

Broken Cisterns

Jeremiah 2-3

90 minutes · Win, Build, Send inductive format

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that God frames Israel's sin not as rule-breaking but as a broken marriage: He is the Bridegroom, the fountain of living waters, and His people have traded Him for cisterns they dug themselves, cracked and dry. They find for themselves that Jesus takes up the living water image in His own voice, and they hear the astonishing refrain of chapter 3: the betrayed Husband begs His bride to come home.

Catholic Touchstone. The desire for God is written on the human heart (CCC 27), and every idol is a failed attempt to satisfy it. The wonder of prayer is revealed beside a well, where Christ offers living water to a woman who had had five husbands and whose present life, He gently reveals, was not marriage (CCC 2560).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- **The courtroom that is really a marriage.** Chapter 2 has the form of a covenant lawsuit: God states His case against His people. But the language is bridal from the first lines: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness" (2:2). The charge is not merely disobedience. It is adultery. Idolatry in the prophets is unfaithfulness to a marriage, which is why it wounds God and not just His law.
- **The two evils.** Jeremiah 2:13 is the thesis of the whole section, and one of the great diagnostic verses of Scripture: forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out broken cisterns. In the ancient Near East, a cistern was a pit cut into rock to catch runoff: stagnant at best, and useless if cracked. The sin has two movements: walking away from the spring, and then working hard, chisel in hand, on a substitute that cannot hold water.
- **The geography of thirst.** Verse 18 names the two superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, by their rivers: the Nile and the Euphrates. Political alliances are just cisterns at national scale. Judah keeps running to the great rivers of the age while the fountain stands at home.
- **The divorce law behind chapter 3.** Jeremiah 3:1 alludes to Deuteronomy 24:1-4: a divorced and remarried woman could not return to her first husband. By the analogy's own logic, Israel's case looks closed. Then comes the shocking prophetic reversal: "Return, faithless Israel... for I am merciful" (3:12). God is not breaking His own law; Deuteronomy 24 legislates a human marriage case, and God sovereignly summons His unfaithful people beyond what the analogy could promise. Mercy exceeds the legal frame it borrowed. Do not soften how shocking this is; the whole chapter turns on it.

- **Shuv, the key verb.** The Hebrew verb *shuv* (turn, return) rings through chapter 3 in both directions: Israel has turned away, and God calls her to turn back. “Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness” (3:22). Repentance in the prophets is not self-improvement. It is coming home to a Person.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The covenant goes back to Sinai, ratified by spoken assent and blood (Exodus 24); Scripture and Catholic tradition have long read that bond in marital terms, a reading the prophets make explicit. Hosea, a generation or two before Jeremiah, lived the same message in the north: a prophet commanded to love an unfaithful wife, because that is what God does (Hosea 1-3). The water imagery runs back further still, to Eden’s river and the rock struck in the wilderness (Genesis 2:10; Exodus 17:6).

Fulfillment. Jesus claims the fountain image in His own voice, twice, and your group will find both places themselves: at Jacob’s well He offers a woman who had had five husbands “living water” (John 4:10), and at the feast He cries out, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). John adds that He spoke of the Spirit. The Bridegroom theme resolves in Christ as well: John the Baptist calls Him the bridegroom (John 3:29), and the Bible ends with a wedding (Revelation 21:2). Keep the bridal thread warm; it matters later in the study.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine · *Confessions, Book I*

St. Augustine opens his *Confessions* with the sentence that explains every broken cistern ever dug: You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You. Augustine had tried the cisterns himself, ambition, pleasure, philosophy, and found each one cracked. The restlessness is not a design flaw. It is a homing signal.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bernard of Clairvaux · *Sermons on the Song of Songs*

Across his sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard returned again and again to one name for the soul’s relation to God: bride. God wills a union of love that marriage signifies. When Jeremiah frames sin as adultery, he is testifying to how high the original invitation was.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Teresa of Avila · *The Book of Her Life*

St. Teresa, a Doctor of the Church, described the soul in prayer as a garden watered in four ways, from the hard labor of the bucket to the sheer gift of rain (Life, ch. 11). The fountain of living waters is not a metaphor to admire from a distance. It is an invitation to drink daily, which is what prayer is.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 27** · the desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.
- **CCC 2560** · the wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there Christ comes to meet every human being, thirsting first for us so that we may thirst for Him.
- **CCC 1428** · Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of the baptized; conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church.
- **CCC 2129-2132** · the theology of sacred images: what the commandment forbids, what the Incarnation changes, and why honor given to an image passes to the one it represents. Background for the steelman chain; keep it in the leader guide.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY · NEVER APPEARS IN PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

Thread 1 · Build and Plant. Tonight the group learns what is broken: not a contract but a marriage. File this away: whatever God eventually builds and plants will have to heal a broken covenant, not just patch behavior. Say nothing. If anyone speculates near the target, smile and move on.

Thread 2 · The Prophet Like Jeremiah. Notice tonight how Jeremiah voices God's own grief. The prophet does not merely deliver the message; he begins to feel what God feels. A bridegroom betrayed, pleading for the bride: hold the image until it finds its face.

Thread 3 · The Watched Word. Light touch tonight. The word spoken over the bride in her youth (2:2) has not lapsed; God remembers even when Israel forgets.

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can state the two evils of 2:13 in their own words and explain why the image is so precise.
2. Participants discover that Scripture frames idolatry as adultery, and can say why that framing changes what repentance means.
3. Participants find John 4 and John 7 themselves and articulate the claim Jesus is making by taking up the fountain image.
4. Participants hear the iconoclast objection at full strength and can give the Catholic response with the bronze serpent in hand.
5. Participants name one personal cistern and one concrete way to return to the fountain this week.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Opening prayer and Win: 15 minutes. Build: 55 minutes. Send and Live It This Week: 15 minutes. Closing prayer and memory verse: 5 minutes.

If you are running long: cut Question 4 (the rivers of Egypt and Assyria) first, then compress Question 9 (Deuteronomy 24 background) into a one-sentence leader summary. Never cut the steelman chain or the two live discoveries in John; they are the heart of the session.

Broken Cisterns

Jeremiah 2-3

OPENING PRAYER

"Father, You are the fountain of living waters, and we confess that we have dug our own wells and wondered why we are still thirsty. Tonight, show us our cisterns honestly, and show us Your heart more honestly still. Give us the courage to hear the word Return, and the grace to obey it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." (Opening Prayer)

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

W1. Think of something you were sure would satisfy you, a purchase, an achievement, a relationship, a milestone, and it did not. How long did the satisfaction last?

W2. Why do you think human beings keep going back to things that have already failed to satisfy them?

Leader note: *do not resolve W2. Jeremiah 2:13 will answer it in about twenty minutes, and the answer should land as a discovery.*

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY (55 MIN)

READ JEREMIAH 2:1-8 ALOUD.

1. Before God brings a single charge, what does He remember in verse 2? What kind of relationship is this language describing: a king and subjects, a judge and defendants, or something else?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness" (2:2). This is marriage language: honeymoon language, in fact. The covenant at Sinai was not a business contract; it was wedding vows. That reframes everything that follows: the coming accusations are not a policy dispute. They are the grief of a betrayed Husband.

2. In verses 5-8, God asks a wounded question: "What wrong did your fathers find in me?" Notice who never asked "Where is the LORD?" in verses 6-8. Who should have asked it, and what does their silence tell you?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The priests, those who handle the law, the rulers, and the prophets (2:8): the religious professionals.

The people best positioned to notice God's absence stopped asking for Him. Familiarity with holy things is no protection against forgetting the Holy One; sometimes it is the anesthetic. A sobering word for everyone in ministry, including the people leading this study.

READ JEREMIAH 2:9-13 ALOUD, SLOWLY. VERSE 13 IS THE THESIS OF THE ENTIRE SESSION.

3. God names exactly two evils in verse 13. State both in your own words. Why is the image of a cistern so precise? What is the difference between a fountain and a cistern, even a good cistern?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Evil one: forsaking the fountain of living waters. Evil two: hewing out broken cisterns that can hold no water. A fountain is alive: it flows, renews itself, gives without running dry. A cistern is a hole in a rock that catches runoff: stagnant at best, and this one is cracked. Notice the labor involved: hewing rock is brutal work. Sin is not usually laziness; it is hard work invested in a substitute for God. That is why W2 has no natural answer. We keep returning to failed cisterns because the thirst itself is real and God-sized.

DIG DEEPER · THE RESTLESS HEART

The Catechism teaches that the desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God (CCC 27). St. Augustine said it in one line: You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You. Every idol ever worshiped is evidence of that verse. Nobody digs a cistern unless they are genuinely thirsty.

4. *(Cut first if short on time.)* Look at verse 18. Egypt and Assyria are named by their rivers, the Nile and the Euphrates. What do national alliances have to do with broken cisterns?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Judah keeps running to the superpowers for security instead of trusting her covenant God: cisterns at national scale. The great rivers of the age look far more impressive than an invisible fountain. Ask the group: what are the Nile and Euphrates of our own moment, the big impressive things we trust to keep us safe instead of God?

5. Read 2:27. The people say to a tree, "You are my father," and to a stone, "You gave me birth." But look at the end of the verse: what do they say when trouble comes, and what does that reveal?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"But in the time of their trouble they say, 'Arise and save us!'" (2:27). They know. Under pressure, the pretense collapses and they cry out to the real God. Idols are fair-weather gods; nobody prays to

their stock portfolio in the emergency room. What people reach for in their worst moment tells the truth about what they actually believe.

Steelman: Does Jeremiah Condemn Catholic Images?

BUILD THE CASE AT FULL STRENGTH: PRESENT THIS AS PERSUASIVELY AS A THOUGHTFUL PROTESTANT FRIEND WOULD

The case: “Jeremiah mocks people bowing to wood and stone (2:27), and the commandment forbids making images for worship (Exodus 20:4-5). Yes, God commanded cherubim for the tabernacle and the bronze serpent, but those were His explicit exceptions for His own sanctuary, and when Israel began directing devotion to the serpent, faithful Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kings 18:4). That is the principle: worship is regulated by God’s command, not our creativity, and acts directed toward images, kneeling, kissing, candles, are exactly what the commandment guards against. Yet walk into any Catholic church and there they are: statues, candles in front of them, people kneeling. Isn’t this exactly what the prophets condemned?” Let it land. Many Catholics have never heard a real answer.

6. First press: our friend concedes God commanded the cherubim and the serpent, but calls them sanctuary-only exceptions and says devotional acts toward images are what the commandment forbids. Test that. Where did the commanded cherubim stand, and what act, exactly, did God command the people to perform toward the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:8-9)?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The cherubim stood at the dead center of Israel’s worship, over the mercy seat where God met His people (Exodus 25:18-22): not at the sanctuary’s margins but at its heart. And the serpent was commanded precisely so that the people would perform a devotional act toward it: look at it, in faith, and be healed (Numbers 21:8-9). God Himself instituted an image as the channel of a grace-filled act, and Solomon’s Temple later multiplied images beyond any explicit command, cherubim, oxen, lions, palms (1 Kings 6-7), and God consecrated it with His glory. So the commandment cannot forbid images or acts directed through them as such; what it forbids is treating the image as a god, which is exactly what 2:27 describes: calling a tree Father.

7. Second press: our friend’s best evidence is Hezekiah smashing the serpent (2 Kings 18:4). Look closely at that verse: what exactly had Israel started doing, what did Hezekiah destroy, and what did the same king leave standing in his own Temple?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Israel had begun burning incense to the serpent itself, treating the channel as the terminus, so Hezekiah destroyed it, while the commanded cherubim went on standing in that same king’s Temple (2 Kings 18:4). His own act draws the very distinction our friend’s case blurs: the target was the idolatrous act, not images as such. Give the honest concession our Protestant friend deserves:

yes, images can be abused, and when they are, faithful people remove them; the Church's own history includes such purifications. But the standing distinction is the Catholic one: veneration, honor that passes through the image to the one it represents, is not adoration, which belongs to God alone (CCC 2129-2132). A Catholic kneeling before a crucifix is not praying to plaster, any more than a soldier kissing a photo of his wife loves paper. And the Incarnation raised the stakes: the invisible God now has a face that can be depicted, because He took one (CCC 2131).

READ JEREMIAH 3:1 AND 3:12 ALOUD.

8. Verse 1 invokes Israel's divorce law: a wife who has left and remarried cannot return to her first husband (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). By that analogy, Israel's case looks closed. Now read 3:12 again. What does God do with the legal analogy He Himself invoked?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He reverses its verdict: "Return, faithless Israel... I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful" (3:12). The human law said no return; the divine Husband says come home anyway. God is not breaking His own law; He invoked the analogy precisely to show that His covenant mercy exceeds what any legal frame could promise. If anyone in the room believes their own case is closed, that they have gone too far to come back while breath remains, this verse was written over their head.

9. Live discovery. Jesus once sat down by a well and offered someone the very thing Jeremiah 2:13 says Israel abandoned. It is in John 4. Find the verse where He names it.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

John 4:10: "If you knew the gift of God... you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." And notice who He says it to: a Samaritan woman who had had five husbands, and whose present life, He gently reveals, was not marriage: a life that had drawn from many wells and stayed thirsty. Jesus steps into Jeremiah 2 and speaks as the fountain in person. The Catechism marvels at this scene: Christ comes to the well thirsting for us, so that we may thirst for Him (CCC 2560).

10. Live discovery. He says it again, standing up and shouting, at a feast in John 7. Find it.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

John 7:37-39: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink." John adds that He said this about the Spirit. On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, when, as Jewish sources describe, water from the pool of Siloam was ceremonially poured out, Jesus stands and claims the fountain of Jeremiah 2:13 as Himself. The two evils have one remedy, and He is standing in the Temple court announcing it.

READ JEREMIAH 3:19-22 ALOUD.

11. Listen to the ache in verses 19-20, and then the promise in verse 22: "Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness." What does God promise to do that the returning sinner cannot do for himself?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Heal the faithlessness itself. Not merely forgive the past, but repair the broken loving mechanism inside. We cannot fix our own cracked cistern of a heart; the same God who calls us back is the one who does the healing once we come. Even our turning is grace-led: God's call awakens and enables the repentance we freely make, and the restoration is entirely His work. Hold on to that promise; this book has much more to say about what God intends to do inside the human heart.

SEND • CLOSING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

S1. Name one cistern in your life right now: something you keep returning to for what only God can give. What does the thirst underneath it actually want?

S2. God's word to the bride whose case looked legally closed was "Return." Is there any part of your life where you have quietly decided you are beyond that invitation?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Once a day, when you feel a want, pause and ask one question before you reach for anything: what is this thirst actually for? Answer honestly, then say one sentence to the Fountain.
- Choose one cistern this week and fast from it for a single day. Notice what rises up in its absence, and bring that to prayer.
- If you have been away from the Sacrament of Reconciliation, hear 3:22 as addressed to you and take one step: find your parish confession times and put one on your calendar.

CLOSING PRAYER

"Lord Jesus, Fountain of living water, we have dug our cisterns and drunk from them, and we are still thirsty. We come back to the spring. Heal our faithlessness, as You promised. Teach us to drink from You daily, until the day our thirst is finally satisfied at Your wedding feast. Amen."

(Closing Prayer)

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." (Jeremiah 2:13, RSV2CE)

Every Passage in This Session

Jeremiah 2-3

Primary Text

- Jeremiah 2:1-8 · the bride in the wilderness; the leaders who stopped asking (Q1-Q2)
- Jeremiah 2:9-13 · the two evils; fountain and cisterns (Q3, memory verse)
- Jeremiah 2:18 · the Nile and the Euphrates (Q4, cuttable)
- Jeremiah 2:27 · wood and stone; the emergency prayer (Q5, steelman lead-in)
- Jeremiah 3:1 · the divorce law invoked (Q8)
- Jeremiah 3:12 · “Return, faithless Israel... for I am merciful” (Q8)
- Jeremiah 3:19-22 · “I will heal your faithlessness” (Q11)

Old Testament Roots

- Exodus 24 · covenant as vow at Sinai (leader background)
- Deuteronomy 24:1-4 · the divorce law behind 3:1 (Q8, compressible)
- Hosea 1-3 · the prophet who married the message (leader background)
- Exodus 25:18-20 · cherubim commanded (steelman Q6)
- Numbers 21:8-9 · the bronze serpent commanded (steelman Q6)
- 2 Kings 18:4 · Hezekiah destroys the abused serpent (steelman Q7, live find)

New Testament Fulfillment

- John 4:7-15 · living water at the well (live discovery, Q9)
- John 7:37-39 · the cry at the feast (live discovery, Q10)
- John 3:29; Revelation 21:2 · Christ the Bridegroom (leader background)

Catechism

- CCC 27 · the desire for God written in the heart
- CCC 2560 · prayer revealed beside the well
- CCC 1428 · ongoing conversion of the baptized
- CCC 2129-2132 · sacred images (steelman, leader only)