Safety in God Alone
Jeremiah 7:1-20, 30-34.

Now, this week, Theresa May, the UK Prime Minister, gave a speech - in case you missed it - that might just have cost her her job. And, I suppose, it would be possible for me to preach a sermon that could cost me my job. But today we're going to look at a sermon Jeremiah preached that nearly cost him his life. Not because it was bad, because it was true.

And he preached it around 609BC when the nation was in trouble. Good king Josiah, had been killed in battle. His replacement Jehoahaz had barely sat down on the throne before Egypt carried him off as a prisoner and installed Jehoiakim, as their puppet, in his place. And now Judah was caught in the middle of two empires, Babylon and Egypt, who were fighting for supremacy.

Reading: Jeremiah 7:1-20, 30-34.

The Presence You Want
Now, the Book of Psalms, in the Bible, is so enduringly helpful because those who wrote it were honest and open about their emotions and experiences. And you read it and think, 'they know what I'm feeling' - because they do. Take the beginning of Psalm 10, 'Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?'

And maybe you know what that feels like. You're facing some situation and you know you need God's help to get through it, to cope. And you don't have to be a Christian to think like that, do you? Things aren't going the way you want in life and you find yourself praying. And you're asking God to help you, to come alongside you, with his strength and his presence, to let you know he's there.

And one of the extraordinary messages of the Bible, from the first book to the last, is that God wants you to experience and enjoy the reality of his presence. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, begins in a garden, with God walking and talking with Adam and Eve, like a friend. And the Bible ends, in Revelation, with a garden city coming down out of heaven, with the cry, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man" (Rev 21:3). And in between God rescues the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, so that they can be his special people and he will be their God, living among them. And first the tabernacle, and then the temple, were God's dwelling places, right in the middle of his people.

And here, in Jeremiah's day, the people of Judah were facing turbulent and uncertain times. Times that would have left them looking for reassurance and that sense of security, that things were going to be ok, that they were going to be safe - the kind of things we want to know when our lives are up in the air. And, despite the threat of invasion and war, they had found that confidence. And they'd found it in God's temple. Because this was the Lord's house, this was the place where God dwelt. In their own words, that Jeremiah quotes back to them in v10, 'we are delivered' - it's going to be ok, because God won't ever let this temple, his house, fall.

But what Jeremiah tells them is that their hope and trust are badly misplaced. And from what he says it's clear that ours can be also.

False Hopes
Look at v1-2: "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word."' So imagine everyone streaming in through one of the temple gates for a worship service. It would be like me

standing on a table at the front doors, preaching at you whilst you're trying to get in. Only there would have been a crowd of hundreds or thousands. And they're all coming to church.

And he's in *the* most important religious site in Judah, and he's about to tell them everything that's wrong with their religion. This would be like someone standing on the steps of Congress, or the door to the House of Commons, and denouncing all that's wrong with our politics as all the politicians stream in.

And Jeremiah has two charges against them. Firstly, v3: 'Amend your ways and your deeds.' Secondly, v4, 'Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

So, he's doing two things. He's critiquing the kind of religion that makes no difference to the way someone lives, *and* that gives them a false confidence. He's saying that you can be in the right place, like the Temple, or church, and say all the right words, repeatedly, but your heart be wrong. For your behaviour out there in the world to be unaffected by your religion, *but still* to see religion like an insurance policy that keeps you safe.

Now, there's a difference, isn't there, between a consumer and a covenant relationship. In a consumer relationship you provide me with the goods. And if you don't, or if I can get them better elsewhere, then I can break the relationship. But in a covenant relationship, like marriage, it's the relationship, not what you're getting out of it, that's key.

And God had called the people into a covenant relationship of love with him. But they had made it into a consumer relationship: if we keep coming to the temple God will give us security; but the relationship part, that really doesn't matter. Our hearts don't have to be in it.

You see, God tells them what their lives would look like if their hearts really were in it: v5-7, 'If you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place.'

So to be in real, covenant relationship with God, was not just about turning up to church and making it through the songs and staying awake in the sermon - it was about a relationship that transformed the way you saw all of life. And especially how you see those on the margins who have no power.

But their second issue was their false confidence. Verse 8, 'You trust in deceptive words to no avail.' Now our third daughter, Hannah, is currently in Scotland working at an outdoor activity centre. And last weekend, she and her friends went out for a walk and found a rope swing over a stream. And everyone had a couple of goes, and then Hannah decided she'd have one last go. And Hannah being Hannah decided she'd get as much speed up as possible, and right when she was at full stretch over the stream that swing gave way and she landed face down in the water and was knocked out cold! She thought this bit of rope and stick would hold her, and she was deceived!

And so are the people of Jerusalem. They think they're safe, regardless of how they behave, or what they really believe deep down, because this was the temple of the Lord, this was God's house, this was his city - it'll never fall.

The problem is their trust wasn't in God, in his faithfulness or his character, it was in all the externals of religion: the building, the words they recited. And religion had become for them something repetitive, something they did by going through the motions: the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. And that kind of religion, Jeremiah says, has no power to save you.

Verse 9, 'Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' In other words, you can't spend your week breaking the ten commandments, then show up at church, and think you're ok.

You see, it wasn't God they wanted, or the life that comes from being in relationship with him, it was his protection, his blessing. But that's so easy to do, isn't it? To want what God can give you: peace in your heart, or a good family, or a happy marriage, but not God himself, for himself.

Now, one of Charles Dickens' great characters is Fagin from Oliver Twist. And Fagin's a receiver of stolen goods - and he has all these street children who he trains up and sends out onto the streets of London to pickpocket. And at the end of the day they all come back to Fagin's Den.

And God likens the temple to a Fagin's Den of thieves: v11: 'Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it.' Like a bunch of pickpockets, the people think they can live however they want, out there on the streets of Jerusalem, and then come to the temple as if it was their safe space. But God says, no, it's not; I see everything you're doing and you can't use religion as a cover-up.

And God says to them that if they don't change their ways, and if they don't stop trusting in the wrong thing, then the very thing they're looking for, safety, is going to be taken from them. And if they have any doubt about whether God will do that, he sends them on a field trip.

Now, if you ever visit one of the great sites of Roman ruins, like Pompeii, you can buy these guide books, that have photos of the ruins as they are now, and over them you can lay a semi-see through page of what the buildings used to look like in their glory days. I mean, now, there's just this stumpy bit of pilar, but turn the page, and it's not a stumpy bit of pillar you're looking at, you're standing in the precincts of the temple of Venus.

And God sends them to Shiloh: v12, 'Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.' And Shiloh was where the tabernacle of the Lord was pitched in the days of the Judges. It was like Jerusalem and the temple, before there was a Jerusalem and a temple. It was where God dwelt. But Shiloh had been destroyed centuries before because the people of Israel had abandoned God just like Judah was doing now. And God is saying, look, if you think the externals of religion can save you, look how that worked out for Shiloh. Because you won't find a great religious site, you'll find a ruin, and you'll need a fancy tourist guide with flip-over pages to even be able to imagine what used to be there.

But if the people's hearts where elsewhere, where was that elsewhere? If it wasn't God they were trusting and living for, what was it? Well, pretty much like today what was going on in their families tells us.

Family Worship
Look at v17-18: 'Do you not see what they are doing?… The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women kneed dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven.' Now, on the surface this looks like a family that's doing everything those books on parenting tell you to do. They're not glued to the TV, they're not all sat in different rooms on their electronic devices, they're spending quality time together!

Except, they're doing it by worshipping an idol: Ishtar, the goddess of war and fertility and family.

Now, today, a family's unlikely to have a little stone image of Ishtar to bow down to. And yet, the sad truth is that whole families can be engaged in the worship of an idol. And they may not call it Ishtar, but it could still be the idol of family: our family is *the* most important thing about us. Or it could be sport, and everything else takes second place to skiing, or whatever; or it could be school success, and the whole family is engaged with getting the very best results possible, because if we succeed here then we can feel good, and face our friends. And sacrifices of time and energy and money are offered to whichever god it is, so it gives us what we want.

The problem is that, just like cigarettes, idols should carry a health warning: worshipping this idol can seriously damage your family's health. You see, family, and sport and academic success are all good. And they're God's gifts to us, to enjoy. But they're not God. And if we treat them as gods, it'll come back to bite. Look at v19, where God says of this idolatry, 'Is it I whom they provoke?… Is it not themselves, to their own shame?' And that word *provoke* means to harm or bring shame. And God is saying, look when a family gives themselves to idols like this it's like a form of self-harm. And think how that works: we make these things our ultimate, and our kids become more anxious, or driven, or they turn away from God, or the stress that comes from trying to keep up with others damages the relationships within our families. Because these things just aren't designed to bear the weight we put on them.

Now, whole families involved in idolatry is one thing, but sacrificing your kids to idols is another. But just outside Jerusalem that was exactly what was happening. Verse 31, 'They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire.'

Now, in pagan worship, child sacrifice was the supreme religious act. You were giving to the god that which was most precious to you, so that the god would give you what you wanted in return.

And today we look on that kind of thing with abhorrence. And yet, our 21st century idols of personal freedom, and the good life I want to live, or career success, still ask us for our children, don't they. Now, I know that abortion is incredibly sensitive and frequently tragic. But the tragedy of abortion is that almost every baby who is aborted is sacrificed to one or other of society's idols. It might be to the idol of personal freedom - this is my choice and I just don't want to be tied down by a child yet. It might be the idol of money, and having another child now would impact on our lifestyle; it might be to the idol of how others see us, or how we value others - this baby will be disabled and that wouldn't be good for him or her, or for society, to have to look after them.

But this can also kick in at a lower level. Because all of us who are parents face that temptation to invest our time and energy in the pursuit of something that will give *us* what we want but our kids and families suffer along the way.

And Jeremiah's message to them was sobering. In the place where they had slaughtered their children, they would be slaughtered. Verse 32, 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called… the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.' And when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, history tells us that that valley just outside Jerusalem was indeed filled with the corpses of the slain.

But that's not the last we hear of the Valley of Hinnom. After 70 years of exile, the people eventually returned to Jerusalem and they used that valley as a rubbish dump. And when its name, Valley of the Son of Hinnom, is shortened, it becomes Gehenna. The place Jesus used as an image for hell: a place of smouldering fire and maggots.

But hell was exactly what the people of Jerusalem were creating for themselves. It might be clothed with religious activity. It might look like happy families. It might look like acts of great personal sacrifice in the pursuit of something you really want. But the final outcome is anything but what you want.

So, if there's this downward spiral into the destruction of sin and trusting in idols, where's the way out? And is there a way out that can lead us into the presence of God and the real security that brings, that we know we need in life?

The God Who Lives Among Us

When the apostle John tried to find words to describe how God had become a man in Christ he said, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). Literally, he came and pitched his tent, he tabernacled among us. That just as God had dwelt among the people in the tabernacle and the temple, so now he was living among us in Christ.

And in the last week of his life, Jesus went into the temple and kicked out all the money changers, and as he did he quoted Jeremiah, 'you have made my house a den of robbers.' And then, the gospels tell us, the blind and the lame came to him. The type of people, with no power, who Jeremiah says the people of his day were ignoring came to Christ and he healed them.

But if Jeremiah's sermon almost cost him his life, there was no *almost* for Jesus. And in response to his words and his deeds the religious leaders crucified him. But ultimately, that wasn't their plan, it was God's. You see, if here God is appalled that people would sacrifice their children to get what they want from idols, the Son of God sacrificed himself so that we might gain what we truly need. God gave that which was of infinite value to him to bring you close to him.

And at the cross Christ took upon himself all the punishment that Judah and Jerusalem is threatened with here, that's ours to bear. And he was cut off from the presence of God, so that we might enjoy it forever. And he became a curse for us, so that we might enjoy his endless blessing. And he was condemned that we might be forgiven - forgiven for all those times we've used religion as a cover-up, or sacrificed others, including our children, so that we can get what we want, for all those times our religion has been nothing more than a repetition of words, or we've sought comfort or security

in things other than God. And Christ experienced Gehenna so that we never have to - so that he might be our God and we his people. So that we can live now and forever in his presence, and enjoy it.

You know, Christ doesn't save us because we obey him, or because we care for the vulnerable, or pursue just economics. He saves us because he loves us, even when we don't deserve it, because he knows we can not save ourselves.

And when we know his self-sacrificial love for us deep in our hearts, it does something to our hearts. And you find yourself wanting to obey him. And rather than sacrifice others for your wants you'll sacrifice yourself for them. And we'll come together to worship this God of endless grace, and we'll trust him, and then we'll go out to serve and work for justice. Because God's your God, and you know you're secure and loved in him.