

Knowing and Valuing what God Wants

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- [0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to the first in our new series called What God Wants. This is a series that we're going to be basing on some selected verses in the book of Jeremiah.
- So do keep your Bibles open at that passage in Jeremiah chapter 9. We're going to be looking at a few different sections of Jeremiah. So we're going to flip around a little bit, so get ready for that.
- But it's important that you have your own Bible in front of you so you can follow along. And not just take my word for it, but see what God is saying to you this morning. We've seen recently in our own country how easy it is for a society to begin falling apart at the seams.
- The recent violence and looting in KZN and Gauteng just a few weeks ago has exposed once again that the safety and the order that we enjoy in community and in society is very fragile.
- And it's actually just a thin veneer that covers over the ever-present greed and anarchy and sin that exists in the human heart. And that can come out in different ways at any time.
- [1 : 15] History actually shows us time and time again that human societies, no matter how good and together they look, they're always on the brink of collapse.
- We think of just the early 20th century in Europe and how it was, really, Europe was in its heyday in the early 20th century. The economies were going strong.
- There was peace. There was order. There was civilization. And then just a few years later, they descended through some chain of unlikely events. They descended into one of the most destructive wars that the world had ever seen in the First World War.
- And that wasn't obviously the end. There was another one after that. Human society is always on the brink of collapse. There's always this rot under the surface of order and civilization that's at any moment ready to burst out.
- Well, Jeremiah the prophet was writing to a nation that was on the brink of collapse. And his job wasn't an enviable job. But like most of the Old Testament prophets, his job was to tell people something they didn't want to hear.
- [2 : 26] And to expose that rot that existed under the surface, just under the surface of his society. And what struck me as I worked through Jeremiah in the last week and read this book and read his thoughts and the things that God had told him to say to these people, it just struck me how much of what he says applies directly to us today and to our world and to our societies.
- And why? Why it's so important to read what he says. Because if we ever want to live in a society that works, and I think we all want to live in a society that works, don't we?
- Especially after the events of the last few weeks. We yearn for a society that functions, that works. But if we ever want to really find the way for society to work properly, we need to hear how Jeremiah describes what the real problem of our society is and what the real solution of it is.

And that's what we're going to look at this morning. Firstly, the problem, then the solution. Very briefly, there's much more to say on these things and much more to read in Jeremiah, which we won't be able to cover in four sessions.

But hopefully we'll get some of the heart of Jeremiah's message. And so the problem, let's look at the problem, why society fails to work properly.

[3 : 52] The first thing we need to understand, though, coming to Jeremiah, is that the society that he was writing to, that he had to bring God's words to, was no ordinary society.

It was the kingdom of Judah. It was a covenant community. Which means that it had a, that society, that group of people, that nation had a special relationship with God that no other nation enjoyed.

And they were given by God, through the law of Moses, the best framework for a working society on earth. And that law that we read about in the early books of the Old Testament.

Israel was given the way from God, the creator himself, for them to have a community that works. A community of justice and truth and good relations between neighbors.

And a community that could prosper and enjoy the land. And God told them how. And the point was, for Israel, to obey God's law and then be a shining example to the rest of the nations of the world.

[5 : 05] But of course, as we read further in the biblical story, we discover that that's not what happened. They failed to be who they should be. And Jeremiah was sent to them to show them and expose to them how far they've fallen from their purpose as God's covenant nation.

And there's a lot of lament in the book. Jeremiah laments like at a funeral. He laments for what they've lost as a nation. And we pick some of it up in chapter 9.

Turn there in your Bibles. He's here lamenting just how far his society has fallen from what he knew it should be.

He says in 9 verse 2, If only I had a traveler's lodging place in the wilderness. I would abandon my people and depart from them. Don't we feel the same sometimes?

We look at our society. We read the newspapers and we want to just fly away. We want to go to the wilderness or we want to go to Australia or the UK or Canada. You know, we just don't want to be here.

[6 : 10] But then, of course, I talk to people in those countries who want to be somewhere else. The grass is not actually greener. But that's what Jeremiah is feeling here. He just wants to get away from this broken society that he's living in.

And he goes on. For they are all adulterers. A solemn assembly of treacherous people. They bent their tongues like their bows.

They're lies. And not faithfulness prevail in the land. For they proceed from one evil to another. Don't you feel the same? Doesn't this describe our society?

He goes on in verse 5. Each one betrays his friend. No one tells the truth. They have taught their tongues to speak lies. And they wear themselves out doing wrong.

And so, Jeremiah was just grieved at the fact that his nation, who was supposed to be a shining light to the darkness around them, had become just as dark as the surrounding nations.

[7 : 14] Their light had spluttered out and died. And now they were just the same as all the other nations. They had lost their uniqueness. They had lost their purpose as a nation.

But then, as we continue to read these verses, God tells Jeremiah why. Why they are like they are. He tells them why he lives in such a broken society.

Have a look at verse 3 again at the end of it. God says, Because they do not take me into account. This is the Lord's declaration.

And verse 6. You live in a world of deception. In their deception, they refuse to know me. This is the Lord's declaration.

In other words, the reason that Jeremiah's society had fallen so far was because they had lost touch with who the real God is. And they were starting to follow the idols of the world.

[8 : 13] But the thing is, we know as we read this, that this doesn't just describe Judah, which was Jeremiah's nation. It describes every nation in the world.

In every time in history. It describes all broken societies. Even the ones that look like they are together. And they have that thin veneer of order and civilization.

And yet, under the surface, this is what is going on. In every human society in our world. And what we realize from these divine words is that the reason why a society fails to work properly is because the people in that society fail to know who their true God is.

The God who put them there. The God who made those societies. And in doing so, in failing to know who their true God is, humans have become, we see in Jeremiah, God says, even dumber than animals.

For all our advances in medical science. And all the things we can make. And all the things we know.

[9 : 29] And all the great libraries and the books we read. You know what? The Bible says we, in a very important way, are actually less insightful than the animals that roam our earth.

Have a look at chapter 8, from verse 6 to 7. This is God speaking. He says, talking about Judah, talking about any human society.

They do not speak what is right. No one regrets his evil, asking, what have I done? Everyone has stayed his course, like a horse rushing into battle. Even storks in the sky know their seasons.

Turtle doves, swallows, and cranes are aware of their migration. But my people do not know the requirements of the Lord. Even storks know better, he's saying.

You know, animals, if you've ever watched animals do what they do. In nature, in their element, you know, in the wild. I had the privilege of being in a national park recently.

[10 : 34] And I got to watch animals in the wild. And they, what's fascinating about them, when you watch a nature documentary, is that they know exactly what they need to do.

No one's taught them. But they know when to migrate. They don't get memos or emails saying, now's the time. Just put it in your calendar. They know when to go and where to go. I was watching, actually, a spoon bull.

I don't know if you know what a spoon bull is. A ridiculous looking animal. But the spoon bull has this beak, shaped like a spoon, hence the name. And it's got a fascinating way of feeding, of getting its food.

It uses its beak in a very skillful way. And it makes these, like, arcs in the shallow water and catches fish and other food that are in the mud, the little creatures and stuff, as it's going.

No one taught it to do that. It didn't go on a training course for how to use its spoon-shaped beak. It knows that. Inherently, instinctively. You see, animals know their place in creation.

[11 : 37] They know what they're there to do. They know what they must do. They don't have to ask questions. They don't have to sit and philosophize. You've never seen a lion sitting in the field going, you know, what should I do?

How should I catch food? What is my purpose in life? Why am I here? No, they know what to do. They must go catch impala. That's what they're there to do. Animals have this instinctive ability to know their place in creation.

In other words, to put it another way, they are in their element, truly in their element. You know, we talk about someone being in their element, where they're supposed to be. Well, animals are actually truly in their element.

They're where they're supposed to be, and they're doing what they're supposed to do. Humans are not. That's the point God is making here in Jeremiah 8. Human societies, as opposed to the animals, are not in their element.

They don't know what they're doing there, and they don't know how to use what they've been given in a way God wants them to. We don't know our place in creation as humans.

[12 : 46] And that, in fact, was the sin of Adam and Eve. They didn't know their place. They exceeded the boundaries that God had given them in their place in creation. God had given them an amazing place as humans to rule over and steward creation.

But they didn't know their place. They wanted more. They overstepped their boundaries, and therefore they lost their element. They lost their place in creation. That's the tragic story of Genesis 3. And so we find ourselves living in societies where we just don't know what we're meant to be doing here.

And so what that results in is people doing whatever they want, and that leads to the chaos that we see around us every day.

Because we're not in our element naturally. And that is what causes the frustrations and the anxieties that we feel every day.

We feel those frustrations and anxieties because we're not in our element. We're not doing what we're meant to be doing. We're not doing what we're made to do.

[13 : 49] And without God's revelation, we don't even know what we're meant to be doing. And that's why it's only by knowing God, truly, the true God, not our conception of God, but the true God as he reveals himself.

It's only by knowing God that we can ever be who we were made to be. And that's one of the main messages here of Jeremiah, why even this covenant nation that he's in failed to be who they're meant to be because they lost touch with the true God.

Look at chapter 2, page back. See what he says. 2 verse 8. The priests have quit asking, where is the Lord? The experts in the law no longer knew me.

The rulers rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal and followed useless idols. And I say even the top religious scholars, the religious leaders of the day, didn't know God.

And 2 verse 11. Has a nation ever exchanged its gods? But they were not gods. Yet my people, notice this, this is striking.

[15 : 04] My people have exchanged their glory for useless idols. That's what it literally says. Your translation might be a bit different. But literally what it says here is God saying, when they forgot me, when they lost touch with who I truly am, they exchanged their glory.

They put aside their glory. It doesn't say my glory, not God's glory. Their glory. Their glory. The glory of humans depends on knowing God.

That's what it's saying. Knowing God is our glory. In other words, humans are only significant. We are only glorious in so far as we know the God who made us.

Know Him truly. As opposed to the things we think make us glorious. Because we actually think a whole lot of other things make us important and glorious.

Like wisdom and strength and money. But they don't, actually. And that brings us to our main text for this series. Jeremiah 9, verse 23 to 24.

[16 : 08] Do take a pencil or a pen or whatever writing implement you have and maybe draw a square around that I have in my Bible because these are the two verses I really want us to chew over over the next four weeks.

Look at what they say. Jeremiah 9, 23 to 24. This is what the Lord says. This is the Lord's declaration.

You see, we think it's through being wise and powerful and prosperous that we will win in life.

And become all that we can be. That's what the world tells us. That's what we naturally assume. That the stronger we are, the wiser we are, the more we know, the more money we have, the more power we have, will allow us to be glorified and to be who we should be as human beings.

And so those are the things we run after. Students work for wisdom. And politicians work for power. And businessmen strive after money.

[17 : 40] Because those are the things that we see our glory in. But that's not actually true. It's why the wise and the powerful and the wealthy are still unsatisfied with life.

They're still searching. They're still yearning to feel in their element. No matter how much they have. And the reason is because what we discovered, the only way to truly as human beings, as creatures made by God, the only way to be in our element and to know what we're here to do and to live the lives we were made to live is to know God.

But notice here in these verses, not just to know God, but to know what He wants, what He desires, what is on His heart.

You don't really know someone until you know what they truly desire deep down inside. And God reveals in these verses what His desires are, what He delights in.

Faithful love, justice, and righteousness. For I delight in these things. And so we find the solution to the problem of a broken world, according to these verses, is knowing and doing what God wants.

[19 : 04] Rather than what we want. You see, because we are sinners, the Bible convinces us of that, if not our own lives should convince us of that. Because we are sinners, by nature we don't want what God wants.

We want something, by definition, different to what God wants. That's essentially what sin is. But we've also seen that doing what God wants is the only way that our world will ever work.

And what that means, therefore, is that if we want lives that work properly, if we want our world to work properly and our societies to work properly, what we need to do is realize that what God wants must always trump what I want.

That's the only way to find our place in creation again. And I don't mean, you know, wait for our hearts to want the same thing as God, but to realize that it doesn't, by nature, and to consciously learn every day to say, I want this, but God wants this, and it's different to what I want.

And I choose to value what God wants over what I want. And don't fill yourself into thinking that because you're a Christian, you're already doing that.

[20 : 34] Or because you're religious in some other religion, maybe, that you're already doing. Maybe you're a very religious or spiritual person. That does not mean, by any means, that you actually want the same things as what God wants.

Ironically, actually, sometimes it's the most religious people who are furthest away from genuinely choosing what pleases God. We see this in Jeremiah. It's one of Jeremiah's other major messages that he says, just because you're religious and you go to temple, doesn't mean that you want what God wants or that you value what God wants.

Look in chapter 7. Chapter 7, verse 4. Do not trust deceitful words chanting, This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

That's what he was saying. That characterized what the people of his time were doing. They were having so much confidence that they were Jews, that they were going to the temple of the Lord, that they didn't even think about whether their lives were in line with what God wanted.

In fact, he says later, chapter 7, verse 9. Do you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, follow other gods that you have not known?

[21 : 46] Then do you come and stand before me in this house that bears my name and say, We are rescued, so we can continue doing all these detestable acts.

Has this house which bears my name, says God, become a den of robbers in your view? Yes, I too have seen it. This is the Lord's declaration.

So you see what was happening to the covenant community of that day? They were doing what they wanted. They were pursuing the idols and the attractions of the nations around them.

And then they were going to the temple to assure themselves that they were safe and it was okay. So actually their religion gave them an excuse even more to pursue what they wanted rather than what God wanted.

Don't think because you're religious, you naturally want what God wants. Jesus came across the same hypocrisy in his day. Remember when he went to the temple and he says, This has become a den of robbers.

[22 : 47] He quotes Jeremiah's words here because exactly the same thing was happening in his day. The religious leaders of his day were actually not pursuing what God wanted at all, but they were using their religion as a way to get away with that, or they thought so.

But God saw it. And it's the same today. In the Christian church as well. People thinking that their religious works on Sunday could placate God enough so that we can keep chasing what we want Monday to Saturday.

That's often how people see church. They log into church or they go to church so that they can feel good about themselves and their relationship with God and then they can carry on living the lives they want to for the rest of the week.

That's not true Christianity. That's not what Christianity is about. That's not what being a Christian is about. Rather, being a Christian is about having our hearts so captured by God that we choose what pleases Him in place of what pleases us each and every day.

We don't pretend that what we want is the same as what God wants. But we actually realize that it's not. And we choose what God wants instead.

[24 : 05] That's what being one of God's people is about. Realizing that what we want is actually puny and passing away.

But what God wants is important and real and lasting. Being a Christian is knowing our place in this universe.

Realizing that it's not about us. being a Christian is actually realizing that this universe doesn't revolve around us. It revolves around Jesus the Son of God. It's about Jesus.

That's who God made all this for. Not for us. You realize that? If you haven't realized that you have to realize that. God did not make this creation for us. He made it for His Son Jesus.

He made us for Jesus. To glorify Jesus. This universe is about Him. It's not about us. And being a Christian is realizing that.

[25 : 06] It's knowing our place in this universe. That Jesus is the one that it's all about. He's the one who will one day inherit and rule all of God's creation. And He will make society work.

And so for you to be someone who is in your element. Don't you want to be in your element? Don't you want to feel like you are living the life you were made to live?

Well, for you to be in your element that will only happen when you believe in Christ who He really is and through Him you learn and are empowered to live a life that God wants rather than what you want.

And I hope that this series over the next four weeks will help you to do that as we study in more detail each of these things that God says He delights in so that we can line up our lives to what God wants rather than what we want.

That's the purpose of this series. And as the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 31 let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

[26 : 19] He's referring to what Jeremiah was saying here. and he's saying that we need to realize that our true value as human beings will never come from our own wisdom or our strength or our wealth but it will only come our value our glory will only come in so far as we are attached to Jesus Christ the Lord the Son of God in whom the whole of creation including us finds its real meaning and its purpose.

Well I hope to see you back next week as we delve deeper into these verses. Let's pray. Lord we thank you that you have made a way for us to come back to who we should be who you made us to be through the Lord Jesus Christ that without Him we are lost we are the blind leading the blind but with Christ and through being attached to Him and believing in Him and submitting to Him we can come back to be in our element we can come back to be the people you made us to be.

Oh Lord help us to recognize how our wants naturally are very different to what you want help us to prioritize what you want rather than what we want every day and through the power that Jesus gives His people in His Spirit working in us would you turn our hearts to live the kind of lives you want to do the things each day that you want that you delight in and help us to see those things as far greater and far more worth it than the things we want and the things we delight in and so we pray would you use the series over the next few weeks just to reprogram us reorient our hearts and to focus on you and the Lord Jesus Christ so that we may please you and that you may delight in us as your people that you will be happy with us and we pray all this in Jesus name

Amen Jesus Christ in Jesus name Jesus Christ he Conn Och bli