

FALSE AND TRUE WISDOM

Jeremiah 8:4-10:25

In Jeremiah 8-10 is found a collection of the prophet's sayings on wisdom, which date from various periods of his ministry. To the Hebrews true wisdom was never thought to be merely intellectual but was concerned with the practical aspects of an understanding of the true nature of society and the world. Such knowledge could not be possessed by anyone who did not comprehend the ways of God. True wisdom would lead a man to live his own life in accordance with the divine pattern. Such wisdom could not be learned from men but only through revelation from God.

I. FALSE WISDOM

The prophet deals with two kinds of wisdom that miss the mark. The first kind is one that particularly plagues religious communities, and the other is the tendency of the natural man.

1. Wisdom Confused with Knowledge of the Law (8:8-13)

Israel thought that because she had the law of God, she was wise (8:8). Yet those who knew the law best, the scribes, had twisted the law to make it mean whatever they wanted. That meant that the scribes had given the law a meaning never intended by God when he gave it. They saw only peace for Israel in the Torah and would not apply its curses (8:11).

This is still the Christian's greatest dilemma. Although he knows that the Bible is the Word of God, yet, as he reads it, how can he be sure that he hears what God is saying to him rather than what his own teachers have pointed out? We tend to read into a passage our own prejudices and preconceived notions. We speak to the text and receive back from it our own voice rather than the word of God.

It is much easier for the average person to accept what he is taught without question than to find his own way under God.

Until we are willing to leave all and follow him, we really never can hear his voice.

God's Word does not change, but our understanding of it should continue to grow.

To possess the law does not guarantee that one knows what it means, Jeremaih was saying. The Jews had received it but could not interpret it.

2. Wisdom Confused with Humanistic Philosophy (10:1-16)

Jeremiah said that the nations did not recognize the law of God at all but depended upon their own ideas for knowledge. They created their own gods, then bowed down to worship them. What stupidity! They went into the forest and cut down a tree, and decorated it with silver and gold. It could not speak or move about, yet it became a god. What was subject to man's will became his own master (10:1-9).

In contrast with helpless idols, the God of Israel is a living God. He is the King of the nations (10:7,10). It is he who made the heavens and the earth and rules over them (10:12-13). Compared to his wisdom, the knowledge of man is insignificant (10:14). It is to his people that he gives his wisdom. No one else can discover it (10:16).

Today few people are tempted to follow after the sort of idolatry that Jeremiah was battling, but just as great is the temptation to make the work of their own hands into their gods.

Men who fail to acknowledge the revelation of God must try to find their own way, and it never is a right one. They simply become the slaves of their own invention.

The most common idol before which the world falls down today is materialism. Whether communism or capitalism, the same god is being worshiped. Man works and slaves in order to get for himself all the things that he has made with his own hands. It is still the great god mammon that is being exalted.

Nehru of India shocked thinking people in America when he said that Russia and the United States possess essentially the same kind of cultures. The first concern of both is the acquisition of things. Spiritual values are secondary. If this is true, our country is in a more serious condition than Russia, for Russia openly states its materialistic philosophy while we delude ourselves into thinking that we honor God. Whereas Communists are openly atheistic, we acknowledge God with our lips but deny him with our lives. His life is so full of the attractive creations of man's own hands and mind that he does not have time for the eternal truths of God. They can wait until he leaves this good earth. There will be time enough to enjoy spiritual things when material joys are taken away, he thinks. If he were to go to heaven, he would find it very uncomfortable there. The man who finds it difficult to sit through one worship service a week could find no satisfaction in serving and praising God forever. Only those who walk with the living God now will dwell with him in eternity.

II. TRUE WISDOM

1. Recognizes the Inability of Man to Direct Himself (8:14-22; 10:23-24)

Jeremiah declared that when God should pour his wrath upon them, the people would see the truth about themselves. Man is at his wisest when he sees himself a wretched sinner in need of the grace of God (8:14), for that is his true condition.

As faithful and devoted as the prophet himself was, he well realized that it was not in his own power to find his way. A crawling infant does not teach himself to walk. He learns from those who already know. Just so a man needs a higher Being to guide his uncertain walk through life. Even Jeremiah needed to be corrected by God when he took a step in the wrong direction. Yet he pleaded with God to temper his judgment with mercy. If God treated him as he deserved, God would utterly destroy him (10:23-24).

2. Found Only in Knowledge of God (9:23-24)

There are several attainments in which the natural man is tempted to glory. Those who have superior knowledge are always prone toward letting it affect their

ego. Else why do they so often put it on display rather than consider it as an investment by God to be used for the help of other inquiring minds? Knowledge is meant to be used, not to be exhibited.

Other men glory in their strength. "A show of strength" is tempting to individuals as well as nations.

Others take pride in their riches. Every opportunity is found to display their superior position in society. If the typical American will go to any length to try to impress people with a pretended status, how much more glory it would be actually to have it! He drives a car he cannot afford, lives in a house he can never pay for, throws parties that nearly bankrupt him -- all for the approval that may come to him. What a false set of values; how passing a fantasy!

There is only one kind of glorying that is sound: a man's rejoicing that he has found God. He cannot say enough about this wonderful Friend. What is so amazing about this great God is that he finds ways to be just, yet loving.

3. Perceives the Signs of the Times (9:12-22; 10:17-22)

Many different meanings can be read into some happenings. Trouble had come upon Judah: "Death is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces" (9:21). Why had it happened? Some interpreters believed that it was just the unhappy world situation. Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon were locked in mortal combat, and Israel was caught between them. Others saw in it the purifying of the country. God would take away the dross and leave the pure metal. Those surviving in Jerusalem would be the chosen ones of the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah did not so view the situation. God had shown him the real significance of the events. Only from the divine perspective could the events of earth be seen in their proper light.

"Who is wise enough to see the meaning of this distress?" asked Jeremiah (9:12). The answer came from God, not from Jeremiah's reason: "Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice" (9:13). The day of God's wrath had arrived. He was not so much purifying as he was destroying. There was not even a remnant deserving the name.

Today's world is also a troubled one. What is God about to do in the world? Something momentous is about to happen.

Who can properly interpret the meaning of the events of our day? Only the man to whom God reveals himself. Nothing is so unreliable as the wisdom of men or so certain as the purpose of God. Fortunate indeed are the people who have a true prophet among them. How much more wonderful if they will heed him!

Not only do we need to know what God is doing but also what the Lord will have us do. In the case of the people of Jeremiah's day there was only one course to follow in the prophet's opinion. It was too late to save the city. All the people could do was take whatever came, hoping to survive somehow the blast of God's wrath (10:17-19).

What God is about to do is still not clear to most of us. Meanwhile, what are we to do? It would appear that we should be busy at what we know to be the work of God. We are to get to the main task, the salvation of a lost world.

III. THE FOOLISHNESS OF ISRAEL (8:4-7)

Rather than follow the course of wisdom and seek help from God, Jeremiah's people has "slidden back by a perpetual backsliding" (8:5). They continued to go steadily downhill. Usually when a man falls down he will try to get up again; but Israel made no effort to recover from her fall away from God (8:4). When a man leaves home, he usually will return one day. Not so with Israel. In this she showed herself to have less sense than the homing birds (8:7). They know when it is time to return home, but God's people leave and have no desire to return. They rush headlong away from God as a horse rushing into battle, without a glance behind. No one ever stops to take inventory (8:6), to check on the state of his affairs.

Israel was rushing madly after the object of her desires, never asking how far she had gone from home. Serious thoughts might disturb her enjoyment of her sin. Besides, a full awareness of her condition might make it necessary to try to return. She was too busy in sin to be disturbed.

Men estranged from God are restless, but they seldom realize the reason for their uneasiness. True wisdom will lead a man to let God take inventory of his life. Only his Maker can properly evaluate his solvency.

When men lose the consciousness of God they do not lose their sense of the need of God; and consequently they substitute the false for the true. It should be recognized that the making of an idol follows, and is the result of, the loss of the consciousness of God, rather than precedes, and causes it.

In this teaching of Jeremiah the contrast between false gods and the true God is vivid, and its value is permanent; for if the form of the idols changes with changing times, the essential matters abide for all time.

We shall consider the contrast then, by observing the teaching concerning substitutes for God in three particulars; those namely, of their origin; their nature; and their worth.

Concerning the idols that men were substituting for God, Jeremiah takes one instance only, referring to it twice in the course of his argument. He first referred to it as a tree, a tree killed. That is the first thing; it is a dead tree. Secondly, it is a tree fashioned by human hands into some form, according to the mind of the artificer. In the third place, it is a tree decked with silver and with gold. Finally, the prophet referred to it as with nails and hammer fastened down, in case it should sway!

First the tree must be cut down. A dead tree is necessary for the making of an idol. The dead tree is then formed, decorated, clothed, and fastened securely down, lest it sway.

There is in the heart of that man a great human desire, a great need, a great demand, a great craving; and his activity in the making of his idol, is that of his attempt to create something to answer the clamant cry of his nature. He is making out of something inferior to himself, that which is to answer the deepest cry of himself. I am watching a man attempting by physical and mental dexterity, to answer the clamant and agonizing cry of spiritual need. That is idolatry.

In every case Jeremiah puts these idols into contrast with God. God is the enthroned King. God is the everlasting King. God, as he says at last, is the Former of all things.

The tree is cut down; the tree is formed; the tree is covered with gold and silver; the tree is decked in blue and purple; the tree is nailed down. God is Former, Framed, Fashioner of the man tinkering with the tree, of the gold and silver, of the blue and purples, of everything! Mark the graphic contrast. They are fashioned; God fashions. They are made; God makes. They are less than men, and must for ever be; He is more than men.

Let us now consider the teaching of the prophet as to the nature of these substitutes for God. "Like a scarecrow in a garden of cucumbers!" A little further on he described them as "The work of skilful men"; a description which was at once a suggestion of their inferiority, and a satire on the men who made them.

The final reference to their nature is that on which the prophet said: "There is no breath in them." I doubt if in all this prophecy, or in any other prophecy, there is one brief sentence more comprehensive, more inclusive, more exhaustive, more full of satire, more flashing with light than that, as a revelation of what idolatry is as to its nature.

The nature of idols may then thus be summarized. They are first contemptible, like scarecrows in gardens of cucumbers. They are secondly subservient, the work of cunning men; and consequently subservient to the men who make them. Finally, they are unresponsive, there is no breath in them.

Here also we have a revelation by contrast. God is fear-commanding, duty-demanding, trust-inspiring, principally because there is breath in Him, there is Spirit in Him, there is life in Him. Idols are dead, or impersonal. They make no response to individual aspiration. God is living, and personal. A man who knows Him may live with Him, talk to Him, and listen to Him; have all His heart to himself, all His wisdom for his guidance, all His strength for his comradeship; and yet never impoverish any other man, who has the same need and the same relationships. This is indeed a mystery, but it is also a demonstrated fact, in the experience of millions of men and women who have put their trust in Him.

Now let us ask what is the value of these idols; what are they worth? The prophet answers, first as to power, then as to intelligence, and then as to influence. Their value as to power is revealed in two statements; first, "they ... speak not"; and secondly, "They must needs be borne, because they cannot go." As to intelligence, "The instruction of idols, it is but a stock." In other words, the instruction, the wisdom, the philosophy of idols, is wooden! When we come to the influence they exert, we touch the deepest note of the tragedy. They are in themselves vanity, and therefore they are a work of delusion; and the word delusion there misses something of the tragedy of the actual word -- they are a work of mockery. They are disappointments, which react upon the soul of the man who makes them, in shame. The goldsmith is ashamed of his molten image; and worse than ashamed, he is in despair.

God is great, and His name is great. God is true, and living, and His voice is heard.

The abiding difference between idols and God, is that they are carried, while He carries. This is taught by Jeremiah. A man makes his idol. He must then carry the thing he has made. God makes a man. God carries the man He has made. That is the difference between false and true religion everywhere. False religion is the religion you carry. Christianity is idolatry to some people, because they carry it. True religion is the religion that carries you, that bears you, that strengthens you, that upholds you. Idols are of

the earth, and under the heaven: God is over the heaven, and the earth is of Him. They perish; He cannot perish; and He possesses those who put their trust in Him, so that neither can they perish.

Even though the ancient forms, so far as we are concerned, have passed away, men are still finding substitutes for God.

What is God to a man? Either He or that to which a man renders worship.

What then, is worship? Worship is the response to worth. What then is worship? Homage, and service, rendered to that which a man considers to be worth such homage, worth such service. Then if I want to know what a man is worshipping, I have to see what he pays homage to, what he serves; for a man may recite the name of a God, and never worship Him at all. When Israel had been carried away captive from the Northern part of the kingdom, that wonderfully sagacious politician, the king of Babylon, colonized the country with people from other places. With what result? They were superstitious, and had a haunting fear that the God of the land would trouble them. They built altars to Him, and it is written, "They worshipped Jehovah, and served their own gods." They built altars to Jehovah, and served their own gods. Their real worship was not that of the altar built, but that of the homage rendered; and it is always so.

There is widespread idolatry in our own country. There is the worship of power, that is, the worship of Mammon. By Mammon I mean gold and silver; wealth. No man really worships wealth; he worships that which wealth can do, the power wealth confers upon him. Or there is the worship of beauty; and perhaps most widespread, the worship of sensation. These are expressions of idolatry, and the man who gives himself, with all his mind, and all his heart, and all his woul to the service of power, beauty, sensation, is an idolater.

All substitutes for God are limited, and unsatisfactory, because they are less than the man who created them. Because a man makes his god, his god is less than he is himself, and therefore never can satisfy the cry of his heart. They are dead things, and there can be no communion with them. They are utterly worthless in the day of visitation and calamity, of need and of heartbreak, for there is no breath in them, no response.

Wherever a man puts a substitute for God before mind and heart and will, to command homage, and to inspire conduct, he is creating for himself the uttermost agony; for whensoever there shall come to him the hour of need, it may come with the clash of strife, with the swift stroke of suffering, with the benumbing influence of bereavement, it may come in a thousand ways; but when it comes, then what are are these things to which he has given his strength? Scarecrows in gardens of cucumbers! Then let us to the Lord our God with Contrite hearts repair.