. It's almost like the ark, it is here.

The shrine that we worship has arrived. They didn't worship the God that that shrine was to represent, they worshipped the shrine. It's here, it's going to save us.

In fact so much so that even the pagan Philistines, what did they say? It says in verse 6, when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, what means the noise, what meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the Lord was coming to the camp and the Philistines were afraid and they said, God is coming to the camp. Why? Because they were idolaters. So they linked the presence of God with the shrine.

Now we don't think anything of that when we think of the Philistines doing that but what an atrocity and a tragedy when God's own people did it. They were afraid, they said, God's presence has come into the camp and then the Philistines were afraid, verse number 7, for they said, God has come into the camp and they said, woe unto us. But then in verse 9 it says, be strong and quit yourselves or be men, O ye Philistines that we be not servants unto the Hebrews as they have been to you.

Quit yourselves like men and fight and the Philistines fought and Israel was smitten. People that are involved in religion without relationship, people that are involved in ritual without genuine relationship are always going to be on the losing end. Always.

There can be no victory for such people. There can be no victory for such a person and Israel's relationship with God had simply deteriorated into one in which they were simply going through the motions. Don't let your relationship with God turn to that.

Fourth year students as you're launching out, don't just go through the motions. Don't just view your fourth year program as one more meeting to go to, one more assignment to complete, one more prayer meeting to attend. Don't do that.

There's no victory, there's no power in a life like that. Students that are here, it can easily happen. Don't just fall into the trap of just saying, oh, I've got to go to classes again today, I've got another meeting, I've got to go to practical Christian work, I've got to do this, I've got to do that, and all of a sudden it just becomes a list of chores that you have to complete.

And then we become like the nation of Israel in which God may have to knock on the door of your heart and say, never once have you said where is the Lord in all of this. What a tragedy to serve God and yet leave Him behind. That would be awful, wouldn't it? That would be awful to be doing all of the right things.

Israel had the greater cause and yet they still lost because they did not have the God that should have been sustaining them in that cause behind them. They had forgotten Him. One of my favorite passages, and I'm going to close with this because we're out of time, is Exodus 33.

And let me just, I remember coming to and I think it's one of my favorite passages because of Moses, as many mistakes as he made, Moses didn't want to go through the motions. Moses didn't want to embark on a journey even though God was laying out the plan for that journey if God wasn't going to accompany him and go with him. In fact, so much so that listen to what it says in Exodus 33 in verse number 12.

Listen to what it says. Moses said unto the Lord, verse number 12, See thou sayest unto me, bring up this people, and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me, yet thou hast said, I know thee by name. Thou hast also found grace in my sight.

Now therefore I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, show me now thy way, that I might know thee, that I might find grace in your sight, and consider that this nation is thy people. And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. Listen to verse 15.

And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? Is it not in that thou goest with us? What did Moses know that many of us forget in life? He says, is the proof of success not going to be, it's not simply that we went the way that God wanted us to go, but he says the proof of success is it not that you're going to go with us? Is it not the presence of God? That's what he said. I want to know your way, verse 13, I want to know you and then God says my presence will go with you.

And Moses says if your presence doesn't go, I don't want to go at all. If you come to MBBI and you just want to kind of get to the end of the program and that's all, and you're not going to take God along with you, you might as well not even begin the process. If you're going to go on your fourth year and go to a church or some kind of ministry that God has called you to and you have no intention of bringing God along with you, you might as well just quit right now.

Moses said I'm not interested in going through the motions. I'm not interested in taking any kind of journey unless God you promise me that you're going to go with me. And then he says it so clearly.

For wherein shall it be known that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? Is it not that thou goest with us? You see, Moses said how are people going to know that we are your people on your mission with your power? How are we going to impact people in such a way that they know that? Is it not going to be that they know that you're with us? If people look at your life, whatever ministry you are partaking in, and they don't see that you're doing it with God as your help, you will have no impact. I don't care what you're doing. No impact on the campus of New Brunswick Bible Institute.

No impact in your practical Christian service. No impact for God. How are people going to know that we found grace in your sight? Is it not that you go with us? Moses said.

Somebody once wrote these words. I won't read the whole thing but they said I would like to have three dollars worth of God please. Not enough to explode my soul.

Not enough of God to disturb my sleep. Just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love a homeless man or to pick beets with a migrant worker.

I don't want enough of God to really upset the plans that I've laid out for my life. You might say I don't want enough of God to help me love my roommate. What I want is ecstasy.

I don't want transformation. I want the warmth of the womb. Not a new birth.

I want a pound of the eternal wrapped up in a paper sack to go. I want to buy three dollars worth of God please. No no not the flesh and blood one.

He'll keep me from my appointments with the hairdresser. Make me late for my cocktail party. He'll keep me from living life the way I intended it to live.

I don't want any living breathing Christ. But one that I can keep in its crib with a rubber band. The plastic one will do just fine.

Moses said if your presence doesn't go with me I don't want to go. Are you interested in just going through the motions? Is that what you want here at MBBI? Do you want three dollars worth of God? Or are you

willing to say God like Moses if you don't go with me I don't want to go. I'm beginning this journey at MBBI and if you're not going to be behind me and lead me and guide me I don't even want to begin the process.

Don't come to the end of your year here and have God knock at the door of your heart and say put your name in there. Where was the Lord in all of this? That's not a message just for students. I'm speaking to myself as well because we all can find ourselves in that place.

Pastors, teachers, missionaries. We begin to work in the flesh and leave God at the door knocking. Waiting to come in and be a part of it.

Let's just bow in a word of prayer. Father we thank you for how you move in our lives and I pray that you will this year cause us to begin this journey like Moses saying if your presence doesn't go with me I don't want to go at all. Lord we want to move throughout this year conscious of your presence, sensitive to it.

Inviting you to be a part of every decision that we make so that we don't come to the end having you say where was the Lord in all of this. We want you to be a vital part of every decision, every choice that we make to your honor and to your glory. In Jesus name.

Amen.

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