

ALFRED STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

WITH all *YOUR* HEART

Alfred
Street
BAPTIST CHURCH
Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley

JANUARY 7/8

2023

A SERMON BY REV. DR. HOWARD-JOHN WESLEY

@PASTORHJW

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JEREMIAH 29:10-14 (NIV)



Date: January 7th and 8th, 2023

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley

Sermon Title: "With All Your Heart"

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:10 - 14

*This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.** I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."*

SERMON SUMMARY

Beginning with freedom from exile, the story of the Hebrews is told by Pastor Wesley in this weekend's sermon. He traces the route of the people from exile to Canaan and from a confederacy of tribes named after Jacob's sons and grandsons to a people united under three successive kings. However, after the rule of Saul, David, and Solomon the united kingdom crumbled. Once Rehoboam, Solomon's son, ascended the throne, the kingdom fractured into northern (Israel) and southern tribes (Judah).

The northern tribes were located in Samaria, where the northern tribes intermarried and diluted their Jewish heritage by taking on the ways, gods, and religion of their new Samaritan neighbors. Warned by prophet after prophet, the northern tribes moved farther and farther from God until in approximately 721 BCE God allowed the Assyrians to capture them, destroy their way of life and assimilate them into Assyrian life.

Pastor Wesley reminds us, '...bad things happen when we stray from God.' Bad things happened to the northern tribes and because the southern tribes were unmoved by what they saw in the north, they also fell prey to a similar fate. Just like their northern kin, the southern tribes ignored the prophets, and in approximately 586 BCE, bad things happened to them. They were vanquished by the Babylonians and taken 900 miles into exile and captivity.

The prophet Jeremiah warned the southern tribes before their exile and continued to communicate with them while in exile. The 29th chapter of Jeremiah is a portion of the correspondence between the captured southern tribe of Judah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah wants the people to know that their primary problem is not their condition of exile but their spiritual distance from God.

Pastor Wesley moves from the predicament of Judah to the primacy of this message for our lives. All of us have faced or will face a moment when we are distant from God. Pastor Wesley points to five signs that suggest we are on a dangerous descent, growing distant from God. We see signs that we are growing distant from God when:

1. We become callous to conviction.
2. Our devotional lives become more and more diminished.

3. We are intentionally offensive to others.
4. We have a weakened or weekend worship life.
5. We lose our joy and peace.

KEY POINTS

1. The number one reason we stray from God is our participation in idolatry. Idolatry is when we allow anyone or anything to take priority over God. Idols in our lives can include: those we love, Instagram, work, past times, etc.
2. Even though bad things happen when we stray from God, Jeremiah reminds us we can get things back on track by searching for God with all our hearts.
3. The 40-day period of prayer and fasting we call Seek 2023! allows us to take ownership as we seek God. Seek 2023! calls us to discipline our diets, disrupt our distractions, and limit our spending.
4. Prayer and fasting are biblically supported in the experience and words of Jesus from Matthew 17. Jesus reminds the disciples that some types of problems are solved only by prayer **and** fasting.
5. Fasting removes distractions and allows us to quiet ourselves and purposefully focus on God.
6. If we participate in Seek 2023!, Pastor suggests we will hear the voice of God more clearly and we will learn how to control the things in our lives that have caused us to stray from God.

Village Members and Facilitators,

The Curriculum Team does not expect you to cover all the questions. We ask the facilitators to choose the best questions, in each section, for your Village.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU QUESTIONS

1. Pastor Wesley believes that “quality time” is one of God’s primary love languages. What is your love language(s) with those in your life? What is your love language(s) with God?
2. Seek 2023! is a season when we, as a church family, will turn to prayer and fasting. If you have participated in a previous fast, what spiritual muscles did you strengthen?

INTO THE BIBLE QUESTIONS

1. The number forty is prominent in the Bible. It rained for 40 days while Noah and his family were on the ark. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Elijah went 40 days without food or water on Mt. Horeb. Jesus was tempted for 40 days before he began his ministry. The number 40 symbolizes many things, including “a period of time sufficient to accomplish the task”. Pastor Wesley reminds us that the first three kings of Israel all served 40 years. As we enter Seek, we have 40 days. What task do you want to accomplish in your 40 days of Seek?

2. Pastor Wesley notes that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to convict us when we sin. The Bible points out other roles of the Holy Spirit. What roles has the Holy Spirit played in your life? What roles are highlighted in the Bible? (Please see the resource section for additional information.)
3. Pastor Wesley mentions that for the first 400 years in Canaan the tribes lived in a confederacy. For many years afterwards the tribes unified to the extent there was a single King over the nation. Once Rehoboam came into power there began to be fractures and divisions amongst the tribes. If the tribes had remained a confederacy as they were originally established, do you believe warnings of apostasy from prophets would have been proclaimed? Why or why not?

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Pastor Wesley defines apostasy as the act of straying from our commitment to God. It is likely that we have all strayed from God, intentionally or unintentionally. What draws you away from God? What has the power to tempt you to stray from your commitment to God? How do you fight back against this thing? What have your struggles taught you?
2. Jeremiah preaches to the people for 23 years (first 25 chapters of his book) and they do not change their ways. It is only after a painful, 70-year period of exile, that they learn their lesson and shift their pattern of living. Why do you think some of us only learn when we are placed in spaces of exile, punishment, difficulty, etc.? Why can we not learn lessons without the pain? What has your life taught you about this question?
3. Once you are awake, what is the first thing you do in the morning? What would you like to create as a morning ritual to fill the space between being aware that you are awake and getting out of bed? What would happen if you began to follow that desired ritual for the 40 days of Seek 2023!?
4. There are occasions when mental distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.) can unintentionally draw us away from God. This happens more often than we might think. When this occurs, what resources might aid in drawing the person back into relationship with God and community?

5. Being distant from God diminishes our peace and joy. How would you define peace? What is the difference between joy and happiness? How does growing closer to God impact your joy and peace?
6. Fasting requires sacrifice. Why is sacrifice important? What do we learn from sacrifice? What happens when we sacrifice in the name of God and successfully come through? What have you learned from sacrifice?

"CAN I PUSH IT?" QUESTIONS

1. Idolatry is anything that takes the place of God in our lives. **If** we tell the truth, we all have idols. Your idol might be a thing (e.g., Visa or food), a pattern of thinking (e.g., worry, obsession, anger), a way of being (e.g., perfectionism, busyness), or something altogether different. Tell the truth, what are your idols?
2. Our contemporary culture encourages us to speak our full minds. Tactics that demean and diminish can be seen from the halls of Congress to the street corners in our neighborhoods. But Pastor Wesley tells us that when we can say whatever we want to say, no matter how it lands on another, **we have grown distant from God**. How can we fight against the cultural norm of 'my right to say whatever I want to say?' As Christians, what is our responsibility to shift the culture's use of words that harm?

ACTIVITY

1. Pastor Wesley urges us to "Put the word of God in our hearts." Memorizing scripture works for some, but for others it is a task that leads to frustration. What innovative ways do you employ to hide God's word in your heart?
2. Pastor has encouraged us to prepare for Seek 2023!. How are doing so? Please share your preparatory activities.

SPIRIT WORK

Pastor Wesley reminds us that our distance from God is determined by our priorities and predilections, and not by God's position. During the upcoming week, set a time each day, and declare the following: "God, I desire to move closer to you." After you pray this, sit quietly for a time and once you are through with your moment of stillness, write down one way you will seek to draw closer to God that day. Do not worry about making a grand statement. Instead, see this act as an opportunity to practice drawing closer and closer to God through the seven days of this week.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Within the structure of Village, there are various affinity groups. Each week the team creates questions, especially for the individual groups. However, any village may draw from the questions listed below if the Spirit so moves.

For Married Couples

1. Do you know your spouse's love language? How have you spoken to your spouse in that language. Have you ever expressed your love language(s) to your spouse? If so, how did it affect your relationship?
2. In this sermon, Pastor Wesley notes it's a sign that you are growing distant from God when "You find yourself talking to other people more than you talk to God about the problems of your life." How does this statement strike you? What is a healthy balance between conversations with God and others? In your marriage, how do you strike a healthy balance between talking to your spouse and talking to God?

For Young Adults

1. In this age of technology, we are rarely without some sort of smart device. What is the longest period of time you've "unplugged"? Did it make a difference in how you spent your day?
2. Pastor Wesley declared, "The devil's most powerful weapon to disrupt your devotional life is busyness". What do you think about this statement? What role does busyness play in your life in general and in your walk with God in particular? How do you want to shift your busyness, especially during our season of Seek 2023!?

For Parents

1. What is your child's love language? As they've grown older, how has it evolved? How do you practice speaking to them in their love language? What happens when you do?
2. Parents say "no" to their children all the time. However, Pastor Wesley asks us to consider the last time we said "no" to ourselves. When was the last time you applied discipline to your life by saying no to self? What was that experience like for you? What does it teach about the way "no" lands on the spirit of your child?

For Seniors

1. It is easy to sneer at the southern tribe of Judah. After all, they did not learn from what happened to their northern kin. However, have you ever walked down a path even though you saw someone else walk down that path with a disastrous result? Why do we not learn from those who go before us? Why do we need to suffer even though there are models before us?
2. Pastor Wesley states that: "You don't have to go home to be married. But . . . the longer you stay away from home the more it will mess up your marriage." Post COVID-19, church attendance is still less than it was pre-pandemic. Being in worship, in the presence of the people and of God, can strengthen our worship and diminish any distance between us and God. Does it make a difference to be in church, physically? What difference does it make? Does that physical presence shift the relationship we share with God?

For Women

1. We are familiar with the story of Mary and Martha. As women, we are often so busy being busy that we sometimes put God last on our to-do list. What changes are you committed to making in order to be more like Mary than Martha?
2. Think of a time when you felt distant from God. How did you recognize that you had become distant? What did you do to draw closer to Him?

For Men

1. Pastor suggests a simple mistake can become a habit, habits can become patterns, patterns can become a behavior, and behaviors can become a lifestyle. Have you ever made the mistake of straying from God and then becoming comfortable with the distant relationship? What made you comfortable and what, if anything, ultimately made you uncomfortable? What did you learn from this experience?
2. When was the last time you wanted to get even with someone? Did you? If you did, when all was said and done, you had gotten your revenge, what would you have said if God showed up and asked you, "So, my son, what did you really accomplish?"

For Returning Citizens

1. Sin is deceptively progressive. Have you ever begun with something that might be considered a simple, little sin that became a challenge? How did the progression sneak up on you? What did you do when you realized you were now "in deep". If you were talking to the you that fell prey to that deceptively progressive sin what encouragement and advice would you offer?
2. Jeremiah writes to those who have strayed from God and reminds them we can get things back on track because God will be found when we search with all our hearts. The Prophet Jeremiah reminds us that we can never be so far from God that we are hopelessly lost. This is good news. How do you seek God with your whole heart? How might you use Seek 2023! to seek God?

For Differently-Abled Persons/People

1. Have you ever felt distant from God? What did you do? What did you learn? How does this sermon inform or prepare you for the next time you feel distant from God?
2. Pastor Wesley tells us that fasting serves to turn down the distractions in our lives so we might hear more clearly the still, small voice of God. During this season of Seek 2023!, what do you want to "turn down" in your life? How might you go about that?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. **HOLY SPIRIT:** In this sermon, Pastor Wesley noted the role of the Holy Spirit. For more information on the roles and names of the Holy Spirit, please see the following references.
 - a. Roles: https://www.openbible.info/topics/holy_spirit
 - b. Names: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/torreys-topical-textbook/titles-and-names-of-the-holy-spirit.html>
2. **FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES:** The book, The Five Love Languages, is referenced in the sermon. For more information, please see the following reference.
 - a. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Five_Love_Languages
3. **SEEK 2023! DEVOTIONAL:** Under the direction of Rev. Dr. Dustin Sullivan, a devotional has been developed for Seek 2023! It will be available on the ASBC website.
 - a. To view it, please go to alfredstreet.org.
4. **FASTING:** There are over 70 references to fasting in the Bible. If you wish to review some that Pastor Wesley noted in his sermon, please see the references noted below.
 - a. Moses' Fast:
 - Exodus 34:28
 - b. Elijah's Fast:
 - I Kings 19:8
 - *In the strength of that food. The one meal sustained Elijah for 40 days and 40 nights.*
 - c. Daniel's Fast:
 - Daniel 10:3
 - d. Paul's Fast:
 - II Corinthians 11:27
 - e. Fasting in the early Christian Community:
 - Acts 13:3
 - Acts 14:23
 - f. Jesus' Fast:
 - Mark 1:13
 - Matthew 4:1–11
 - Luke 4:1–13