

Sunday November 17, 2019

Lesson 12: Shamed by Shams

Scripture: Jeremiah 51: 15-19; Habakkuk 2: 18-20

**Context:**

Today's scripture lesson and focus on knowing God pulls from two prophets in the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Habakkuk. The purpose of the lesson is to be reminded that nothing we worship other than God can impart life. The vivid imagery of these writers will help us understand that nothing on earth can compare to the life that God breathes into us.

The first scripture to examine comes from the book of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah is the second longest book of the prophets after Isaiah. The lesson today focuses on verses from chapter fifty-one, as part of a longer section with oracles condemning other nations that most affected Judah.<sup>1</sup> The book of Jeremiah is complex with several perspectives that seem to contradict one another. However, if one looks at the timeline of events in Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, the overall message makes sense.<sup>2</sup> The prophet stood with the reforms of Josiah, the reforms failed, and Jeremiah then prophesized doom with the belief that Yahweh would not entirely abandon the people.<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah speaks of hope and also reminds the people of their own part in their undoing.

Chapter fifty-one comes in the midst of an oracle against Babylon, the empire that would conquer Judah and lead to the exile. Jeremiah's words are to remind the readers that even though Babylon has all the resources and appear all-powerful, they will be destroyed. Their idols will be smashed and their vanity will be their undoing. These arrogant, wealthy people and their inanimate statues will not defeat the God of Abraham and Jacob.

The second scripture passage comes from the book of Habakkuk. The book is one of the minor prophets section and is placed between Nahum and Zephaniah. The location of the book indicates the book was written during the early Babylonian period right in the midst of the Babylonian campaign at the end of the seventh century BCE.<sup>4</sup> The book has two parts, the first being a lament about violence done to the righteous with divine responses, and the third being a hymn of Yahweh's triumph.<sup>5</sup> The verses today are God's response reminding Habakkuk that God will triumph over any god of silver and bronze. God will tear down the idols and expose these false gods as simply pottery that looks

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011), 365.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 364.

easy on the eye.

### **Application**

The prophets have always been the ones to “step on toes.” They are not afraid to say what needs to be said even if it threatens their lives and the offices they hold. Their words provoke and seek to remind people of the origins of real life.

Sometimes I wonder what the prophets would say of today’s idols that have been formed. The ancient world was full of literal idols. The idols had different substances and represented different things. People worshipped the idols pledging their lives to them and devoting all their money and energy to preserving them. For the wealthy, the idols represented their own prestige and power. The fact that they could create such pieces gave them what they thought was authority and prestige. Yet as we have seen, God destroys those idols without a hesitation and will continue to do so.

There are no shortage of idols today that we think impart life. For some people, money is what holds the key. Its representation comes in the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the houses we build, and the second vacation homes we purchase. Having those things are not bad. However, we would do well to remember that they do not give us life and they certainly do not make us more authoritative or better than those around us.

Idols can come in other forms though. Sometimes it can be a building, an institution, or even people who supposedly hold power and influence. We will sometimes dedicate our lives to worshipping things that represent vanity and awe because we think that somehow it will make us look good or feel better.

There is nothing wrong with loving or venerating buildings, institutions, or people. Yet when they begin to hold our attention as to what brings us life, we have fallen into the same trap that plagued the Babylonians and the rebellious Israelites. God formed those things and gave life to them. Yet when they begin to take all our time, energy, and devotion, they have replaced God and take away the life that God has given us.

In today’s world, the temptation to worship idols still holds our attention. While the substance of the idols has changed, the sentiment remains the same. Whenever we as individuals or groups of people begin to place all our hope in things other than God, then we miss out on the goodness of our God. We miss the loyalty and never-ending love of God. We miss out on the wonders that God performs and the beauty of God in creation. We miss out on relationships that are warm and meaningful, instead of contrived relationships that are superficial and parasitic. Things that are made by humans take hold of us and we cannot see the damage that is being done to our souls as we worship them.

The real truth is that when we place our hope in idols, they turn out to be shams. Money and the conveniences it brings will not buy us happiness. It can be gone in an instance. The same goes for buildings, institutions, and people. Buildings will crumble. Institutions will falter. And people will disappoint us. All these things cannot compare to God who is eternal and is the one who holds us when the world seems to be collapsing.

What are gods that you see in today’s world? Has money ever been a god for you? What about building, institutions, or people? Discuss a time when you worshipped something else and you ended up discovering things were a sham. What are the ways that we can be vigilant about idols and making sure that we place our trust in God and not in the idols in front of us?

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