

“Four Friends”
Paul Overland*

Recently I met four friends. They proved remarkably wise. Suggestions they offered were borne out of their experiences in ministry, in the hope that my ministry might be richer. Their advice deeply moved me. Perhaps it will you, as well.

Before proceeding, I must admit that these insights are not my own. They come from someone else's sermon. By now it must be “public domain”, since it was first preached in approximately 627 B.C. That places us at the opening days of Jeremiah's ministry, just a bit ahead of the closing days of the Southern kingdom of Israel. Jeremiah will personally witness the demise of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Listen, then, with both mind and imagination to what may have been Jeremiah's inaugural sermon (Jer. 2.1-9).

1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Go proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: 'I remember the devotion of your youth,

At once as these words open to us it is as if someone were leafing thoughtfully through a cherished album. God is the one opening the album - a very personal album. In fact, albums don't come with more deeply-cherished memories than these. Picture scenes from the next leaf.

I remember...how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.

3 Israel was holy to the Lord, The first fruits of his harvest; All who devoured her were held guilty, And disaster overtook them," declares the Lord.

At this point God shuts the album. He has something very, very sobering to say to his people.

4 Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel.

5 This is what the Lord says: "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me?

Was there a divine pause after this question? Did God wait for a reply? Perhaps so. The people answered nothing. So he went on.

* Paul Overland (Ph.D., Brandeis) is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at ATS. This is a slightly edited transcript of an ATS chapel sermon delivered 10/26/01.

“Four Friends”

They followed worthless idols, And became worthless themselves.

Do not these few words convey an enormous truth? What I follow, that I become, for good or ill.

6 They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?'

7 I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land And made my inheritance detestable.

Now we meet our four friends.

8 (First) The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?'

(Second) Those who deal with the law did not know me;

(Third) The leaders rebelled against me.

(Finally) The prophets prophesied by Baal, Following worthless idols.

9 Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the Lord. "And I will bring charges against your children's children.

The passage continues to unfold, reading very much like a court case. God probes: “By walking away from our relationship your fathers lodged an implicit complaint against me. Tell me: Was it I who let them down? Did I offend them? Was I an abusive husband? What went wrong?”

A hollow silence echoes in response. Then God proceeds to present His case. “The actual fault,” he explains, “is not with me, but with you.” That fault confronts us like a banner emblazoned across the courtroom wall: “*They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord...who led us through the barren wilderness, through...a land where no one travels? (v. 6)'*” After arriving in Canaan, Israel should easily have realized that they owed their transit through the severe Sinai Peninsula to nothing less than God’s miraculous leadership and provision.

God led them with a towering cloud by day and a column of fire by night. One Jewish commentator suggests that the pillar fundamentally consisted of fire symbolizing God’s presence. During the night the fire blazed through a cloud which encased it, a bright contrast against the night sky. During the day, however, sunlight made the fire less obvious and caused the

encasing cloud to become more evident. Whether day or night, the fiery pillar reminded them of God's immediate presence. His presence is illuminating. His presence is powerful.

As the Presence moved, the people packed up and moved. But when the Presence stayed, the people stayed. So there was keen connection linking the people with the presence of God as he led them *through the barren wilderness, through...a land where no one travels*.

Some 900 years later in Jeremiah's day, it was a callous insensitivity to this Presence which comprised Israel's fundamental flaw. No one missed God's presence. No one thought to inquire, "Where is the Lord?" And we could, I suppose, stop the lesson there. But Jeremiah keeps preaching.

Beyond this fundamental flaw of failing to inquire after the presence of God, the four friends expose four particular fissures, cracks in the foundation of Israel's spiritual life which led to her eventual downfall. One of them speaks especially to me, for I am very like him. Perhaps one of the four will speak to you.

The first friend to introduce himself to us is a priest. What uniquely characterized the ministry of a priest in the Old Testament? Fundamentally, the priest was charged by God through ceremony to bring men and women into the presence of God. We associate their ministry with ceremony, since they executed prescribed liturgies. They were the ones who knew which sacrifices must be offered for what offenses. They knew when and how much should be burned on the bronze altar, what may be eaten, and that by whom. Festivals were their domain as well--prescribed events recurring with caledrical circularity. So you may think of the priests as men charged by God through ceremony to bring men and women into his presence. For, you see, of anyone they served closest to that place which of all places in the entire cosmos was thought to be *where God resided*-- the Holy of Holies. In addition, one of these priests dared annually to actually enter that space. In the fall of the year, at Yom Kippur, he cautiously crossed the threshold to effect atonement.

Priests were, then, men charged by God through ceremony to bring others into God's very presence. They were charged to clear out roadblocks of sin so that commoners may draw close to God. And so my friend "Kohen", the priest would say to me, "If ever such a ministry is entrusted to me-- if at any point in my ministry, God may entrust me with the privilege of escorting people into his presence, whether it is leading a worship liturgy, a conducting a baptism, or officiating a wedding, then take my advice: do not venture into the service without sincerely inquiring, 'Where is the Lord?'"

What shall I do if in response to that question, I sense that the Lord is not present? Move. Search out where the column of fire has gone, and move after it.

"Four Friends"

The second friend belongs to those who deal with the law: "Law-handlers". Some versions translate "judge". But in reality, the Hebrew at this point does not use *shophet*, judge, but rather "those who handle the law." "Handle" (*tapas*) is an interesting word. It was used in battle to describe a victor's the control over vanquished peoples. POW's are "handled," captured. Sometimes *tapas* is simply translated "capture". But here it characterizes how the professionals were treating biblical law.

A puppy is the newest member of our family. When go out we attach a leash to her collar-- you might say we are "puppy handlers." We are clearly in control. Or at least that is the illusion she allows us to entertain!

Transfer the leash-and-collar image to "law handlers", and I suspect we will have grasped Jeremiah's point. God's law, his Torah, had become their puppy. They could lead, manipulate it as they wished. They represented the professionals, the law was their subject.

Of the four friends, this "law handler" speaks most clearly to me. I, too, am a law handler by profession. I even have alphabet soup after my name to prove it. So Friend #2 asks me, "Overland, you know so much about the Bible. It reminds me of my back in the 7th century B.C. Don't you make it too. I knew so much about the Torah, but there was a piece of knowledge even more vital, which I overlooked. I did not know God! (v. 8b)."

As I read Jeremiah's words it's rather like a sonic boom echoing within. I'm paid to *know*. However, as I prepare for lecture, the first item which routinely must appear on my checklist is this: to know *God*. Then knowledge about literary structure, authorship, historical background, word studies will take their place. But first know God. So the law handler speaks to me.

The third friend introduces himself as a "leader" (v. 8c). The word back of "leader" is shepherd. Many versions appropriately render it "leader" since it is clear we are not talking about care of animals of the four-legged variety, but the two-legged variety. What distinguishes the leader from the priest and law handler? By the way: all four of these roles are *good roles*. They are God-ordained roles, to be regarded with honor. However, they are susceptible to spiritual diseases, maladies which our friends would inoculate us against.

Back to the shepherd: what distinguishes this role? The shepherd stands out as one charged with caring for other people. More than scrutiny of scripture, more than guiding people into God's presence, the shepherd cares for the daily needs and concerns of a cluster of people. Through a modern lens we may picture administrators, committee chairs, and counselors caring for people and their problems.

So I turn to the 7th century leader and ask, "What can go wrong in the ministry of a shepherd?" His response cuts to the heart of leadership. "I lost

sight of the fact that my power over people was an entrustment. I was all the while accountable to an over-shepherd for how I used my power. But instead of standing accountable, I *rebelled* (v. 8c). With the best of intentions I pursued my godly agenda. As my agenda substituted for God's, I continued to pursue it, even though it set me at cross-purposes against God. Don't make that mistake!"

Another fisherman-turned-shepherd put leadership in perspective some 600 years later. He wrote, *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers -- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples of the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away* (1 Pet. 5.2-4). So the third friend urges me always to bear in mind that I care for these people *for him*. It is *his agenda*, not mine, I must pursue.

The fourth friend calls himself a prophet. What exactly was a prophet? Among many definitions, each with their merit, it helps me to picture the prophet as a man (and sometimes a woman) who claimed divine authorization as he agitated God's people. They sought to awaken God's people from moral and spiritual slumber, a slumber which if left unattended would lead to destruction. One Jewish writer, Abraham Heschel, observes that had Israel not slumbered, there would have been no need for the prophets. They would have been splendidly unemployed. But, alas, Israel often drifted, so our Bible is rich with their arresting agitations.

If I find myself from time to time entrusted with a message of warning, sent to awaken God's people, I may be able to learn a bit of wisdom from this fourth friend. He warns me, "Beware of becoming so enamored with your message that you failed to check the source. The cause may seem right, but unless you are careful, you will start preaching sermons inspired from a faulted source: too late we discovered that we *prophesied by Baal* and were *following worthless idols* (v. 8d)."

We need agitators today. I need friends who will confront me: "Overland, you're asleep on this issue or that. You're pretending everything all is well, but it's not!" However, it's possible for me to become agitated for an important cause (spiritual, social), yet failing to ensure that my script comes from God. Failing that checkpoint, I'm just a cannon firing in all directions, damaging the flock. Sometimes the error will be a surplus of truth with a deficit of love. Or the error will be caving in to the wishes of the people, assuring "Peace, peace" when there will be no peace.

As we met these four friends, did you find yourself identifying with any one of them? Be grateful for the role entrusted to you. Each is honorable. Then take a page from our friends' notebook. Am I a priest? Then in all my

ceremonial routines, routinely I must ask, "Where is the Lord?" So simple a question! So profound a probe! Is the Lord not near? Then move.

Am I a law handler, knowing much about the content of this inspired book? Above all I must purpose to know its author, else I know nothing.

Am I a leader? Then I must seek the chief-shepherd's favor, always aware that it is for him that I care for them.

Am I a prophet? May I always check the source of my sermons, stirring others to action with messages that spring from divine authorization, not of my private musing.

The four friends offer profound counsel. Aided by their discoveries may we fulfill our ministry with even greater effectiveness.