

“No Substitutions” (Jeremiah 2:9–13)

The Trouble with Substitutes

In 1982, a sailor named Steven Callahan attempted to cross the Atlantic Ocean *alone*. Tragically, his boat struck something and sank.¹ He managed to escape into a small inflatable life raft. But suddenly, he found himself completely alone in the middle of the ocean. For seventy-six days, he drifted across the Atlantic. All around him—mile after mile in every direction—there was water. More water than most of us will ever see in a lifetime. He was surrounded by it on every side.

But there was a terrible problem: None of that water could save him. The ocean was full of saltwater, but it was saltwater. If he drank it, it would actually dehydrate him faster and eventually kill him. What he desperately needed was something very specific: fresh water. So, every time rain clouds appeared, he prepared for it. He spread out containers and carefully collected every drop that fell from the sky. Those small amounts of rainwater were precious. They were the difference between life and death.

Imagine someone looking at his situation and saying, “Why are you waiting for rain? Look around you. There’s water everywhere.” But Callahan understood something critical: Not all water is the same. And when your life depends on it, substitutes won’t work.

Now that idea may seem obvious when we’re talking about survival at sea. But it raises a deeper question for us. What about the things we depend on for life, satisfaction, security, and hope? Are all sources the same? Are all spiritual options equal? Or is it possible that something can look promising, yet ultimately fail to give what it promises?

That question isn’t new. In fact, it’s the very issue God confronts His people about in Jeremiah 2:9–13. Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord speaks to His covenant people at a time when their hearts have drifted from Him. Jeremiah ministered during Judah’s final years before the Babylonian exile. He warned that judgment was coming, yet he also promised that one day God would restore His people.² And the way God delivers His message here is striking. This passage unfolds like a courtroom scene. God calls witnesses, summons the nations and creation to observe, and brings charges against His own people.

God’s Lawsuit

Our passage begins in 2:9 with God announcing a lawsuit:

“‘Therefore I will yet contend with you,’ declares the LORD, ‘And with your sons’ sons I will contend.’”

The word “therefore” connects back to 2:1–8. God reminded Israel that He had loved them since their youth. He rescued them from Egypt. He led them through the wilderness. He brought them into a fruitful land. Yet despite all this, Israel abandoned Him. So, God begins with a legal response: “I will yet contend with you.” “Contend” is courtroom language. God is saying: “I’m bringing a legal case against you.” In prophetic OT literature, this is often called a covenant lawsuit. It’s about knowingly breaking a binding agreement. In Exodus 19–24, Israel had entered into a covenant with God (at Sinai), but they had violated that covenant.

So, God stands as the plaintiff, prosecutor, and judge. This highlights something crucial: God’s anger isn’t random. It’s relational and covenantal. Israel hasn’t merely made bad decisions. They’ve broken faith with the God who loved them. God says He’ll even contend with future generations. This implies the

sin has become intergenerational. Idolatry is no longer just an individual choice. It's become a cultural inheritance. Parents passed down distorted loyalties, misplaced trust, and false worship.

This reminds us that we all have a role in shaping the next generation. If you have children, are you reading God's Word with them? Are you praying with them throughout the day? Discipleship doesn't stop at home. Who are you intentionally investing in? Who are you helping know God's Word, share the gospel, and follow Christ? Don't be overwhelmed by trying to reach everyone. Start with one person. Ask God to bring someone into your life, then faithfully pour into them. That's how disciples are made—one life at a time.

The Shocking Comparison

After announcing the lawsuit, God makes a shocking comparison. In 2:10–11a, He calls the nations as witnesses:

“For cross to the coastlands of Kittim [Cyprus] and see, And send to Kedar and observe closely And see if there has been such *a thing* as this! [Now, notice the Lord's rhetorical question³ to Israel] Has a nation changed gods When they were not gods?”⁴

Here God goes into prosecutor role and starts laying out the evidence. He tells Israel to look at the pagan nations. Go to Kittim—the far west Mediterranean world. Go to Kedar—the far east desert tribes of Arabia. Look everywhere. Study the whole world. And the result will be astonishing.

Even pagan nations stay loyal to their gods. False gods. Powerless gods. Worthless gods. But they don't abandon them. People change lots of things—shoes, jobs, hairstyles. But ancient cultures rarely changed gods. The Canaanites never abandoned Baal. The Babylonians never forsook Bel. That would've sounded ridiculous.⁵ Most practiced polytheism—the worship of many gods. They could add new gods, but they didn't abandon the old ones.⁶ If you were one of them, the one thing you didn't do was abandon your gods entirely.

And yet in 2:11b we read the tragedy:

“But My people have changed their glory [the only true God⁷] For that which does not profit.”

Think about that. Israel knew the one true and living God, their glory, and yet they traded Him for worthless idols.⁸ The word “glory” carries the idea of weight or worth.⁹ God is the One of ultimate value. And yet Israel traded Him away. I say traded because the word “changed” or “exchanged” suggests bartering. They thought they were getting a good deal. But they were completely deceived.¹⁰

The phrase “that which does not profit” likely plays on the name of the Canaanite god Baal. It's almost like saying: “They exchanged their Glory for The Useless One.”¹¹ The point is devastating: The people who knew the true God were behaving *worse* than those who worshiped false gods. The pagans never abandoned their *dead* gods.¹² But God's people abandoned the *living* God.¹³ So, Israel's sin isn't just idolatry. It's *irrational* idolatry. It defies logic. God's people exchanged the living God for idols made of wood and stone. It would be like going to the Oregon coast and trading the worship of God the Creator for a piece of driftwood lying on the beach. Why would anyone make that trade?

Have you noticed how complicated ordering food has become these days? We walk into a restaurant, and suddenly we turn into movie directors. Like we're Steven Spielberg recasting a film. “I'll take the cheeseburger . . . hold the cheese. Substitute avocado. No bun. Make it a lettuce wrap. Let's change the protein. Kill the beef. Instead give me a black bean patty. Upgrade the regular fries to sweet potato. Oh,

and make sure each item is organic, gluten-free, soy-free, keto-friendly, grass-fed, and preferably blessed by a monk. I'll take that to go. I'm in a bit of a hurry."

Now, besides driving the server crazy, all those substitutions usually cost extra. True story: Lori and I were looking at a restaurant menu last week. The burger was \$22. But Lori needed a gluten-free bun, which was another \$4. And she needed sweet potato fries instead of regular fries, which was \$3.50 more. Suddenly that "burger" was a luxury item pushing \$30. We decided maybe we weren't *that* hungry.

But here's the *real* problem with too many substitutions: By the time you're done . . . it's not the same burger anymore. And most of the time, it's more expensive. And . . . less satisfying.

Broken Cisterns

Now imagine the stakes being much higher than dinner. Imagine swapping out not just a meal—but the very Source of life itself. That's exactly what God says His people did in Jeremiah 2:9–13. Israel didn't just tweak their relationship with God. They replaced Him. They traded the real thing for the empty substitute of manmade idols. And in this passage, God confronts them and us about that tragic exchange.

Now before we judge Israel, let's take a look at ourselves. Of course, idols *today* rarely look like statues of wood and stone. In fact, they often look far more respectable and reasonable: Consumerism. Political power. National identity. Career success. Personal comfort. The approval of others.¹⁴ These idols promise meaning. They promise security. They promise identity. But like every idol in history—they cannot save.¹⁵ And whenever we trust them in place of God, we repeat the same tragic exchange. We trade our Glory for temporary benefits that cannot profit eternally.

One area that has been particularly convicting for me is watching sports on TV. Several years ago, a sports radio station once asked its listeners, "If someone offered you \$2 million, could you give up sports for two years?" No games on TV, radio, or in person. No ESPN. No podcasts. No sports radio. No Tuesday-morning arguments about Monday Night Football. One caller said no—he wouldn't give it up. Not for \$2 million. Not even for \$25 million. "Sports is where I turn when I pick up the paper in the morning," he said. "It's where I go online. It's what I watch on TV and listen to on the radio in the car. Everywhere I go, it surrounds everything I do."¹⁶

Now, I'm not suggesting you can't watch sports. I believe sports are a gift from God meant to be enjoyed. But the point stands. Sports are just one example among many. The deeper question is this: What do we turn to for comfort, pleasure, and escape, and how tightly are we holding on to it? What is your idol? Is it money, technology, social media, entertainment, politics, popularity, pleasure, leisure, comfort? Perhaps it's a particular person—a friend, a boyfriend or girlfriend, your spouse, your children, or even your grandchildren. Will you acknowledge your propensity to idolatry? John Calvin put it well, "The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols."¹⁷ We must own our idols and confess them to the Lord.

After focusing on the nations, in 2:12, Jeremiah's language suddenly turns poetic and cosmic:

"Be appalled, O heavens, at this, And shudder [be shocked¹⁸], be very desolate,' declares the LORD."

Jeremiah addresses the heavens as if they were people.¹⁹ Why? Because in the OT, the heavens and the earth often serve as witnesses to God's covenant with Israel.²⁰ They witnessed the covenant being made. Now they witness it being broken. And the reaction is shock.²¹ Even creation itself is portrayed as horrified by Israel's disloyalty.

God commands the heavens: “Be appalled.” The word carries the idea of being devastated or stunned—like someone who has been struck by a crushing blow and stands there speechless. Then He says, “Shudder.” It’s a vivid word that describes hair standing on end in shock. And then He adds, “Be very desolate.” The word is often used to describe the devastation left behind after war has ravaged a land. Here it’s used figuratively. The heavens are pictured as reacting like people who stand in stunned silence after seeing their land destroyed.²² In other words, Israel’s sin is so outrageous that the entire universe should recoil in horror. Creation itself should be shocked that God’s people would abandon Him.

And yet when we step back, the tragedy begins to sound familiar. Because we often trust things that are as fleeting as a puff of smoke as though they could provide lasting security.²³ We look to temporary things—success, possessions, power, approval—and expect them to give us what only God can give. And every time we do, we repeat the same tragic exchange: Trusting what cannot last . . . instead of trusting what can.

The Great Exchange

Now we reach the heart of the passage in 2:13:

“For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me,²⁴ The fountain of living²⁵ waters, To hew²⁶ for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water.”²⁷

The first evil is forsaking God. “Forsaken” is covenant language. It describes officially breaking the relationship.²⁸ But it’s also deeply personal. Israel abandoned their covenant King.²⁹ The second evil is worshipping substitutes. Before Israel worshiped idols, they first walked away from God Himself. Most spiritual collapse begins the same way: prayer fades, the Word becomes neglected, devotion cools, God becomes distant. Idolatry often begins not with rebellion but with drift. When we leave the source of living water, we will inevitably look elsewhere.

Imagine living in the desert. The sun beats down, everything is dry, and water is scarce. Every drop counts. Then you discover a flowing fountain of clear, fresh water that never runs dry. Surely no one in their right mind would leave that fountain behind. But now imagine doing something even more absurd. Instead of drinking from the fountain, you start digging cisterns. In Jeremiah’s day, cisterns were reservoirs to hold rainwater dug into the ground, usually carved into limestone bedrock and then plastered. But they leaked. They held stale water.³⁰ They were work-intensive and unreliable. Imagine pouring massive time and energy to build a cistern when all the while, the fountain flows freely right beside you.³¹

This would be like turning off the water to your house and then digging a trench to drink from the nearest industrial canal.³²

Instead of trusting the Lord, God’s people pursued false gods like Baal. The worship of Baal promised prosperity, fertility, and success. So, God’s people turned their backs on Him and chased these idols with their whole hearts. And it broke Jeremiah’s heart. Because false gods never fail to fail. That’s the one thing you can count on about idols. Whatever they promise . . . Whatever price you pay . . . The result is always the same: Shattering disappointment.³³

The call of this passage is simple and urgent: Stop digging. Start drinking. Turn back to the God who never fails, the One whose waters satisfy fully, and drink deeply from Him. Every substitute eventually leaks. But the fountain of God never runs dry. This text emphasizes an important warning: *Don’t trade the Source for substitutes.*

Throughout Scripture, knowing God is compared to drinking cool water that quenches thirst.³⁴ And here God calls Himself “the fountain of living waters.” He alone provides the never-failing resources we need to live in the real world. Everything else eventually leaks.

And this imagery doesn’t stop in the OT. The NT extends the same invitation through Jesus Christ.³⁵ In John 4:13–14, Jesus says that whoever drinks the water He gives will never thirst again. Later He cries out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37).³⁶ Revelation 22:17 says: “And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

Jesus is saying: “I am the Fountain. You don’t have to improve on Me. You don’t have to replace Me. You don’t have to keep searching for substitutes. There are no substitutions. You just have to come to Me.” The invitation hasn’t changed. Come to the fountain. Stop digging broken cisterns. Drink deeply from the living water of God. *Don’t trade the Source for substitutes.*

But here’s the challenge for us: If we forget what God has done—if we aren’t regularly shaped by His Word—we begin to feel spiritually dissatisfied. And when that dissatisfaction grows, we start looking for something to substitute.³⁷ Just like Israel, we take the legitimate thirst God placed inside us and try to quench it with broken cisterns.

We all thirst for something. At the deepest level, we long for two things: A love that cannot be lost, even when we fail.

And a life that matters, an impact that cannot fade with time. *Relationship and impact.* Those are powerful, God-given longings inside every human heart. And those longings will move us somewhere. Either toward God . . . or toward broken cisterns.

Which means dealing with sin goes deeper than simply avoiding bad behavior. That’s like telling a starving person not to eat junk food. The real solution is to find the banquet God has prepared—and feast there. Because when you’re drinking deeply from the fountain of living water, the cracked cisterns of this world suddenly lose their appeal. *Don’t trade the Source for substitutes.*

The Fountain Still Flows

The good news of Scripture is this: God hasn’t closed the fountain. The fountain is still flowing. Through Jesus Christ, God still invites thirsty people to come and drink. The living water of forgiveness, grace, and eternal life is still freely offered. So, if you’ve been digging broken cisterns . . . stop digging. Turn back to the fountain. Because every substitute eventually leaks . . . but the fountain of God never runs dry. *Don’t trade the source for substitutes.*

Scripture References

Jeremiah 2:9–13

Exodus 20:3–5

Deuteronomy 4:16–18

Psalms 106:1–48

Isaiah 44:9–20

Romans 1:18–23

John 4:10–14; 6:35; 7:37

Study Questions

1. What “gods” do the nations worship (2:11a)? What substitutes for God are most common in your church—success, comfort, achievement, security, autonomy? How might you lovingly help a non-Christian friend, neighbor, or coworker see the emptiness of these substitutes?
2. What “gods” of the nations are you personally tempted to trust or pursue (2:11b)? Has any disappointment with God pushed you toward substitutes? Where have you subtly thought, “God is good . . . but I also need _____”? Where might you be minimizing the seriousness of exchanging God’s glory for something lesser?
3. What “cistern” have you been digging that promises satisfaction but repeatedly leaks (2:13)? If someone observed your calendar, priorities, and spending, what might they conclude is your true source of life?
4. How much time, energy, or emotional weight are you investing in something that cannot ultimately satisfy? How has this substitute shaped your mood, identity, or sense of security? What has it cost you spiritually?
5. How does this passage show God’s grief rather than just His anger? What does it show about God that the fountain of living water still flows even after His people forsake Him? What would it look like for you to return to that fountain this week? What practices or habits help you drink deeply from God rather than only occasionally?

Recommended Reading

Christopher J. H. Wright, *Here are your Gods: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times* (IVP, 2020)

Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (Penguin, 2009)

G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (IVP Academic, 2008)

Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (IVP Academic, 2015)

Copyright © 2026 Keith R. Krell. All rights reserved. All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation, and are used by permission.

Notes

¹ Steven Callahan, *Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

² John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 375.

³ John L. Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 143.

⁴ The phrase “not gods” links back to Deut 32:17, 21.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 41.

⁶ Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 143.

⁷ *NET Bible*, note on Jer 2:11: “*Heb* ‘have exchanged their glory [i.e., the God in whom they glory].’ This is a case of a figure of speech where the attribute of a person or thing is put for the person or thing. Compare the common phrase in Isaiah, the Holy One of Israel, obviously referring to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah: Grace in the End*, The Bible Speaks Today (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2014), 67.

⁹ Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 42, “Paul uses this language in 2 Cor 4:17, where he contrasts between ‘weight of glory’ and that which is slight.”

¹⁰ Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 144.

¹¹ Cf. 2:5 and 23. J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 170.

¹² Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 41.

¹³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Tiberius Rata, *Walking the Ancient Paths: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2019), 48.

¹⁴ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 68.

¹⁵ J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 63.

¹⁶ Mark Galli, “The Thirst of the 24/7 Fan,” *Christianity Today* (3/28/05); Preaching Today citation.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.

¹⁸ See ESV, NET, CSB, NRSV.

¹⁹ This is a fairly common figure of speech (i.e., anthropomorphism) in the OT.

²⁰ See esp. Deut 30:19; 31:28. J. Daniel Hays, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 15–16.

²¹ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 68.

²² Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 144.

²³ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 68.

²⁴ The phrase “they have forsaken Me” is fronted in the clause for emphasis, “I am the one whom they have forsaken.”

²⁵ *NET Bible*, note on Jer 2:13: “It is difficult to decide whether to translate ‘fresh, running water’ which the Hebrew term for ‘living water’ often refers to e.g., Gen 26:19; Lev 14:5), or ‘life-giving water’ which the idiom ‘fountain of life’ as source of life and vitality often refers to e.g., Ps 36:9; Prov 13:14; 14:27). The contrast with cisterns, which collected and held rain water, suggests ‘fresh, running water,’ but the reality underlying the metaphor contrasts the LORD, the source of life, health, and vitality, with useless idols that cannot do anything.”

²⁶ HALOT, s.v. חָצַב, 2: “to hew out (from rock).” The verb means “to quarry or carve stone.” That tells us Jeremiah specifically has in mind cisterns cut into limestone bedrock, not containers.

²⁷ John Goldingay, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 116, “Water is a life or death matter in Canaan. Fortunately, Jerusalem has a *fountain of living water* (running water), the Gihon spring on the eastside of the hill on which the city is built. Towns are regularly built near such a water supply, but most springs dry up during the summer, so towns also have *cisterns* for collecting rain during the winter to keep them going through the summer until the rains come again—though running water is much nicer than rain water stored in a tank.”

²⁸ See Deut 29:25.

²⁹ Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 145.

³⁰ Allen, *Jeremiah*, 42.

³¹ Anyone living in the ancient Near East would instantly recognize that exchanging a spring for a cistern is a terrible trade.

³² See 17:13; Ps 36:9. Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 42, “Like Jeremiah, Jesus Christ grieved at the heartbreaking struggle of those around Him. He urged them to find their satisfaction and sustenance in Him. Jesus said, ‘Come to me and I will give you rest.’ Picking up and expanding Jeremiah’s metaphor He offers Himself as ‘the water of life’ and ‘the bread of life’—the sole sufficient source of life and fulfilment.”

³³ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 68.

³⁴ Mackay, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 146.

³⁵ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 69.

³⁶ See also John 6:35 and Rev 22:17.

³⁷ Steven Smith, *Exalting Jesus in Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Nashville: Holman Bible, 2019), 27.