

Knowing the True God

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[0 : 00] Now we are turning again to the book of Jeremiah, and you'll find the reading on page 644. We're going to be reading chapter 16 of the book.

Jeremiah chapter 16, reading from verse 1. The word of the Lord came to me.

You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord, concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them, and the fathers who fathered them in this land, they shall die of deadly diseases.

They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth.

For thus says the Lord, Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or grieve for them, for I have taken away my peace from this people. My steadfast love and mercy, declares the Lord, both great and small shall die in this land.

[1 : 16] They shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them, or cut himself, or make himself bald for them. No one shall break bread for the mourner, to comfort him for the dead.

Nor shall anyone give the cup of consolation to drink for his father or his mother. You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride.

And when you tell these people all these words, and they say to you, Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God?

Then shall you say to them, Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord, and have gone after other gods, and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me, and have not kept my law.

[2 : 23] And because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me. Therefore, I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there shall you serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.

Therefore, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt. But, as the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them, for I will bring them back to their own land, that I gave to their fathers.

Hold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward, I will send for many hunters, they shall hunt them for every mountain, and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rock.

For my eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes. But first, I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations. O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth, and say, Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things, in which there is no prophet.

[4 : 01] Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods. Therefore, behold, I will make them know this. Once, I will make them know my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the Lord.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading from his word. Shall you notice the contrast between the two sections of this chapter? The first section, grim and rather hopeless, and the second section, looking to God, who can bring life out of death.

I said last week, I think Jeremiah is often like the lament psalms, because you get psalms like that, where the psalmist begins in profound gloom, and then turns to the mighty deeds of God.

And we're going to sing one of those psalms. Now, Psalm 77. And now, could I ask you, please, to have your Bibles open at Jeremiah 16, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

God our Father, you have told us that to this one will you look, the one who is of a humble and contrite heart, and who trembles at your word. Father, help us to tremble at this word, this living word, this word, so faithfully and fully, leading us to the Lord Christ himself.

[5 : 29] See how in scripture, Christ is known. And may that be our experience this evening. And we ask that in his wonderful name. Amen.

Amen. If you drive south down the M74, just before you reach the border, you're going to come to the curiously named village of Echelfeichen, a place of which it's said that those who can pronounce it can't spell it, and those who can spell it can't pronounce it.

Be that as it may, it proudly proclaims itself as the birthplace of Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century writer, historian, and philosopher.

Carlyle was not himself a believer, but at one period in his life, his native village was wanting to appoint a new minister to their church.

And they asked Carlyle for his advice. And Carlyle said, what you need is a man who knows God other than by hearsay. A man who knows God other than by hearsay.

[6 : 42] That's not just true for ministers. That's true of all Christians, isn't it? And that's what I'm calling this chapter this evening, knowing the true God. Taking this from verse 21, the last chapter, the last verse, sorry, We've noticed regularly, as we've gone through Jeremiah, how this apparently diverse material that he presents to us usually has a key that unlocks it.

And I think this is the key that unlocks this chapter. Knowing who the true God is. Serving the living and the true God. And this is nothing less than eternal life.

And what Jesus says in John 17, this is eternal life. That they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

This chapter seems to me to be about knowing the true God. Now, as you read Jeremiah, you'll find there's an unusual amount about his personal life. It is quite rare in the prophets.

Many of the prophets we know very little apart from their names. And hardly even that in some cases. Malachi, I mean, may simply be an omnipotent, for example, meaning my messenger.

[8 : 06] But in Jeremiah, his life so much mirrors his message that we are given considerable chunks of his personal life. And as we go through, we'll find that in subsequent chapters.

His message comes not only through his preaching. Not only through symbolic actions, like the spoiled loincloth that he had to take to the Euphrates. It's mirrored in his own life.

Jeremiah emphatically knew God, other than by hearsay. The chapter, as I said, falls into two parts. The first part, verses 1 to 13, is sober realism.

Now, realism, even if it is painful and hurts, is far better than fantasy. The people were living in fantasy land. Jeremiah opens their eyes to painful realism.

But the second part deals with living hope. And they're both linked by this theme of knowing God. So first of all then, in verses 1 to 13, knowing God in costly discipleship.

[9 : 16] Knowing God in this deeply personal and autobiographical passage. The pain of being faithful. The pain of being, remember, he who would valiant be.

Now, Jeremiah certainly is someone who would valiant be, fighting with giants and so on. Pity the modern version, missed out the hobgoblins and the foul fiends, but you can't have everything.

The painful cost of being faithful. Given the nature of this section, this probably comes rather earlier than later in his ministry. This costly discipleship is developed in three ways.

First of all, there is personal loneliness. Verse 2, you shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons and daughters in this place. Jeremiah's ministry, Jeremiah's mission is going to cause painful and costly personal loneliness.

Not for him, the loving intimacy of marriage. Not for him, the privilege of bringing up children. Now remember, this is not a model of what to do.

[10 : 25] This is not saying that if you are called to a ministry, you must therefore be celibate. That's the mistake that sometimes has been made. They're two different calls, actually.

And this is a specific word of the Lord directed to Jeremiah's circumstances. We remember in 1 Corinthians 7, both marriage and singleness are described as gifts of the spirit, charismata. And obviously both, both come with their challenges, both come with their particular circumstances. What's so poignant here is, remember the circumstance of Jeremiah, rejected by his countrymen, mocked, ridiculed, attacked, persecuted, and there's no one to go home and pour his heart out to. You must not take a wife. Rather like the terrible, poignant passage in Ezekiel 23, where the Lord says to Ezekiel, your wife's going to die tonight, and you've not to mourn. Just, I mean, the cost these prophets paid for being faithful was terrific. No children to see growing up. Especially since there's no sense he had actually chosen this way of life.

[11 : 42] It wasn't that Jeremiah decided one stage, well, I'm going to be single and that's that. And he is given the reason in verses 3 and 4. If you had children, they'd be caught up in the horrors of war, and exile.

Don't marry, don't have children, otherwise you'll simply see them die, you'll simply see them exiled. This is what C.S. Lewis called a severe mercy.

It is a mercy, but it's a very severe and poignant one. So there is personal loneliness involved, and he comes to know God in this personal loneliness. As we've seen, he wrestles with God, he argues with God, he questions God.

Lord, why, why, why? Like the lament psalms, like the one we sang a moment or two ago, I cried out to God to help me. In my turmoil and my grief, day and night, my voice came to him.

Yet my heart found no relief. You'd be very surprised if there aren't people in this room, and in the other rooms, who haven't experienced that. Perhaps someone may be experiencing that now.

[12 : 49] But to personal pain is added social isolation in verses 5 to 9. Not only are you not to marry Jeremiah and have children, you are not neither to go to the house of mourning, verse 5, or the house of feasting.

Now, as so often in the Old Testament, these are used as, if you like, the opposite switch, and everything in between. Jeremiah, there is no social life for you either.

The key, and I think the key is verse 5. Terrifying verse. I have taken away my peace, my shalom, from this people, my steadfast love, and mercy.

Remember, that's the Sermist of Psalm 97, says, has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he taken his steadfast love, his covenant love, away? Jeremiah, says the Lord, you cannot enter into a personal covenant with another human being.

Because, Jeremiah, the covenant between me and my bride has been broken. See, in Jeremiah, the word becomes flesh, very, very painfully.

[14 : 05] We'll sing later on, how his heart upon the cross was broken, the crown of pain, to three and thirty years. Few people have ever entered the sufferings of the Lord more poignantly, more powerfully, more agonizingly, than Jeremiah.

The fellowship of his suffering that Paul talks about in Philippians. And look at verse 9. Thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will silence this place before your eyes, and in your days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, the voice of the bride.

These are good things. These are wonderful things. And this is anticipating the day of judgment. Read the book of Revelation. Read chapter 18, the fall of Babylon.

Not just the ancient city of Babylon, but the whole anti-God world system. The voice of the bride and the bridegroom will be heard no more.

What the Lord is saying is Jeremiah, when the city falls, this is an apocalyptic event, anticipating the day of the Lord. So, Jeremiah, there is personal loneliness, there is social isolation, and the third element of cost is the continual rejection of his message.

[15 : 24] Verses 10 to 13. When you tell these people, they say, why has the Lord pronounced all this? The total complacency of those who think the message is for others.

God, I mean, after all, the attitude here is, what have we done? In a later generation, Malachi is going to face the same sort of thing at the end of the Old Testament period.

We'll say, well, in what way have we offended you? Wholesale and repeated breach of covenant. The lesson all was taught and never learned.

That's the problem. Verse 11. Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord. And verse 12. You have done worse than them.

We saw this morning how the curse on Reuben carried down the generations. This is what's happening here. Your fathers forsook me and you have done worse.

[16:22] Their heart has gone after other gods. They did not know God. Unlike Jeremiah, they opted for a painless religion, free from the Decalogue, no Ten Commandments, free from responsibilities, as rootless as birds and bees.

There was no, there was absolutely no sense that there would be any kind of comeback on this. What's the result? Verse 13. I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known and there you shall serve other gods day and night.

Babylonian religion will end in Babylon. As before, in an earlier generation, Amos had warned the Syrian religion will end in Assyria. It's interesting when you read the post-exilic prophets like Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi.

The post-exilic community, and you find this particularly in Ezra and Nehemiah, had many sins, but on the land on the Euphrates, idolatry had been burned out of them.

They discover what these gods were like. You shall serve other gods day and night. And this is what had happened to them. Gods who will show them no love, no favor.

[17:42] Gods who will show them no steadfast love, no compassion. Gods who cannot see. Isn't it idolatry? Why is idolatry so attractive to people?

Idolatry is attractive because after all if you have a god who can't see, he can't see if I'm getting up to no good. On the other hand, it's not much use if I want guidance.

A god who can't speak, he can't rebuke me, but neither can he tell me what to do. Gods who can't move, rooted in the same place, hopeless, futile, and empty.

Now, as I said, this is not a model, this is not a picture of what it will be like for us if we are faithful. This is a picture that comes from the circumstances.

Nevertheless, we are going to be faithful like Jeremiah. We are going to have to experience some of this. Whoever will follow me, said Jesus, let him take up his cross and come after me.

[18:44] There is no discipleship, there is no following that does not go the way of the cross. You see, for Jeremiah, it was visible, painful, and dramatic because Jeremiah is an object lesson to the people.

That's why it's so vivid. but, in unseen and in undramatic ways, all God's people follow him in a discipleship that costs not less than everything.

You see, you, we don't know what people are suffering. We don't know the problems that people are wrestling with. We don't know the lonely agonies and the painful disciplines often make up people's lives unless we know people quite well and even then we don't necessarily know what people are struggling with and how painful discipleship is.

Knowing God, first of all, then, through costly, painful discipleship, it is the way the master went should not the servant tread it still. Remember, and remember that Peter says in his first letter having established very clearly that salvation is only through the blood of Christ and not by our own efforts then tells us having established that he suffered leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps.

But the second, in the second section, verses 14 to 21, knowing God by seeing his word come true. These two sections are closely linked.

[20:20] Jeremiah is told to preach and exemplify model, if you like, only the word that God gives. It would have been far more pleasant for Jeremiah had he behaved unspoken like the false prophets.

In fact, we are studying his words this evening show that his words were true words, that they were lasting words, that they were the words from God. You see, the fatal flaw if he had gone the way of the false prophets and spoken the word, which was palatable, he would never have been heard of. He would simply have disappeared, brief layer of popularity, and then gone. And notice verse 14. This is the phrase that Willie drew our attention to this morning in Genesis 49.

The days are coming, declares the Lord. The last days, the latter days, the period between the two comings, the period between the coming to Bethlehem and the final coming of the kingdom.

The whole Bible is pointing forward and impelling us forward. You see, the God that we know in painful and costly discipline is the God who will one day vindicate himself and his servants.

[21 : 41] And the first thing to notice is he is still the Savior, verses 14 to 15. No longer shall it be said as the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

That's at the very heart of Israel's faith. When your child asks you what this is about, tell him, tell her, that we were slaves in Egypt and Yahweh our God brought us out by a mighty hand.

You may remember the psalm we sang, Psalm 77. The psalmist with the particular problem still unsolved turns to the God of the Exodus and I thought upon the marvels of the Lord our God most high, pondering the Lord's great goodness mortal power could not defy.

But this Exodus is just the forerunner of something even greater. So often the enemy from the north has been mentioned. But notice verse 15, as the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country.

Notice this phrase brought up, the phrase used about the coming from Egypt, now the coming from Babylon. But it's surely foreshadowing something greater. Flash forward to Luke chapter 9 verse 31.

[22 : 56] Jesus stands on the holy mountain with Moses and Elijah. What are they speaking about? They spoke, Luke tells us, of his departure, of his exodus that he would carry out at Jerusalem.

Here is the greater Moses come to lead the greater exodus of his people across the sea of death and judgment to the promised land. I will bring them back to their own land I gave to their fathers. As we notice so often in our studies in Genesis, the land to the fathers was only a trailer of something else. Remember Hebrews again, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in the land of promise as pilgrims, as sojourners.

They realized this was only a staging post if you like. and on the day of Pentecost what happened? People from every nation under heaven heard the voice, heard the wonderful deeds of God in their own language.

They heard about the new exodus. They heard about these words of Jeremiah being fulfilled. This is the living God who brings life out of death.

[24 : 04] It's going to be, of course, our subject this week leading up to Easter, isn't it? The God who brings life out of death, as Paul says in Romans 4, who brings things out of nothing, calls them into being, and raises the dead.

And he keeps his promises, the land I gave to their fathers. God is still the Savior. This is the great truth of the Exodus. God is the Savior. God is the rescuer.

God is the deliverer. What he did, what he did to ancient Israel, bringing them from Egypt, is a picture of something far greater. In verses 16 to 18, God is the just judge.

Now, this may seem an intrusion, and many of the commentators do see it as that. But it's not. It's a powerful reminder that this salvation comes at a great cost.

The metaphor there, fishers and hunters, is what the prophet Habakkuk says about the Babylonians. They will come like fishers. They will draw you out of the sea like hunters.

[25 : 11] They will pursue you wherever you go. It is the pagan conquerors who are coming and purging out idolatry. For all my eyes, sorry, verse 70, my eyes are on all their ways.

They are not hidden from me. And first, I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin. Same word that Isaiah used in chapter 40.

Israel, God's people, have suffered double. Now, it doesn't mean they've been punished twice. The metaphor there is a sheet of paper folded over like this where the two sides exactly correspond to each other.

That's the metaphor. The just punishment for their sins, which, of course, brings about the great salvation. And that's the gospel, isn't it? How God can be just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus.

The sin was dreadful, the punishment was dreadful, but the salvation is even greater. We sang a few weeks ago, Great God of wonders, all your ways are matchless, God-like, and divine, but the fair glories of your grace above your other wonders shine.

[26 : 22] Who is a pardoning God like you, with grace so free, so rich, so true. God is still the Savior, he's still the just judge. As Cranmer's prayer book puts it so beautifully, most merciful Savior, judge eternal.

The one who judges on the last day is the one who died on Calvary. You read the book of Revelation, it's the Lamb who unleashes the judgments on the world.

And thirdly, God is the Lord of the nations. He's the Savior, he's the judge. In verses 19 to 21, he's the Lord of the nations.

Another confirming of Jeremiah's call. Back in chapter 1, Jeremiah had been told, I've put you, my words, in your mouth, and I've set you this day over nations and over kingdoms.

It's a theme that runs right through the scripture. Elijah tells Elisha, go and anoint the king of Israel and the king of Syria, meaning that the word of the prophet is greater than the power of the kings and will outlast the kings.

[27 : 37] And this theme of the nations turning to God is after all a fulfillment of the call of Abraham, isn't it? That all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And notice how Jeremiah praises Yahweh here. Verse 19, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble. He turns to the language of the Psalms as he does so often.

Notice this in scripture. The prophets so often echo the words of the Psalms. Here and here, Jeremiah praises the Lord on whom his life has been built.

To you shall the nations come. They'll sing in a moment, I cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage, how satisfy the needs and aspirations of east and west, of sinner and of sage.

And once again, the emptiness and futility of human religion. Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit. Can a man make for himself gods?

[28 : 41] Such are not gods. And once again, this is where we began. Knowing God. How is it going to happen?

Verse 21, Therefore behold, I will make them know. I will teach them. Same Hebrew verb as the verb to know in the particular form means make them know. In other words, teach them.

I will teach them to know my power and my might. what does Paul say in Romans 1? The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Now, it's so important. Paul does not say the gospel word is accompanied by the power of God. Paul says the gospel word itself is the power of God.

It is the living word, the word that spoke creation, the word of judgment, the word of God that comes through the failing and fickle and fragile words of humans.

[29 : 41] This is what God is pleased to use to bring people to know him. That they might know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom they have sent.

So when we feel that words is a very futile and very fragile weapon to use against idolatry and ungodliness, this is a God-appointed way of bringing people to himself.

Not just any old words, but words taken by the Spirit of God. And what do these words do in Jeremiah's time? They pluck up and they break, they pluck up kingdoms, they restore kingdoms.

They break down strongholds. Remember Paul says that in 2 Corinthians 10. Our words, that's to say the words given by the Holy Spirit of God, are powerful for the demolishing of strongholds.

The word of God. Let's trust in it, let's believe in it, let's celebrate it, let's rejoice in it because it is this word that will cause people to know that my name is the Lord.

[30 : 47] Costly, painful discipleship, coming to know God in the agonies of his life and his ministry.

But also, this wonderful glimpse of the future, coming to know that the words spoken in the darkness is going to be gloriously true in the light when all the lands worship and every knee bows and every tongue confesses.

If we weren't Presbyterians, we'd probably be saying hallelujah at that point. Let's pray. God, our Father, how we praise you for the fountain opened for sin and salvation, for this powerful word that breaks down barriers, makes its way into the hearts and minds of people.

Lord, give us confidence in that word, give us hope in that word, help us to believe it, help us to proclaim it, until the day when we see that that word is true.

Amen.