

No sin is condemned more severely in the Old Testament than the sin of idolatry – having substitute gods. The prophet Jeremiah seemed to denounce this sin more frequently and more scathingly than others.

Idolatry was the central issue in the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 1500s and 1600s. The Reformation was, above all, a tearing down of idols.

Despite his well-known focus on justification, the great Reformer Martin Luther in the early 1500s in Germany, was equally provoked by the idolatries of late medieval practice and theology.

As another example over in England, Pastor Hugh Latimer in 1533 preached a series of sermons attacking idolatry. The other pastors in his down organized a series of counter-sermons, and tried to silence Pastor Latimer. When the dust had settled, Pastor Latimer had established himself as a leading advocate of the Reformation throughout England. Over the following years, the idols in churches were systematically dismantled. Relics were taken from monasteries all over England, catalogued, and destroyed or sent away.

All of the fuss in Jeremiah over idolatry, and all the fuss in the Reformation over idolatry is because **The God of The Reformation is revealed as the one true and living God.**

### **1. The foolishness of idolatry. (v.1-16).**

Here God shows us the dangers of living by the customs of unbelievers. Listen to verse 1, “*Learn not the ways of the nations...*” verse 2, “*...for the customs of the peoples are vanity...*”

Everybody is doing it. The World Series is played in two stadiums that seat more than 40,000 people. Everybody else in Atlanta is watching it on TV. If everybody is doing something, does that make it a good custom? The blessing of thoughtful worship and studying God’s Word together is that we can see what others cannot see. It takes God to say what others will not say...baseball is just a game, and years from now it counts for nothing. The customs of the peoples are vanity. The most popular music and fashion will count for nothing before God.

What are the customs of unbelievers? Fake gods. Verse 3, they cut down a tree from the forest with an axe, and then sculpt the wood. Verse 4, they then decorate the wooden statue with gold and silver, and hammer and nails, set up the idol so that it will not fall over.

Turning to verse 5 what does it mean that their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field? It means that their idols are a foolish thing to worship, because their idols are about as helpful as a scarecrow. You could find a bird sitting on top of the head of the scarecrow, eating a cucumber, instead of being scared away by the scarecrow. Why? Because the scarecrow cannot speak or yell and scare away the birds, and the scarecrow needs to be carried to where it is standing, because it cannot walk. None of us need to be afraid of scarecrows, and neither do the birds. It is the same way with idols. Idols cannot speak or walk, and need to be carried. None of us need to be afraid of idols, because they cannot do any harm, nor can they do us any good. The idols and the scarecrow have one more thing in common – they are not really alive.

What if you saw your neighbor having a conversation with his scarecrow in his garden. You might laugh, because it is laughable. But it is not simply innocent silliness. It is truly damaging. It is like the whole town electing the scarecrow to be mayor of the town. And then waiting for the scarecrow to tell us what to do. And bringing our money and laying it at the feet of the scarecrow. And bringing our children, and asking the scarecrow to raise them for us.

The silliness of the scarecrow has become injurious and ruinous.

The silliness of idols has become pernicious and destructive.

The One we need to trust is very, very different from every idol.

Verse 6, Jeremiah declares, *“There is none like You, O LORD; You are great, and Your name is great in might. Verse 7, Who would not fear you, O King of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like You.”*

Jeremiah is describing a choice for the people. One option is to follow idols, and the other option is to follow the LORD God of the nations.

Now Jeremiah builds his case by describing each.

Verse 8, Jeremiah is back to describing the people who select idols, *“They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood!”*

Who would follow idols? Well, Jeremiah understands how the idols could tempt and attract people to follow – since the idols are very impressive as they are destructive, Verse 9, *“Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the craftsmen and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is violet and purple; they are all the works of skilled men.”*

A Tesla is very impressive. It makes a good car, but a bad god.

The true God gives us all things for us to enjoy, and yet these things ought not to be worshipped as God.

The idols, says Jeremiah, are as impressive as they are destructive. Don't fall for it. How can we avoid the trap?

By focusing on the better choice. After conceding that the idols are alluring, Jeremiah writes in verse 10, "*But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation.*"

What is Jeremiah's point?

However attractive all of the idols are, they have one thing in common – they all originate from humans. They can never offer what God has. Vitality. What is that? Life. God is alive. God is the living God. Idols never offer that.

Jeremiah says think about where this is all going.

Verse 11, God tells Jeremiah what to say to the people, "*Thus shall you say to them, 'The gods who DID NOT make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens.'*"

It is an interesting fact that most of the book of Jeremiah is written in Hebrew, but verse 11 here is written in another language, called Aramaic. For centuries, Aramaic was the common language of half of the world, but now, no one speaks it. What a fulfillment of the words of this verse, and how appropriate that it is recorded in Aramaic. All of the nations shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens, and yet one day, people from every tribe and every language will worship our God together with us in heaven. People will worship God in Aramaic, even though their nations were later destroyed, and their language was later extinct.

Jeremiah is making a point...that there is only one God. That one God is the One who made the heavens and the earth. All of the other gods are counterfeit gods, and they will be destroyed.

Verses 12-16 are a powerful and beautiful description of the one true God while He was creating the heavens and the earth.

Why? Because we need a picture of a better option than idols. We need the sovereignty of God to be shown to us again. We need to be reminded of the place of God in our lives as our only source of strength. It is comforting to us to realize the context in which these verses were written. The people had long rejected God, but God still kept all of His covenant promises to them. The phrase "the portion of Jacob" is none other than God Himself.

Listen to the description of the God of the Reformation as I read verses 12-16, "*It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens. When he utters his*

*voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses. Every man is stupid and without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion; at the time of their punishment they shall perish. Not like these is he who is the portion of Jacob, for he is the one who formed all things, and Israel is the tribe of his inheritance; the Lord of hosts is his name.”*

## **2. The consequences of idolatry. (v.17-22).**

How can the people who have the God just described in verses 12-16 end up packing up their last bags of tattered belongings and hit the road as nameless, hopeless, future-less refugees? How can they be tossed out of the land that was their land forever, as promised by God?

Let’s ask a different question – while they were steadfastly abandoning God, how could they expect God’s blessings?

The long-threatened exile was now at the very gates of the city, and the society was in imminent danger of collapse. Jeremiah pleaded that the punishment would be in proportion to what the people could endure.

The time for weeping had ended. Their journey to Babylon was beginning.

In verse 17, the people were summoned to pick up their bundle of belongings for the long trek into captivity, *“Gather up your bundle from the ground, O you who dwell under siege.”* In verse 18, finally the people will be expelled from their land and get what their sins deserved, *“For thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land at this time, and I will bring distress on them, that they may feel it.’”* Verse 19 is the voice of Jeremiah, and he is grieving the fact that he also needs to join the people in their suffering, *“Woe is me because of my hurt! My wound is grievous. But I said, ‘Truly this is an affliction, and I must bear it.’”* Verse 20 is God speaking, using the language of wandering peoples who live in tents to describe God’s people in their desolation and suffering as a nation. God’s nation was like a tent that had collapsed, *“My tent is destroyed, and all my cords are broken; my children have gone from me, and they are not; there is no one to spread my tent again and to set up my curtains.”*

What about the leaders of God’s people? The leaders were incompetent, and that was one of the main causes of the exile. The shepherds were the pastors, and listen to the verdict in verse 21, *“For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of The LORD; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered.”*

The blame cannot be placed on God. Where does the blame properly belong? Blame belongs on the shoulders of those religious leaders who ignore God Himself.

Activity coming from the northern country of Babylon is a signal that the exile is impending. Verse 22, *“A voice, a rumor! Behold, it comes – a great commotion out of the north country to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals.”*

This brings us to Jeremiah’s prayer, which we understand as a prayer for reformation.

### **3. The prayer for reformation. (v.23-25)**

Here Jeremiah pleads the basic moral weakness of man, and man’s inability to overcome temptation and walk with God. Verse 23, Jeremiah says, *“I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.”*

Further, Jeremiah pleads for the justice of God to be applied, but not in such severity that Jeremiah will be destroyed. Verse 24, *“Correct me, O LORD, but in justice; not in Your anger, lest you bring me to nothing.”*

In other words, let God reserve the strongest of His wrath for the pagan nations. Listen to this change in tone in Jeremiah’s prayer in the next verse.

Verse 25, *“Pour out Your wrath on the nations that know You not, and on the peoples that call not on Your name, for they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation.”*

Interesting, though, if God’s people were behaving like the wicked nations, then on what basis should God be asked to withhold punishment? It was Israel that refused to acknowledge God. It was Israel who kept calling on every god except the Lord. Who most deserves the judgment here prayed for? If the nations must be judged and punished, then so must Israel be judged and punished.

But what about the opposite? If there can be hope for Israel’s future despite their sins, can there be hope for other nations despite their sins?

Romans 1:18, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ALL ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”*

**Conclusion:** 1. Put your hope in the God of The Reformation. Maybe you have lost some hope. Maybe you are struggling with physical health, with family relationships, with something at work, with the condition of our country, with something at church, or with your own sin. Put your hope in God. According to

verse 16, God is the portion of Jacob, but remember that Jacob was a cheat and a liar! Jacob received the grace of God to put his hope in God and even to give his name Jacob to the whole nation of other cheats and other liars. But the perverse people were entrusted with knowing the Living God. We can put our hope in God, because His Son Jesus Christ came to die for us, washing our sins away and to rise from the dead, giving us power over sin. God is our God, and we are His people. God is our treasure, and we are His treasure, through Christ. The God we worship this morning is the same God who was active in Jacob's life, the same God active in the nation of Israel, the same God active during the days of Jeremiah's ministry, and the same God who was active in the days of the Reformation. Each age struggles with idols, and a resulting loss of hope. The idols we are tempted to place our hope in today are things like: money, pleasure, power, and self. None of these things are meant to be trusted as our God. Instead, Christ alone is to be trusted as our God, because He has true greatness, power, and sovereign control. The glamor of other things fades away, but the glory of the one true, living, and eternal King lives on. All other substitute gods are within the created order. Only God is above the created order. All things are perishable, except for God. History shows us a graveyard of false gods. Where are the gods of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome, and ancient Europe? Each of the gods seemed to rule the world of their day, but they didn't and eventually even the memory of them has perished from the earth. Why do we keep on trying to refurbish dead gods? Because we need to remember again who God is. Psalm 33:6-9, "*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,*

*and by the breath of his mouth all their host.*

<sup>7</sup> *He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;*

*he puts the deeps in storehouses.*

<sup>8</sup> *Let all the earth fear the LORD;*

*let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!*

2. Ask God to reform His church. The nations run after other gods, but the true church knows better. Theologically we know better. We need to live out the incredible Reformed theology that we have received as a heritage. It is sheer folly when we as Christians exchange Christ for anything else. To be reformed is to revert back to Christ, and Christ alone, and Christ crucified. To be reformed is to insist on Christ's gospel of grace. To simply crave Christ alone, by faith alone by grace alone, through scripture alone to the glory of God alone, is the core of the reformation. Just as Jeremiah did in verse 24, we can pray for reformation in ourselves and in our church, and in the churches of our country. Jeremiah prayed, "*Correct me, O LORD...*" Do we ask for God to correct us? Will we listen and

stand corrected? This humble spirit is what it means to be reformed. To stand corrected is to clear away the rubble and focus on the basic truths of God's Word. Whenever we again abandon Christ to chase idols once more, we are making a damaging decision. We must admit that we are no different. Each generation of Christ's church flirts with idols, and each generation has two choices. A) we keep on returning to God through repentance and faith or B) it will be shown that we are not God's people after all, and we will come under God's judgment. Ask God to reform His church.

3. Pray for reformation for all the nations. Chapter nine ended talking about the nations. Chapter 10 both began and ended talking about the nations. The nations are described as uncircumcised, vain, and needing to be punished by God. Idols always suck the life out of nations, and then fail the people when they need them most. But in our prayers today, we do not echo Jeremiah's prayer for the nations. Because we live in a different time than Jeremiah, we don't echo Jeremiah's prayer in verse 25 for God's judgment on the nations. Instead, we pray for God's reformation for the nations. We know God as our own God. God is our portion. How did it get to be that way for us? It got to be that way for us after God caused a reformation in nations in Europe in the 1500s, and that reformation spread to us here. Tonight we will study God's Reformation in Scotland in the 1500s. Next Sunday, we will study God's reformation in another country. What we need is God's reformation in all countries. We need God's correction everywhere. We need God's mercy everywhere. Like we sing in our Christmas carol, 'Joy to the World, the LORD is come, let EARTH receive her king, Let EVERY HEART prepare Him room....He rules THE WORLD with truth and grace, and makes THE NATIONS prove, the glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love. He comes to make his blessings flow FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND.' We pray for the nations not God's judgment, but God's reformation. We join with the Apostle Paul in praying in Romans 15:10, *"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people."* Pray for reformation for all the nations