

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Israel's Faithlessness and the Fountain Forsaken

Jeremiah 2:1–3:5

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage establishes the covenant relationship between God and His people as a marriage, and therefore frames sin not first as the breaking of rules but as the breaking of love, spiritual adultery against a faithful God. The teacher must hold up the searing image of 2:13, that to sin is to forsake a free, living fountain in order to dig leaky cisterns of our own making. This guards against a thin view of sin as mere mistake and reveals it as both treason and tragic folly. It also displays the holiness and justice of God, who brings a true legal charge against His people, alongside His covenant faithfulness and mercy, since even in the lawsuit He keeps pleading, "Return to me."

The teacher should be careful to draw timeless principles of trusting, obedient love from Israel's story without reading later New Testament practices back into pre-Christian lives, and to point forward honestly to fulfillment in Christ, the true Bridegroom, and in the church, His bride. The living water Israel forsook is offered again and fully in Jesus (John 4; 7), and the wounded, pursuing love of God in these chapters reaches its climax at the cross.

Beyond the doctrine, the lesson aims at the spiritual formation of the student. Every believer is tempted to let early devotion cool and to quietly substitute cracked cisterns, comfort, approval, money, control, for the fountain of God Himself. The teacher's goal is that students would honestly name their own broken cisterns, feel afresh the bitterness of forsaking the spring, and walk out having returned to drink deeply from the Lord, their first love restored.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 2:1–3. God remembers the "devotion" and "love as a bride" of Israel's youth, when she followed Him into a barren wilderness. What does this opening reveal about the nature of God's covenant with His people and the kind of love He desires from them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by lingering on the tenderness of verses 2–3. Before God says one word of accusation, He remembers. "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride." The Hebrew word for devotion is *hesed*, covenant loyalty and steadfast love. God is recalling the days right after the exodus, when Israel followed the cloud into a wilderness that offered nothing, simply because the LORD was leading. The point is staggering: the God of the universe keeps the memory of His people's first love close to His heart.

Establish here the great biblical truth that the covenant is a marriage. God does not relate to His people as a distant employer to employees, but as a husband to a bride. That is why the rest of the chapter reads like a wounded spouse, not a frustrated manager. Understanding this changes everything about how we read sin and how we understand worship.

Notice what kind of love God treasures: love that follows Him “in a land not sown.” It is easy to follow God when the table is full and the path is smooth. The devotion God remembers is the kind that followed Him when there was no visible reward, only His presence. That is the love He still desires from us.

Land the application gently. God remembers our beginnings with Him, the season when we would have done anything for Him. The question this whole lesson asks is simple and searching: does He still have that kind of love from us, or only our leftovers?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The covenant between God and His people pictured as a marriage of love and loyalty (2:2).
- God’s desire for wholehearted devotion (hesed), not mere outward religion.
- The value God places on following Him through hard, unrewarding seasons (2:3).
- The danger of letting early love for God cool into routine.
- Worship and obedience as the response of love, not duty alone.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God describe His relationship with His people as a marriage rather than a contract?
- What does it mean to follow God into “a land not sown,” and when have you done that?
- What is the difference between giving God our love and giving Him only our leftovers?

Question 2

Student Question:

God treasures the memory of a time when His people followed Him even into hard, unrewarding places (2:2). When was your own “bridal” season with the Lord, and what has cooled since then that you long to recover?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question invites honest remembering. Almost every mature believer can point to a season of first love, perhaps right after conversion, or after a crisis when God felt overwhelmingly near. Back then prayer was easy, the Bible was alive, and obedience felt like joy rather than effort. God deliberately stirs that memory in Israel, and the teacher should let it be stirred in the room.

Help students see that remembering is not nostalgia; it is the first step of repentance. Jesus tells the church at Ephesus, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the works you did at first” (Revelation 2:4–5). The way back to first love begins by honestly facing that it has cooled.

Invite gentle specificity. What practices marked that warmer season, daily prayer, time in the Word, glad obedience, generosity, that have quietly slipped? Often the love cools not through one dramatic failure but through a hundred small neglects.

Be encouraging, not condemning. God brings up the honeymoon not to shame Israel but to woo her. The aim is hope: the same fountain is still flowing, and the road back is open.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- First love for God and how it can quietly cool over time (Revelation 2:4–5).
- Remembering as a doorway to repentance, not mere nostalgia.
- The slow erosion of devotion through small neglects rather than one great fall.
- God’s remembering of our beginnings as an act of love that draws us back.

Discussion Prompts

- When was your “bridal” season with the Lord, and what was it like?
- What spiritual habits from that time have quietly slipped away?
- What is one “work you did at first” you could return to this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 2:4–13. God asks, “What wrong did your fathers find in me?” (2:5), then names the two great evils of verse 13. What does the image of forsaking “the fountain of living waters” for “broken cisterns” teach us about the true nature and folly of sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 13 is the doctrinal heart of the chapter, and it deserves slow, vivid attention. God names “two evils.” The first is forsaking Him, “the fountain of living waters.” A fountain is a living spring, fresh and moving, endlessly supplied, free for the taking. That is who God is to His people: the source of life itself. The second evil is hewing out “broken cisterns that can hold no water.” A cistern is a man-made pit dug to store rainwater, second-best at the best of times, and a cracked one is worse than useless.

Help students grasp that sin is here defined not merely as doing wrong but as a catastrophic exchange. We leave the spring to dig in the rock. We trade the living God for substitutes that cannot finally hold anything. This is the folly of sin: it is not only wicked, it is stupid, like a man dying of thirst beside a river while he scrapes at a dry hole he dug himself.

Connect this directly to Christ, who stood up and cried, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37), and who told the woman at the well of water that becomes “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The fountain Israel forsook is the very living water Jesus offers. Every human heart is built to be filled by God and will leak endlessly until it is.

Press the diagnostic power of this image. Our culture is full of cistern-digging: chasing money, status, pleasure, approval, control, things that promise to hold our happiness and always crack. The gospel does not merely forbid the cisterns; it points us back to the fountain.

Close by holding together both evils. It is not enough to stop digging cisterns; we must return to the spring. Repentance is not only turning from sin but turning back to God Himself as our true and sufficient source.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin defined as forsaking God, the fountain of living waters, for broken cisterns (2:13).
- The folly of sin: trading the infinite for the worthless, the living for the cracked.
- God Himself, not merely His gifts, as the true satisfaction of the human heart.
- Christ as the giver of living water who answers Israel’s thirst (John 4:14; 7:37).
- Idolatry as the universal human habit of digging cisterns we can control.
- Repentance as both turning from cisterns and returning to the fountain.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is sin not only wicked but foolish, according to the picture in verse 13?
- What are some of the “broken cisterns” our culture teaches us to dig?
- How does Jesus’ offer of living water answer the thirst behind all our cistern-digging?

Question 4

Student Question:

Sin rarely announces itself as rebellion; it usually feels like a small, reasonable substitution. Where have you been settling for a cracked cistern of your own making instead of drinking deeply from God Himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question turns the fountain-and-cistern image directly on the student’s own life. The genius of verse 13 is that it describes not just ancient Israel but every one of us. We rarely set out to forsake God; we just start drinking elsewhere. The substitution feels reasonable, even responsible, at the time.

Help students name their particular cisterns. For one it is the constant need for achievement, for another the endless scroll for distraction, for another food, comfort, romance, or the approval

of a certain person. The test of a cistern is simple: we keep returning to it, and it never finally satisfies.

Distinguish gifts from idols. Money, work, relationships, and rest are good gifts from God. They become cisterns when we ask them to do what only the fountain can do, to be the deep source of our security, identity, and joy.

Move toward one honest, concrete step. Not a vow to never enjoy good things, but a deliberate return to the fountain: a renewed habit of prayer, time in the Word, worship, that puts God back in the place the cistern has been occupying.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The personal, everyday forms our “broken cisterns” take.
- The subtle, reasonable-feeling way we substitute lesser things for God.
- The difference between enjoying God’s gifts and idolizing them.
- Returning to the fountain as a deliberate, repeatable practice.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one cistern you keep returning to that never truly satisfies?
- How can you tell when a good gift has quietly become an idol?
- What is one concrete way you will return to the fountain this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 2:14–19. Jeremiah says Israel’s own evil will correct her and her backsliding will rebuke her, that it is “bitter” to forsake the LORD (2:19). How does Scripture show that sin carries its own built-in misery, and how is even that bitterness a mercy from God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 14–19 reveal a sobering and merciful truth: sin punishes itself. “Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God” (2:19). Israel’s alliances with Egypt and Assyria, her substitutes for trusting God, would bring her not safety but slavery. The bitterness was not arbitrary divine cruelty; it was the natural fruit of forsaking the only true source of life.

Teach the biblical principle that God has woven moral consequences into the universe. “Whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Sin does not deliver what it promises; it leaves us emptier, more enslaved, more ashamed. The hangover is built into the drink.

Then show the mercy hidden inside the bitterness. The misery of sin is one of God's great megaphones to call us home. Like the prodigal who "came to himself" only in the pigpen (Luke 15:17), we often will not turn until the cistern runs dry. God can use even the consequences of our wandering as a severe mercy.

Keep this God-centered and hopeful. The aim is not to make people wallow in regret but to help them read their own bitterness rightly, as a signpost pointing back to the fountain rather than a dead end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin carries its own built-in misery and consequences (2:19; Galatians 6:7).
- The bitterness of forsaking God as a natural fruit, not arbitrary punishment.
- God's use of the consequences of sin as a severe mercy to call us home.
- The danger of trusting in worldly "alliances" instead of the LORD.
- Reading our own emptiness as a signpost back to God, not a dead end.

Discussion Prompts

- How does sin carry its own punishment within it?
- When has the emptiness of wandering become a way God called you back?
- Why is the "bitterness" of forsaking God actually a kind of mercy?

Question 6

Student Question:

Look honestly at a season when walking away from God left you emptier, not freer. How did the "bitterness" of that wandering become one of the ways God called you home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question asks for honest testimony. Most believers can remember a stretch when they pulled away from God expecting freedom and found a cage instead. The teacher should make the room safe for that kind of honesty, perhaps by going first or by allowing quiet reflection rather than public confession.

Help students name the specific bitterness: the relationship that promised everything and cost them their peace, the secret habit that grew into a chain, the pursuit of success that left them hollow. Naming it honestly is part of how God turns it from shame into testimony.

Point to the pattern of the prodigal son. He had to taste the bitterness of the far country before he remembered his father's house. The bitterness was not the end of the story; it was the turning point. So it can be for us.

End on grace. The God who let them feel the emptiness is the same God who ran to meet them when they turned. Encourage students to thank God even for the hard seasons that drove them back to the fountain.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest remembering of seasons when sin left us emptier, not freer.
- The bitterness of wandering as a turning point rather than a dead end (Luke 15:17-20).
- Turning regret into testimony of God's pursuing grace.
- Gratitude even for the hard seasons God used to call us home.

Discussion Prompts

- When did walking away from God leave you emptier rather than freer?
- How did the "bitterness" of that season become part of God's call home?
- How can you give thanks even for a hard chapter God used to draw you back?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 2:20-28. God describes Israel as a chosen vine gone wild and a bride who plays the harlot "on every high hill" (2:20), worshiping things that cannot save. What does this expose about the spiritual unfaithfulness, or idolatry, that lies underneath outward sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 20-28 expose what lies beneath outward sin: spiritual unfaithfulness, idolatry. God had planted Israel as "a choice vine, wholly of pure seed," yet she became "a wild vine" (2:21). The imagery turns to marital betrayal: "on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore" (2:20). The high places and green trees were sites of Canaanite fertility worship. Israel had not merely broken rules; she had given her heart to other lovers.

Teach that all sin is, at root, idolatry, the giving to something else of the love, trust, and devotion owed to God alone. The Ten Commandments begin where the human heart begins: "You shall have no other gods before me." Every particular sin is a symptom of that deeper misplacement of worship.

Notice the folly God exposes in verses 27-28. The people say to a tree, "You are my father," and to a stone, "You gave me birth," yet in trouble they cry, "Arise and save us!" Idols are insulted in good times and uselessly begged in bad. They cannot save, because they are nothing.

Bring it home. We may not bow to stone images, but the human heart is, as one teacher said, a factory of idols. We still look to created things, success, romance, security, to be our father and mother, our source and savior. The cure is not better behavior but a heart returned in worship to the living God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry as the spiritual unfaithfulness lying beneath outward sins (2:20).
- All sin as fundamentally misplaced worship (Exodus 20:3).
- The folly of idols that cannot save in the day of trouble (2:27–28).
- The modern heart’s ongoing manufacture of idols from good things.
- True repentance as a return of the heart’s worship to the living God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture describe idolatry as a kind of marital unfaithfulness?
- How is every particular sin connected to a deeper problem of worship?
- What does it look like to give a created thing the devotion owed only to God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Idols promise what only God can give, then leave us ashamed when trouble comes (2:27–28). What “god” in your life have you been tempted to cry out to in trouble, and what would it mean to trust the living God there instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses the idolatry theme into a very practical place: where do we turn when trouble comes? Verses 27–28 mock those who ignore God in good times but cry to their idols in crisis. The reflex of the heart in trouble reveals what we actually trust.

Help students examine their crisis reflexes. When the diagnosis comes, the bill arrives, the relationship fractures, where does the heart instinctively run, to money, to a person, to a substance, to frantic control, or to God? The honest answer often names our real god.

Affirm that turning to the living God in trouble is itself an act of faith and worship. The psalms are full of people pouring out their fear and need to God. Idolatry says “save me” to things that cannot; faith says it to the One who can.

Move toward a concrete resolve. Identify one current worry, and decide deliberately to bring it first to the Lord in prayer rather than to the usual cistern. Faith is built in exactly these small redirections of the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- What our reflex in trouble reveals about what we truly trust (2:27–28).
- The contrast between crying to idols and crying to the living God.
- Bringing our fears and needs to God as an act of faith and worship.
- Building trust through deliberate redirection of the heart in small crises.

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your heart instinctively run when trouble hits?
- What does that reflex reveal about what you most deeply trust?
- What is one current worry you will bring first to God this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 2:29–3:5. Though Israel insists “I am innocent” (2:35) and has “a harlot’s brow” that refuses to be ashamed (3:3), God still calls, “Return to me” (3:1). How can God be perfectly just in His charges and yet remain astonishingly merciful in His invitation, and how does this tension find its fullest answer in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it gathers the chapter’s tension to a point. Despite everything, despite a people who say “I am innocent” (2:35) and wear “a harlot’s brow” that refuses to blush (3:3), God still calls, “Return to me” (3:1). The legal background of 3:1 is striking: the law forbade a man to take back a wife who had married another (Deuteronomy 24:1–4), yet God, the wronged husband, offers to take back a bride who has betrayed Him with many. Justice would close the door; mercy holds it open.

Teach both truths without softening either. God is perfectly just. His charges are true; Israel really has forsaken Him, really has chased idols, really is guilty, and her insistence on innocence only deepens the offense. A God who excused all this would not be holy. Yet the same God is astonishingly merciful, pleading for return when every right has been forfeited. Hold these together; do not let mercy erase justice or justice silence mercy.

Show how this tension finds its fullest answer in Christ. The cross is where God’s perfect justice and astonishing mercy meet. There the wronged Husband bears the penalty His unfaithful bride deserves, so that He can righteously say “return to me” without setting aside His holiness. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The door Jeremiah holds open is the door that Calvary throws wide.

Guard against two errors. One is cheap grace, hearing “return to me” as if sin did not matter; the very passage that invites return spends two chapters showing how seriously it matters. The other is despair, thinking some sin has finally slammed the door; the whole point of 3:1 is that God’s mercy reaches past what justice alone would allow. The call to return is real, and it must be answered with genuine repentance, not a brazen face that still claims innocence (2:35).

Land it pastorally and toward Christ. No one in the room is too far gone to hear “return to me,” and no one is so innocent that they do not need to. The same wounded, pursuing love that

pleaded with Israel pleads with us, and it has a name and a face: Jesus, the Bridegroom who gave Himself for His bride.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The perfect justice of God's charges against His people (2:29–35).
- The astonishing mercy of God's "return to me" when justice would close the door (3:1; Deuteronomy 24:1–4).
- The meeting of justice and mercy fully revealed at the cross (Romans 5:8).
- The danger of cheap grace that hears "return" as if sin did not matter.
- The danger of despair that thinks some sin has shut the door for good.
- Genuine repentance versus the "harlot's brow" that still claims innocence (2:35; 3:3).
- Christ as the wronged Bridegroom who bears the penalty to bring His bride home.

Discussion Prompts

- How can God be perfectly just in His charges and yet merciful in His invitation?
- Why does the law of Deuteronomy 24 make God's "return to me" so astonishing?
- How does the cross hold together what these chapters hold in tension?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this whole passage, from the bridal love of chapter 2 to the wounded, pleading heart of God in chapter 3. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using these verses to draw you back to the fountain and to reshape your love for Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question moves from study to surrender. Look back across the whole passage: the bridal love of Israel's youth, the lawsuit of a wounded God, the fountain forsaken for cracked cisterns, the bitterness of wandering, the idolatry beneath the sin, and the breathtaking "return to me" that still hangs in the air. Every theme is an invitation to come home.

Resist letting this stay general. Press for one specific way the Lord is drawing them back: a cistern to abandon, a first love to recover, a crisis-reflex to redirect, a brazen self-justification to lay down, a thirst to bring honestly to the fountain.

Tie it explicitly to Jesus. He is the living water Israel forsook, the faithful Bridegroom who pursued an unfaithful bride to the cross. We are not formed by trying harder to love God but by coming again and again to drink from Him, by walking with Christ until our cold hearts warm in His presence.

Invite each person to name their "one thing" aloud or on paper, and to carry it into the week as a matter of prayer, repentance, and glad return to the fountain.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from knowledge of God's grief to personal return and repentance (James 1:22).
- Christ as the living water and faithful Bridegroom who answers the whole passage.
- Spiritual formation as repeatedly coming to drink from God, not self-effort.
- The value of naming one concrete step of return this week.

Discussion Prompts

- Which image from this passage is the Lord pressing on your heart most?
- What one cistern will you forsake, and how will you return to the fountain?
- How does walking with Jesus, rather than gritting your teeth, rekindle love for God?