

Jeremiah 10 — False Gods

Lesson Ten of 52

Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn's 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2022. References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.

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Lesson Summary

Jeremiah 10 exposes the absurdity of idolatry by contrasting gods made by human hands with the living God who made heaven and earth. The idols must be fashioned, decorated, secured and carried; they cannot speak, walk, harm or help. The LORD, by contrast, is “the true God,” “the living God” and “the everlasting King” (10:10). But the chapter moves from satire to sorrow as Judah discovers that its false gods cannot rescue the nation from coming judgment. Jeremiah closes with a prayer acknowledging that our lives are ultimately in God’s hands and asking, remarkably, “Correct me, LORD” (10:24).

Big Idea

We become foolish when we give created things the place that belongs only to the Creator. False gods may change their appearance, but they remain powerless substitutes for the One True God. Jeremiah calls us away from trusting what we make, possess or control and toward knowing the living God, trusting him who is in control to direct our steps and even allowing him to correct us when we wander.

Introduction

Our lesson brings together pain and anger expressed by the Almighty toward our Jewish people. It is heartfelt, but it is also the summary and finale of the section we began in chapter 7 dealing with things that are not true: false worship, false prophets, false confidences and now, finally, false gods.

I hear people say, “It doesn’t matter what deity you believe in. There are so many religions. Peace and comfort, joy and love—those are found in every religion, no matter what you call your god. It doesn’t matter.” I understand the desire behind some of that. We want people to live together peacefully. We value tolerance and respect. But Jeremiah will not allow us to take the next step and conclude that therefore all gods are the same or that it makes no difference whom we worship.

Standing up and insisting that there is only one God, and that he wants humanity to know him, love him and live according to His ways, is what is called “particular.” That isn’t necessarily

the way our world thinks. Neither was it the way people in Jeremiah's world thought. Judah was surrounded by nations with their gods, their religious practices and their assumptions about the world. The temptation was to absorb some of that and simply add it to the worship of the LORD.

But calling something a god doesn't make it so. In fact, Jeremiah is about to show us the *narishkeit* (a Yiddish word meaning *nonsense*) of doing exactly that. He will take the gods of the nations seriously enough to condemn them, but he will also make them look ridiculous. Someone cuts down a tree, decorates it, fastens it so it won't topple over, and then bows down before it. Jeremiah compares the result to a scarecrow in a cucumber field. That's where today's lesson takes us: the absurdity of false gods and the incomparable greatness of the living God.

Commentary

1. A Satire on Idolatry Jeremiah 10:1-16

The first sixteen verses would be satire in almost any playwright's pen. The nations and their false gods are held up to scorn and derision. And what is Jeremiah saying by that? Judah—God's people—should not be acting like them. We know better, or at least we should know better. Yet their false worship and false assumptions have been drawn from the nations around them and from gods which, Jeremiah will tell us, are not gods at all.

Look at verse 1. Jeremiah is proclaiming the word of the LORD. He makes it clear that this is not his opinion. This is not human enterprise. This is not merely the recommendation of the son of a priest. This is a message from heaven for the Jewish people. And when you remember this young man who was reluctant to speak back in chapter 1, notice how he has grown in his faith, his love for the Lord and his *koach*—his strength—to communicate what God has given him.

Some of you may be new to Messiah and His love. There is much to learn in this sacred text. But beyond the information is the personal God who welcomed you first. He sent his Son Yeshua to bear our guilt and shame and bring us to himself. Everything we learn about God from this book is designed to draw us closer to Him, not to earn an academic degree at the uni. Watch Jeremiah himself grow as we move through this book. May that encourage you today.

Then comes the command: "Do not learn the way of the nations" (10:2). Notice the singular—"way." Jeremiah is talking about a way of thinking and worshipping that draws God's people away from the One True God. That's difficult language in our age that prizes religious tolerance. It was difficult language in Jeremiah's day as well.

Verse 2 also warns Israel not to be terrified by "the signs of the heavens." That immediately raises the question of astrology, star signs and the human tendency to look to the heavens for guidance rather than to the God who made the heavens. Israel had a long history with that temptation. Abraham himself came out of a culture in which heavenly bodies were

worshipped, and throughout the Tanakh God repeatedly calls his people away from worshipping created things and back to the Creator.

Then verses 3–4 describe the manufacture of an idol. Someone cuts down a tree. A craftsman works it. Silver and gold are added. Finally, it must be fastened with hammer and nails, so it doesn't wobble or fall over. This is not a warning about Christmas trees, although I remember hearing that interpretation when I was younger. Jeremiah is mocking the manufacture of idols. Human beings make the thing and then worship the thing they have made.

Abraham and the Idol Shop

There is a Jewish story about Abraham and his father's idol shop. It appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 38, a post-biblical Midrash imagining Abraham as a young man working in the shop of his father, Terah, who manufactured idols.

According to the story, Terah went away and left Abraham in charge. A man came in wanting to buy an idol. Abraham asked how old he was. "Fifty years old," the man replied. Abraham responded, in effect, "You are fifty years old and you want to worship a statue that is only a day old?" The man left ashamed.

Later a woman came into the shop with an offering for the idols. Abraham took a stick and smashed the idols, leaving only the largest one standing. Then he put the stick into the hand of that idol. When Terah returned and demanded to know what had happened, Abraham explained that the idols had fought over which one would receive the woman's offering, and the largest had smashed all the others.

Terah protested. The idols couldn't possibly have done that. They were only statues. They had no knowledge and no power. And Abraham had him. If you know they cannot think, speak or act, why are you worshipping them?

That's Midrash, not the biblical account of Abraham, but its satire sounds remarkably like Jeremiah. Jeremiah looks at an idol and essentially asks the same question. You cut it down. You shape it. You decorate it. You nail it down, so it doesn't fall over. Now you're frightened of it?

The Scarecrow in the Cucumber Field

That brings us naturally to verse 5, and this picture still makes me laugh: "Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they." Chris Wright calls it "possibly the most richly comic metaphor for idolatry ever invented." The humor is intentional. Here is this impressive-looking object, perhaps decorated with gold and silver, standing there supposedly possessing divine power—and it cannot even move.

Jeremiah piles it on: "They cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot walk!" (10:5). Then comes the wonderfully practical conclusion: "Do not fear them, for they can do no harm, nor can they do any good." Why be afraid of a god you must carry?

And suddenly, in verse 6, Jeremiah breaks away from the satire: “There is none like You, O LORD; You are great, and great is Your name in might” (10:6). I love that movement. Jeremiah has been laughing at the emptiness of false gods and suddenly breaks into praise of the Living God. Celebration and Hallelujah! One God. Only one. No others. The rest are fake.

Then Jeremiah goes back to the satire. “They are altogether stupid and foolish” (10:8). The contrast continues through verses 9–10. We know where the silver comes from. We know where the gold comes from. We know where the wood comes from and who fashioned it. But “the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10).

There it is: truth versus falsehood. The idols are manufactured; God is the Maker. The idols are lifeless; God is living. The idols must be carried; God rules creation. At his wrath the earth quakes and the nations cannot endure his indignation (10:10). Why would God's people exchange him for something they made with their own hands?

Jewish Insight — The Aramaic Sentence

Then verse 11 does something very odd. Jeremiah suddenly switches languages. Almost all of Jeremiah is written in the Hebrew language, but Jeremiah 10:11 is written in Aramaic:

“The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under these heavens.”

Why Aramaic? Both Rashi and Radak noticed the problem. Jeremiah is giving the Jewish exiles something to say when the Chaldeans tell them to worship their idols. In effect, here is your answer when you are confronted with the gods of Babylon. God is giving the Jewish people a statement to read to the press. “Tell the Babylonians: Your gods did not make heaven and earth. They are not the real God. They will perish.”

And because the statement is in Aramaic—the international language the Babylonians themselves could understand—the Jewish exiles aren't merely being given something to believe privately. They are being given something they can say in the language of the people around them.

Then verses 12–16 return to the contrast. God made the earth by his power, established the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding (10:12). The idols are “worthless, a work of mockery” (10:15). But Israel's God is different: “The Maker of all is He” (10:16).

Life Application

Idolatry is not only about statues. It begins when we turn away from God and put something else in the place that belongs to him. That “something” does not even have to be something most would recognize as bad. Our traditions, our way of worshipping, our congregation, our theology and even our Bible knowledge can become substitutes for knowing and walking with the Almighty.

That is what makes idolatry so deceptive. We can take something God has given us and allow the gift to become more important than the Giver. We can defend our religious system while avoiding God himself. We can know the right words, attend the right meetings, read the right books and still resist the personal encounter with God that calls us to surrender.

Jeremiah's idols look ridiculous because they must be made, decorated, nailed down and carried. Our idols may be considerably more sophisticated, but the question is the same: What have I given the place that belongs to God alone?

2. Those False Gods Are Being Removed Jeremiah 10:17-22

Verse 16 introduces this next section: "The Portion of Jacob is not like these; for the Maker of all is He, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; the LORD of armies is His name" (10:16). Israel belongs to God. The idols are manufactured things, but the LORD is the Maker of all things. That makes what follows especially painful. God's own people have exchanged their Maker for gods they themselves have made.

Then the tone changes abruptly. "Pick up your bundle from the ground, you who live under siege!" (10:17). The satire is over. Jeremiah has laughed at the idols, but there is nothing funny about what is coming. God says, "Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time" (10:18). Judah is going into exile.

There is something powerful in that word picture. God is not describing a slow, comfortable relocation. The people are being hurled out of the land. The gods they followed cannot prevent it. The idols that could neither do good nor harm in verse 5 certainly cannot rescue Judah now.

Then comes the cry: "Woe to me, because of my injury! My wound is incurable" (10:19). The voice is difficult to identify precisely. Is this Jeremiah? Is it Jerusalem metaphorically speaking as a person? Is Jeremiah giving voice to the nation as a whole? Whatever the answer, the response is striking: "But I said, 'This certainly is a sickness, and I must endure it.'" Although the nation went into captivity in Babylon, Jeremiah himself would eventually be taken to Egypt. He does not stand safely outside the consequences experienced by his people.

Verse 20 gives us another painful image: "My tent is destroyed, and all my ropes are broken." The children are gone. There is nobody left to pitch the tent or hang its curtains. Home, family and security are disappearing.

Why has this happened? Verse 21 answers: "For the shepherds have become stupid and have not sought the LORD; therefore, they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered." Leadership matters. The shepherds were supposed to seek God and lead the people in his ways. Instead, they failed to seek him, and the flock was scattered.

Then Jeremiah hears it coming: "The sound of a report! Behold, it is coming—a great roar from the land of the north" (10:22). We know by now what that means. The Babylonian threat that Jeremiah has been warning about is approaching. Judah's cities will become desolate.

The contrast of the chapter is now complete. The false gods are helpless, and the people who trusted them are being removed from the land.

3. Final Prayer Jeremiah 10:23–25

And then Jeremiah prays. “O LORD, I know that a person’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a person who walks to direct his steps” (10:23).

That’s a gorgeous prayer because it announces something very simple: God is God, and we are not. We make plans. We choose directions. We put dates in calendars and imagine that we know where we are going. Yet ultimately our lives are not ours to control. Jeremiah has just watched an entire nation discover that truth.

We don’t need a pandemic to discover that we are not sovereign. A phone call, an accident, a financial change, a family circumstance or any number of events can rearrange tomorrow before we arrive there. But Jeremiah does not ask God to leave him alone. Quite the opposite:

“Correct me, LORD, but with justice; not with Your anger, or You will bring me to nothing” (10:24). That’s a remarkable prayer. Correct me.

Most of us would rather pray, “Bless me.” Jeremiah is willing to say, “Correct me.” He knows he needs God’s direction, but he also knows he needs God’s mercy. Correction is not rejection. Discipline from God can itself be evidence that we belong to him.

Verse 25 then asks God to pour out his wrath upon the nations that do not know him and have devoured Jacob. That is not a comfortable ending, but it belongs to Jeremiah’s world. Babylon will be God’s instrument of judgment against Judah, but Babylon is not innocent. The nations that destroy and consume God’s people will themselves answer to God.

Conclusion

Jeremiah 10 began with false gods and ends with the true God. The contrast could hardly be stronger. The idols must be made; while the true God is the Maker. They must be decorated; God possesses glory in himself. They must be nailed down so they will not fall over; God established the earth by his power. They must be carried; God directs our steps. They cannot speak, walk, harm or help. But “the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10).

That is why idolatry is not merely foolish; it is tragic. We take something created and give it the place that belongs only to the Creator. Sometimes the idol is obvious. Sometimes it is something good—money, family, success, politics, religious tradition, even our own understanding of Scripture—that we have asked to carry a weight it was never meant to carry.

Jeremiah gives us another way to live: “I know, LORD, that a person’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a person who walks to direct his steps” (10:23). That is surrender. I do not have to pretend that I am sovereign. I can trust the One who is. And perhaps Jeremiah gives us a prayer worth making our own: “Correct me, LORD” (10:24). Not merely bless me. Not simply

make my circumstances easier. Correct me. Show me where something else has taken your place. Show me where I am trusting something I made rather than the One who made me. Then lead me in your ways.

God is calling each of us to know him and walk with him. Have you received Yeshua as Messiah and Lord? Have you renounced your sin and your idolatry and given God first place in your life? If not, you can do that now. Use your own words. Yield yourself to the Lord of life.

What's Next?

Jeremiah 10 has confronted false gods and reminded us that “the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10). But knowing who the True God is carries consequences. In chapter 11 Jeremiah returns to the covenant—the *brit*—and to a word Israel knows very well: *Shema*. Hear. Listen. Obey.

God had spoken. The people had heard the words of the covenant, but hearing without obedience was not enough. Jeremiah will remind them of the blessings and curses of Torah and of the warnings God had already given them. The consequences they now face did not arrive without warning.

But chapter 11 becomes intensely personal as well. Jeremiah discovers a conspiracy against him. “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19). The people plotting against him are not distant enemies. They come from his own village of Anathoth, and even more striking, chapter 12 will reveal that members of his own family are involved. The prophet who has been warning Judah about the consequences of rejecting God now discovers the cost of speaking God's Word himself.

Next: Jeremiah 11 — Conspiracies Happen

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