

“Accept No Substitutes”

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Baxter Exum (#967)
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Introduction:

This morning, I wonder how many of us have come to accept various substitutes for the real thing. Many of us do. Many times we will accept a generic medication that is much cheaper than the original product. Many times we will go to the grocery store and purchase the store brand or the generic of a well-known product. In our own family, I know that we often purchase Roundy's butter, and as far as I can tell it is just about identical to the name brand. Often we will shop at Aldis. Some of those brands I have never heard of, and yet we have rarely had a problem. Sometimes, however, we make the choice to stay with the brand. Most of you know that I prefer Coke, and those generic colas just do not do it for me. Sometimes there is a huge difference between a name brand and a generic, and sometimes the products are almost identical.

With this in mind, I would like for us to return to our study of the book of **Jeremiah** by looking together at a passage where the people of Israel were in the habit of accepting substitutes for God. We remember that Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet who was called by God as a teenager, during the reign of King Josiah. He was commissioned to take the word of God to the nations, starting with the Southern Kingdom of Israel. He prophesied for several decades, and he continued bringing God's message of repentance even as the Southern Kingdom continued to slip farther and farther away from God, and prophesied even through the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. He was a man of tremendous courage and kept on preaching in spite of intense persecution.

Last week we looked at Jeremiah's call, and this week I would like for us to consider a passage of Scripture that is taken from Jeremiah's very first message to the Southern Kingdom of Israel, from a passage that is found in **Jeremiah 2**. **»PPT»** At the time of Jeremiah's very first message, the Kingdom was basically falling apart at the seams. Enemies were approaching and starting to gather around, the kingdom was being upset with trouble from the inside, the government was corrupt, any concept of morality was in the process of being thrown out the window. The nation seemed to be on the verge of collapse. In many ways, the Southern Kingdom of Israel could be compared to our own nation in modern times. They had at one time been a superpower, but they were slipping. They were in the process of making worthless substitutes for the true and Living God. This morning, therefore, as we look at the situation around us, I would like for us to consider God's message to the Southern Kingdom of Israel, and I would like for us to focus on **Jeremiah 2**. We will be looking at **Jeremiah 2:4-13**...

- 4 Hear the word of the LORD,
O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.**
- 5 Thus says the LORD,
"What injustice did your fathers find in Me,
That they went far from Me
And walked after emptiness and became empty?**
- 6 "They did not say, 'Where is the LORD
Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
Who led us through the wilderness,
Through a land of deserts and of pits,
Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,
Through a land that no one crossed
And where no man dwelt?'**
- 7 "I brought you into the fruitful land
To eat its fruit and its good things
But you came and defiled My land,
And My inheritance you made an abomination.**
- 8 "The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
And those who handle the law did not know Me;
The rulers also transgressed against Me,
And the prophets prophesied by Baal
And walked after things that did not profit.**
- 9 "Therefore I will yet contend with you," declares the LORD,
"And with your sons' sons I will contend.**
- 10 "For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,
And send to Kedar and observe closely
And see if there has been such a thing as this!**
- 11 "Has a nation changed gods
When they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory
For that which does not profit.**
- 12 "Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate," declares the LORD.**
- 13 "For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water."**

This morning, I would like for us to consider God's warning, I would like for us to think about the fact that God refused to give up on the nation of Israel, and then I would like for us to close with a reminder that the people ultimately had to make a very clear choice.

I. As we look at verses 4-8, one of the first things we notice is that Jeremiah gives A VERY CLEAR WARNING ABOUT THE DANGER OF FORSAKING GOD. **»PPT»**

Hopefully all of us appreciate seeing warning signs as we drive on the highway. We appreciate knowing that there is a dangerous curve ahead, or that traffic will be merging in from the right, or that there is a blind intersection over the next hill, or that there is a school zone around the next corner. One of the first things we did before driving on the German Autobahn several months ago was to make sure we understood some of the major warning signs. Some of those signs were rather confusing, and so we got some advice on how to interpret the various signs. We thought it was important to do this because we wanted to be safe—we wanted to avoid spending Christmas in a German prison. We wanted to stay out of trouble. And in a similar way, Jeremiah starts out by giving the people some warning signs about what they were doing that was about to get them in trouble.

One of the first warnings comes in verses 5-6 as Jeremiah warns the people about the sin of humanism. Yesterday I looked up the word “**humanism**” in the dictionary, and this is the definition that is given (as we read the definition, try to apply this to ancient Israel as well as to the United States, especially here in Madison), “**...a system of thought that centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth, emphasizes reason, scientific inquiry, and human fulfillment in the natural world and often rejects the importance of belief in God.**” As I see it, that is exactly what Jeremiah is warning about in verses 5-6. The people had started trusting in their own natural abilities and were denying the role of God in the past successes of the nation of Israel.

They began trusting in their own power. They began trusting in their own ability. They began trusting in their own skills. And they began to take the credit for themselves for all that God had done. One author has compared humanism to plagiarism—the idea that we take what God has done and try to pass it off as our own accomplishment. We look around us today, and we can see the same attitude. People around us are rejecting God in favor of human achievement.

Not only does Jeremiah warn against humanism, but we find in verse 7 that he also warns against the sin of materialism. According to verse 7, the people were abusing the blessings that God had provided. According to verse 7, the people had “**defiled**” the land. And again, we see the same problem in the world today. All around us, people are taking the blessings that God has provided, and they are twisting those blessings into a curse. We see people piling up possessions and failing to share with others as they should. We see people abusing and wasting the resources that God has provided.

Not only does Jeremiah warn against the danger of humanism and materialism, but we also see a warning in verse 8 about the danger of religious pluralism. We find in verse 8 that even the religious leaders had given in to the pressure of their religious neighbors. Near the end of verse 8, the prophets were prophesying by Baal. They had given in to the point where they were compromising with a pagan God. And

again, even today, religious leaders continue to compromise with the truth. We hear calls from all sides to simply ignore matters of doctrine, **"Let's just ignore our differences, and let us just agree to disagree. Let us just get along."** And yet we find in **verse 8** that God very clearly warns against the danger of religious pluralism.

It is interesting to me that the basic problems have not changed very much at all. Jeremiah was prophesying roughly 600 years before the birth of Christ, and yet here we are so many years later, and the warning from God remains basically the same. Even today, the church continues to be threatened by false teachers—by those who would like to change and challenge the gospel message. The threat is very real—just as real as it was when these words were first spoken. First of all, then, we have a warning from Jeremiah about the danger of drifting away from God. We are to heed the warning signs.

II. As we look back at Jeremiah 2, we also find, however, that in spite of the rejection of the people, GOD REFUSES TO GIVE UP. Perhaps we could refer to this as GOD'S FAITHFUL LOVE (we see it referred to in verses 9-12). **»PPT»**

In **verse 9**, Jeremiah says, **"Therefore I will yet contend with you,' declares the LORD."** As I understand it, the word **"contend"** (as it is translated here) goes back to a Hebrew word for filing a court case or a lawsuit against someone. In fact, the NIV says, **"Therefore I bring charges against you again."** In other words, we have the picture here of a lawsuit. We have the idea that God is bringing the Southern Kingdom of Israel to court. God is pressing charges. God is suing His people, and we find in **verse 9** that He is doing it **"again."** In other words, this is a pattern. God is contending with His people over and over again.

In **verse 10**, Jeremiah encourages the people to look around to, **"...see if there has ever been such a thing as this!"** After all, the surrounding nations were faithful to their gods, and those were not even real gods!

And so as God makes the case against the Southern Kingdom, He is amazed. In **verse 11**, **"Has a nation changed gods when they were not gods?"** They had swapped the one true and Living God for a bunch of dead idols. They had made a substitution! According to the second part of **verse 11**, **"My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit."** And then in **verse 12**, God calls the heavens into the courtroom as witnesses, **"Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder, be very desolate,' declares the LORD."** The word **"shudder"** is a Hebrew word based on the word **"hair,"** and literally it refers to something that makes your hair stand on end. The meaning is, **"to bristle."** We picture a dog who sees an intruder, and we see the hair along the dog's spine stand on end. That is the picture we have here in the middle of **verse 12**. The heavens are to **"bristle"** when they see the behavior of God's chosen people. Their rejection of God should make our hair stand on end! We should get mad. We should be shocked! Today we would say: There has never been anything like it!

And yet through all of this, Jeremiah says that God is still contending with His people. God was bringing the lawsuit: He had not yet given up! Today, we need to try to apply this to the church. Even among those who claim to be Christians, we see people compromising essential doctrine. We see people allowing immorality into the church in the name of political correctness. We see people turning away from the doctrine of Christ and turning aside to man-made religion that does not really do any good. And yet in spite of how bad it might be, we find that God is still bringing charges. God is still concerned. And as long as the final judgment has not yet been decided, there is still the possibility for change. And this leads us to **verse 13**.

III. In Jeremiah 2:13, GOD PRESENTS THE PEOPLE WITH A VERY CLEAR CHOICE. »PPT»

The importance of this choice is represented with water. Certainly we know the importance of water to human life. We know from elementary school that the human body is made up of more than 70% water. In fact, it takes only a 1% deficiency to make us feel thirsty, and from there it only gets worse, leading to death. Water is absolutely essential for human life. For this reason, our spiritual journey is often described in terms of thirst. Being thirsty is something that all of us can understand.

And so with that in mind, God gives us quite a sad picture in **verse 13**. Hopefully, our spiritual thirst will lead us to God, but **verse 13** tells us that the people had committed two evils, ***"They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water."*** And so Jeremiah presents it in terms of a choice: On one hand there is a fresh mountain stream, and on the other hand there is a cistern. And so when it comes to quenching our thirst, we have a very clear choice.

Augustine once said, ***"Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition (thirst) and try desperately to fulfill it without God."*** That is exactly what the people of Jeremiah's time were doing. And so on one hand, they were trying to quench their thirst by creating a man-made cistern. Perhaps (as I have) some of you have lived in homes with cisterns. Many times there is a big pit in the basement or crawlspace or maybe somewhere in the back yard. There will be gutters going from the roof of the house directing rainwater to the cistern. The water washes all of the crud off of the roof, washes all of the gunk out of the gutters, and the water then collects to be used sometime later. There is a benefit. Here in Madison, in our enlightened society, there has been a huge push for rain barrels lately. We think we are so special, but the practice goes back thousands of years! But again, there are benefits. Obviously, you get free water. But then again, the water is not clean. It would obviously be full of bird droppings and leaves. It would get stagnant. It would grow bacteria. It would get rather disgusting.

But we find in **verse 13** that their cisterns were not even working! They had worked so hard to dig these cisterns, but the cisterns were broken! The cisterns would not hold water. Totally useless!

But just as they were dying of thirst due to these broken cisterns, they were rejecting the fountain of living waters. Last summer I had the privilege of kayaking on Lake Wingra, and my mission for that little outing was to make it across the lake and discover one of the major springs that feed the lake. After getting directions, I went straight across Lake Wingra, and when I got to the other side I found a little inlet between the reeds, and I paddled back through the little creek, and at this point the water temperature drops probably twenty or thirty degrees. I can see giant fish swimming under my boat, and on my way in, I pass several other kayakers on their way out, and they tell me that once I get back there I should try holding my hand in the water to see how long I can stand it. I get back there, and it is beautiful—totally peaceful and quiet. There is a small stream of water bubbling out of the rocks, it is a hot summer day, and I put my hand down into the water. Ice cold! I can only hold my hand there for a few seconds before it is painfully cold. It was a clear stream of pure water! Absolutely beautiful!

Jeremiah tells us that God's people had rejected that crystal clear stream! They had turned away, and they were digging pits in the rock in a vain effort to capture the runoff that would occasionally wash down the side of the hills. Why would they make that choice? I think the key is that the cisterns were the product of their own labor. They wanted to do their own thing. They wanted to drink their own water. They did not want God's rules and regulations. They did not want God's permission. But instead, they wanted gods in their own image. They wanted gods that they had created!

Do we see this in the world around us today? Have people been drinking from the rain barrel when they should be drinking from the crystal clear stream? Have people swapped God for concerns that do not really matter? Absolutely! As a society, we are busy digging cisterns as we are standing right next to a refreshing mountain stream! As a society, we are bowing down to anything but God.

And again, as Augustine said, **"Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural ... (thirst) and try desperately to fulfill it without God."** That is what our society has done. We are stooping over holes in the ground, lapping up muddy water. As a society, we have turned away from the pure mountain stream for the stagnant water of a leaking cistern. But thankfully, the choice remains!

Conclusion & Invitation:

Jeremiah gave a clear warning—the people had turned away from God for humanism, materialism, and religious pluralism. God was upset, but He was not giving up. He was not giving up, because He knew that there were some who still had a chance of turning back. The people still had a choice. A hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had given the same invitation in **Isaiah 55:1** when he said, **"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters..."** (NIV). The invitation is repeated in the New Testament, from beginning to end. In **John 4**, Jesus met with the woman at the well, and after she gave Him a drink, Jesus said, **"Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him**

shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

The Bible ends with the same invitation in **Revelation 22:17**, ***“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”*** And nearly 2,000 years later, we pass along the same offer. Salvation is a free gift. We accept the gift by turning away from the broken cisterns, by turning away from our sins. We then turn to the living water by making an appeal to God for a clean conscience. According to **1 Peter 3:21**, the appeal is made at the point of baptism, at which point our sins are forgiven. If we are talking about butter or cola, the choice does not really matter. But if we are talking about the Lord’s invitation—the choice between a broken cistern and the Living Water, our decision makes all the difference in the world. If you have any questions, we hope you will talk to us sometime soon. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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