

The living and true God

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning, and Bob is leading us through the book of Jeremiah, and we've come this morning to chapter 10.

If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, I think that's page 638. If not, you'll find it pretty near the middle of your Bibles, and you'll find it after the big book of Isaiah and before Ezekiel. Jeremiah chapter 10. And just as our opening psalm that we sang was all about idols and the living God, so here Jeremiah likewise is pointing up the great difference between the God who is alive and the dead and hopeless gods of the mind of man.

Hear the word that the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the Lord, learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens, because the nations are dismayed at them.

For the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold.

[1 : 15] They fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak. They have to be carried, for they cannot walk.

Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil. Neither is it in them to do good. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might.

Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due. For among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like you.

They are both stupid and foolish. The instruction of idols is but wood. Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of craftsmen and of the hands of the goldsmiths. Their clothing is violet and purple. They are all the work of skilled men. But the Lord is the true God. He is the living God and the everlasting King.

[2 : 19] At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation. Thus shall you say to them, the gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.

It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom and by his understanding stretched out the heavens. When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens.

And he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes the lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses. Every man is stupid and without knowledge.

Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols. For his images are false. There is no breath in them. They are worthless. A work of delusion.

At the time of their punishment, they shall perish. Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob. For he is the one who formed all things.

[3 : 25] And Israel is the tribe of his inheritance. The Lord of hosts is his name. Gather up your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under siege.

For thus says the Lord, Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time. I will bring distress on them, and they may feel it. Woe is me because of my hurt.

My wound is grievous. But I said, Truly, this is an infliction, and I must bear it. My tent is destroyed, and all my cords are broken.

My children have gone from me, and they are not. There is no one to spread my tent again and to set up my curtains. For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the Lord.

Therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered. A voice, a rumor. Behold, it comes, a great commotion out of the north country to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals.

[4 : 27] I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself. It is not in man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but in justice, not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing.

Pour out your wrath on the nations that know you not, and on the peoples that call not on your name. For they have devoured Jacob.

They have devoured him and consumed him, and laid waste his habitation. Amen. And may God bless to us this his word.

Amen. Now, as we turn to Jeremiah chapter 10, let's have a moment of prayer.

And if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 638. Amen. Lord, we pray that you will open our eyes, that we may see with clarity.

[5 : 46] We pray you will open our hearts, that we may love you sincerely. We pray that you will open our ears, that we will hear and obey you, and that you will lead us through the written word, and through the words spoken about it, and all that imperfection, to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. If you were to ask Christians, what's one of the things that worries them most about the situation of the faith in these days, many people would probably mention the so-called new atheism.

People like Richard Dawkins and so on. The many on the faith that people like that launch. And that's true. I mean, that is a feature of our time.

But in many ways, it's very much a minority sport. It's the kind of thing that happens in senior common rooms and universities, on highbrow and little watch programs on television.

So in many ways, it's not a particularly serious problem for people. What Jeremiah is presenting, though, is one that is far more dangerous, because it is far more subtle.

[7 : 12] It is the problem of idolatry. The problem of loving and trusting anything other than the Lord. There's actually no third option here.

We need to either trust the Lord or we need to trust some idol, some idol of our own manufacturing and so on. And that's what Jeremiah is dealing with here in chapter 10.

I want to say two things by way of introduction. First of all, look at verse 1 and into the first part of verse 2. Jeremiah is determined that there is one voice that the people will listen to, whether they don't want to listen to it or not.

And this is the voice of the Lord himself. And when we open the word of God, remember, this is not just a routine or a ritual.

It's not just something we do because we're met together in church. This means we are expecting an encounter with the living God through his word.

[8 : 24] Hear the word that the Lord speaks to you. And the house of Israel, of course, is not simply the people of that time, but the people of all times, including us.

And just a word about the structure of the chapter. Jeremiah is a poet. Now, many of you will probably have bad memories of doing poetry in English classes in schools.

And as a former English teacher, I know very well that I didn't always contribute to the love of poetry in the nation's youth. But if you're going to grapple with Jeremiah, you have to realize this.

He is a poet. He uses language with brilliance, with power, with variety. And it's usually pictorial language. That's why many preachers don't like him.

They prefer the therefore, therefore, therefore style, developing a logical argument. Jeremiah is not like that. Jeremiah puts pictures together. And when he puts these pictures together, as you get in a collage of photographs and so on, each of these pictures actually helps us to understand the other.

[9 : 37] Each of them comment on and complement the other. And here we have three types of picture. We have satire, an attack on idolatry.

A very uncompromising and very colorful attack on idolatry. We have a hymn, particularly in verses 12 and 13.

Great hymn of praise to Yahweh, to the Lord. And then we have a lament at the end of the chapter from verse 19. So we're going to look at these three things, the satire, the hymn, and the lament.

And this will help us to understand something of what the poet prophet is saying. And I'm going to call this the living and the true God. The church of the Thessalonians, we are told in the beginning of that short letter, turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God.

That's what Jeremiah wants to happen to his people here. Turn from idols to the living and the true God. So first of all, the seduction of idolatry.

[10:49] Idolatry is very seductive. Idolatry is very tempting. And in the first 18 verses or so, the praise of the Lord and the attack on the idols blend together.

It's satire to get people to sit up to see what idolatry is really like. It's very probable Jeremiah was influenced by Psalm 115, which we sang at the beginning, because many of the verses here about idols are very close to that.

So very close to what Isaiah says about idolatry in chapters 40 and following. Now when the Old Testament prophets attack idolatry, very often it's not so much idolatry is evil, but idolatry is silly. Idolatry is foolish. They mock it. As long ago C.S. Lewis did in the screw tape letters, showing the sheer triviality often of what the devil tempts us to do.

And in the preface to that, he quotes the words of Sir Thomas More, the devil is the proud spirit who cannot bear to be mocked.

[12:03] So he uses mockery against idolatry here. But why are we so prone to idolatry? If it's so silly, and after all, people are not stupid, why are we so prone to idolatry?

And Jeremiah here analyzes some things that makes the human heart so prone to idolatry. First of all, there is a pressure of public opinion in verse 2.

Learn not the ways of the nations. Verse 3, the customs of the peoples. Learn not is a very strong word.

It actually says, don't become disciples of this. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you must follow the way that everybody else follows.

Don't be superstitious, he says. Do not be dismayed at the signs of the heavens. Don't bother about horoscopes and silliness like that. Make sure that you keep your mind open to reality.

[13:07] Idolatry. Because you see, idolatry opens the door to unreality. Idolatry makes us foolish. Idolatry makes us hazy and fuzzy and not really living in the real world.

But of course, the power of public opinion is very strong and we all feel it, don't we? We're all pressurized into thinking certain things.

Not so much that we actually sit down and logically think that everybody's thinking this. Everybody does this. Those of you who have brought up kids know very well that your kids will come home from school and say, we need to get this because everybody has it.

Usually it means the two people who are their best friends do. But this pressure of public opinion remains with us, I think, throughout our adult life. To think in ungodly ways.

To act in ungodly ways. The power of the mass media, not least the social media. I mean, after all, remember the devil is an adept at exploiting any kind of human type of communication.

[14:16] The written word, the spoken word on the radio, the visual word on TV, and of course not least the social media, Facebook and Twitter and all the rest of it.

He is very, very active there, isn't he? The pressure of public opinion. That's what makes us into idolaters. That's what makes us trust in the seen rather than in the unseen God.

It said of Moses in Hebrews 11 that he endured because he saw him who is invisible. We need to keep our eyes open and see him who is invisible.

Hear him whose voice is speaking from his word. But another part of the seduction of idolatry is the sense of control it gives us.

Verse 3, a tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Idols are human inventions.

[15:19] And of course it means we're worshipping something utterly impotent. Verse 5, their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak. They have to be carried for they cannot walk.

Do not be afraid of them. They cannot do evil. Neither is it in them to do good. You see, this is a period of it. I make an idol and I worship it.

But somewhere at the back of my mind is the idea, well, this is less than me because I've made it. So there's this sense of control. People worshipping their own creations.

They have to be carried. The great nations of the east Babylon, Assyria, feature of their religion was carrying their gods in procession to the temple of their god, to their main temple.

On New Year's Day in ancient Babylon, the statue of the god Marduk was carried in procession up to his temple. That's what Isaiah walked. See, have to be carried.

[16:21] What a difference from the true god. What does the true god do? He carries you. He carries us. He carries the lambs in his arms. He gently leads those with young.

What kind of a useless, powerless god is it who needs to be carried? If you're worshipping something you can carry, something that you can control with your own hands and put in a box, then he's no god at all.

So there is this sense of control, a sense of public opinion. There's a third thing in verse 4, and it's developed in verse 9. They decorate it with silver and gold.

Verse 9, beaten silver brought from Tarshish and gold from Ufas, the great metal-producing centers of the time. And beauty, of course, is a good thing.

But no amount of finery can change an idol into something living. That is the point. You see, we're back in the Garden of Eden. Eve looked on the tree and saw that it was beautiful.

[17:27] Now, beauty, of course, is celebrated in Scripture. Read the Psalms, the praise of the created order. Read the Song of Songs, the praise of human love and beauty, and so on.

But what are these people doing? They're doing what Paul says in Romans 1. They're worshipping the creature rather than the creator. And the damning words of verse 14, There is no breath.

There is no life in them. The love of created objects simply because they are beautiful. Now, you see the problem about all this and the reason it's so seductive.

None of these things are bad things in themselves. Beauty is a good thing. God has created us with a sense of beauty. God has created us with a sense of himself.

What is being said here is do not build your life on them. Because if you build your life on things you admire, whatever they may happen to be, you're going to be let down.

[18:35] As my son and I ruefully thought to each other as we returned from seeing our team yet again snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. You see, if you depend on these things, whether it's a team, whether it's some possession, whether it's sex or money, they're going to let you down.

And that's what Jeremiah is saying here. So he turns now from the seduction of idolatry to the security of trusting the Lord.

And woven in this satire, in verses 1 to 16, is the security of trusting the Lord, culminating in the hymn of praise in verse 12.

See, this is not just intellectual security. This God does satisfy all these longings. He satisfies the longing for something bigger than ourselves. Satisfies our desire for beauty.

All those things which idols try to imitate. And Jeremiah shows us great life-changing truths about God. First of all, he is the Lord of history.

[19:48] Verse 6. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due.

For among all the wise ones of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like you. He is the living God. And his kingdom will never end.

No one can hinder him. He can deal with the giant problems of the earth. There's no point in turning to idols when we're looking for help for the giant problems of the world.

Is there things that Willie mentioned in his prayer? The problems in Algeria, the conflict in Syria, the great economic problems that plague us, the personal problems that plague us.

We may remember Isaiah 40 talking about the nations, the collective power of humanity says, all the nations are like a drop in a bucket.

[20:50] He takes up the coastlands as a very little thing. And verse 11, perhaps a proverbial saying, the gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and under the heavens.

They will go. They will disappear. They will come to an end. But this God will never end. And this is the God who, as Ecclesiastes says, has placed eternity in our hearts.

He is the living God. He is the Lord of history. That means he's also the Lord of your history and mine. There is never, you will never reach a time in your own life history that he's not there.

You'll never find a place where he isn't. And that's the second point. He is also the Lord of creation.

Verse 12, it is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

The universe is not simply colossal power. There is colossal, immense wisdom there. Wisdom and understanding. The vast spaces of the universe, the nearest stars, light years away, all by him and for him.

[22:05] Helvin described the universe as the theater of God's glory. Look up at the stars. Don't look at them and worship them. Look up at them and thank the creator who made them.

Look at their beauty. Think of the vast distances. Think of the immense power and wonder and glory of the God who made them. And he controls the elusive forces of nature.

When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of water in the heavens. He makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain. Brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

All these forces of earth that we cannot control. These forces, oh, we can tell the direction the wind is coming from. Forecasters are better than they used to be at telling what the weather is going to be like the next few days.

But they don't control them. And we don't. We don't control them. The Lord is not trapped in his creation. That's why the very heart of Israel's faith is the great affirmation of the psalmist.

[23 : 12] My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. There is nothing in heaven and earth that can resist him. As the book of Daniel says, no one can stay his hand or say to him, what are you doing?

He is the Lord of history, the Lord of creation. These great truths, they're not just abstractions.

When the devout Israelite tumbled out of bed and said, hear, O Israel, Yahweh is your God, Yahweh is one, that wasn't just a theory.

It meant there were no other gods. But no other gods controlled any part of their lives. There was nothing that we do, however trivial it may seem to us, that isn't under his control.

And that really is the third thing about the security. Verse 16, not like these is he who is the portion, the inheritance of Jacob. When you look up at the night sky, and particularly if you think of the vast distances, or even more if you look through a telescope and see these galaxies upon galaxies, they're far beyond human understanding.

Thought might strike our hearts. How can a God like that possibly be interested in a tiny planet circling a minor star in a remote galaxy on the edge of the Milky Way?

[24 : 42] Much less, how can that God care if I have a job? How can that God bother whether I'm healthy or ill? How can that God possibly care about my relationships?

And so what Jeremiah is saying here is something very, very powerful. That God is not too great to care. He is too great to fail.

Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob. The pagan gods were totally amoral. The pagan gods were totally heartless.

The pagan gods were totally capricious. This God cares for his people. He is the portion of Jacob. Who is he? He is the one who formed all things.

And Israel is the tribe of his inheritance. He is committed to his people by promises that he will not and cannot break. So the issues are very clear, aren't they?

[25 : 47] life-less, impotent, heartless gods in a chilly, lonely universe or the living God who cares for his people.

The portion of Jacob don't worship the heavenly hosts. Worship the Lord of hosts. Yahweh of hosts is his name. There's no third option, is there?

We either worship the Lord and depend on him or we worship something else whether it's sex or money or career, even the church. It's easy to worship the church instead of worshiping the living God.

So the seduction of idolatry, the security of trusting the Lord. And as the tone of the poem turns to lament, we have the sorrow of the prophet for his people's blindness.

And it seems to me these last verses from 17 onwards is the prophet commenting on what's happening. You see, it's not unconnected, as some of the commentators say.

[26 : 50] The prophet is saddened beyond belief that his people have turned to the idols from the living God. He said back in chapter 2, you've forsaken the fountains of living water and you've turned to broken systems and hold no water.

You see, one's saying the stupidity. Imagine turning away from a perpetual fountain of clean, flowing water and turning to a broken system that doesn't even have water in it at all.

So, what is the prophet saying? First of all, he is giving hope in the middle of desperation. God is going to punish his people.

Verse 17 and 18, get your bags ready, you're going off to Babylon, that's going to happen. Gather your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under seas. For thus says the Lord, Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time.

I will bring distress on them that they may feel it. Now, that doesn't sound very comforting, does it? Until we remember one thing. Jeremiah is saying, not the Babylonians, not the foe from the north, the great commotion out of the north country, verse 22, they're ultimately not in charge.

[28 : 06] The Lord is going to take them into exile. Just as in, just the book of Daniel says that as well, the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand and it is probably in the reign of that king that these words are spoken.

You see, the Lord, the only hope for them is in the Lord they have rejected. It's what C.S. Lewis called the severe mercy. They must turn to the one whom they have rejected and who will not share them with idols.

And then in verses 20 and so on, the sheer vulnerability of the people, my tent is destroyed, all my cords are broken. Jerusalem may be a well-defended city with strong walls.

Indeed, it took the Babylonians three years, we believe, to destroy it. But yet, it's like a tent, cords broken, no one to spread the tent again.

There's no future. Children have gone. And once again, a theme comes up which is so common in Jeremiah, verse 21, the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the Lord.

[29 : 16] The false prophets and leaders who have led the idolatry, catastrophic failure of leadership. So, the sorrow of the prophet.

And then, in the last few verses, in his sorrow, the prophet appeals to the Lord of the covenant.

Verse 23, I know, Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, it is not in him to direct his steps.

Now, you see the connection of idolatry. Idolatry says that I do have it in me to direct my steps. The idols that I make to which I look for guidance, my own creations.

That really, that really ultimately is arrogance because ultimately idol worship comes down to the worship of me, doesn't it? Idol worship, it dethrones God and I place my creations, my prejudices, my desires, which ultimately are a projection of me on the screen of the universe.

verse. But here, Jeremiah shows himself as the true shepherd, as against the false shepherds. He's asking that the Lord will, through this just judgment, bring about correction and repentance.

[30 : 37] No idol can do that. You can talk yourself hoarse and fall in front of the idol as often as you want. Nothing will happen. Correction rather than destruction.

And verse 25, something that he appeals, he says, Lord, you love Jacob. Jacob is your inheritance and you are Jacob's inheritance.

They have devoured Jacob. They have devoured him and consumed. They've laid waste his habitation. Notice he doesn't presume on God. He actually speaks to God, if you like, reminding him of his character.

character of compassion. And that has to do with actually, as I bring this to a close, I want us to reflect back on verse 1 because it all flows from verse 1.

Hear the word that the Lord speaks. Thus says the Lord, ultimately we avoid idolatry. Ultimately we avoid the vanity and silliness of idolatry by listening to the voice of God.

[31 : 51] And some months ago one of the Cornhill students gave a very powerful exposition of a passage in James.

The passage where James says, be doers of the word, not just hearers of the word. And it stuck with me in these months and with others as well who have commented on it.

This student talked about how two of them had gone earlier that week to see, I think it was the Phantom of the Opera, and how on their return from that visit, thrilled by what they had seen, they talked about it, they thought about it, they conversed about it.

And this student then said at the end, as the passage was applied, what do we do when we hear the voice of God? Do we talk about after the preaching is over?

Do we do what happened with them at the Phantom of the Opera? Or do we instantly say, well that's the sermon over now, can we just go back to talking about other things?

[33 : 02] We need to get our priorities right. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Amen. Let's pray.

Our Father, how we recognize idolatry in ourselves. Remember the words of your apostle, little children, keep yourselves from idols.

We know you have given us all things richly to enjoy, but help us above the voices, the other voices that we hear, to hear the voice of the shepherd, those sheep hear his voice and who follow him.

Help us by your gracious Holy Spirit to walk in your ways, to listen to your voice, and to love you all the days of our lives. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.