

Awesome God

SPEAKER	Joe Friedman
DATE	Sunday, November 24, 2024
PASSAGES	Jeremiah 2; Jeremiah 31; Romans 1; Psalm 107
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:19:24 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jeremiah tells a crumbling nation exactly what is wrong with it — denial, addiction, and good things asked to do God’s job — and then names the root underneath all three: “the fear of me is not in you.” The remedy is not tighter effort. It is awe, learned in praise and thanksgiving, offered to the God who in the same breath promises to write his law on our hearts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Everybody sins; that is not what is fatal. Denying it is. Joe’s analogy: it is not fatal to be an alcoholic, but it is fatal to insist you are not one.
- ◆ Sin is not merely a lapse in effort. Jeremiah’s picture is a person spending themselves chasing it — “I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go.”
- ◆ Idols are made from good things. Wood and stone are good; a career is good; a child is good. Anything loved more than God gets crushed under the weight of what we ask it to be.
- ◆ Three moments always expose an idol: serious illness, bereavement, and personal failure. Naming that honestly is not the same as calling bad things good.
- ◆ God’s complaint in Jeremiah 2 is not that he is offended but that we are ruining ourselves: “it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God.”
- ◆ Worship comes from *worship* — declaring something’s worth. Refusing to praise what is genuinely praiseworthy does not make you neutral; it makes you wrong about reality.

- ◆ Ingratitude is not small potatoes. Taking credit for your own life is the working assumption that you are spiritually self-sufficient.
- ◆ Prayer that starts with petition piles weight on you. Prayer that starts with praise puts the weight where it belongs before you ever get to the mortgage and the car.

► 1:20:09

The church has been working through the Gospel of John, so Joe opened by saying he half wanted the Monty Python sting — *and now for something completely different* — because he had come to preach Jeremiah. The connection would be clear by the end, the Lord willing. It was.

A prophet for a time when everything was coming apart

► 1:20:50

Jeremiah ministered about six centuries before Christ, and three deportations to Babylon happened inside his lifetime. His first vision was a pot boiling over, tipped from the north ([Jeremiah 1:13](#)), and it came true — which is why *a Jeremiah* became the name for the man nobody wants to believe. Churchill wore the label for years while he warned about a war.

Under Josiah the scroll of Deuteronomy turned up in the temple ([2 Kings 22:8–11](#)). Nobody had read it. They tore their robes, and reforms followed — but so did hedging. We will worship the Lord, and Baal too. We will make an alliance with Egypt. We will consider rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. It ended with Jerusalem destroyed. And underneath the whole period ran one question, asked the way people still ask it: what is wrong with our world, what is wrong with us, what is wrong with them.

1. Sin puts us in denial

► 1:22:40

“Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine? Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God.”

JEREMIAH 2:21–22 ↗

The indictment is graphic and specific, and the answer that comes back is “I am not defiled.” That is the first mark. “Everybody sins. That’s not what’s fatal,” Joe said. “What’s fatal is to deny that you are in sin.” It is not fatal to be an alcoholic — people function, they work the steps, God rebuilds them. It is fatal to deny you are one.

2. Sin is powerfully addictive

► 1:24:28

The next verses pile up images of an animal in heat — a restless young camel, a wild donkey sniffing the wind, so driven that pursuers need not tire themselves (Jeremiah 2:23–25). Then the line Joe wanted heard: *keep your feet from going unshod and your throat from thirst* — and the reply, “It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go.” This is not someone failing to resist. This is someone running until their feet are bare. It enslaves us, Joe said, and we are hardly aware of it: I am just doing my life, doing what feels right.

3. Idols are good things asked to be God

► 1:26:47

Jeremiah watches a whole nation say to wood, “You are my father,” and to stone, “You gave me birth” — and then, in trouble, turn around and cry, “Arise and save us.” The Lord’s answer is withering: let them come, if they can save you; you have as many gods as you have towns (Jeremiah 2:26–28). Joe noted that wood and stone are good things. That is exactly the problem.

He worked this out through Augustine, who taught that everyone seeks happiness and attaches themselves to whatever they think will supply it — and that our trouble is disordered love. We love what we ought not to love, or fail to love what we ought, or love more what we should love less. A man who loves money more than justice will exploit his workers. A man who loves his career more than his children will lose the family. “If you love anything more than God, you will crush it beneath the weight of your expectations of it.” Which is why Joe admits to cringing when a new parent tells a newborn, *you’re my life*. Say instead: I am so thankful.

► 1:28:58

There are three moments, he said, when an idol is guaranteed to fail you: serious sickness, bereavement, and personal failure. If you make your living with what your body can do and then you get long COVID and have to think about whether you can make it past breakfast, and that was your god, you will be devastated. He was careful here: “Bad things are bad. We don’t call bad things good.” And then the quiet one — barring a very strange coincidence in Austin traffic, one spouse outlives the other. If you meant it literally when you said *you are my everything*, your life ends when theirs does.

The intervention

► 1:30:44

“Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord God of hosts.”

JEREMIAH 2:19 ↗

God does not need to arrange a punishment; he lets people live the consequences of their own choices. And the verbs that follow — *know*, *see*, *consider* — are the language of an intervention. Don’t you get it? Look at what this is doing to you. Joe put the diagnosis in one sentence: “It’s not me, it’s you. It’s because you have no awe of me. You are more awed by and fearful of things other than me.”

The same voice, making a promise

► 1:33:27

The God who says *you tore off your yoke and said I will not serve* is the God who says this:

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

JEREMIAH 31:33–34 ↗

And then, immediately, the credentials: the one who gives the sun for light by day and stirs up the sea so its waves roar (Jeremiah 31:35). “By the way, that God — I’m that God. I’m that awesome God.”

► 1:34:32

Which is a word we have ruined. Coming back to the States from the mission field, Joe would find the vocabulary had moved on without him. One furlough it was *awesome* — awesome that he knew his own address, awesome that he could give a phone number. By 2014 it was *perfect*. “They’ve seriously lowered the bar.”

How awe is actually learned

► 1:35:39

Joe was honest that this is slippery for him, because it is experiential before it is intellectual: knowing about God is not knowing God. The comparison he used is family. There is knowing, in the abstract, that your parents would not like what you are about to do — and there is watching their face after you do it. The people we love best are the easiest to take for granted; he claims expert status on that. Positive experiences teach it too. Since his cataract surgery he still reaches up at bedtime to take off glasses he has not worn since the third grade, and finds nothing there, and it is glorious — until the day he stops being amazed.

► 1:37:16

Hence the old English root of the word: *worship*. “You have ultimate worth and value in my eyes. You have ultimate beauty in my eyes. I worship you. I see you as my greatest love.” That, he said, is what transforms us.

► 1:38:25

He took the obvious objection from C. S. Lewis, who admitted in *Reflections on the Psalms* that he had trouble with a God who seems to demand constant praise — we rightly despise a man who requires continual assurance of his own virtue. Lewis’s way through was to ask what we mean when we call something admirable. We mean that if you fail to admire it, you are the one missing out. You saw the film; you tell your friends. You read the book; you press it on people. Not recommending it diminishes it. Joe added Tim Keller’s joke about God being like a date who says, “That’s enough about you, let’s talk about how perfect I am” — except that he actually is. So the flags and the dancing at Hope are not primarily for the emotional payoff. “It’s for the fact that God deserves that.” Refusing him that is not neutrality; it is failing to see the world as it is.

Cosmic ingratitude

► 1:40:37

“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world... So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

ROMANS 1:20–21 ↗

Joe used to read that and think the charge was thin — no glory, no thanks, small potatoes compared to real sin. He now takes it as a measure of how little he understood. “Cosmic ingratitude is deadly. That’s the illusion that you are spiritually self-sufficient.” It is taking credit for your own life: anything good in it, I deserved, it was owed to me. He confessed that when he sees someone doing that, he finds it hard not to want lightning — which is itself worth noticing, given how patient God has been with him.

Start with praise

► 1:42:28

So the pathway into awe is authentic praise and thanksgiving, and the Lord’s Prayer already shows the order — hallowed first, daily bread after ([Matthew 6:9](#)). The more you see of God’s holiness, justice and love in Jesus, the more astonishing it is that he is like this toward us. And when God dominates the landscape the way a mountain does, Joe said, you can finally look at your own flaws without flinching, forgive the people who trespass against you, and be safe in your neediness. No cowering, no wondering whether today is the day he pushes the smite button.

He passed on a story from another pastor whose congregant took the advice seriously and reported back weeks later that it had changed her life. Praying needs-first only piles the weight on — the mortgage, the car, everything she is powerless over — until she is crushed. Praise-first is walking in holding your father’s hand. It is the shape of the Psalter itself, which ends in five psalms of nothing but praise ([Psalm 150](#)); Eugene Peterson noted you have to persevere to get there.

Cranmer’s five moves

► 1:45:35

The second discipline he offered came from Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the greater part of the Book of Common Prayer. Every collect has the same five moves: the address, a name for God; the doctrine, a truth about his nature that the prayer stands on; the petition; the aspiration, the good that would come if it were granted; and then *through Jesus Christ our Lord*. His example was the collect for Holy Communion — “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name.”

That last phrase is not a way of signaling you have finished. “It’s like saying, I have my Father God’s credit card. In Jesus’ name — Jesus is paying, Jesus is doing this.” Which is a long way from the grace he grew up racing through at dinner, where whoever got to *amen* first won the drumstick.

If God seems too high, look at Jesus

► 1:48:45

Joe closed where the morning had already been. The service had been given over to thanksgiving — a plane that never should have flown, a C-5 boarded too late to die on, a marriage no one could arrange, a daughter still alive, a baby who made it to thirty-six weeks — and the refrain running under all of it was the one from [Psalm 107](#): then they cried to the Lord in their trouble.

If God still feels too high and impersonal, he said, look at Jesus. Look at the cross. Look at the empty tomb, because an empty tomb means yours will be empty too, and we will be at the banquet table with no more sorrow and no more tears. That is the aspiration that carries a person through the dark night of the soul. Maybe right now it is a dark place, or a dry and barren land, or the middle of a long cold winter. Either way — look at Jesus. It will thaw out your soul. He offered the prayer team, and for anyone too shy to come forward, the person in the next seat: “Just turn to them, and if they avoid eye contact, don’t ask them to pray for you.” Then he prayed the sermon back as a request — “God, be more awesome for us all, please” — and the room was sent out to be in awe of the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Jeremiah 1:13](#)
- [2 Kings 22:8–11](#)
- [Jeremiah 2:21–22](#)
- [Jeremiah 2:23–25](#)
- [Jeremiah 2:26–28](#)
- [Jeremiah 2:19](#)
- [Jeremiah 31:33–34](#)
- [Jeremiah 31:35](#)
- [Romans 1:20–21](#)
- [Matthew 6:9](#)
- [Psalm 150](#)
- [Psalm 107](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Joe said denial, not sin, is what turns fatal. Where have you caught yourself answering “I am not defiled” about something you already know?
2. Augustine’s categories: loving what we should not, failing to love what we should, loving more what we should love less. Which of the three describes you at the moment, and about what?
3. Sickness, bereavement and personal failure expose what we were really leaning on. Has one of those already shown you something about your own loves?
4. “It’s not me, it’s you — you have no awe of me.” What has been more awe-inducing to you lately than God, and how did it get there?
5. Try Cranmer’s order this week — address, truth about God, request, hope, in Jesus’ name — or simply praise before petition. What would have to change in how you actually pray on Monday?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Joe Friedman is Hope Chapel's current men's ministry director, introduced from the pulpit by Matt before this message. He and his wife spent years serving overseas as missionaries, returning to the States periodically — through 2014 and after — and finding the slang changed each time. He has worn glasses since the third grade and, after recent cataract surgery, still reaches for them at bedtime out of habit and is delighted to find nothing there.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNOzZeGjAUc&t=4764s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.