

**Date:** March 16-17, 2024

**Title:** Return to Me: Lesson of the Hidden Stones

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 43

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When I was a kid, I wasn't always the brightest of kids, and I wasn't always on the kind of track that you would want your own kids to be on. And so, at one point when I was probably eight, nine years old, a couple of my friends and I, during one of the boring summer days, decided that we needed to do something exciting.

And so, what we did is we got on our bikes, and we rode our bikes. This is back when parents let their kids ride bikes all over the place and do stuff without tracking devices and phones and such. But we went on our bikes and there was a highway about a mile and a half from where we lived.

There was a bridge that went over this highway that did not have an exit or an exit ramp, and that's key. We went to this bridge and brought a bunch of water balloons. We thought it would be really fun to throw water balloons at the cars. I did tell you I wasn't the brightest or best behaved always. We thought it'd be fun to throw water balloons at the cars. And so, we threw water balloons at the cars. We'd get the occasional honk, but nobody could get off to come back to us without going up a mile or two and coming around. By then we could ride our bikes and be far gone if we anticipated anything. So, we'd ride our bikes out, go throw water balloons for a while, and there was never a consequence. Now, as far as we know, there were no accidents or issues.

And so, one day when there was a snow day in the middle of the winter, and again, I'm old enough that we didn't do virtual school on snow days, we just had snow days. Okay? So, when you were on a snow day, it was your day. And one of those days we decided, well, that was fun in the summer, so let's go out and throw snowballs at cars. Now, the bridge, without riding a bike in the middle of the winter, was too far. We just went out not far from our houses, and we figured we'd come out from behind a snowbank, throw a snowball at a car, and then run behind the snowbank. People would keep going and leave us alone. It would be just like when we were on the highway kind of a deal. Our big plan was that if a car stopped, we would just run farther away, and the person wouldn't leave their car in the middle of the road to chase us down behind all these other houses and things. And so, that was kind of our plan.

I hop out from behind the snowbank, throw a snowball at one of these cars, and I hit it, which was impressive because I didn't hit many. This car screeches to a halt, and this guy gets out and he proceeds to chase us. And so, we run behind the house and then we run farther, and he keeps coming. I'm thinking this guy's just leaving his car there. But he was determined to catch the kids who threw snowballs at his car. So, we run a little farther and finally he catches up to us, grabs us, and asks us where we live. Now, that's a moment where you have to decide how far in am I going with this thing that I've done? And so, at that point I said, well, okay, what's he going to do? He takes us to our houses and tells our parents what we did. We end up getting grounded.

Now, here's why I tell you that story. I didn't think there was any chance that somebody would chase us down and we would get caught and there would be a consequence for that. My guess is that some of us have that perception with God that we think that we can run from God, from His precepts, from the things we know are true, and that God will never find us. God will never deal with it. God will let it be just kind of kids having fun.

Well, we've been in a series that we've called *Return to Me*. We've been looking at these stories in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, a major prophet, meaning it's long. And so, it's a book that talks about the coming captivity for the children of Israel. What that means is the people had disobeyed God and he was planning to have the Babylonians come and take the people captive back to their land. When we get to Jeremiah 43, what's happening is they are on the verge of this invasion. They all know it's coming, and they decide that they're going to go to Egypt. So, Babylon on one side, Israel in the middle, Egypt on the other side, they're basically saying if that's what's coming, we're going somewhere else. We're going from one superpower to another to hide from the presence of God.

God says to Jeremiah, I want you to take these stones. I want you to put them in Pharaoh's temple because there will be a day when the Babylonians will rule. So, what's going on here? What does this mean for you and for me? Here's the principle that I think this shows us, and that is there is nowhere that is beyond God's reach, nowhere. And I think that has two implications.

I wanted to use some New Testament stories to show these just so that you see that I'm not making too much of this Old Testament account. But what this tells us, I think, is a visual demonstration by saying you can put these stones down, and yet the Babylonians are going to come all the way to Egypt and what God said will come true. There is nowhere that you can go that's beyond his reach.

Here's the first implication. You cannot evade God's discipline or God's judgment in your life. Now, when you think about running from God, my guess is the things that come to mind are like Jonah in the Old Testament, who ran from God, kind of a similar scenario. Let me get away from God. Or maybe you think about the prodigal son who went to the far country for a time. The point probably in both of those stories is that you may think for a while that what you're doing is putting distance between you and God's pursuit of you, but it isn't because there is nowhere that you can go to evade God's discipline or God's correction or God's judgment in your life.

Now, I'm using the phrase judgment and discipline, and I don't mean to imply that they're interchangeable. There is judgment that comes from God, which is when we don't turn to Jesus, and that is when we will face judgment for our sins. But there's also discipline that comes, which is different from judgment because it's for the child of God.

Hebrews 12 says that there's no father who loves his child, who doesn't discipline his child. And it's saying, in essence, the same thing, that God at times will pursue his children through discipline to get them to return to him. And so, there's nowhere that you can go. No college campus, no other town, no hotel room, no place on the Internet that is out of the reach or view of the God of the universe. Sometimes God will use severe means of discipline. This is

what the Babylonians were because he wants to bring about something better in your life and in my life.

If you have had kids or you've known a kid, you know how this kind of works. And that is when a kid starts to want to touch a hot stove. As a parent or caretaker, your inclination is no, no, and you keep pulling their hand back. And after enough times of trying to do that, what happens? You get a little exhausted and you're like well, go ahead, touch the stove. You'll learn. Now, I know some of you are thinking, how did your kids turn out? But what you do at some point is you say that will be its own teacher, pain will be its own teacher. Sometimes what God does is he allows pain to be its own teacher.

You may say well, I know people who have seemed to run from God, and it seems like they don't have any discipline or any consequence for what happens. But there is no place that evades the discipline of God. It may not be evident to you, it may not be in your time, but anything that you or anyone else does is not beyond God's reach. And so, certainly we may think in terms of people or ourselves when we've denied or ignored or tried to avoid God's discipline or God's judgment, that's the thought in the Prodigal Son. But you know the story title when we call it the Prodigal Son, it's probably a bad title. Do you know why? There were two sons, and they were both prodigal in their own way. One was prodigal by saying I'm running from the father. The other was prodigal by saying I'm staying with the father but I just want to use my goodness to get from the father what I want.

One of the ways that you and I can think that we're evading the discipline of God is by asserting our own goodness in such a way that we think that we don't actually need to have grace because we don't think we need forgiveness. Jesus told another story that drives this point home. It's called the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. It's in Luke 18 verses 9 through 14. Here's what it says. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'"

So, Jesus tells the story, and it says He told it to those who had confidence in themselves and looked down on everyone else. And if you've been around church, you've been conditioned when you hear the word Pharisee to say well, this is the person who Jesus is about to call out. And so, they're probably not the good people in the story. But if you were a listener in the first century, you would have heard this and it would have been, this is a really nice, churchgoing, good person. This isn't the kind of person that everybody said oh, it's the Pharisee. They would have thought the Pharisee was a good person in this story. And so, Jesus says the Pharisee went up to pray and he looked down on everyone else. His prayer was thank you I'm not like other people. Do you know that we can use comparison as our way to assert our goodness and to avoid dealing with our need for Jesus Christ? What we can do is we can say God, I thank you that I'm not like them, like those other people.

So, let me just ask you, who's on your other people list? Do you have a list? People who don't vote like you. People who don't read books as deep as you read them or don't study as deeply. People who don't worship as passionately. People who don't care as much about justice. Or people who don't have a concern for some of the things you have a concern for where you say God, maybe you don't actually pray the prayer, but I think I'm not quite like them.

That sense of comparison is one of your ways of maybe running from God, because what you're doing like this Pharisee, is you're using your comparison to say, I don't actually need a savior. And not only does he use comparison, but he uses his sin avoidance. He says I thank you that I'm not like other people, that I'm not an evil doer, I'm not an adulterer, or I'm not like this tax collector. He's not just saying I'm not like them, but he's saying look at the way that I've changed and then he appeals to his rituals, his religion. He says I fast twice a week, and I give a 10th of everything that I get. In other words, I practice my religion meticulously. Do you see how good I am?

And do you see what the statement is from Jesus? I mean, catch this, verse 14. Again, tax collectors in our day aren't our favorite people, but probably don't draw quite the comparison that they did in that day. Think more somebody who sells drugs to kids. It says this man, rather than the other one, went home justified. This is a rich theological word that means to be declared right, that there is an irrevocable thing that God does when somebody is justified. And so, Jesus' story is this. He says there's the person that you expect is on the good side of the ledger, and somebody who's had everything going against them and who goes home justified. It's the one who says God, have mercy on me, the sinner, me, a sinner. In other words, you can't evade God's discipline or God's judgment even through your goodness, and you certainly can't evade it through your lack of following what Jesus does and asks you to do.

And Josea 6, which is another one of these minor prophets from this era, says it this way. Return to me. And this is God's pleading to say know that there's no place you can run, that God can't come to, that God won't come to, and that God won't use to find you. Here's what this simply means. You may be here today thinking you know what, I don't need to worry about where I'm headed or what I'm doing. I just want to enjoy some things. But your perception is missing that God will pursue you and call you back to himself.

John Stott put it this way, he said, "Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of him and their unwilling witness to admit it." Charles Stanley put it like this, he said, "When a system of performance-based acceptance is transferred to our Heavenly Father, the result is legalism. Legalism is an attitude. It's a system of thinking in which an individual attempts to gain God's love and acceptance through good works or service. Some people sincerely believe their salvation is at stake. For others, it's a vague feeling of divine disapproval, of which they are trying to rid themselves. Either way, however, legalism always leads to the same dead end a lack of joy, a critical spirit, and an inability to be transparent."

Do you see that in the Pharisee here? God, I thank you I'm not like other people. Critical spirit. We don't know for sure there's a lack of joy but the reason I would anticipate there's a lack of joy is when you're always trying to satisfy the inner voice that says I have done enough,

you don't rest in what God has done. And because of that, there's a lack of transparency. And so, the lesson of the stone says you can't run from God's discipline either in your badness or your goodness, so you might as well run to the mercy of Jesus and say God have mercy on me, a sinner.

Here's the second implication and it's this. Ultimately there is no one who can evade God's kingdom. There is no power that's greater than God's power and only God has ultimate power. The reason I say this is because again, these stones put in Pharaoh's palace, that ultimately Babylon would overrule, tell us that this earthly power that seems so vast, so unconquerable, was no match for the kingdom or the power of God.

In the New Testament, the idea of this cornerstone in First Peter 2, is picked up and he quotes Isaiah where he says that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the temple, of the way that God builds things. And the imagery that this calls forth from us is this idea that God's kingdom will ultimately prevail. What this means is that there's no earthly power, no political power, and no cultural power which can ever withstand the Kingdom of God. It means that the coming and present kingdom that God is bringing cannot be defeated. The reason that this is so significant is because I don't know about you, but if you look at our world sometimes and you say the world feels a little bleak, a little hopeless. It isn't, because God's kingdom will not be defeated by human power.

Now, one of the most prominent places where Jesus speaks about the kingdom is in the familiar section that we call the Lord's Prayer. You know how this goes. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. What's he saying? He's saying, God, bring your kingdom. Pray that God will bring his kingdom. And the kingdom had already begun. And it is coming, is present. It is coming. And it's Jesus who says pray that the kingdom will come.

John Ortberg once said that when we pray, God, your will be done, it's very different than praying whatever. Whatever is a prayer of resignation. God, your kingdom come is a prayer of trust and surrender and saying God, I believe that your kingdom is better than what is. So please let your kingdom come now. Hasten your kingdom to where we are.

Jesus taught about this, and again in a parable, this is in Luke chapter 13. Here's what we see. This is verses 18 through 21. It says, "Then Jesus asked, 'What is the kingdom of God like?'" So again, He's talking about the kingdom. "'What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.' Again he asked, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.'"

So, what does Jesus say about the kingdom? Well, to take a small seed and have it grow into a large tree, or to have yeast that works its way through the dough. Well, what he's saying is this, and that is the kingdom of God advances. It advances internally. It advances imperceptibly. A tree is something that grows, and you can see it grow from year to year. But if you go and watch a tree, you won't say oh, I just saw it grow. You can't tell when it's growing. When yeast starts to work through bread, you can't see the process. You can see the result after a while, but you can't see it in the process. And not only that, these things

advance irresistibly, meaning they just do. Once a tree starts to grow, even if you don't water it half the time, you can't stop it. And the same thing's true when yeast starts to work its way into something, into the bread. The kingdom of God is something that can't be deterred.

You know, this is important because globally, nationally, you may feel like the powers that are working in our world, it's so difficult, so hard, and it is. And how you respond matters. The kingdom of God is not going to be held hostage by our cultural moment or our cultural powers. And not only that, but the Kingdom of God is something that God is bringing here and now.

Since I've already talked about my childhood, I'll tell you another aspect of it. I'm old enough that when I was a kid, Star Wars had some competition. You know, if you're growing up now, it's all Star Wars all the time. There used to be Star Wars and Star Trek. Anybody remember this? Yeah. Those of you are nodding. It's like, yeah, I know how old you are. Star Trek had the same kind of space thing going on, but there was a difference in this. When the Starship Enterprise would go to different places, and the people would have their missions on these different planets, whenever they got in trouble, they had these little intercoms on their wrists. And they could hit a button, it would make a weird sound, and then they would say hey, beam me up. Okay? We know who the Trekkies are, and I know that you know what I'm talking about. For some people, this is their version of Christianity. The world is getting worse and worse. Everything's gone horrible. There's a ship up there. And if I just say beam me up, I'll disintegrate here, and I'll rematerialize there, and I'll be whisked away.

Now, I'm not suggesting that there's nothing to the idea that there are things that are getting harder in this world. But that is not the biblical vision of how God works in this world because he has a kingdom that's like a mustard seed that will continue to move its way through this world, and he will continue to work. God did not simply put people on his planet in order for them to say beam me up, Jesus, but instead to say, there's a kingdom that's at work here and now, and God isn't done with this world.

And that isn't just global. That can be personal. Some of us right now are walking through seasons of life where it feels like evil has won, where it feels like things have gone horribly wrong, and God isn't in control. We need to be reminded of the lesson of the stones, that when all feels lost, God's Kingdom has not been usurped by earthly power, by evil, or by things that seem to be more powerful than God.

So, let me just ask you today, what difference would it make in your life if you believed that there is nowhere that's beyond God's reach for you? For some of us, it would change how we approach our next trip or our next weekend. It would change how we're thinking about what's in front of us because we would say, if there's nowhere to go, then I might as well surrender to God. And not only that, if the lesson of the stones is that there's nowhere that's beyond God's kingdom, then why would you want to invest your life in anything other than the Kingdom of God?

Do you see this is a message not just of challenge of saying you can't run from God, but it's a message of comfort, saying no one can run from God, and you can be a part of the side of history that you know how things work out. And so, it's an invitation today to return to God. And this has been kind of this idea of Jeremiah, of Lent, saying Lent has historically been a

time of examining our sinfulness so that when we come to Good Friday, when we come to Resurrection Sunday, we're able to say I have looked at my life and I know how desperately I need a savior. And when that is how you come to those days, the sense of hope and rejoicing is real. The lesson of these stones, these hidden stones of Jeremiah, is that you and I cannot evade the judgment of God, and there's no power that can overrule the Kingdom of God. And so, there's nowhere really that you can go that's beyond God's reach. And that is good news, hopeful news for our lives.

God, I ask today that you would help me and each person who's here, listening online, listening later, to not just give intellectual assent to this idea that there's nowhere that's beyond your reach, but that the implications, the lessons of this would go deep into our heart, creating a trust and a confidence and a desire to align our lives with you. And that we would know that we can bring our sinfulness to you because you have given us Jesus Christ as the Savior of our souls. And so, we don't need to run. We don't need to pretend to be good, but we can come and say God, have mercy on me, a sinner who needs your grace, your mercy. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.