

# The Fiery Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

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Text

Jeremiah 2:20-31

Topic

God describes the people of Judah as oxen who have foolishly broken their yoke in order to be free to pursue their own rebellious lusts

Title

*“Folly, Folly, Oxen Free”*

## Introduction

No one ever told me about the Stanford “Tree.”

“The Tree” is the very unofficial mascot of Stanford University. Stanford's team name is "The Cardinal," referring to the vivid red color (not the common bird, which was another revelation to me!). The University has never been able to come up with an official mascot.

A while back TIME Magazine published a list of the worst college team names. Here are five of them:

- The NYU “Violets”
- The Evergreen State College “Geoducks”
- The St. Louis College of Pharmacy “Eutectics”
- The Grays Harbor College “Chokers”
- The UC Santa Cruz “Banana Slugs”

In our text this morning God has some names for His people. They're not very flattering, but they are extremely descriptive of their spiritual condition. To give you a preview, in verse twenty-four God names them ‘the wild donkeys in heat.’

God gets very graphic attempting to show His people their sin in order that they might repent of it while there was still time to avert the Babylonian invasion.

It makes you wonder what name God might call *us* instead of 'Calvary Chapel of Hanford.' Or any of us individually.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Don't Want To Be Labelled By Your Lusts, and #2 You Don't Want To Be Lamenting God's Love.

#1 You Don't Want To Be  
Labelled By Your Lusts  
(v20-28)

The spiritual condition of the southern kingdom of Judah was one of bold, flagrant idol worship. King Ahaz, preceding his son Hezekiah long before Jeremiah, had established a system of sacrificing children to the god Molech in the Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem. Hezekiah led reforms but his son, Manasseh, continued the practice of child sacrifice as well as other gross idolatry which continued into Jeremiah's time.

The Molech idol was a large, hollow brass statue with the head of a bull and the bulging belly of a man. It was designed like an old fashioned pot-bellied stove, with the belly as the firebox.

A child sacrifice laid on the hands, would roll into the fire in the belly cavity. Scripture describes this practice as "passing through the fire to Molech," in Leviticus 18:21.

Molech had a female consort, Ashtoreth. She was a fertility goddess. The relationship between Molech and Ashtoreth gave rise to disgusting, perverted sexual practices by their followers as the means of worshipping them.

Baal was another Canaanite god whose worship also involved child sacrifice and sexual immorality. One author described it like this:

[In] ritualistic Baal worship... adults would gather around the altar of Baal. Infants would then be burned alive as a sacrificial offering to the deity. Amid horrific screams and the stench of charred human flesh, congregants – men and women alike – would engage in bisexual orgies. The ritual... was intended to produce economic prosperity by prompting Baal to bring rain for the fertility of “mother earth.”

These practices had become the norm among God’s people. Outwardly they still worshipped God; they went to the Temple; they went through the motions. But they were simultaneously worshipping idols by engaging in child sacrifice and in the sexual deviances of those deities.

They might have labeled themselves as devout Jews, the children of God, the chosen people. God labeled them very differently. Jeremiah will give nine labels that describe their true spiritual condition.

Jeremiah 2:20 "For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds; And you said, 'I will not transgress,' When on every high hill and under every green tree You lay down, playing the harlot.

An alternate translation of the opening few words is, “for long ago **you** broke **your** yoke and tore up **your** bonds...” Judah was being described as an ox yoked together with God. Nothing wrong with that; it’s a good label. But rather than remain yoked, she broke free to go her own way. They were ‘the broken yokes,’ or the ‘escaped oxen.’

There’s a second label in verse twenty - that of a “harlot.” “On every high hill and under every green tree” is a summary of the locations where they worshipped Molech or Baal. Since so much of the worship consisted of unrestrained sexual immorality, God labeled them “harlots.”

Jeremiah 2:21 Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me Into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?

The vineyard is a favorite image of God’s to describe not only His people but His tender care for them. God did all He could for the nation but in spite of His care she became a corrupt, wild, “alien” vine, incapable of producing any good fruit. They became ‘the alien vines.’

Jeremiah 2:22 For though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, Yet your iniquity is marked before Me," says the Lord GOD.

God described them as a “stain” that no “lye” or “soap” was capable of removing. The ‘stains,’ or the ‘stained.’

Jeremiah 2:23 "How can you say, 'I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baals'? See your way in the valley; Know what you have done: You are a swift dromedary breaking loose in her ways,

They were labeled a camel “loose” and without a master, going to and fro, confused, useless, expending strength but getting nowhere. The ‘loose camels.’

Jeremiah 2:24 A wild donkey used to the wilderness, That sniffs at the wind in her desire; In her time of mating, who can turn her away? All those who seek her will not weary themselves; In her month they will find her.

Graphic and gross, God saw them as a “donkey” in heat mating with any partner that happened along.

Jeremiah 2:25 Withhold your foot from being unshod, and your throat from thirst. But you said, 'There is no hope. No! For I have loved aliens, and after them I will go.'

This is a picture of an adulteress, so filled with lust that she ran barefoot after strangers and was parched on account of her relentless pursuit of them. The ‘barefoot adulteresses.’

Jeremiah 2:26 "As the thief is ashamed when he is found out, So is the house of Israel ashamed...

They were like thieves who had been apprehended and, from God’s true vantage point, should be “ashamed.” The ‘captured thieves.’

Jeremiah 2:26 ... They and their kings and their princes, and their priests and their prophets,

Jeremiah 2:27 Saying to a tree, 'You are my father,' And to a stone, 'You gave birth to me.' For they have turned their back to Me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble They will say, 'Arise and save us.

The Jews held on to a false hope that God would answer their cries to save them from ruin regardless their idolatry. It came from their ethnic pride; after all, they were God’s chosen people.

The fact that the northern kingdom of Israel had already been overrun and taken captive by the Assyrians didn't worry them. After all, they were in Jerusalem and certainly God would defend Himself in the Temple.

Jeremiah 2:28 But where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, If they can save you in the time of your trouble; For according to the number of your cities Are your gods, O Judah.

Apparently the Jews had adopted the pagan practice of assigning a deity, an idol, to every town.

What does any of this mean for us? There are at least two applications we must make. One is what you might call *public*; the other is more *personal*.

I don't want to spend too much time on what I'm calling the 'public' application - not because it isn't relevant or incredibly important, but because I think it causes us to avoid the 'personal' application.

I'll quote an article I read that gets immediately to the point of the public application.

[Today in America and elsewhere] the worship of "fertility" has been replaced with worship of "reproductive freedom" or "choice." Child sacrifice via burnt offering has been updated, ever so slightly, to become child sacrifice by way of abortion. The ritualistic promotion, practice and celebration of both heterosexual and homosexual immorality and promiscuity have been carefully whitewashed – yet wholeheartedly embraced – by the cults of radical feminism, militant "gay rights" and "comprehensive sex education." And, the pantheistic worship of "mother earth" has been substituted – in name only – for radical environmentalism.

We live in an idolatrous culture whose philosophies and practices are not just the same as those of worshipping Molech and Baal; they are far worse.

That should be obvious. What is less obvious, but more to our point, is a personal application. The question isn't how bad my culture is but rather, "Am I an idolator?"

Could I be labelled by my lusts? Or would I be labelled by my love for the Lord?

The doctrine behind my question is that of sanctification - the daily process by which I can cooperate with God as he changes me into the image of Jesus Christ. If I read my Bible correctly, even though I am a Christian with a new nature and have God the Holy Spirit indwelling me, I still struggle against what is called “the flesh.” It is that influence that remains in my unredeemed physical body that impels me to fulfill the lusts of my physical appetites.

I can therefore act just like the sixth century Jews. I can be going through the outward motions of worshipping Jesus while simultaneously yielding my mind and body over to sinful practices that fulfill the lusts of my flesh.

The important question, then, is, “How would God label me?” Do any of the nine or so descriptions fit me? **I certainly hope not!**

But more than “hoping not,” I can choose to yield my members to the Lord, to serve Him. *I can at any moment be labelled by my love for the Lord!*

In Romans 6:6 we read,

Romans 6:6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin [the flesh] might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

Pastor David Guzik explained it like this:

God calls us, in participation with Him, to do actively day by day with the flesh just what He has already done with the old man - crucify it, make it dead to sin (Galatians 5:24). But when we allow the flesh to be continually influenced by the old man’s habits of the past, the world, and the devil, the flesh will exert a powerful pull towards sin.

Until my physical body is redeemed at the resurrection or the rapture I will struggle with the flesh. It remains with me. But my knowledge of the crucifixion of my old man cuts the power cord.

Thus we should “no longer be slaves of sin...” I need no longer yield my mind and body over to the control of the flesh. It’s not a matter of feelings, but of the fact I have been crucified with Jesus Christ.

Do you remember the ad campaign whose theme was, “Look for the union label”?

We should long for the “union-with-Jesus label!” In Him, identified with Him, we have victory over the flesh and can walk in love.

#2 You Don't Want To Be  
Lamenting God's Love  
(v29-31)

I mentioned in our last study that God was a pleader. He pleads with His wayward people, urging them to repent.

It's not to be taken as a sign of weakness. He is disciplining while He pleads. When the time comes, God disciplines His children severely if they refuse to repent.

After 40 years of pleading through Jeremiah and other prophets, God will allow the Babylonian armies to overrun Jerusalem, to destroy and loot the Temple, and to hold His people captive for 70 years.

The feel of these last three verses is that God is pleading and, in light of it, you don't want to ignore Him and be lamenting that you've missed-out on experiencing His love.

Jeremiah 2:29 "Why will you plead with Me? You all have transgressed against Me," says the LORD.

It sounds like Judah would be pleading with God and not the other way around. But this pleading by Judah is something that would take place in the future. In verse thirty-one we will see God pleading with them.

Jeremiah 2:30 "In vain I have chastened your children; They received no correction. Your sword has devoured your prophets Like a destroying lion.

The idea here isn't that God took it out on their kids but, rather, that He was disciplining them as a Father does His children. God's love was active in disciplining them but they would not respond in kind. They continued to rebel.

In a final label God calls them “destroying lions” for having killed His prophets. Instead of being His sheep, responding to His voice through the shepherds He sent, they were predators. They were the ‘murderous lions.’

Jeremiah 2:31 "O generation, see the word of the LORD! Have I been a wilderness to Israel, Or a land of darkness? Why do My people say, 'We are lords; We will come no more to You'?"

After all the graphic, in-your-face, talk of the previous verses, this is tender. God invites them to “see the Word of the Lord.” Not just “hear” it; to “see” it.

- They could “see” God’s dealings with them for some centuries. The times of blessing when they obeyed; the times of buffeting when they rebelled.
- They could “see” what had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel - carried-off with cruelty by the Assyrians.

God was involved with them. He was in their history and predicting their future - both far and immediate.

**We** hear God’s Word, but do we also take time to **see** it? Look, for example, at the lives of people you know. Are there those whose lusts have brought them to ruin? **See it!**

Are there those whose love for the Lord has brought them spiritual rest? **See it!**

God asked Judah, “have I been a wilderness to Israel, Or a land of darkness?” No; of course not! The Israelites had been plentifully supplied by God when in the wilderness, and since then they were brought into a land flowing with milk and honey; so that they stood in need of nothing; they had a constant supply of all good things.

“Why do My people say, 'We are lords; We will come no more to You'?” A better translation is, “we are broken loose.” It brings us right back to the first description in this section, that of an ox who had broken the yoke and gotten free. In a sense, all the other digressions were the result of this first step.



You can't help but think of Jesus saying to us, "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" (Matthew 11:28-30).

You know what I think sometimes happens? **We believe a lie that the yoke of Jesus is heavy and harsh.**

The world system and the devil present something that is outside the boundaries God has set for us. Instead of understanding that our loving heavenly Father has set boundaries for our good and for His glory, we start to chaff against His yoke, we start to give-in to our flesh, until we break-away from His yoke and indulge our flesh. Then, depending on how far we go, we can be labelled in various ways.

His yoke is easy and His burden is light. But it IS a yoke and the way of Jesus is one of submission, humility, and service.

We sometimes sing,

*Make me like You; Lord, make me like You  
You are a servant; Make me one, too*

*Lord I am willing, Do what You must do  
To make me a servant, Make me like You*

You know where Jesus 'makes' us servants in response to our heart's desire? In our not-so-perfect job or church. Or at home when we are called upon to love our wife or to submit to our husband, or to raise our kids or to honor our parents.

He does it when you are called upon to forgive, to extend mercy, to show grace. Those are the times you need a yokefellow with the power of Jesus to keep you serving rather than going your own way.

In the end you want to remain the 'yoked oxen.'

**Studies in the Book of Jeremiah**