

Jeremiah 44

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 March 2014

Preacher: Graham Thompson

[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn back to that passage in Jeremiah 44, we're going to come to think about that. And as you do so, I'll ask you a question, what is it that got you out of bed this morning?

What is it that gets you out of bed every morning? Is it the alarm clock? Is it your parents? Is it somebody else? Is it the sun streaming through your windows?

Really, that's not the question we're asking there, is it? A question we're really asking is what are you living for? What's the point of life?

Because the meaning of life is a far bigger question and a far bigger answer than the 42 Douglas Adams came up with. Because it's the question, and these are the questions that we either ask ourselves or we spend our entire life trying to avoid asking ourselves.

And certainly our entire life trying to avoid answering. Because the people in our passage in Jeremiah 44 were in a situation where they could not avoid asking themselves these questions and working out what the answer was.

[1 : 23] Just to give you a bit of the background, if you've maybe not come across Jeremiah before or if you've not read it for a long time, Jeremiah, don't read it if you're depressed, or do read it if you're depressed, it might chime with you.

It's, as I recently described, a cold face, a dark cold face of depression and war with diamonds in it. That shine all the brighter because of the darkness.

Here we are, Jeremiah, he spent decades and decades and decades speaking to God's people in Judah, telling them that unless they turn back to God, unless they trust in God instead of trusting in themselves and trusting in their allies in Egypt, then devastation and destruction is all that awaits them.

And his prophecies had come true. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had ripped, literally, the people out of Judah.

Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, had seen his sons killed before his eyes and then had his own eyes put out before being taken off to Babylon. And these people here, you might think, well, they're in Egypt.

[2 : 37] Well, these were the people like you and me. Well, I'll speak for myself, like me. These were the peasants. These were the people who'd been left behind in Judah. These weren't the rich people who'd been taken off to Babylon.

They'd been left behind in Judah. And the guy Nebuchadnezzar had left in charge of Judah had been murdered. And so the people had panicked.

Look, Nebuchadnezzar's ruler has been murdered. He's going to come back and visit judgment on us. And they probably used that most popular line in movie history, we've got to get out of here.

Because he's coming back. And so as they were running off to Egypt, they asked Jeremiah, they said to Jeremiah, you're the Lord's prophet. Should we go to Egypt? Should we remain in Judah?

And Jeremiah inquired of God. And God said, no, stay in Judah. And when Jeremiah told the people, they said, well, we're going anyway.

[3 : 40] And so they went off to Egypt. And in this passage that we've got here, they'd probably been there a while. Because maybe, as Peter read it to us, you were wondering about these place names in verse 1.

Well, basically, they're there to show us that the people of Judah were the length, breadth, and depth, as it were, of Egypt. It's the north.

It's the south. It's the width of Egypt. So there's probably been some time passed since they got there. They'd arrived there. They'd lived there for a while. And so as they come to this showdown with Jeremiah, probably at a festival, a religious festival, we see two different answers, two very different answers to those big questions of significance that we thought about at the beginning.

So as we think about them, as these people answered those questions, as we think about them, as we have to answer those questions, we need to see firstly that love is where the heart is.

Love is where the heart is. I don't know if you've ever had that experience. Maybe you're in a meeting, or maybe you sat around the dinner table with the family, and your phone rings.

[4 : 56] Perhaps it's a bit of a dilemma. Should I answer my phone and annoy everybody in the meeting? Should I not answer the phone?

Don't know about you, gentlemen, but really annoy my wife and be in the doghouse for days. It's that dilemma, isn't it? And the answer's easy.

The answer to that dilemma is easy. Which is more important? Is the phone call more important? Or staying sweet with your wife and kids?

Or staying sweet with your manager? Which is most important? Because it's an example of the fact that we always do, we always do what we want to do most.

If the phone call's more important, you'll answer the phone. If the meeting's more important, you won't. We always do what we want to do most.

[5 : 57] We always give ourselves to what we love the most. And we've got two examples of love here in our passage, and how that love works itself out in action.

Both of us show us where people's heart is. And they both show us what's most important to the different groups of people.

And so let's see first, as we think about this love, let's think about some real love. Some real love. You might not be surprised to think that what we're talking about as real love here is God's love in this passage.

This is a love that cares for his people, that puts them first, that's sacrificial in nature. Or perhaps, you might actually be surprised that we're talking about God's love in this passage as real love.

Because in verses 1 to 6, God explains that he's destroyed his nation. He's destroyed his chosen people. He threatens them, in verse 13, of death by violence, death by famine, death by illness.

[7 : 09] In verse 26, he cuts them off completely from himself, practically forever. What's that all about? You might say, I'm not interested in a love like that.

This God sounds vengeful and nasty. This God sounds intolerant. He sounds needy. Why would he destroy men and women and children? Just because they want to worship, or just even because they want to make special cakes to someone who doesn't really exist.

It's all so unreasonable. It's not love. They worship him as well, after all, don't they? Why? Well, there's two ways of thinking about this.

Firstly, think about that marriage relationship, in which a wife discovers her husband's having an affair. And when she confronts him, he says, what's the problem?

I still give you a kiss as well, don't I? I still bring the money home. I still put the bin out. What's the problem?

[8 : 28] We're rightly shocked by that. We're rightly certain that that's a wrong response. Because that's the kind of relationship that God had with his people here.

God has with his people today. It's exclusive. It's binding. It breaks God's heart that his people would turn their backs on him again and again and again.

And secondly, we see God's real love in this passage because God just can't let his people destroy their spiritual lives by carrying on in this sin of turning away and rebelling against him.

He loves them too much to see them destroy their lives, destroy their relationship with him. And we've got to understand, if we're to understand this properly, what the worship of these idols consisted of.

If you read back through Jeremiah and back in 2 Kings, the history of this situation, you'll see that the worship of these gods consisted of sacrifice of children, ritual prostitution, people being killed left, right, and center.

[9 : 49] And so God points out to his people what the idolatry of the people of Judah cost them in verses 1 to 6.

He wants them to see the pointlessness of it in verse 3. Look what he says, they provoked me to anger by burning incense and by worshipping other gods that neither they nor you nor your fathers ever knew.

He's basically saying, one, they're not me, two, they're not real. This is pointless. He wants them to see them to see the pain it causes him.

As he says in verse 4, do not do this detestable thing I hate. He wants them to see his kindness to them in verse 4, that he sent his prophets to them again and again to warn them of the disaster they were bringing upon themselves.

He wants them to see in verse 6 the awful final consequences of it as Judah and the streets of Jerusalem are made desolate ruins.

[10 : 54] And so God asks his people through Jeremiah in verses 7, 8 and 9, three questions. Halfway through verse 7 and then at the beginning of verses 8 and 9.

He says in verse 7, why bring such great disaster on yourselves? Verse 8, why provoke me to anger? Verse 9, have you forgotten the wickedness committed by your fathers?

He's saying, why would you carry on when you can see the destruction that turning away from me causes? Why would you do this to yourselves and to your children and to me, the God who made you a nation?

The God who cared for you and loved you from the beginning? I wonder if you've ever asked yourself those kind of questions. Why do I do such stupid things?

Why do I keep falling into this or that pattern of life, this or that sin? Why do I mess up my life and others' lives so much? Why do I rebel against and cause such pain to a God who's created the very world we live in, even ourselves?

[12 : 10] Well, in order to answer those questions, we need to see as well as this real love, some me love, some me love shown by the people here. Because I wonder if you've ever noticed how people's view of the past, present, and future is shaped almost entirely by what they want to know, what they want to be true.

Maybe you've, maybe you've experienced this most in, in what, I don't know, how can we call it, a frank exchange of views maybe with your spouse about who said they'd do the washing up or who put the bin out or whatever.

Or maybe you know, maybe you don't know, but maybe you know the Arctic Monkeys song, The Fake Trails of San Francisco. It's a song all about how terrible a band in a working men's club are.

They can't sing, they can't play, they can't do anything. The line says, his last thinks they're amazing though, so all that's left is the proof that love's not only blind but deaf. It's true, isn't it?

What we want to be true shapes our view of what we see as true, especially our history. Because the truth is your heart defines your history.

[13 : 26] As a historian, I know that better than most. Look at the people in verses 15 to 19. Because the actual physical facts of what had happened to Judah and Jerusalem weren't in dispute.

Jeremiah says, Judah and Jerusalem are destroyed, that's why you're here, folks. The people said, Judah and Jerusalem are destroyed. And it just went terribly wrong.

That's why we're here in Egypt. They all agree on that. But for some reason, they are completely at odds about why it's destroyed.

Why they're there in Egypt as exiles. Look at what Jeremiah says in verse, or God says to Jeremiah in verses 5 and 6.

Jeremiah says, But they did not listen or pay attention. They did not turn from their wickedness or stop burning incense to other gods. Therefore, God says, my fierce anger was poured out.

[14 : 31] And it raged against the talents of Judah. Because of their idolatry, because of their worship of other gods, God's anger was poured out. Look at what the people say. Look at that last sentence of verse 17.

At that time, this is when they were worshipping this queen of heaven, we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we've had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.

They say, it's since we stopped worshipping other gods that we've had all our problems. Jeremiah says, it's because you're worshipping other gods and not the true and living God that you've got problems.

The truth is that their love for the ritual and the sin of worshipping this queen of heaven, Ashtaroth, the Canaanite fertility goddess, rather than the true and living God, meant they were blind to what had happened in Judah and they were deaf to God's pleadings to them through Jeremiah.

I don't know if you've ever had the experience of knowing a young child who's just started to tell lies. Just working out that it is actually physical possible to tell lies.

[15 : 54] And they say the most ridiculous things, don't they? My friend said this week she had a three-year-old in the kitchen eating an apple. She said, Ellis, why have you only taken one bite out of that apple?

He turned around and he said, Daddy did it. She said, Ellis, Daddy's not in the room and I just saw you take that bite out of the apple. And with something only a three-year-old could say, Ellis turned around and he said, Mummy, you did it.

But the reality is that we all do that. Really, don't we? We all tell ourselves lies and each other lies as ridiculous as those that Ellis told first to.

as those people in Egypt told Jeremiah. We do it because we love ourselves and the things we want and the things we have more than we love each other and most importantly more than we love God.

So what's your me love? What are the things that get you out of bed in the morning? To go back to our initial question. What are the things that you're really putting your hopes, your dreams, into?

[17 : 08] We all worship something. It's only a question of what. Maybe you're a parent and perhaps the most important thing to you is that your children are successful or perfect or even grandchildren or whatever.

Maybe you buy into the current thinking that if you let them watch TV or too much TV or you let them eat McDonald's, they're going to turn into some kind of psychopathic axe murderer.

Just so you know, there's not a clean line between McDonald's and sociopath as someone who worked there for nine months. Maybe if you think, if you don't push them to get an A star on every exam, they're going to turn away from everything.

It's not true. But you tell yourself the lie that you're just doing your best for your children as all the while they learn to put themselves at the center of the universe.

Think that academic success and good habits and healthy eating are what matter most in life. Maybe you're desperate to succeed or even just to survive at work.

[18 : 28] So no matter how you try, work becomes the be all and the end all. You live to work, you live to that promotion, you live to hear other people's appreciation of your work.

So you tell yourself the lie that you're just doing your work to the best of your ability. as slowly but surely you forget that that woman who hangs around in your front room every day is actually your wife.

And as you begin to wonder why nothing else but sleep and the next deadline matter anymore. Or maybe finally that you're desperate for people to think well of you.

Maybe respectability and other people's acclaim is what matters most. Maybe you're really bothered about how people see you. So you start to shape your behaviour so that other people only see your good side.

Or they see what they want to see. And you tell yourself the lie that you're just sociable. That you're a sacrificial person. You just want to serve other people.

[19 : 38] As slowly but surely you shape your world, your views and your heart according to what the lady at the coffee morning thinks. And your world falls apart when she disagrees with you.

Maybe those aren't your problems. I hope they're not. Maybe those are just some of the things that convict my heart. But you know deep down what's most important to you.

You know deep down what you're living for. You're probably thinking about it right now. So what can we do? Because these people in Egypt failed to do anything and ultimately it destroyed them.

If our hearts remain set on things that will not last, will not satisfy, it'll do the same to us. So what do we do? How do we change?

Because that's surely the biggest question we could ever ask ourselves. Well the answer is to love what lasts. To love what lasts. It's that time of year isn't it?

[20 : 47] When Slimming World and Weight Watchers and all the others have banked the most money they will make for the rest of the year. Because everybody joined on January the first and by March the first most people have given up.

Because. Why does that happen? happen. Because the truth is that if you're on a diet you won't lose weight until the benefits of losing weight are more important to you than the great taste of chocolate.

It simply won't happen. There's a guy in the 18th century in Scotland called Thomas Chalmers and he preached a sermon called The Expulsive Power of a New Affection. It might seem a weird title but basically what he was saying was this.

If you love something you can't get rid of it by just blocking it. You can only get rid of it by loving something else more. And it's true in our own lives.

It was true in these people's lives because they loved the ritual. They loved their invented goddess more than they loved the God who had formed and cared for them. Individually and as a nation.

[22 : 04] And so for them and for us the only way to change our hearts and therefore our behavior, the only way to rid ourselves of these worthless things that don't satisfy is to fall in love all over again.

To fall in love with God. And in order to do that we need to see two things afresh. We need to see firstly the God of love. Look at how God makes his promise that he will punish his people in verse 26.

He says it in a bit of an odd way really. Verse 26 after Jeremiah said go on then get on with it do what you've promised. He says but hear the word of the Lord all Jews living in Egypt.

I swear by my great name says the Lord that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt shall ever again invoke my name or swear as surely as the sovereign Lord lives.

What's that all about? Why does God swear by his own name that this will happen? Names don't mean much today do they? They're generally there because they sound nice or they prevent you having a ridiculous acronym for your initials.

[23 : 21] I wanted to call my little brother Edward. My mum said I couldn't because that would give him the initials ET. but my parents got it right. Graham can be with a bit of manipulation be made to mean miserable one.

So sometimes they do mean something but in the Bible your name meant everything. It spoke about who you are and in fact about who you were to become.

When you were speaking about your name you were speaking about everything that you were. If you think back to Jacob the heel snatcher the deceiver think back to Abraham the father of many nations.

Well think back to what God's name is. The name by which he swears here. He said to Moses at the burning bush I am what I am.

And as he explained that name to Moses what did it mean for God to be I am what I am? He explained it in Exodus 34 and verse 6 on Mount Sinai. He said this the Lord the Lord the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin.

[24 : 36] Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of their fathers to the third and fourth generation. As God swears by his name he's saying this is who I am.

I'm a God who is righteous and pure and therefore angry at sin that destroys the people God has made. But he's also a kind, forgiving, gracious God who loves his people more than we can ever imagine.

And he loves his people so much he's not even just revealed himself in words. So that we can see who he is. He's given us Jesus. If we look at Jesus we see God's purity and kindness.

We see his power and his majesty. In Jesus we see God's love displayed as he goes to the cross for people who spit in his face. The cross we see God's anger at sin as Jesus takes sin and God's wrath upon it upon himself.

So what does it take to get rid of those idols, those worthless things that you're living for that will never satisfy, that cause you to lie to yourself, that cause you to stuff up your life?

[25 : 57] You need to fall in love with Jesus. You need to see that Jesus is far more desirable than perfect kids. Or an afternoon in front of the fire watching the football or the rugby.

Even that great game yesterday afternoon. You need to see that Jesus is far more satisfying than chocolate. Or even pizza. Or promotion. Or good grades. Or perfect kids.

Or whatever. Because none of those things will last. None of them will satisfy. Maybe you're not like me. I really hope you're not. But one pizza's never enough.

Your kids will always at some point let you down. Cause you pain. Your friends will never give you enough friendship. Or love. Enough to give you peace.

Only Jesus can do that. So let me ask you this morning what do you love the most? Do you love Jesus enough?

[26 : 58] As we said before we always do what we want to do the most. Your priorities and your actions show your heart. Come to Jesus.

Say sorry to him for the fact that you've put other things in place. Ask him to forgive you. And show you his beauty. His wonder and his love. Because we've got to see.

As well as the God of love we need to see the love of God. I once heard about a book called Taxi Driver Wisdom. It's a collection of sayings that taxi drivers say in their cabs.

Probably most of them are unrepeatable. but this one said women love who they love the most. Men love who loves them the most. Now I don't know how much truth is in that hopefully not a lot but as we think about what God says in this passage there's no question about who loves us the most.

Just look at verses 27 and 28. God says God's judgment is something that is fixed.

[28 : 28] Like all these people here we're all in deep trouble. but find the gold hidden in these verses those diamonds in the cold face because even in his righteous punishment God will be gracious.

A few will return to the promised land. God will provide a remnant for himself. If we're to fall in love with God we need to see for the first time if we're Christians here this morning we need to remember constantly continually God's love for us.

We need to remember that each and every one of us stands before God in the same position as these people. Rebellious unwilling to change and condemned.

And yet God says Romans 5 verse 8 God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Only if we recognize the truth of the good news the gospel will you be able to escape from the slavery you have to the idols that cling on to you. Only as you see and remember constantly and consciously how much God has loved you will you be able to love him first with all your heart and mind and strength.

[29 : 57] Only as you see that Jesus has broken the power of sin and idolatry at the cross will you be able to escape its hold. Only if you know and acknowledge that Jesus has paid the price for your idolatry will you be able to escape the guilt of it.

Only as you see what it cost Jesus to free sinful people like you and me will you be able to hate those worthless idols as much as you should do.

And only if you turn to this Jesus this saviour cast all your hope and trust on him will you be able to escape the righteous punishment of God for your rebellion and sin.

So this morning don't be like these people here in Egypt listen to God's warnings the things you put your trust in your hope in your dreams in your fears in your idols the things that you in this life you functionally expect to save you they will not satisfy or save you they will crush you open your heart to God ask him to show you the true desires of your heart and have the bravery to ask him to destroy them and place the glorious precious person of Jesus on the throne of your life in their place please don't put it off turn again to Jesus or the first time to Jesus and know the truth of his promise and he says come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest let's pray father thank you that we can know the truth of these promises that God you Lord have provided a way for us to come to you to be forgiven of all our rebellion and sin against you father thank you that it is that wonderful person of the Lord

Jesus Christ help us for the first time or anew to put our faith and our trust and all our hopes in him to turn away from all that we seek instead of you and to seek to serve and love and walk with you we pray in Jesus name amen the Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you the Lord turn his face towards you and in Jesus give you his peace amen