

September 4, 2005  
Labor Day Weekend

"It's Ruined!"  
(Jeremiah 13:1-11)

Let me tell you about my friend Gabe. Short for Gabriel, you know. Like San Gabriel. As in the valley.

Gabe was raised around here, and his parents took him to church. He comes from a good family. Not perfect, but good people. Gabe went to Sunday School and was baptized, the whole bit. He went through High School around here and then off to college.

College was a challenge for Gabe. He was a C-student, but that's not what I mean. Since he went away to a state school out of the area, he was really on his own for the first time. He had to learn how to do his laundry and how to make his bed. Well, to tell the truth, he didn't make his bed much, but you get the idea. He had to make his own money decisions. And he had to determine how to use his time.

Monday through Friday, he was busy all right. Classes all day plus a part-time job at Burger King. Then the weekend. A few times a term he went home, but really he'd rather stay on campus. He told his parents it was because of all the schoolwork. But that really wasn't true. It was the parties. Yep, this was a party school.

Gabe remembered orientation. All the campus groups had their displays. There was a campus Christian fellowship. He looked, picked up a flier, and moved on. Did he believe? Yeah, but, this was *his time*. Four years of college to have fun. To experiment a little. Then maybe back to God. Maybe.

His parents would bug him when they would call on Sunday afternoon. Did you go to church? They should have known better. After all, it was 2 o'clock in the afternoon and their call woke him up.

Did he stop believing? Well, no. It just didn't seem that important. There was work and school and regular keggers and there was also Abby Kolinsky, the girl from San Jose. Was he in love with her? He wasn't sure. But he was sure that Abby would *do* just about anything, and that included things he was told good girls shouldn't do.

So what? The Bible's an old book, thought Gabe. It's just not relevant to relationships today. I'll do what I want to do. But it was a rocky relationship. He and Abby broke up and made up three times over the four years of college.

And then graduation was looming. A B.A. in Business and interviews. Gabe was lucky; he landed a job in Pomona. Not much to start, but not bad. That's when Abby told him: "I'm pregnant."

Sure, he thought they *might* get married. *Maybe* in a year or two. They'd talked about it. But right now? This wasn't on Gabe's radar. He cursed and swore at Abby. Couldn't you have been more careful? She swore back at him. Can't you be a man, and take responsibility?

It was a lousy way to start a marriage, but that's what they did. A Vegas wedding over Memorial Day weekend, graduation a week later. The job started a week after that, and seven months later Gabe Jr. was born.

Gabe's folks quickly accepted Abby and the marriage and loved little Gabe. Under the

surface, Gabe resented being trapped. Here he was, not yet 23 and a dad. And Abby felt trapped too. She was a mother, but she wanted to go to work in commercial art—that's what her degree was in.

And neither would forget the day when Abby told Gabe she was pregnant. That was a hard day. There was a bitterness there that they'd never forget.

Gabe's parents tried to get Gabe and Abby into church. They managed to drag them there a couple of times. Actually, Abby was more open to it than Gabe.

Long ago there was a man named Jeremiah. He was sent as a prophet to the people of Israel—people, by the way—who were a lot like Gabe. Once, God told Jeremiah to do something odd. Look at Jeremiah 13:1-2:

*1 This is what the LORD said to me: "Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water." 2 So I bought a belt, as the LORD directed, and put it around my waist.*

Jeremiah lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The garments people wore in that time wasn't unlike what a modern Bedouin wears to this day: a simple loose garment tied at waist. You could tie it at the waste with a cord, or you could tie it with a waste band, what is translated here as a "belt." The belt could be leather—as Elijah's belt was, or of cloth.

This waste band is described as an *ezor shesh*, a linen waste band. The fact that it was linen is significant because all linen was the wear of the priests.

Now if you had a waste band that was linen, and if it got dirty, you would wash it. Linen washes well, and when it dries, it's supple and

good as new. But God says, "Don't let it touch water." Why's that?

Because this is a drama, a parable for the people of Israel. According to Exodus 19:6, they were to be a nation of priests. But they sure hadn't acted like it. Like Gabe, they'd drifted away from the faith. They forgot. The belt of priesthood just got dirty, and dirtier and dirtier.

No washing, no cleansing—the pride of forgetting God. *I don't really need God. I want to do my own thing. There's nothing wrong with me...I'm just experimenting... sowing my wild oats...*

Then God tells Jeremiah to do something strange:

*3Then the word of the LORD came to me a second time: 4"Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks." 5So I went and hid it at Perath, as the LORD told me.*

Now a little inside chat here. "Perath" was a name for the Euphrates River. It was also the name of a little town near Jeremiah's hometown of Anathoth, just north of Jerusalem. The names were the same--kind of like Moscow, Russia and Moscow, Idaho. So the scholars aren't sure if Jeremiah went 250 miles away to the Euphrates or just five miles to the village of Perath.

In either event, the name Perath was linked to the far away Babylonians. Take the belt to the godless, idol-worshipping Babylonians. They don't think of God, not the living God, the God of Israel.

There's a downward progression here. Israel was called to be God's special people, a nation of priests. But they forgot. They weren't mindful of God. And as time went on, the belt got dirtier and dirtier. At any moment, it could have been washed. At any moment, Israel could have turned back to God. But they didn't. Their souls just got dirtier and dirtier.

But then there comes a tipping point. In their hearts, Israel was more Babylonian than Israelite. They'd sold out.

So the waste band goes to Perath—whether it's the literal Euphrates to just a town like it. (I once met some folks from Babylon—Babylon, NY; it's on Long Island.)

Jeremiah hides it there "in a crevasse in a rock." Then what happens? Look at verses 6-7:

*6 Many days later the LORD said to me, "Go now to Perath and get the belt I told you to hide there." 7 So I went to Perath and dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless.*

No surprise, is it? Sifting soils had buried the belt; Jeremiah had to dig it up. However long "many days" were, it was enough to ruin the waste band.

God interprets the story for us in vs. 8-11:

*8 Then the word of the LORD came to me: 9 "This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. 10 These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be*

*like this belt--completely useless! 11For as a belt is bound around a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me,' declares the LORD, 'to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened.'*

Ancient, irrelevant? I don't think so. Drifting from God has real world consequences.

And we're not even talking about standing before God consequences. We're talking about peace of mind, joy in life, consequences. We're talking about today consequences, just the same way when Jesus talked about the blessed life in Sermon on the Mount, it has to do with right now things.

Gabe and Abby and little Gabe are of course fictional. But their story is real. It began with a man who went off to college and put God on a shelf. It ends with a bitter man, not at peace with himself, not at peace with his wife and not at peace with life.

We write the stories of our lives daily. The choices we make turn around and make us.

Take the story of the waste band and turn it around. Write the story the way it should have been. Take the gift and keep it clean. Live before God with a clean conscience. Seek His will in what you do. Align yourself with the people of God. That kind of life doesn't haul off to Babylon, off to spiritual exile. It stays in the center of God's love and in the heart of God's plan.

That's a place of true worship, of love, of service. That's where the man or woman of God finds their ministry to other believers and their mission to non-believers. That's where the life is. That's where the joy is.

But you might be saying, "You don't understand, Glenn. I am Gabe. I am Abby. I've run away from God. I'm like that ruined belt. I've messed up my life and there's no way back. I haven't listened to God. I've just listened to me, and my friends and now I'm right there in the mud."

One of the reasons Jeremiah took that belt to Perath, to Euphrates, was because the Babylonians were pressing down on Israel. And God spoke through Jeremiah to the people of Israel to tell them that the Babylonians would win. They would exile them. A time of separation from the land of promise would come.

But then God also spoke through Jeremiah to tell them that that time of separation would end. God, who is full of love and grace, longed to see His people back where they belonged.

And the application for you is just the same. God longs for you to come back to the place, the way of life, He longs for you to have. Another prophet, Isaiah recorded these words from God (Isaiah 1:18):

*18 "Come now, let us reason together,"  
says the LORD.  
"Though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson,  
they shall be like wool."*

God longs to reach into your life and give you a do-over, a brand new start. He longs for it so much that God the Son came into the world to die on a cross. He shed scarlet blood cleanses us clean and snow white.

Don't say, "It's ruined!" That belt was ruined. But God can do miracles. He changes lives

every day. Is this your day to trade in your rags for His riches?

Walter Wangerin wrote a story about a Ragman. It's a wonderful parable of the love the love of Jesus. The waste band was a ruined rag; in the story of the Ragman, a man cries out in the streets of the city,

*"Rags! New rags for old!  
I take your tired rags! Rags!"*

He comes upon a woman sobbing on a corner, and exchanges her handkerchief for a new one. Her sobbing ceases, but he starts to cry.

He comes upon a girl with a bloody bandage on her forehead, and again he exchanges rags with her: her bloody one for a new clean one. Her wound is healed, but the Ragman starts to bleed.

Next he meets a man with one arm; he exchanges jackets with him and as he does, the Ragman's arm goes from him to the man with no arm.

And finally, he gives new clothes for an old drunken man sleeping under an army blanket. He staggers forth from there: weeping, bleeding, one-armed, barely able to walk. Staggering to a landfill, the Ragman lay down and died.

The end of the story, let's here in Wangerin's own words:

*I slumped in a junked car and wailed  
and mourned as one who-has-no-hope-  
because I had come to love the Ragman.  
Every other face had faded in the wonder  
of this man, but he died.  
I sobbed myself to sleep.*

*I did not know - how could I know?  
that I slept through Friday night  
and Saturday and its night, too.*

*But then, on Sunday morning,  
I was wakened by a violence.  
Light - pure, hard, demanding light  
- slammed against my sour face, and I  
blinked, and I looked, and I saw the  
last and the first wonder of all.*

*There was the Ragman,  
folding the blanket most carefully,  
a scar on his forehead, but alive!  
And, besides that, healthy!  
There was no sign of sorrow nor of age,  
and all the rags that he had gathered  
shined for cleanliness.*

*Well, then I lowered my head and trembling  
for all that I had seen,  
I myself walked up to the Ragman.*

*I told him my name with shame,  
for I was a sorry figure next to him.  
Then I took off all my clothes in that place,  
and I said to him with dear yearning in my  
voice:*

*"Dress me, LORD".  
HE dressed me.  
My LORD, HE put new rags on me,  
and now I to, follow HIM.*

*The Ragman, the Ragman,  
THE CHRIST*

The belt, the waste band, your life before God;  
be careful with it. But even now, it's not  
ruined. Jesus, the Ragman, makes all things  
new.