

# Welcome

How many of you have seen the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*? It's a British film from nearly 30 years ago that traces the lives of a group of friends as they experience... well, four weddings and one funeral. The writer/director, Richard Curtis, went on to make *Love, Actually*, one of the classic Christmas movies.

A few years ago, Hulu created a miniseries of the same name. With ten hours (rather than just two) to tell the story, a new group of friends experiences even more drama and laughs as they navigate life together. And, yes, there are still four weddings and a funeral.

The titular funeral is actually one of my favorite moments in the show - for reasons I won't share thanks to spoilers. But would it surprise you to learn that one of my favorite parts of being a pastor is officiating funerals?

I mean... who *enjoys* a funeral?

No one. I don't. But I've found that being invited into a family's grief can be really sacred. The opportunity I have to help them grieve well, to honor their departed loved one, to navigate the complex and complicated emotions that come with grief. It's not fun, but it's deeply good.

Weddings and funerals are some of the ways we mark out our lives. They mark times of transition - from one family to another, from life to death. That's why every culture in the world has wedding and funeral rituals.

So what does it mean when someone *doesn't* attend one?

It's a signal flare that something is very wrong, isn't it?

So you can imagine that, for God to tell a prophet to withdraw from weddings and funerals would be a sign something is deeply wrong. And that's exactly what we're going to see today. But before we go there, let's begin with worship. Let's center and ground ourselves in God's endless love for us.

## Message

I know a lot of Christians these days who feel like Black Sheep - the one who doesn't fit in. Not from the larger culture, but from the Church. Now that's not necessarily a new phenomenon, but when I was growing up, you felt distance from the Church because you were drifting from faith.

Today, though, a lot of the folks who are feeling this sense of isolation, of being the weird one - it's not because of weak faith. It's actually the opposite

And it's not because they're drifting or backsliding or wandering from their faith. It's actually our faithfulness *to* Jesus that's making us feel like outsiders to our own faith. The people who claim to represent Jesus don't actually look very much like him.

[Timeline] This is the experience of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the years leading up to the Exile, one of the most apocalyptic and formative events in the history of God's people. Jeremiah was born into a world in the shadow of the Babylonian Empire, and the little nation of Judah spent decades trying to figure out how to survive Babylon. They made payments to the emperor to keep him from conquering them. They entered into alliances with other nations.

This was the big point of contention, because these alliances involved adopting the other nations' gods - a sort of cultural exchange. This idolatry was a violation of the covenant between God and God's people. It was a signal that God's people didn't trust that God's way would preserve them, protect them and provide for them. The people continued to give lip service to God, but their actions showed they preferred to trust the power of the nations around them.

Sound familiar?

If you can relate, then this series is for you. We're spending a couple of months with Jeremiah, to bear witness to his faithfulness and ask what we can learn about how God is calling us as a Black Sheep church today.

We began by looking at how a prophet's work is grounded in a deep knowledge of and love for God - especially important since God's people usually ignore prophets until tragedy strikes. We saw that God hates idolatry so much because it warps us away from who God created us to be. And last week, Ashley reminded us that God's call to repent isn't meant to engender shame, but liberation.

Turn with us to [Jeremiah 16](#).

Today, we're exploring another of Jeremiah's prophecies. Like the others we've seen in this series, this one is provocative and shocking.

Today's message can be summed up by a meme, actually - and I bet you've seen it. [Image] This cute little doggo was drawn by K.C. Greene in his webcomic *Gunshow* back in 2013. It's shared these days as a way to express self-denial - the house is on fire, but we're all sitting around, sipping coffee, pretending everything is just fine.

There's a plea in the This is Fine dog. We want him to get up. To grab a fire extinguisher or at least get out of the house. Because when the house is on fire, you can't go about business as usual!

That's exactly what we're going to see in Jeremiah today. God warns him that things are *not* okay, so no one should be going about business as usual.

Let's listen to what God tells Jeremiah to do - or rather, to not do:

The Lord gave me another message. He said, "Do not get married or have children in this place. For this is what the Lord says about the children born here in this city and about their mothers and fathers: They will die from terrible diseases. No one will mourn for them or bury them, and they will lie scattered on the ground like manure. They will die from war and famine, and their bodies will be food for the vultures and wild animals." -- Jeremiah 16:1–4 (NLT)

God tells Jeremiah not to marry or have children because of the coming catastrophe. The Exile is going to be so bad, so brutal, that he shouldn't bring children into it.

You might recognize that impulse - it's one we hear more and more these days in the face of the impending climate catastrophe. An increasing number of younger folks are choosing not to have kids for exactly this reason - they don't want to raise kids in a world hurtling for disaster.

It's easy to be hopeless these days, isn't it? That's why it's important to hope. Now more than ever. So before we go on, let's sing a song for the hopeless right now.

## Song

As shocking as God's instructions to Jeremiah are, they're part of a larger thing God is calling the prophet to do:

This is what the Lord says: "Do not go to funerals to mourn and show sympathy for these people, for I have removed my protection and peace from them. I have taken away my unfailing love and my mercy. Both the great and the lowly will die in this land. No one will bury them or mourn for them. Their friends will not cut themselves in sorrow or shave their heads in sadness. No one will offer a meal to comfort those who mourn for the dead—not even at the death of a mother or father. No one will send a cup of wine to console them.

"And do not go to their feasts and parties. Do not eat and drink with them at all. For this is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: In your own lifetime, before your very eyes, I will put an end to the happy singing and laughter in this land. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will no longer be heard.

"When you tell the people all these things, they will ask, 'Why has the Lord decreed such terrible things against us? What have we done to deserve such treatment? What is our sin against the Lord our God?' -- Jeremiah 16:5–10 (NLT)

A few notable things in this bit: first, some key words. In verse five, God warns:

**I have removed my protection and peace from them. I have taken away my unfailing love and my mercy. -- [Jeremiah 16:5](#) (NLT)**

These are three really important terms in Hebrew. The first is one you've probably heard - *shalom*. Shalom is the state God intends for creation, the goal of everything - living in the peace and harmony for which we were created.

The next word - rendered here as 'unfailing love' - is *chesed*. This is a word that doesn't have a good English equivalent, but it's the sort of formal love that accompanies covenants. So you know at a wedding when couples promise to be faithful 'for better or for worse'? *That's chesed*. God's announcing the removal of his covenantal obligations to God's people.

And that's shocking, but so too is this last bit - mercy. The Hebrew connotes the tender feelings that accompany a deep relationship. The word sometimes gets translated 'compassion'. This is the more emotional side of the covenant, the personal stake God has in this ongoing relationship with God's people.

God is removing God's *shalom*, God's *chesed* and God's mercies. Harsh? Remember, this is in response to decades of God's people not honoring the covenant. Every time they made an alliance with a foreign power, they were saying to God, "We don't want to be in this covenant with you."

What we're seeing here is God finally granting their desires. God is relenting, signing the divorce papers God's people have been presenting for years.

Big thing number two: God told Jeremiah not to go to any funerals *or* attend any weddings or other celebrations. In short: No fasting, no feasting. No mourning, no celebrating.

Why?

Theologian Walter Brueggemann points out that what God is prohibiting the prophet from participating in here is the normal rhythms of life - fasting and feasting. Sadness and joy. By withdrawing from regular, public life, the prophet is signaling that things are not okay.

That's become necessary because the *people* are acting like everything is fine. God's judgment looks like giving the people what they think they want. God won't let them have their cake and eat it too any longer. So God is withdrawing, which means no more shalom. No more chesed. And no more compassion.

God's people will be left to fend for themselves, to try to get from their idols what the idols can't give.

Could there be a starker warning of this impending reality than God's prophet withdrawing from 'business as usual'?

Friends, I have to be honest: this was a difficult message for me to write. Because the question has to become for us: what does it look like to refuse to be about ‘business as usual’ in a time when so much of the American church is chasing after idols?

I know many of you came to Catalyst from other churches because you could no longer continue in business as usual. I’ve sat with you and heard the pain that comes with leaving those formative, deep relationships.

Jeremiah knows your experience. Jesus knows your experience.

Many of us, myself included, have suffered the loss of friendships and familial relationships because they want to continue ‘business as usual’ while falling into conspiracy theories, racist ideas or hateful behavior and beliefs.

Friends, I am not by nature a doom and gloom person. I don’t like fire-and-brimstone preaching. But when I read Jeremiah and I look at the state of the American Church, I can’t help but hear God’s warning: if God’s people persist in idolatry, God will give us what we (think) we want.

It’s right and holy to withdraw from that. No feasting. No fasting. No pretending things are normal when they’re not.

God’s people don’t normalize idolatry.

## Communion + Examen

That’s a hard word, but even still we come to the table. This is the space to which we come when we leave business as usual. This is very much *not* business as usual, as Jesus’ disciples realized after his arrest.

Where has God led me to withdraw from relationships or spaces in order to be faithful?

Where in my week do I encounter idolatry?

Where am I trying to pretend everything is normal despite God’s leading?

How is God calling me to faithfulness in the next week?

## Assignment + Blessing

God will not allow despair to be the final word:

“But the time is coming,” says the Lord, “when people who are taking an oath will no longer say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who rescued the people of Israel from the land of Egypt.’ Instead, they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the people of Israel back to their own land from the land of the north and from all the countries to which he had exiled them.’ For I will bring them back to this land that I gave their ancestors. -- Jeremiah 16:14–15 (NLT)