

Amend Your Ways

JEREMIAH'S TEMPLE SERMON, PART 2 – JEREMIAH 7

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This morning I would like for us to continue in our brief series of lessons going back to a request that was turned in about a month ago, a request for more information on the “Weeping Prophet,” Jeremiah. The questioner wanted to know why Jeremiah is described in this way, and more importantly, “In what way does this description apply to us today?” As I pointed out last week, we have studied the prophet Jeremiah a number of times over our years together, so what we are doing now is going back and looking at some of those passages that we have not been able to cover in the past.

Last week, we learned by way of reminder that Jeremiah served in the later part of the 500’s and in the early 600’s BC. He served primarily during the reign of King Josiah, but the overwhelming influence came from Manasseh. We had this timeline on the wall up here, and we also had this available as a handout. If you did not get one of these, we have put the extras on the table in the entryway, and we would invite you to get one. Jeremiah’s ministry is highlighted by that purple section over on the right-hand side.

And as you can see, Manasseh ruled for 55 years – this is the king Jeremiah would have grown up with. This is what was familiar. And we learned that Manasseh was a horrible human being. In fact, he was one of the worst kings to ever lead God’s people. It got so bad, in fact, that under his rule, the Southern Kingdom became even more evil than the Canaanites who had lived in the land before the days of Joshua (2 Kings 21:9). It was a time of terrible spiritual darkness, and it even got to the point where Manasseh offered his own son as a sacrifice to the pagan god Molech. The temple was desecrated, and it was just a terrible time for God’s people.

Well, when Manasseh died his son took over – King Amon – but Amon’s own servants saw Amon as being so bad that they killed him almost immediately. And so at that point the kingdom fell to an 8-year old young man by the name of Josiah. We noted that we have an 8-year old here at our congregation, and we also noted that Josiah (even at only 8 years old) knew the difference between right and wrong. The Bible tells us that, ***“He did what was right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left.”*** And almost from the beginning, King Josiah started making changes. He cleaned house; he started repairing the temple. And several years into this process, as they are cleaning all of the debris out of the temple, they find the word of God buried under debris. They give it to the king, and Josiah immediately orders the entire law to be read publicly. They step up the reforms, and some amazing things are accomplished.

Last week, we jumped into the future a number of years. It seems that King Josiah and Jeremiah pretty much grow up together. But as he grows up, Jeremiah sees these reforms taking place, but he's worried, because he sees the people putting their faith not in God but in the temple that was slowly being restored. And so on the outside, they were making progress – they were keeping the feasts, they were worshiping, they were offering sacrifices – but on the inside, their hearts were still not right with God.

And so last week, then, we started looking at what is commonly referred to as Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon," in Jeremiah 7. The people had come to worship, probably on one of the big feast days, and Jeremiah has an urgent message from God, and the message is, **"Amend your ways!"** He says it several times. They were holding to the outward form of religion, but their hearts weren't right. And so the prophet says over and over again, **"Change your ways!"** And that was the main point of our lesson last week. Last week we had a one-point sermon, **"Change your ways!"** And for us, that means that we not only worship as God has instructed, but it means that we are to actually care for the widows and orphans, we are to take care of the poor and the strangers among us. We are to love as Jesus calls us to love – in very practical ways. We are to love God from the heart.

This week, I want us to start again in verse 1, but this time I want us to continue through the rest of the chapter. We have the idea that we are to change, that we are to amend our ways. But this morning I want us to continue. And today I want us to notice two ideas: 1.) I want us to specifically notice Jeremiah's role in this process (the actual call for change through God's messenger), and then 2.) I want us to notice the consequences promised by God if the people refuse to change their behavior.

Let us then look together at all 34 verses of Jeremiah 7. We have the Temple Sermon itself last week (in verses 1-15), and then we have a message off to the side a little bit, directed right at Jeremiah, starting in verse 16 – notice, please, Jeremiah 7:1-34,

¹ *The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ² "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the Lord!'" ³ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' ⁵ For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. ⁸ "Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹ Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!' — that you may do all these abominations? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," declares the Lord.*

¹² *"But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel. ¹³ And now, because you have done all these things," declares the Lord, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you but you did not answer, ¹⁴ therefore, I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to the place which I gave you*

and your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. ¹⁵ I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brothers, all the offspring of Ephraim.

¹⁶ “As for you, do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me; for I do not hear you. ¹⁷ Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸ The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me. ¹⁹ Do they spite Me?” declares the Lord. “Is it not themselves they spite, to their own shame?” ²⁰ Therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and on beast and on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground; and it will burn and not be quenched.”

²¹ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. ²² For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. ²³ But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.’

²⁴ Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward. ²⁵ Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets, daily rising early and sending them. ²⁶ Yet they did not listen to Me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck; they did more evil than their fathers.

²⁷ “You shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you; and you shall call to them, but they will not answer you. ²⁸ You shall say to them, ‘This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God or accept correction; truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth.

²⁹ ‘Cut off your hair and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the bare heights; For the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath.’

³⁰ For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight,” declares the Lord, “they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 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, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.

³² “Therefore, behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when it will no longer be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place. ³³ The dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away. ³⁴ Then I will make to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; for the land will become a ruin.

There is so much we could say about this chapter, but this morning I want us to focus our thoughts on Jeremiah’s warning as the “weeping prophet,” and then I want us to close by looking at the fact that there were some very real consequences on the horizon.

- I. But first of all, let us focus in on Jeremiah – last week we looked at the need for change, ***“Amend your ways,”*** as Lord put it. But now, let us look very carefully at **JEREMIAH THE PROPHET**, and specifically, at what Jeremiah was called to do.

And we find in this chapter that Jeremiah is speaking in response to the Lord’s command. Even going up to verses 1-2, ***“The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ‘Stand in the gate of the Lords’ house and proclaim there this word and say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord...’”*** In other words, this message was not something that Jeremiah made up, but he was speaking for God. Jeremiah was a prophet. Sometimes people think the word “prophet” refers to someone who predicts the future, and that is certainly what prophets do sometimes, but the word “prophet” literally refers to someone who “speaks forth” for God. The word describes someone who speaks on God’s behalf, to someone who presents a message that is not his own.

And that is the idea here. Jeremiah is speaking for God. We see that from the very beginning. Jeremiah is God’s messenger. Even the name “Jeremiah” means, “The Lord Throws,” or, “The Lord Hurls.” And it might refer to God throwing nations down, but it might also refer to God throwing or hurling a message to his people, just as someone might throw out a lifeline. Last week, we studied the Parable of the Sower and the idea that the sower literally “flung” or “hurled” the seed of God’s word on the soil of human hearts. And that seems to be the idea here. Jeremiah was a seed-flinger, he was a man commissioned to faithfully communicate the word of God to a nation of people who might have taken some steps in the right direction under the leadership of Josiah, but their hearts were still stained with sin. And so they needed to hear a message directly from God. That was Jeremiah’s role here. Jeremiah was responsible for faithfully communicating God’s word to the people.

When we try to piece the timeline together, it seems that Jeremiah started preaching at roughly the age of 20, and he preached the word of God for about 50 years. During that time, he was rejected by his own people, he was considered to be a fanatic by those who heard his message, and he was horribly abused for what he had to say. We think of that time later in the book when Jeremiah was thrown in the cistern and left to die. There were some who were sympathetic to Jeremiah’s cause, they came and got him out, and you know what Jeremiah did? As soon as he got out, he went straight back to the king and said, “If you obey the Lord you will live, but if not, you will die.” I’m paraphrasing there, but that is the idea. Jeremiah continued, even, and said to the king, ***“Please obey the Lord in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live.”*** There was nothing that could stop this man. And what I would point out is that in all of this, we have no indication that Jeremiah was happy about any of this, there was no arrogance on his part, but he was begging, pleading with the people to turn back to God. And from other passages in this book, we know that he did it with tears in his eyes. He was not hard-hearted or mean about it, but his heart was broken. Jeremiah was preaching through his tears. We notice what God says in verse 29, ***“Cut off your hair and cast it away, and take up a LAMENTATION on the bare heights; for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath.”***

He wasn’t preaching to make people feel better, but he was preaching to change lives. He was preaching to encourage repentance. As we learned last week, the main point here is, ***“Amend your ways. Change the way you are living.”*** This is the message Jeremiah was called to deliver. Jeremiah was called to be like that sign along the highway that warns that the bridge is out. If we ignore the sign, we cannot blame the sign, we cannot blame those who are working on the bridge, but the fault is our own if we refuse to turn aside. Jeremiah was the sign. Jeremiah was the message. He called out from the heart.

II. And this leads us to Jeremiah's warning in this chapter, the promise that if the people did not amend their ways and change their hearts, GOD'S JUDGMENT WAS ON THE HORIZON.

Last week, we looked at that reference to Shiloh, and the idea was, "If you people don't believe that God will let this temple be destroyed, then you need to take a short walk down the road to a place called Shiloh." Again, Shiloh was the first place the tabernacle was set up right after they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. This is the place where Joshua divided the land, and the Ark was there for 369 years. The Ark stayed there until the people stopped trusting in God and put their faith in the Ark itself, sending it into battle almost as a kind of good luck charm, under the leadership of Hophni and Phineas. At that point, the Ark was captured by the Philistines, and Shiloh was destroyed. God was saying, "If I can abandon Shiloh, then I can also abandon Jerusalem."

Well, in the second half of this chapter, the promise of God's punishment continues. In verse 20, notice how God says that his anger and wrath would be poured out – the fire will burn and will not be quenched. He continues to expose their sin, Jeremiah keeps preaching (knowing that the people will keep on refusing to listen), and so right near the end of this chapter (in verse 31), the Lord refers to the high places of Topheth – the places where the people were burning their children as sacrifices to the pagan gods. And God says that the day is coming when they will no longer call it Topheth, but they will call it the **"valley of the Slaughter,"** because something was coming that would cause them to run out of places to bury the dead. God's judgment would be so severe that the bodies would pile up as food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth, and there would be no one left to frighten them away. And in verse 34, no more joy would be heard in the cities of Judah or in the streets of Jerusalem, for the land would become a ruin.

As best we can tell, this sermon was delivered in approximately 608 BC. This puts it roughly 20 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. They did not know it at the time, but God was giving them 20 years to turn back. He was giving them 20 years to change their hearts and to change their behavior. But really, God had already warned them many years before this. We think about those warnings in Deuteronomy 28, roughly 800 years earlier, where God basically said: If you obey me, I will be good to you beyond your wildest imagination; but, if you turn aside to the right or to the left, I will remove you from this good land that I am giving you. In his mercy, God warned the people even before they crossed over the Jordan for the very first time, he continued to warn, and now he was giving them one last chance through the prophet Jeremiah. Later in the book, Jeremiah will warn the king personally. In fact, a scroll of Jeremiah's words were given to the king, but the king took a knife, cut the scroll in pieces and threw it in the fire.

What do we learn from this? We learn that even if our message is rejected, at least we have given the warning. I've told you before that when I first started preaching, my dad framed a quote from John T. Lewis, a quote that was first published in the *Expository Review* back in 1995, and it reminds me of Jeremiah. Mr. Lewis said, "I would rather have thousands to say to me at the judgment, 'We heard you preach and you hurt our feelings, than to have just one lost soul to say, 'I heard you preach, but you did not tell me the truth.'" No one could accuse Jeremiah of not having told the truth! Jeremiah was the "Weeping Prophet." He wept because he knew that judgment was coming, but the people refused to turn their hearts back toward God. First of all, then, the message for those of us who preach and teach is a message of encouragement, that we are to keep on teaching and preaching faithfully.

We also learn from this passage, though, that God is incredibly patient. If we had been in God's place, and if a king had cut up that scroll only to throw it in the fire, if a king had ordered our messenger to be thrown into an empty cistern, that king would not have lived through the night! And yet God was patient. God let this go on

for at least twenty more years before Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonian army. Justice was finally served. The king at the time was forced to watch his own sons murdered before his own eyes were gouged out and he was led away to captivity. The last thing he ever saw were his own sons being killed, and I am sure that image stayed with him for the rest of his miserable life. And yet that king could not say to Jeremiah, “I heard you preach, but you did not tell me the truth.” He couldn’t say that, because Jeremiah spent a lifetime warning, through his tears, that God’s judgment was coming. We learn, then, that God is incredibly loving and patient.

Conclusion:

And that is where this chapter lands with us this morning. We are not facing a Babylonian invasion. Most of us are not sacrificing our children to pagan gods. But in a sense, we face some of the same spiritual struggles the people did way back in 608 BC – sins like selfishness, not caring for the poor, letting God slip out of first place in our hearts because of the distractions of this world. And to us, God’s message is the same: Change your ways! Come back! Make things right with God. Be restored to God’s family. Even with everything these people did, God still reached out through his servants, the prophets – men like Jeremiah. Today, God calls us home through the love and concern of our friends and neighbors, our earthly families, even our good friends and coworkers. The point is: God continues to call. His invitation is always open.

If you have never obeyed the gospel, you need to understand what that means. The gospel is the good news about the Lord’s death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus came to this earth to live a perfect life and to die in our place as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that act of love with awe in our hearts. We see what the Lord has done, and we can just barely take it in. We respond to his love with faith demonstrated in obedience. We obey the good news; that is, we die to sin, we turn away from sin, we have a change of heart concerning sin, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism as we are briefly dipped (that is, buried) under the water. We are then raised up to live a new life, born into God’s family and added to his church.

If you have done this in the past but have fallen away, if you have drifted over time, God knows and he understands exactly what you have been through, and he is inviting you home. When a Christian falls away from the truth of God’s word, the Lord God wants us to be restored, just as a surgeon might set a broken bone – he wants the relationship fixed, he wants the gap to be closed. We are restored to God and his people when we pray, confessing our sin, determined from this point to stay on the narrow path described by Jesus in Matthew 7. As Jesus said, “**...the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.**” We want you to join us on that path. If there is something we can do to encourage you, or if you have any questions, we hope you will let us know. If you have a question, a concern, or something we need to pray about, I would invite you to write it down if you are able and give it to me right now.

On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, and if you know without a doubt that you are ready to obey the gospel, we would also be more than willing to help you with that. We have a baptistery downstairs that we can fill with clean warm water in about 25 minutes, and you can be buried with Christ in baptism even before noon today. If you are ready to obey the good news or if you are ready to be restored to God’s family, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com