

How do we know who is telling the truth?

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] So we'll turn now to our Bible reading, which you'll find in the Old Testament in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 44, and that's on page 670.

We're coming near to the end of our two-year trek. I was going to say marathon through this. And when people get towards the last stages of the marathon, they tend to flag.

So we are hoping to finish this in the five Sundays of this month. Now, just a quick word about the situation. Jeremiah prophesied for over 40 years to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, telling them unless they repented, they were doomed, and that you'd be taken off to Babylon.

That had actually happened by this time. People had been taken off to Babylon. A number had remained, guerrilla fighters and others who had hidden in the hills and so on. And against Jeremiah's warning, these people had gone to Egypt.

The Lord had said, stay in the land. You won't be punished. You won't be ill-treated by Nebuchadnezzar. I'll look after you. In spite of that, they had gone to Egypt.

[1 : 10] And they had forced Jeremiah and his secretary Baruch to go with them. And in chapter 44, we have Jeremiah's last words to the people of Judah who had gone to Egypt.

And that's the context. So let's read the chapter. Chapter 44, page 670. The words that came to Jeremiah concerning all the Judeans who lived in the land of Egypt, at Migdal, at Tach-Penhez, at Memphis, and in the land of Pethros.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah. Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them, because of the evil that they committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went to make offerings and serve other gods that they knew not, neither they nor you nor your fathers. Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants, the prophets, saying, Oh, do not do this abomination that I hate. But they did not listen or incline their ear to turn from their evil and make no offerings to other gods.

Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. And they became a waste and a desolation, as at this day.

[2 : 39] And now, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Why do you commit this great evil against yourself, to cut off from you man and woman, infant and child, from the midst of Judah, leaving you no remnant?

Why do you provoke me to anger with the works of your hands, making offerings to other gods in the land of Egypt, where you have come to live, so that you may be cut off and have become a curse and a taunt among all the nations of the earth?

Have you forgotten the evils of your fathers, the evil of the kings of Judah, the evil of their wives, your own evil and the evil of your wives, which they committed in the land of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?

They have not humbled themselves even to this day, nor have they feared, nor walked in my law and my statutes, that I set before you and before your fathers.

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will set my face against you for harm, to cut off all Judah. I will take the remnant of Judah who have set their faces to come to the land of Egypt to live, and they shall be consumed.

[3 : 50] In the land of Egypt they shall fall by the sword, and by famine they shall be consumed.

From the least to the greatest they shall die by the sword and by famine, and they shall become an oath, a horror, a curse, and a taunt.

I will punish those who dwell in the land of Egypt, as I have punished Jerusalem with a sword, with famine, and with pestilence. None of the remnant of Judah who have come to live in the land of

Egypt shall escape or survive, or return to the land of Judah, to which they desire to return to dwell there.

For they shall not return, except some fugitives. In all the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah, As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you.

But we will do everything that we have vowed, making offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pour out drink offerings to her as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.

For then we had plenty of food and prospered and saw no disaster. Since we left off making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have left everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.

[5 : 16] And the woman said, When we made offerings to the Queen of Heaven and poured out drink offerings to her, was it without our husband's approval that we made cakes for her, bearing her image, and poured out drink offerings to her?

Then Jeremiah said to all the people, Men and women, all the people have given him this answer. As for the offerings that you offered in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them?

Did it not come into his mind? The Lord could no longer bear your evil deeds and the abominations that you committed. Therefore, your land has become a desolation and a waste and a curse without an inhabitant, as it is this day.

It was because you made offerings and because you sinned against the Lord and did not obey the voice of the Lord or walk in his law and in his statutes and in his testimonies that this disaster has happened to you.

As at this day, Jeremiah said to all the people and all the women, Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who are in the land of Egypt. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You and your wives have declared with your mouths and fulfilled it with your hands, saying, We will surely perform our vows that we have made to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, to pour out drink offerings to her.

[6 : 45] Then confirm your vows and perform your vows. Therefore, hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah who dwell in the land of Egypt.

Behold, I have sworn by my great name, says the Lord, that my name shall no more be invoked by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, as the Lord God lives.

Behold, I am watching over them for disaster and not for good. All the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine until there is an end of them.

And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number, and all the remnant of Judah who come to the land of Egypt to live shall know whose word will stand, mine or theirs.

This shall be the sign to you, declares the Lord, that I will punish you in this place in order that you may know that my words will surely stand against you for harm. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hand of his enemies and into the hand of those who seek his life, as I gave Zedekiah, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who was his enemy and sought his life.

[8 : 04] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 44, on page 670.

Well, we're doing so. Let's ask the Lord's help as we look at this message. And Father, we pray indeed, as we have sung, that you will open our eyes.

We pray too, in the words of the psalmist, May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable, O Lord our God, in your sight.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. I don't know if you're a great fan of Sherlock Holmes, as I am.

Some of you may have seen the films, if you haven't read the stories. And some of you will know the story, Silver Blaze, and the story of the dog that did not bark in the night.

[9 : 18] If you haven't read the story, read it. I'm not going to spoil it for you, but one critical point in that story. A dog fails to bark.

And Sherlock Holmes says to Inspector Lestrade, what about that strange incident of the dog in the night time? And the inspector replies, but the dog did nothing in the night time.

And the inspector says, that was the strange incident. The reason the dog didn't bark was because it was his master who came in the dead of night.

He heard his master's voice. He recognized his master's voice and thought everything was all right. This is a chapter about hearing the master's voice.

That is what all Bible reading, all teaching and preaching is about, hearing the master's voice.

Rather, as the young Samuel said, long, long before this, master speak, for your servant is listening.

[10:19] Fundamental issue in this chapter is how do we know who is telling the truth? And that's our title for today. Many voices speak in this chapter, but not all of them speak the truth.

These are the last recorded words of Jeremiah. I know there's many more chapters. These are written words and so on. This is the last recorded words. And it's hardly, he hardly goes out on a high note, does he?

He's preached to these people for over 40 years and his ministry ends with this, a complete, total rejection. Not just indifference, but a complete, total defines of everything he's said.

Now, we cannot dare to measure his ministry by how many people he convinced, how many disasters he averted, how many revivals he experienced. I'm saying a bit more about this next week.

There is one criterion only by which we can judge Jeremiah's ministry. Was he faithful to God and was God pleased with him? Ultimately, that is to be said about all of us, all of our Christian lives, not just ministry, but all of our Christian living.

[11:33] Are we being faithful to God? Is God pleased with us? So the fundamental issue, as I say, is who is telling the truth? Now, if you read the book of Jeremiah, you'll find that this has been at the very heart of his message.

Way back in the temple sermon in chapter 7, he speaks about the lie. Jeremiah was surrounded by false prophets who peddled lies, or the lie even.

And that, of course, is a question for us today as well. How do we know who is telling the truth?

Many of you have been in this church for many decades, and you know very well that over all those decades, the word of God has been expounded.

Different personalities, different styles, different emphases, but the overriding message that this is the word of the Lord. How do we know if you were to go very far from here and listen to somebody else preaching a very different message?

So let's ask two questions then. How do we recognize lies and how do we recognize the truth?

These are my two main points today from this chapter.

[12:43] Let me give you a health warning before I go any further. It's awfully easy, isn't it? How do we recognize lies to think that's what other people are talking?

That's what you hear in other places. And sit complacently back and say, we're not like that. How do we hear the truth? Oh, well, we hear it all the time, don't we?

That's dangerous. That leads to complacency. That leads to arrogance. That leads to death, ultimately. Read about the church in Laodicea in Revelation chapter 3.

You won't find a word about heresies. You won't find a word about lies. You won't find a word about false teaching. What was their problem? Their problem was they had become complacent.

They had become full of themselves. You see, brothers and sisters, none of us are very truthful, are we? We all live in a world of evasions.

[13:40] Well, I'm not saying why we all of us go around all the time telling lies. Well, we all live in a world of evasions and half-truths. That's why I began with Psalm 19, where the psalmist says, cleanse me from secret sins.

Now, I don't think the psalmist there means the kind of secret sins, wrong things that you try to hide from other people. I think he means something much more fundamental. Sins which are secret because they are so much part of us that we don't actually see them as sins any longer.

We've ceased to listen to the master's voice. So these questions are for us. If we say we have no sin, if we say we are totally truthful, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

This is not a message that's easy to preach, much easier to preach and say things, oh well, we are fine, other people pedal lies. That's not what Jeremiah is saying.

I often think, in fact, every time I preach, I think of the words of the poet-preacher of the 17th century, George Herbert, who said, how can man preach thy holy word?

[14:50] He is a brittle, crazy glass. Glass there was the stained glass window, and Herbert says the only way he can do it is to stand back and allow the light to shine through that window.

So let's look at this chapter then. How do we, first of all, how do we recognize lies? Now, remember, this is not a mechanical checklist.

It's far more, it's far, we have a very subtle enemy, and truth and lies can sound very, very alike. Read the book of Proverbs, the two, wisdom and folly.

These two women speak, they speak in the same place, the highways, the streets, everywhere people gather, and they sound exactly alike. They invite us to their parties, and they use the same kind of language.

They make similar claims. So, what's this, how's this chapter going to help us? And the first thing, the first way we recognize lies, I think, is from verses 15 and 20.

[15:52] Then all the men who knew their wise made offerings stood by a great assembly of people. And then again in verse 20, Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who had given him this answer.

Delivered repetition of all the people. Lies often claim a consensus, don't they? Everybody thinks this way. Everybody is doing this. Everybody is saying this.

Now, that kind of thing can be pretty harmless. Many of you have brought up children, know this very well. Everyone's got these new trainers. Now, we know perfectly well that's not true.

We know it's the half dozen friends that they have got those new trainers, and so on. So, it's, but it's a natural human characteristic, isn't it? To claim that everyone's thinking this.

But it can be much more sinister. You get it in theology, in universities, nobody believes in this old fundamentalist stuff now. The Bible contains error as well as truth.

[16:51] No one actually believes this any longer. You see, we need to be alert to that. We also need to be alert to that in our own evangelical subculture, don't we? The celebrity culture, the in people.

If so-and-so or a group of people are saying this, this must be right. We have to be, to avoid that, we have to be like the Bereans in Acts. You may remember they search the scriptures daily to see if what Paul was saying was true.

Now, if even the great apostle needed to be subject to scripture, how much more any of the rest of us who try to teach scripture? So, first of all, lies often claim a consensus.

By the way, that doesn't mean something is necessarily wrong because it claims a consensus. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of false teaching, it is characteristic of error, and it claims a consensus.

Secondly, lies involve the rewriting of history. Look particularly at verses 17 to 18. Verse 16, first, these chilling words, As for the word you have spoken to us, the name of Yahweh, the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you.

[18:05] I will not listen to you. We will do everything we have vowed, made offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pour out drink offerings to her as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.

For then we had plenty of food and prospered and so on, oh disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and so on, we have lacked everything, being consumed by the sword and famine.

Everything is turned upside down. When we followed the word of the Lord, there was disaster. Now, when we followed that narrow-minded Josiah, who imposed his religious revolution, stopped us doing all these fun things, offerings to the Queen of Heaven, then we had disaster.

Now, Josiah's reign was the last period of anything approaching peace and prosperity in Judah.

The moment he had gone, people turned away, and things went badly, disastrously wrong.

In other words, it wasn't the rejection of the message that caused the disaster, it was their behavior, trying to, and this is so often the case.

[19:25] You hear this kind of thing, if you preach the gospel, people won't come. I can't really see nowadays why anyone would come for any other reason. One time, people went to churches because it was the done thing to do.

Those days are long, long past. And the rejection of the message of the gospel day brings nothing but disaster and political correctness, trying to destroy the very freedoms which the gospel brought. After all, democracy is a great gift of the gospel. If you don't believe that, would you rather live under some of those murderous dictatorships? And, I mean, Churchill once said, democracy is the worst form of government ever invented, apart from all the others.

And that's probably true, because democracy allows us to meet like this. Democracy gives people freedom of speech, and we can get them out in a year or so's time, if we don't like them.

Destroying the very freedoms which brought our land times of peace and prosperity. Aren't we all adept, though, at rewriting history? All of us rewrite it, and we tend to rewrite it to make our own part in it more significant than it actually was.

[20 : 42] The devastating retort we made, which we actually thought of half an hour later, and wished we had said it then. All these kind of things. It is, what I'm saying is, human nature is attracted to lies.

The devil transforms himself into an angel of light. So, recognize lies, claim for consensus, recognize them because they rewrite history.

Fairly, we recognize lies when they say superstition and folk religion are good fun. Look at verse 19. We made offerings to the queen of heaven, poured out drink offerings to her, made cakes for her image.

The queen of heaven, sometimes called Ashtaroth or Astarte, was the goddess of fertility, who was worshipped with great orgies and was believed to bring fertility to the land and believed, of course, to bring fertility in the sense of having plenty children.

And, of course, like all lies, this is a version of the truth, because it's exactly what the Lord promised them as they went into the land, a land flowing of milk and honey, the following generations, and so on.

[21 : 57] But, the problem was the worship of the queen of heaven was good fun. This was a Canaanite goddess and texts have been discovered talking about this goddess.

There's no Ten Commandments in them. There's no inconvenient words about holiness. Indeed, holiness is actually, holiness is actually identified with doing religious things in religious places.

The word holy in some of these stories refers to temple prostitutes. They were holy because they worked in a holy place. So, let's have a religion that's all about food, fun, and family.

You see, once again, this is taking good gifts of God. These are all good gifts of God. The reason idolatry, the worship of Baal and Asheroth, were so attractive was because they offered things which God had already given.

After all, they offered deep satisfaction of your inner desires, which is, of course, what the Lord promises. They promised them in the wrong way, and they promised them without any kind of demands made on the worshiper.

[23 : 09] The kind of worship which is simply fun, entertainment, amusement. Now, you can certainly attract people if you do that kind of thing, although it must be said, that sort of thing never really attracts real pagans.

It tends to attract people at the fringes of the church who want to have a kind of religion, but not one that makes any demands. And the first thing is, lies will always lead to complacency and an unwillingness to change.

Because the one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people they need to change. So you see how it all hangs together, the consensus, we're all doing it, we all believe this.

The second thing, the rewriting of history is superstition and folk religion are fun, and we don't need to change. You notice how, you notice how, verse 4, I persistently sent to you all my servants, the prophets, but they did not listen.

Over and over through long centuries, the thousand years since Israel came from Egypt, prophets, messengers were sent telling people you need to change.

[24 : 29] New Testament say you need to repent, but you didn't. And the other thing, of course, is people didn't change because they thought they were doing something new and exciting.

It wasn't something new and exciting as it isn't today, it's the old paganism, as old as the Garden of Eden. Remember that story, Eve saw the tree was beautiful, she saw it was good for food, she saw it would make her wise.

All of these good gifts of God, beauty is a gift of God, food is a gift of God, wisdom is a gift of God, it's getting it without any change of heart, without any repentance, did God really say?

And when you hear that voice, you know, whoever, however plausibly, however eloquently it comes, that is the voice of the devil. Did God really say?

So I say all these things lurk in our own hearts, don't they? All of us like consensus, all of us are afraid to be a lone voice, all of us rewrite history, all of us would like everything to be fun, and all of us don't want to change.

[25 : 45] So, how do we recognize lies? We recognize lies as we hear them peddled today, we also recognize them as we look inside our own hearts.

But secondly, how do we recognize the truth? In Jeremiah, verse 44, the word that came to Jeremiah, all the Jews lived in the land of Egypt.

Perhaps the people had gathered at a central place for a festival, perhaps Jeremiah had visited these places and preached this message.

But this is the final word from Jeremiah to these people, and what's he saying? First of all, that truth has large views of God. the gods of paganism, ancient and modern, are always limited.

The queen of heaven was the goddess of fertility. She wasn't the goddess of the sea. She wasn't the goddess of the land.

[26 : 50] She was simply a goddess of fertility. And whereas Yahweh, God of Israel, is maker of heaven and earth. He is not confined to any one place.

And thus says, you see, if you look there four times, verse 2, verse 7, verse 11, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

That name is chosen deliberately, Yahweh of hosts, the Lord of hosts. Now, when you come across that phrase in the Old Testament, first of all, it means the Lord of the hosts of heaven, whom we call the angels, the angel armies.

Secondly, it can sometimes mean the starry hosts, the starry skies, and occasionally it can mean the hosts of Israel. David says to Goliath, you come to me with a spear and a shield and a sword, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, the covenant God of Israel.

Remember, at the very, very heart of Israel's faith were two great affirmations. Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is God and he is one, or else the great verse in the Psalms, my help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

[28 : 10] See, paganism is like a cake divided up into slices. You've got one God who looks after your work, another who looks after your money, another who looks after your relationships and so on.

And a lot of paganism is juggling your life around. try to placate the good gods, the God of love, the God of plenty, and so on, and try to avoid the evil ones, the God of plague, the God of death, and so on.

The worship of the Lord, God of Israel, introduces a fundamental simplicity. Not simple in the sense of naive, but the fact that all our lives are in his hands.

There is nothing in heaven and in earth that can oppose him. Remember the great psalm of David, where can I flee from your spirit? If I go up to heaven, down to Hades, and so on, you are still there. It also means there is nothing in heaven and earth that isn't under his control. And there is no part of our lives that he doesn't claim.

[29 : 18] Earlier, he had said, Jeremiah had said, there is none like you, O Lord. You are great and your name is great. Who will not fear you, King of the nations?

We're echoing Moses' song in Exodus 15. How big is our God? Is our God big enough? Is he big enough to rule heaven and earth?

Is he big enough to see a way out of the problems in Ukraine and Gaza? Is he big enough to bring history to a conclusion and to bring in the new heaven and the new earth?

Because if he's not, then there is really no hope for us. The queen of heaven can't do that. Baal can't do that. None of our modern godlets can do that.

So you recognize truth because it has large views of God. And there's another implication of that. If we believe in a God who is as big as that, then that gives us a more modest idea of our own place in the scheme of things.

[30 : 19] we realize it's not us who will bring in the kingdom. It's not us who will cause the end of strife and war.

Wonderful illustration of this much earlier in scriptures and Joshua, outside of Jericho, terrified, naturally enough, and he meets a stranger and says to the stranger, basically he says, are you one of us or one of them?

The stranger replies, neither. I have come as the captain of the Lord's armies. This was the Lord himself, the angel of the Lord, come to lead Joshua. That God is our God.

So truth has large views of God. Secondly, truth is persistently faithful to the word of God. Now, the book of Jeremiah itself is a perfect illustration of that.

He notes the kind of things he says in verse 13, I will punish those who dwell in the land of Egypt as I have punished Jerusalem so that none of the remnant of Judah who have come to live in the land of Egypt shall escape.

[31 : 27] Those who were listening to the lies, those who were expecting things would turn out all right, and the deliberate unbelief of we will not listen.

Throughout all that, Jeremiah is faithful to the word of God. No one shakes hands with Jeremiah at the end of this, and so Jeremiah is such a good preacher, we must have you again.

Of course, that never happened to Jeremiah, never happened to Isaiah, occasionally happens, of course, I mean, read the little book of Haggai, Haggai's message was listened to and debated almost immediately, that's quite rare, and it's quite rare today.

Remember, of course, that Egypt in itself, is not a wrong place to go. It was wrong at that time, because after all, a community used to grow up in Egypt, some of whom were to shelter Jesus and his mother and Joseph when they fled from Herod, and of course, many were to come up on the day of Pentecost and hear the word of God in their own language.

Verse 16, we will not listen, that is matched by the persistent proclaiming of the message. What do we do when people don't listen? Do we change the message to make it more palatable?

[32 : 46] No, we don't. We persist in the same message, which alone can save people. Truth has large views of God. Truth is persistently faithful to the word of God.

And finally, and briefly, because I'll be talking about this much more next week, truth outlives lies. The thing about truth is, truth will remain truth.

Lies will be exposed. The last verse of the chapter, I will give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hand of his enemies and the hand of those who seek his life, as I gave Zedekiah, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who was his enemy, and sought his life.

we know from the historical record, this man, Pharaoh Hophra, was actually assassinated by his own body guard. So in the short term, the lies, if we go to Egypt, everything will be wonderful, proved to be a delusion.

And the word of Jeremiah, that the Pharaoh would not save them, more than Zedekiah saved them. So, but there's something more significant than that, and this will be our subject next week.

[34 : 04] The book of Jeremiah has lasted, not just our own day, but as part of scripture will last when heaven and earth have passed away.

And that is the point. The false prophets, one or two of whom are named in this book, they've long gone, and their message has disappeared with them.

This book and its companions remain, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away, said the Lord Jesus. So, what we need to do today is we listen to the babble of voices around us and within us and in our own hearts.

We need to listen to the master's voice, master speak, for your servants are listening. We need to obey it, even when it's difficult, and we can only do that by the help of the living spirit who gave that word, who will be faithful to it, and we will see as it is carried out.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we are so attracted to lies and delusions.

[35 : 15] Help us to, like the psalmist, daily to open our ears to your voice, to listen to what you have to say to us, and to, by the power of your spirit, to carry that out in our lives.

We ask that in the name of him who is the living word, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.