

Chapter 39 Jeremiah 7-11

Jeremiah's Temple Sermon

“Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!’” Jeremiah 7:4

Jeremiah was positioned strategically to deliver the word of the Lord. His message stands as a striking antithesis to everything that popular religion stood for, both then and now. He attacked the spiritual complacency, religious pluralism, idolatry, immorality and ethical relativism of his day with such clarity and boldness that the meaning of his message was never in doubt. In our own age of equivocation and compromise, Jeremiah stands as a powerful reminder of Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders of his day, as well as a painful reminder of the price that can be paid for standing true to the word of God.

This next section is framed by Jeremiah's presence in the Jerusalem temple. It begins with his temple address which took place shortly after Jehoiakim came to power in 609 BC (26:1) and ends with Pashhur, the chief officer of the temple, ordering Jeremiah to be beaten and placed in the stocks (20:1-2). The material bracketed by these two events covers a range of issues including social injustice, flagrant idolatry, spiritual arrogance, and moral indifference. Woven into the fabric of this prophetic critique of contemporary spirituality is Jeremiah's own pain and grief. “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me” (8:21-22).

Jeremiah had no official authority nor professional credentials other than his God-given responsibility to deliver the word of the Lord. He held no position of leadership nor represented any recognizable constituency. He was neither famous nor entertaining. He was not the kind of speaker one invited to fund-raising banquets, prayer breakfasts and college commencements. He had no institutional platform from which to promote his message and no advance team to set the stage for his work. But we would be mistaken if we think of Jeremiah as some fly-by-night, self-styled, self-proclaimed prophet, like the homeless street preacher who loves to shout on street corners. Before Jeremiah stood at the entrance of the temple he stood in a long tradition of prophets who had been created, called, consecrated and commissioned by the Lord God. As we have seen, he assumed his God-given responsibility reluctantly. Far from being a high-energy, egocentric extrovert who fed off of the energy of the crowd, Jeremiah strikes us as a quiet, thoughtful man, who cared deeply for the Lord and his people.

Jeremiah stood where God told him to stand, “Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message...” (7:2). If Jerusalem was ground zero, then the temple was the epicenter. It was there that Jeremiah proclaimed, “Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says...” (7:2-3). Jeremiah was not sent to sit down and try to negotiate a compromise nor arbitrate between conflicting opinions. He was called to stand up and proclaim a clear, unambiguous, nonnegotiable message from the Lord. If his message had been inspired by his plan for Judah, then he should have negotiated with the people. If his vision had been a reflection of his

personality and based on his wish dreams then he should have been open to incorporating other people's opinions and perspectives. But Jeremiah's message was not his by right of authorship or invention, but his by way of obedience and faithfulness to the word of the Lord. Therefore, it was impossible for Jeremiah to be over-bold, too intense or overly dogmatic with the message he was called to proclaim. His proclamation involved explanation, not negotiation. He gave assertions, not suggestions; orders, not options. He delivered the Lord's ultimatums, not his personal opinions.

Martin Luther reflected the spirit of the prophet Jeremiah when he said to Erasmus, "To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all." "By 'assertion,' Luther explained, "I mean staunchly holding your ground, stating your position, confessing it, defending it and persevering in it unvanquished. I do not think that the term has any other meaning...[Of course] I am talking about the assertion of what has been delivered to us from above in the Sacred Scriptures" (Bondage of the Will, 66). It was because the Lord told Jeremiah to "stand up" and say whatever he commanded him to say, that he was made like "a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land" (1:18).

Popular Spirituality

It must have taken real courage for Jeremiah to stand at the gate of the temple and say, "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'" (7:3-4). Jeremiah drew a bold distinction between the authoritative word of the Lord and the deceptive words, "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." Most of the people the prophet faced would have equated the temple of the Lord with the word of the Lord, but not Jeremiah. He saw a critical difference between heartfelt righteousness and religious enthusiasm. As Eugene Peterson says, "The church is never in so much danger as when it is popular and millions of people are saying 'I'm born again, born again, born again'" (Run with the Horses, 65).

In Jeremiah's day, ritual practices were well attended. The temple liturgy was lively. Priests were popular. Religious diversity was culturally inclusive, meaning that both Baal and Yahweh were highly respected. Sincerity was what counted the most. Lay people talked about their faith journeys and scribes discussed the law of the Lord. Expensive sacrifices were presented with fanfare. But evidence of basic obedience was absent, foreigners were oppressed, the fatherless were abused, widows were isolated, and the poor were exploited. Idolatry was widespread, along with violence and moral decadence. Jeremiah posed Yahweh's question, "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?" (7:9-11). The long tradition of respect for the house of the Lord (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 132:13-14) was pretentiously maintained while despising everything the Name of the Lord stood for.

Worse than no religion at all is a religion reduced to self-expression, self-gratification, and self-indulgence. When Marx condemned institutional religion as the opiate of the people, he was mainly right. And there is undoubtedly some truth behind Freud's dismissal of sentimental religion based on the childish illusion of the need for a father figure. It is not surprising that Carl Sagan concluded that religion was a superstition modern science would eventually destroy. Nor is it surprising that the demise of religion as it is popularly conceived and practiced has the Lord's endorsement. The difference between Jeremiah and the 20th century's leading de-bunkers of religion is that the prophet distinguished between an authentic relationship with the Lord God and they didn't. For them all religion was bad, but for Jeremiah that would be like saying all marriage is bad because there are adulterers or that all families are bad because some parents abuse their children.

How bad was Judah's temple religion? Jeremiah painted a vivid picture of blatant idolatry, false sacrifices, and deceptive leaders. Idolatry was a family affair. "The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven" (7:18). Scholars identify the Queen of Heaven with the Assyro-Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Burning incense and pouring out drink offerings to this maternal figure was thought to assure material well-being (44:17-19). Is the Spirit of Sport or the Cult of Self-Esteem modern equivalents to the Queen of Heaven? Do families today neglect the worship of God because they are engrossed in sports? Do well-meaning people ignore the living God and cater to their own welfare? Has American Christianity attempted to justify, in the name of "family values," the devotion of our time, energy and resources to pursuits that compete with our devotion to God? Undoubtedly the people in Jeremiah's day felt it was an innocent and beneficial exercise to pay respect to the gods of other cultures. But it was not an innocent exercise, because it provoked the Lord. It would be sad if what the Lord said of them could be said of us, "Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?"(7:19).

In spite of all the lavish and artistic attention offered to idols, Jeremiah contended that they were nothing more than silent scarecrows in a melon patch (10:5). He contrasted idols with "the living God, the eternal King," who "made the earth by his power," "the world by his wisdom, and stretched out the heavens by his understanding" (10:10, 12). The prophet asserted that the sin-twisted inclination to turn inanimate objects into symbols of virility, success, and pleasure, made no sense at all. Today's secularized culture has infused spiritual value in such things as cars and homes and human bodies. We do not worship fertility but we worship success and pleasure. Nor did the sacrifices paid to idols produce anything positive. In Jeremiah's day there was no shortage of ritual sacrifices. People were eager to sacrifice liberally both to Yahweh and to the pagan gods. They followed a *whatever* philosophy of religion that sought to appease all the gods, and the Lord was not pleased. "Go ahead," declared the Lord, "add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves!" (7:21). The most extreme form of false sacrifice cost the lives of their children. Jeremiah referred to the infamous Valley of Ben Hinnom, which eventually became Jerusalem's refuse dump and "whose shortened name *gehenna* meets us in the New Testament's word for hell" (Kidner, 51). It was there that King Manasseh began the detestable practice of human sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10). The twisted religious rationale for this may have come from the Ammonites who sacrificed their children to appease the pagan deity

Molech. It is argued that some religious leaders may have reasoned that this is what Yahweh wanted when he called for the dedication of all first-born (Ex. 13:2; see Micah 6:7; Butler, 57). This may explain why the Lord condemned this practice as “something I did not command nor did it enter my mind” (7:31; 19:5). It is hard to fathom the tragedy of people sacrificing their children to appease the gods, until one realizes that people today regularly sacrifice their children to pursue their own selfish ends. They don’t burn them on a literal altar, but they neglect or abandon or spoil them. A strong case can be made that moderns, like the ancients, put their children on a sacrificial altar, not for the sake of a pagan deity, but for the sake of pagan desires.

When Jeremiah stood at the gate of the temple to proclaim the Lord’s message against blatant idolatry and false sacrifice, he took his stand in a long tradition that valued obedience over ritual and humble devotion over religious performance. He stood with Abel and his sacrificial lamb, against Cain’s offering of choice produce (Gen 3). He stood with Moses, who climbed down Mount Sinai to oppose Aaron’s Golden Calf Festival to the Lord (Gen 32). He stood with faithful Samuel against Saul’s religion of convenience (1 Sam 13). He stood with a repentant King David when he prayed, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 51:16-17). He stood with Amos, who declared the word of the Lord, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them....But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:21-24). He stood in the tradition of Hosea, who spoke for God when he said, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). He stood with Micah, when the prophet contrasted hyper religiosity with simple obedience, saying, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). He stood with the prophet Isaiah when he said hear the word of the Lord, “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me....I cannot bear your evil assemblies...Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa 1:13-17).

Jeremiah kept this long tradition going, but his most important connection was not to the past but to the future, not to the prophets he echoed but to the Savior he preceded. Standing at the gate of the Lord’s house, he leveled a blistering attack against those who took comfort in their outward performance and religious ritual. On behalf of the Lord he asked, “Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?” (Jer 7:11). This stinging accusation recalls Jesus at the temple, when he forcibly drove out “all who were buying and selling” and “overturned the tables of the money changers.” “It is written,” Jesus said, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a *den of robbers*.” (Mt 21:13; see Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11). By drawing on both Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus equated the religious crisis of his day with the false temple religion that the prophets had confronted. His words and actions vindicated the work of the prophets through the centuries as they sought to drive out empty religiosity, meaningless ritual and self-righteousness. The prophet Habakkuk’s imperative is timely, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

Leadership Crisis

Just as Jesus confronted the scribes and Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jeremiah confronted the leaders of his day. Jeremiah attributed the people's ignorance of "the requirements of the Lord" to the distorted theology and ethical malpractice of the priests, prophets, scribes, and officials (Jer 8:8). These religious professionals handled the law but did not know the Lord nor the law. They did not ask, "Where is the Lord?" and they were unable and unwilling to make the simple distinction between Yahweh and Baal (2:8). Judah's leaders were like disgraced Enron executives (2:26) with their greedy selfishness exposed and their deceitfulness uncovered (6:13). They were like lackadaisical physicians, telling patients with life-threatening diseases to go home and take an aspirin. The Lord complained, "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (6:14).

It would have been better if the priests and scribes had rejected the law of God altogether, but instead they proudly laid claim to Bible before preceding to twist and distort its message. "'How can you say,' Jeremiah asked, 'We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord, when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?'" This is a grave problem today, because many of our so-called professional biblical scholars attribute more integrity and authenticity to Shakespeare's writings than they do to Scripture. They revere the U.S. Constitution with more awe and appreciation than they do the four Gospels. Many modern day scribes read the Bible as a collection of diverse religious experiences. They do not read it as a sure word from the Lord. Both then and now, when "the shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the Lord, they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered" (10:21). As Jeremiah concluded, "Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have?" (8:9). The answer to that question didn't need to be spelled out, but Jeremiah repeated what must have been the message of the times, "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (8:11). It was against these leaders that the Lord called Jeremiah to declare war and deliver this verdict, "'So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished,' says the Lord" (8:12).

Without competition or pretense, Jeremiah provided a dramatically different model of leadership. In contrast to the spiritual indifference, professional demeanor, and religious enthusiasm of Judah's leaders, Jeremiah was filled with anguish and sorrow. Instead of a blaise attitude and feel-good sermons, Jeremiah lamented the tragic state of his people. He cried out to God, "O, my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me...Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me" (8:18-19, 21). He could not imagine why the people acted as if the Lord was no longer in Zion or why they refused to turn to him for healing. Why would you turn to idols when you could worship the living God? Implicit in Jeremiah's question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (a balsam wood resin that was used for medicinal purposes), is the obvious answer, Yes, of course there is. "Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" (8:22).

Jeremiah lamented the tragedy of it all, "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (9:1). He longed to get away from his responsibilities and his pain. He expressed his feelings openly, "At times I wish I

had a wilderness hut, a backwoods cabin, where I could get away from my people and never see them again. They're a faithless, feckless bunch, a congregation of degenerates" (9:2, The Message). But Jeremiah stayed right where the Lord told him to stand. He never strayed from the Lord's will. He may have been overwhelmed with anguish, but even more importantly he was humbled before God. As he confronted those who were "stubborn" and "uncircumcised in heart" (9:14, 26), he became more sensitive to his own sin and his need for God's mercy. He prayed, "I know, O Lord, that a person's life is not his own; it is not for mortals to direct their steps. Correct me, Lord, but only with justice—not in your anger, lest you reduce me to nothing" (10:23-24). He followed in his own life the counsel the Lord gave him to give to others:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this; that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord" (9:23-24).

Images of Judgment

Throughout his temple sermon Jeremiah reiterated the Lord's message of judgment. He sought to impress upon the people the grave consequences for their devotion to idols, deceptive leaders and false sacrifices, as well as their practice of social injustice, greed and violence. The invitation to revisit Shiloh provided historical evidence that God was serious about removing those who despised his name (7:12-15; see 1 Sam 1-4). God's intention was also evident in Jeremiah's description of the scope and intensity of judgment: "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched'" (7:20). Prophesying that the Valley of Ben Hinnom would become a killing field and that the graves of Jerusalem would be unearthed conveyed the extent of the devastation (7:32-8:3). In words reminiscent of Habakkuk, Jeremiah pronounced the Lord's judgment, "I will take away their harvest. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither" (Jer 8:13; see Hab 3:17).

Today we try hard to make people feel good, but Jeremiah worked hard to help people visualize the consequences of their actions. He must have raised his voice when he said, "Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath" (7:29). He pictured Jerusalem as "a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals" where no one was safe anywhere, not even in one's bedroom. "Death has climbed in through our windows and has entered our fortresses; it has cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the public squares" (9:11, 21).

In addition to conveying the extent and the experience of the Lord's judgment, Jeremiah was impressed by its inevitability. It was impossible for the living God, who is holy and just, to ignore Judah's flagrant disobedience and wilful rebellion. "'Should I not punish them for this?' declares the Lord. 'Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?'" (5:29; 9:9). The answer was as obvious as it was devastating. For Jeremiah, the inevitability of judgment took on a

particularly personal dimension. He was told three times not to pray for “this people.” The first time the Lord said, “do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you” (7:16). The second time the Lord said, “Do not pray....because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of distress” (11:14). And the third time the Lord said, “Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague” (14:11). There are several important facts to keep in mind about this divine prohibition:

(1) Jeremiah came at the end of a long line of prophets who had been called to announce judgment against Judah. There had been plenty of opportunities for repentance and now the long-delayed moment of reckoning had finally come.

(2) The Lord was not about to assume the burden of responsibility that belonged to a people who had squandered every opportunity to return to him. Any attempt to “spiritualize” the judgment of God was to be rejected. Prayer must not be used to soften the message.

(3) The prohibition fit with the providence of God who knew the heart and mind of the people.

(4) Jeremiah was prohibited from praying for the welfare of “this people” but he was not prohibited from admonishing the people to repent and return to the Lord.

(5) Jeremiah was issued this personal prohibition personally for that particular time and it is not meant to be an excuse for us to reject praying for others.

Some sensitive people may take this message to heart and begin to think that they can never be forgiven by God and escape the final judgment. They feel it is too late for them to be prayed for and too late for them to pray. They may believe that their spiritual condition is beyond the grace of God and they have committed “the unforgivable sin.” In the light of Jesus’ warning, they may fear that they have sinned against the Holy Spirit: “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt 12:32). But this is to twist the meaning of Jeremiah’s prohibition and Jesus’ warning, because both statements were intended to encourage repentance and compel conversion.

Imagine the people’s reaction when Jeremiah said in effect, “The Lord has told me to stop wasting my time praying for you.” Such a statement should promote action not indifference and shock people out of their spiritual resistance. Likewise, with Jesus’ warning, which roughly paraphrased meant, “Stay what you want about me, but if you refuse the witness of the Holy Spirit you are doomed.” The “unforgivable sin” was not some secret sin that a person may have unwittingly committed, but the persistent rejection of the Spirit’s testimony about Jesus and that person’s refusal to the bitter end of life to come to Christ for salvation. The intent of both Jeremiah’s prohibition and Jesus’ warning was the same: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” (Heb 3:15). Jesus told his followers, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:44). The greatest example of that imperative came on the Cross, when Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). There is no greater expression of God’s readiness to forgive than the very words of the Savior from the Cross. There is no excuse for not turning to God. If you have not accepted the witness of the Holy Spirit and come to Christ, now

is the time to do it, for today is the day of Salvation.