

Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Lecture 13, Jeremiah 8-10, Idolatry

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This is Dr. Gary Yates in his teaching on the book of Jeremiah. This is session 13, Jeremiah 8-10 on Idolatry.

Our session today is going to focus on Jeremiah 8 to 10, and I've labeled this section the destruction of an idol-worshiping people, the coming destruction that God is going to bring on their people for their worship of idols, and their refusal to turn away from that.

Let's remind ourselves of where we are in the book of Jeremiah. And again, these are not just a random collection of messages. There's an order, there's a progression.

And even sometimes, what looks like chaos to us, as Lewis Stuhlman reminds us, there is order there. At the very beginning of Jeremiah in the opening messages of the book in chapter two, verse one to chapter four, verse four, remember that God gives a call for his unfaithful wife to return to him. They've committed adultery.

He indicts them for that in chapter two. But then in chapter three, in the early portions of chapter four, there are these recurring calls for the people to return. God is still willing to take his people back in spite of their unfaithfulness.

Then in the next section, in the remainder of chapter four, all the way to the end of chapter six, we have a series of poetic oracles. The Lord is warning them of the army, the coming invasion, the coming judgment that God is going to bring against them because they are not willing to return. The Lord has given them the opportunity to return, but Jeremiah's messages are acknowledging that that return is not likely.

Chapter five, verse 22, in that section, talks about their rebellious hearts. And it says in verse 23, my people have a stubborn and rebellious heart. They have turned aside and gone away.

They do not say in their hearts, let us fear the Lord our God. And so, there's an opportunity to return in chapter two, verses one to four, four, but an acknowledgment in chapters four to six that that's not likely to happen. As a result of that, the cause and effect is that God is going to bring judgment against them.

He's going to send this enemy army. Chapters four to six are followed by a prose sermon that, I think, in many ways ties together the poetry, these various images that come at us. And there's the temple sermon there, where Jeremiah begins again

with a call that if they will amend their ways, if they will change their behavior, then God will relent from sending the judgment.

There's the possibility of repentance. But by the end of the sermon, the tone of the message has turned from the possibility of judgment to the reality that the people are not going to return. And again, the issue is the people have a heart problem.

They need heart surgery. They're unwilling to do that on themselves. God is ultimately going to have to do that for them.

Verse 24 says this at the end of the message, but they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts. And they went backward and not forward. And so that that has characterized the history of Israel and Judah.

And as Jeremiah ministers to the people, as he preaches the word, as he gives them the opportunity to return, that's not going to change. The Lord says to him at the conclusion of this message, so you shall speak all of these words to them, but they will not listen to you. The problem was not with the message.

The problem was not with the clarity of the message. The problem was not with the rhetoric of the message. We saw in our last session how effectively the prophet convinces them of their need to change and the things that he does that make that temple sermon power.

But they have a heart problem that makes it possible for them to repent. After chapter seven, we move into this section in chapters eight to 10, where again, we have a series of poetic oracles and messages that focus on the judgment that is coming again because the people have a heart problem and they refuse to return. They refuse to relent.

They refuse to turn away from their sin. The prophet addresses this issue at the very beginning of this section in chapter eight, verses four to six. And so I think we're basically seeing here the continuation of what has been going on in chapters four to seven.

In verse four, the Lord says to the prophet, you shall say to them, thus says the Lord, when men fall, do they not rise again? If someone falls down, the natural tendency is for them to stand back up. If one turns away, does he not return? If someone goes on a trip away from their house, the normal thing is that that's going to be a two-way journey where they return. And there we have our key theological word, shub again, but Israel and Judah have not returned to the Lord.

Verse five, why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? The Lord is calling on them to shub, but they have repeatedly shub'd or turned away from him. They hold fast to their deceit. They refuse to return.

I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly. No man relents of his evil saying, what have I done? And so, the Lord is expecting them to return from their sin, to turn away from their evil ways. They won't do that because the issue is, again, they have a heart problem.

In chapter nine, verse 25 and 26 is going to address this heart problem that Israel has or that Judah has that keeps them from turning to the Lord. Remember, in chapter four, the call was, circumcise your heart. Cut away the foreskin of the skin that's causing you to repeat your sin, to stay hardened in your heart against the Lord.

And verses 25 and 26 describe their heart in this way. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all of those who are circumcised merely in the flesh, Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the, in the desert, who cut the corners of their hair for all of these nations are uncircumcised. And so, the Lord includes Judah among all of the uncircumcised nations that live around them.

Their practice of physical circumcision doesn't make them distinctive in God's eyes. What would really make them distinctive is if they circumcise their heart, if they cut away the evil in their hearts that was keeping them from listening to God, but Judah has a heart problem. Now, the prophet uses a different image to describe that in chapter 17, verse one; it says that the sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron and with a point of the diamond.

It is engraved on the tablet of their heart and on the horns of their altar. So, the prophet imagines one of the iron tools that was used to inscribe writing on stone, which was often done because of inscriptions. And he says, in the same way that an iron stylus is used to inscribe on a stone, the sin of Israel is deeply etched on their heart.

The sin of Judah is deeply etched into their character. And so, they're unable to turn away from this. They have a heart problem.

And then, the prophet gives us this description of the human heart. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand, you know, how wicked it really is? So, there's a problem in chapters two to 10 that is going to work its way through the entire book.

God is calling the people to return back to him. They refuse to do that. And the issue is they have a heart problem.

Coming all the way to the point in chapter seven, where the Lord says their sin is deeply etched into their heart. That's their character. They cannot turn.

So, the promise in Jeremiah is that ultimately, what God is going to have to do is to perform heart surgery on the people of Israel. And when we study the new covenant later in the book of Jeremiah in the second half of our lectures on this, we're going to look at a series of passages in chapter 24, verse seven, chapter 29, verses 11 to 14, the promise of the new covenant in chapter 31 to 33. And then following up on that, a recurring, a repeated promise in chapter 32, verses 39 to 41, that what God is going to do for Israel in the restoration.

When God establishes this new covenant, what he's going to do is that he's going to give Israel a new heart. Chapter 31, verse 33 says, the Lord is going to write his Torah on the heart of the people so that they have the internal desire, ability, enablement, and divine empowerment to turn to him and to live the kind of lives that he wants them to live. At this point, what is etched on their hearts, what is written on their hearts, is their deep-seated sin and their rebellion against God.

God is going to erase that, and the new covenant is going to provide an enablement; chapter 32 says that where they will enable, they will be enabled to obey God. They will fear him. They will follow his commandments.

So, so part of the strategy and the plot of the book of Jeremiah in, in the early parts of the book, we see the sin of Israel. We see their corrupt heart. We see their sin that is written and deeply etched into their character.

God in his work of judgment, first of all, is going to purge that sin away. And then as he restores the people, God is going to give them a new heart. He's going to transform them from the inside out by doing a work of salvation that's even greater than what God has done for them in the past.

So, the book of Jeremiah is about the heart problem and how God is going to fix that and remedy that. That's one of the key themes that works itself throughout the book. Now, what exactly was it about Judah's heart that made them so unwilling to turn to the Lord? And I think what we see in chapters eight to 10 is that the thing that has made their hearts so rebellious is that the reason that they have not circumcised their hearts is that they have hearts that are devoted to the worship of idols.

They have idol-worshipping hearts. And I've used this quote a couple of times, but Calvin reminds us that our hearts are idol factories. That's really the issue with Israel and Judah's heart in the book of Jeremiah.

We see the specific connection between a hard heart and idolatry in chapter nine, verse 14. Chapter nine, verse 14 says this, they have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals just as their fathers have taught them. All right.

This is characterized by the history of the people of Israel and Judah. They have followed their evil hearts because they have a desire to worship, to follow, and to serve the gods of the nations. Remember that the Lord had set up Israel to be his missionary people.

As they lived in the midst of the pagan cultures around them, and the Lord in many ways, by putting them in Syria, Palestine, at this place between two different major land areas, the Lord was setting them up on the main street to be a witness to these nations. They were to show these nations what the true God looked like by keeping the law by following the law and then experiencing God's blessings. The book of Deuteronomy says that the people around them would say, what kind of God does Israel have that would give them this kind of great and glorious laws? What kind of people have a God that speaks to them in this way? What kind of people have a God who blesses them with all of the things that are in the promised land and in this land of milk and honey? We want to know this God.

So, it was designed that as Israel lived on Main Street in the midst of these pagan people, they would come to Israel, learn about God, follow him, love him, and want to serve him. What ended up happening is that Old Testament history is primarily the reverse of that. Israel learns the ways of the nations.

They learn about the gods that the nations follow, and they turn away from the fountain of living waters, and they give their lives to broken cisterns. They have idle worshiping hearts. The warning in chapters 8 to 10, just as it's been in chapters 4 to 6, just as it's been in chapter 7 in the temple sermon, is that as a result of this, God is about to bring an enemy army.

And this enemy army that is going to invade the land, this is going to be the covenant curse that God is going to bring on Israel for their worship of idols. And this is going to be the judgment that's the direct result of this. Just like in chapters 4 to 6, there's a cause and effect. Their continued willingness or their unwillingness to turn from their sin and to turn back to God is going to bring the covenant curse of an enemy army.

Just like in chapter 7, if you relent, I'll allow you to live in this place. If you do not turn away from your sin, if you do not repent, then I'm going to do to Jerusalem exactly what I did to Shiloh. And so there are more warnings in chapter 8 to 10 of the judgment that God is going to bring because of their idol-worshiping hearts.

We have another description of the prophet portraying for us the coming invasion, the siege, and just the horrors of that and what Judah is going to experience. If they can see how bad this is going to be, maybe they will be motivated to change their ways. So the prophet describes the people after the enemy has come and after the army has invaded the land.

And here's the picture that we have of this in chapter 8, verses 14 to 17. The people say this, and they've just lived through the horrors of war. Why do we sit still? Gather together. Let us go into the fortified cities and perish there.

We don't really have an option. Let's just go perish. For the Lord, our God has doomed us to perish and has given us poisoned water to drink because we have sinned against the Lord.

We looked for peace, but no good came. For a time of healing, but behold all that we have experienced is terror. And then Jeremiah portrays for them what it's going to be like as this army is coming through their land in verse 16.

The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan in the northern part of the land. At the sound of the neighing of their stallions, the whole land quakes. It's shaking. They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and all of those who dwell in it.

For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you, declares the Lord. So, it's as if God is going to release poisoned snakes throughout the land. And again, all of it is because of the fact there have been these calls for Judah to return, but they can't and they won't because of their stubborn hearts that are devoted to idolatry.

All right. There's a, there's another picture of the enemy invasion of the siege of the punishment that's going to come to Judah because of that, because of this rebellion. And we see that in chapter nine, verses 21 to 22.

And listen to the portrayal that the prophet gives us here. He says death has come up into our windows. It has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares.

Speak, thus declares the Lord. The dead bodies of men shall fall like dung upon the open field, like sheaves after the reaper, and none will gather them. So, in this passage, it's not just an army that's invading their land.

In the same way that we portray death as the grim reaper and we personify it, they've personified death as the one. In Canaanite religion, Mot was the God of death. And it's, it's as if Mot is fighting with the enemy that's invading the land.

Death is climbing into the windows. It's claiming the lives of their children. You can't escape it.

It's even climbing into the palaces and taking the sons of the king. And there are going to be dead bodies scattered like dung all throughout the land. All right, now we think if, if this was the description of judgment that the prophet was given to us, surely, obviously, this would make us change.

This would make us repent. Surely of all the things that the people could hear, this would convince them that they need to change their ways. But this reflects for us the depth of their heart problem.

They are so devoted to idols. They are so devoted to their sinful ways that even these kinds of warnings can't turn them away from the sinful patterns that have reflected their past life. Now we have a passage in the historical books in 2 Kings chapter six that I think reminds us and portrays for us just how horrible siege can really be.

And just how terrible the circumstances are going to be for Judah when this enemy army. In 2 Kings chapter six, we have a story of the siege of Samaria, the capital city of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the Arameans, their enemies. And Ben-Hadad brings his army and they basically have the city of Samaria locked down.

And what would happen is that this meant that your food supply and your water supply were ultimately cut off. As the days and months progress, eventually, you run out of food, you run out of water, and you simply have to surrender or be destroyed. And the famine in 2 Kings 6 is so severe that it says a donkey head is selling for 80 shekels of silver, which is something like seven or eight years' worth of wages for the average worker.

A fourth of a liter of dove dung is so valuable that it would cost six months of wages and five shekels of silver. There's even a story of two women in that passage where they have agreed to kill their children and eat them. One of the women has done that, and the other one has hidden their child, and they come to the king with their dispute about that.

Okay. That's how serious a siege can be. That's what Jeremiah, those kinds of conditions where there would be starvation and famine and a lack of water and cannibalism and terrible suffering and then death itself as the enemy takes the city.

Those are the kinds of things that Jeremiah is prophesying about. As we turn over to Jeremiah chapter 39, Jeremiah chapter 52 in the story of the capture of the city of Jerusalem, that's exactly what Jerusalem is going to experience in its final days. But as the prophet is warning them, they can't respond even to those kinds of warnings.

Even that's not enough to really grip their sinful hearts because they are devoted to idolatry. Now I think we have an idea of the kind of reaction, the kind of response that God was desiring from his people as the prophet is warning them about the judgment that's going to come from one of the minor prophets from the book of Joel. And I'd like to look for just a minute or two at Joel chapter two to contrast the response that the people had to the message of Joel to the response that the people of Judah had to the preaching of Jeremiah.

There's some dispute or debate about the date of the book of Joel. The most likely setting though seems to be the post-exilic period. And amazingly, even after the exile and all of the judgment that Judah has experienced, they have not really returned to God.

They've come back to the land, but the change in geography has not really changed their hearts. So, they have experienced more judgment and more covenant curses as they come back to the land. And Joel writes after the time, a locust swarm has gone through the land and devastated their crops.

And Joel says, yeah, that wasn't just an accident of nature. That has been the judgment of God. And he also says that locust invasion is a warning of the fact that God is about to send another enemy invasion into the land.

And this time, it's not going to be locusts; it's going to be an enemy army. And so, he is threatening the people in the post-exilic period with the same kind of judgment, the same kind of siege that Jeremiah is warning the people of in the days before the fall of Jerusalem. The difference is that as Joel preaches this message, the people respond in the way that God designed for the people to respond in Jeremiah's day.

So, the prophet in Joel says this, yet even now declares the Lord, return to me with all of your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning, and rend your hearts and your garments, return to the Lord your God. So, Joel is saying exactly the same thing that Jeremiah says, turn to God, return, shub. If you will make a U-turn in your life, that's what the Lord desires.

It's not enough just to go through the rituals of fasting, tearing your garments, or attending a prayer service. Rend your heart, circumcise your heart, and truly come back to God. Let your fasting, weeping, and mourning be a reflection of your true repentance over your sin.

Joel says here's the reason why. For the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents over disaster. God actually, when people respond to his warnings of judgment, He changes His mind and may not send the judgment.

And Jeremiah is offering that valid opportunity to the people in his day as well. You may avoid this judgment and this invasion if you'll just turn to the Lord. Verse 14, who knows? Who knows whether the Lord will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him, a grain offering, and a drink offering for the Lord your God.

Who knows? If you turn back to God, there's always the possibility that God may relent and bless you with food and drink in the same way that He's used the locust to take it away. And then he says this: blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, consecrate the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, even nursing infants, let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Hey, let's all come together, bring everyone, bring the children, bring someone on their honeymoon.

Let's all gather together. Let's turn back to the Lord. Maybe God will relent and not send this judgment.

And when we stop at the end of verse 17 in Joel chapter 2, there's been this call to repent. We get the idea in the verses that follow that the people have responded to this call. They have proclaimed the assembly.

They have fasted. They have torn their garments. They have returned to the Lord because here's what we read in verse 18.

Then, the Lord became jealous of his land and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, behold, I am sending to you grain and wine and oil, and you will be satisfied, and I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations. I will remove the northerner far from you and drive him into a parched and desert land, his vanguard into the eastern sea and the rear guard into the western sea.

The stench and the foul of him will rise, for he has done great things. Hey, the Lord stops the judgment in the middle of it, turns the enemy army away and promises to the people of Judah, I'm going to send blessing instead of judgment. He goes on later on, and he says in verse 24, the threshing floor shall be full of grain, and the vats shall overthrow with wine and oil.

I will even restore to you the years that the locust has eaten. So, God not only relents from sending judgment, he takes away the effect of the judgment that has already come. In the midst of this unfolding judgment, God stops and relents from sending it.

What the Lord wants to do in Jeremiah is exactly the same thing. If the people will somehow respond to him, and in Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 8, listen to this and see if it doesn't sound exactly like what God is asking the people to do in Joel's day. In

chapter 5, I'm Sorry, chapter 4, verse 8, it says, for this put on sackcloth, lament and wail for the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned back from us.

So, in Joel's day, we have an example of how a prophet warned of a judgment that was coming. He told the people to lament, to grieve, to turn from their sin, to rend their hearts, not just to go through the rituals, and in the midst of that unfolding judgment, when the locust had already come, when the army was sharpening its weapons and getting ready to go into battle, when the people turned back to God, God relented from sending the judgment. In Jeremiah chapters 8 to 10, the Lord is giving those same kinds of calls; he's providing that same kind of opportunity, and he's warning them of the judgment that's coming, but the problem is Judah has a heart problem.

They have a heart that's devoted to idols, and because of that, they can't turn away from their sin, therefore, God is going to send judgment. God is going to destroy this idol-worshipping people. We saw in chapter 9 verse 14 that idolatry is the problem and the issue that is keeping Judah from turning to God, and so what we have in chapter 10 is a passage that is going to focus on the futility of idolatry.

In a passage that is going to directly address the issue that is keeping Judah from turning back to God and becoming the people that he wants them to be. So, in chapter 10 verses one to five, the prophet simply reminds us of the futility of idolatry. And here's how he describes this.

In verse three, he says the customs and the pagan practices of the people are vanity; they're level, and that's one of the words that is used in the Old Testament to describe idols. They're just wind, they're not going to help you, they're just a vapor. A tree from the forest is cut down and is worked with an axe by the hand of a craftsman.

They decorate it with silver and gold, 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, they cannot walk.

Do not be afraid of them for they cannot do evil, and they cannot do good. Idols can't help you. Now, the prophet here, in a sense, is engaging in some rather biting sarcasm.

Idol worshipers in the ancient Near East were sophisticated enough to understand that the idol itself was not their God. There was a distinction between the God and the idol that represented it. But there was a very real sense that the presence of their gods was associated with the image itself.

There was a consecration ceremony called the opening of the mouth or the washing of the mouth of the idol, where, in a sense, that image became consecrated to God, and the presence of the God became associated with the idol itself. But the fact that this God is represented by a lifeless object, I mean, the idol worshiper has to make the image. To Jeremiah, this reminds him of the futility of trusting in the gods that these idols represent.

The prophet Isaiah engages in the same kind of sarcasm in Isaiah 44 and 47, where he talks about the futility of idolatry. He says, imagine this: a man cuts down a log off a tree, with half of it he burns it in the fire to cook his dinner, the other half of it he shapes and forms into an idol. That reflects the futility of idolatry.

And Jeremiah says, think about all the things that an idol can't do. It can't speak, it can't walk. In fact, they have to nail it to a pedestal to make sure that it doesn't fall over.

They can't do evil, they can't do good. Why would anyone want to worship a god that is represented by that? Now, there are places in the Old Testament where I believe that the Bible is going to acknowledge that there are spiritual forces and that there are spiritual beings associated with the idols. But here, the idea is simply they're absolutely nothing.

Even if there are spiritual forces represented by these idols, compared to the Lord, who is the eternal creator, self-existent God, these idols and the gods represented by them are nothing. In the next section, chapters 6 to 10, or I'm sorry, verses 6 to 10 in chapter 10, the Lord alone is God. Verse 6 to 10: There is none like you, O Lord.

You are great. 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. Verse 10, but the Lord is the true God.

He is the living and the everlasting King. At his wrath, the earthquakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation. The Lord alone is the sovereign Lord over the earth.

And even if these idols do represent gods, they are not gods like the Lord. They are not eternal. They are not creators.

They are not self-existent. They do not have the sovereignty to control history the way that the Lord does, and that's the point that Isaiah makes as well. In fact, the description that fits the idols is that they are stupid and foolish.

All right. The final point that the prophet is going to make about idols in this sermon, in verses 1 to 5, is that idols are futile and unable to do anything. Verses 6 to 10, the Lord alone is God.

The Lord alone is sovereign. He is the true Lord and the only one. In verses 11 to 15, the proof of that is that the Lord alone is the creator.

He is the creator God. Israel believed in creational monotheism. There was no one like the Lord.

Regardless of what other spiritual beings and powers might be out there, the Lord alone is the creator self-existent God. So, verse 11 to 15 says this, the gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. It is he, it is the Lord who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.

Okay. The Lord alone is the only one that Israel needs to worship. The only one that Israel needs to give honor and glory to.

The one that Israel needs to exclusively trust, you know, for their blessing and protection and security because the Lord alone is the creator. Now there's an important connection here that we need to understand in verses 11 to 15 to really grasp the theology of idolatry in the Old Testament. Remember verses 1 to 5, all the things that an idol can't do.

An idol can't speak, an idol can't move, an idol can't do good, and an idol can't do evil. It's impotent. Just like Elijah says to the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, where's your God? Surely, he can answer there in a sarcastic way, he's not there.

Remember in the second section, the Lord alone is God in the description that's given of idols there. Idols are stupid and foolish. Well, listen to what he says about idol worshipers in verses 14 and 15.

Every man is stupid and without knowledge. Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion.

Okay, here's Jeremiah's theological punchline. Idols are stupid and foolish. Therefore, so are the people that worship them.

And G.K. Beale, in his book on idolatry and the theology of that, makes this point. We become what we worship. And the way that God judges idolatry in the Old Testament is that those who worship these empty, foolish gods become like them.

In Exodus chapter 32, when Israel bows down and worships the golden calf, the description of them that is given at least four separate times in the verses that follow is that they have become stiff-necked rebels. And what Beale reminds us there is what that really means is that Moses is using stubborn cow imagery to describe the people. They worshiped a golden calf.

They became like stubborn cows. Psalm 115 makes this point a little bit more explicitly, I think. We become like what we worship.

Verse four says this: their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak, eyes that do not see. They have ears that do not hear and noses that do not smell.

They have hands, but do not feel. They feel, but do not walk. They have feet, but they do not walk.

And they do not make a sound in their throat. Do you hear Jeremiah's image of the scarecrow and the melon patch there? Okay, but here's the point in verse eight. Those who make them become like them.

And so do all who trust in them. And that's exactly what Jeremiah is saying here. Look, I know it's your idolatry. It's your devotion to these other gods.

That's the reason that you have a stubborn heart. That's the reason that you refuse to turn to God. But what you need to understand is that your worship of these idols has made you foolish and stupid.

They have dulled you spiritually because when you worship gods that can't see, can't hear, can't speak, can't know, can't do right or wrong, you become like them. And so, one of the themes in chapters eight to 10 is that Israel has become foolish. Judah has become foolish because of their devotion, their service, and their worship of these empty gods.

And Jeremiah is going to constantly come back to the point in these chapters that Israel's lacking sense. Anyone who had any wisdom would see the need to turn away from their idols, but Judah lacks the knowledge to do this because they've worshipped gods who are stupid and foolish themselves. Chapter eight, verse seven says this: even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtle dove and the swallow in the crane keep the time of their coming.

They obey their nature and the things that God has implanted with them. They have the wisdom to do that. God's implanted that in his creation, but my people do not know the rules of the Lord.

Really, by worshiping idols, they've become more foolish than animals. They're not as smart as the birds in the sky that know how to listen to God. Verse eight, how can you say we are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us, but behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.

And we don't know if the scribes here were actually changing the text, but those who were given the responsibility of teaching God's Word were changing its meaning. They were blunting the message of judgment, focusing exclusively on the message of blessing, and as a result of that, their wise men were foolish. Chapter nine, verses 12 to 14, who is the man who is so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness? Hey, the wise man ought to be able to figure out why we're going through so much difficulty, and the obvious answer is we haven't obeyed the Lord, but because we have a heart that's devoted to idols, we can't see the obvious that should be staring us in the face.

Chapter nine, verses 23 and 24, let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me.

You see, they've lost real knowledge because they don't know the true God. They've lost the ability to discern the difference between good and evil because idols can't do good, and they can't do evil. They've lost the ability to understand why God is bringing this judgment, and they've lost the sense that they need to realize that we need to turn back to God because we brought disaster on ourselves.

Idolatry has caused this. Back in chapter nine, verse three, it says this: they bend their tongue like a bow. Falsehood and not truth has gone wrong in the land, for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord.

They have turned away from the source of real knowledge that would help them to understand the difference between good and evil. Chapter nine, verse six, heaping oppression upon oppression and deceit upon deceit, they refuse to know me, declares the Lord. They've cut themselves off from the true source of knowledge.

Now, I want to spend just a couple of minutes talking about the nature of idolatry and try to apply this and make it real in our lives. Idolatry in Judah was not just about a competing theology. It was not just about, am I a monotheist versus a polytheist? But really, idolatry involved a strategy about living life that the prophet says is absolutely foolish.

Idolatry in some ways in ancient Israel, I think as it reflects in our lives, is about a strategy designed on how to acquire the things that we feel that we need to make

life meaningful and significant. I noticed as I study idolatry throughout the Old Testament, that it's often connected to what some people have called the unholy trinity, money, sex, and power. Israel worshiped idols.

They worshiped Baal as the storm God because they believed that it would bring them wealth and possessions. Hosea chapter two, verse five, God gives them the wine, the grain, the abundant harvest, and they turn around, and they give that back to Baal because they believe that Baal is the one who's given that to them. Jeremiah chapter 44, verses 16 to 18.

Things were going well for us when we made our offerings to the Queen of Heaven and carried out our pagan rituals. Things started going bad when Josiah brought about these religious reforms. We're going to go back to the old ways.

Idolatry was connected with the practice and the acquisition of sex. The Canaanite fertility gods would bless them with children. In Judah, during the time of the divided monarchy, archeologists have found hundreds of these figurines of these fertility goddesses under the houses and homes of the people of Judah.

The women worshiped these gods because they believed that they would give them children. Along with that, the worship of the fertility gods brought sexual immorality, prostitution, and fertility rites into the practice of worship itself. Things that God had designed were not to be a part of Israel's worship.

It brought sex into their lives without having to follow the moral dictates that God had laid upon them. I can imagine that if we were to promote this kind of religion in our culture today, that's the philosophy of modern culture as well. Idolatry is also connected to the acquisition of power.

Kings in Israel desire to appropriate the powers of these gods. In 2 Kings chapter 3, we see the king of Moab sacrificing his son on the wall during a time of battle because he wanted power from that god. The kings of Judah, Ahaz, and Manasseh, do the same thing to their sons because they want the power that those gods provide.

Ahaz makes an alliance with Assyria and brings an Assyrian altar to Jerusalem because that will give him power that the Lord alone does not have. Ahab marries Jezebel and makes an alliance with her father, who is a Baal worshiper because the king of Tyre is a powerful political man. Jezebel promotes Baal worship because it's a way of extending the power of the king.

If a man doesn't want to sell you his vineyard as the king, then you have the right to take it. Idols promise power. What Jeremiah and the prophets and the Lord himself wants the people to see, this is a foolish way to live your life.

You will try to acquire these things and they will become in your life an unholy trinity because you're looking to these gods to provide them in illegitimate ways. The reality is that if we look at the Bible in the way that God has designed us as human, I don't believe that money, sex, and power are an unholy trinity at all. Used properly and when God is the source of those things, they are gifts from God.

God blessed his people with the promised land that was flowing with milk and honey. God blessed them with prosperity. God created sex to be a beautiful expression of his own love within the relationship of marriage.

God created power and made us images of God so that we could be his vice-regents and rule and reign. So, when we recognize God as the source of these things, these things can be used for good. If we recognize God as the source of our wealth, it enables us and allows us to be generous with our wealth because we realize that God will take care of us.

If we realize that God is the one who blesses us with sex and the love and the enjoyment and pleasure that comes from that, we can give ourselves to the other person in the context of marriage, and it can become a beautiful expression of selflessness. If God is not recognized as the source of that, sex is just another way to consume ourselves with our own pleasures, to use people or whatever it takes to satisfy our own needs. Power, if used properly, can bless society and facilitate other people to use their gifts and abilities.

But if power does not come from God, then it becomes something that we use to oppress and to hurt and to practice violence against us. So, idolatry is not just a wrong strategy for acquiring these things. It's a wrong strategy about how to use them as well.

And in Israel, as people look to their idols to be the things that will give them what matters most in life, whether it's money, sex, power, or any of these other things, what we learn is that they become desperate and they use these things in the wrong way because they're never, the gods that they trust are never able to provide the things that they're really looking for. They were looking for Baal to give them wealth and prosperity. Look at the poverty and the impoverishment that Judah is about to experience because they worship these other gods.

They're going to be absolutely destroyed as a nation. They look to the gods to provide them with sex. And when the gods didn't provide that in the way that they wanted or needed, they became desperate and they actually brought that into their worship.

When they were looking to these idols to bring them power, protection, and security, they learned that it wouldn't work. And we're given a really vivid reminder of that in chapter eight, verses one to three. It reminds us there that the kings and the people of Judah had begun to worship the gods represented by the stars.

And the worship of these astral deities can give us protection and power that God can't provide. And here's what the Lord says: did that strategy work? At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all of the hosts of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, which they have sought and worshipped, and they shall not be gathered or buried. They will become like dung on the surface of the ground.

One of the worst curses that you could ever experience in the ancient Near East was not to receive a proper burial. Their bodies are going to be taken out of the graves and laid in front of the stars, the sun, and the moon that they worshipped. Those things were not able to protect them.

So, idolatry is a foolish strategy for living your life. It will teach you the wrong way to acquire the things that are most important in life, and it will teach you the wrong way to use those things because you will become desperate. Those idols will ultimately not provide what you're really looking for.

That's what happened to the people of Israel. Making this practical and relevant to our lives today, Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, reminds us of many of the wrong strategies that we use to acquire money, sex, power, or all of those kinds of things. As I was reading Keller's book some time ago, it's a reminder that anytime we look to something other than God to provide those things in life that matter most, to provide security and significance, we're going to become desperate because those idols will not satisfy us.

They will not provide. So, Keller speaks of approval idolatry. Life only has meaning if I can be loved and respected.

Achievement idolatry, work idolatry, religious idolatry, even religion itself, irreligious idolatry, comfort idolatry, family idolatry, relationship idolatry, where I have to have these things in order to be blessed. That's a wrong strategy for living your life. And ultimately, even if you find those things, you will ultimately discover that they cannot satisfy you in the way that God does.

So, we look at the people of Judah in the days of Jeremiah. We see people that were living their lives and using the wrong strategy, trusting in the wrong things for security and significance. Keller reminds us, and I'll close with this, that we do the

same thing when we turn to anything other than God to meet the deepest needs in our hearts and life.

He says this, if you center your life and your identity on your spouse and your partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you. If you center your life and your identity on your family and your children, you will try to live your life through your children until they resent you and have no self of their own.

At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you. If you center your life and your identity on your work and your career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst, you will lose family and friends.

And if your career goes poorly, you will develop deep depression. If you center your life on identity and money and possessions, you'll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You'll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up your life.

If you center your life and your identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the escape strategies by which you avoid the hardness of life. If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you'll be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends.

You will fear confronting others and, therefore, will be a useless friend. If you center your life and your identity on a noble cause, you will divide the world into good and bad and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies.

Without them, you have no purpose. If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.

The Old Testament reminds us that when we worship idols, we become like what we worship. And anything that we turn to other than the Lord to meet the deepest needs of our lives will never satisfy, will never provide, will never be able to provide that living water that only the true God can.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his teaching on the book of Jeremiah. This is session 13, Jeremiah 8-10 on Idolatry.