



THE TEMPLE OF DOOM

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Jeremiah 7:1-8:3

Seventh Message

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The book of Jeremiah is a difficult message to preach and a difficult message to apply to our lives. However, as I reflect on this prophetic word which is now 2,600 years old, I find it to be helpful in at least three ways. Firstly, this book jolts us out of any sense of complacency with respect to idolatry. Much of the text of Jeremiah is a message of impending judgment and doom coming upon Judah, because the nation had abandoned worship of God in exchange for the hideous worship of Baal.

As we read the text we can take great comfort from knowing that we do not climb the surrounding hillsides to offer sacrifices to Baal. Neither do we sacrifice our children, as was the case in ancient Judah. Or do we? Idolatry, the worship of false images and false gods instead of the one true God who has created us in his image, haunts us today even as it did the Israelites in Jeremiah's time. Like ancient Judah, we are surrounded and immersed in all kinds of idolatrous activities. Our idolatry is much more subtle, of course. We are unaware of the powers that seduce us. We don't give them names like Baal, Molech and Chemesh, but they are just as dangerous and deadly. We need to be jolted out of our apathy, seduction and sleep. This is what Jeremiah the prophet does for us and to us.

Secondly, in Jeremiah we find a frail man of God with whom we can identify in the pathos of our humanity. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, was characterized by "perpetual pain and incurable wounds," to use his own words. God gave him the unenviable task of preaching hard words to hard people for a period of forty arduous years. As a result he was rejected, beaten, imprisoned, thrown into pits, and made the object of public ridicule and scorn. The prophet lived a life of confusion, despair and great loneliness. God commanded him to not even take a wife, since his life would be filled with great hardship.

In Jeremiah's laments we have a window into the soul of a man who hurt deeply and continually. We know more about Jeremiah and his feelings than any other author in the Bible. In his story we find realness and a language for our own pain and sorrow. And we learn that following God does not mean that life will be a walk in the park. The God who calls us to himself and to a life of purpose for him may take us through some very difficult passages.

Thirdly, in the book of Jeremiah we are challenged with the truth that there is no end to the influence that

anyone can have in this life if he or she is armed with the Word of God: "*Thus says the LORD.*" Jeremiah spoke the word that God had spoken to him. God spoke, Jeremiah listened. And today we are privileged to have at our disposal everything that God spoke.

The event that propelled Jeremiah into ministry was the rediscovery of the Word of God by Hilkiyah, the high priest. The text of the Torah had lain hidden in the temple until it was unearthed during Josiah's reign. Josiah embraced the word and, together with the young Jeremiah, began to reform the nation by speaking that word. Christians don't have to be scholars, they don't have to be worldly successful, drive a BMW or graduate from Stanford University. We can be young or old, rich or poor, healthy or unhealthy. Jeremiah grew up in the shadow of Jerusalem and the temple, but his ministry involved preaching the word of the LORD and nothing else. It seems everyone today is seeking God's will for their lives, asking what should they do and where should they go. Jeremiah centers us. If we immerse ourselves in God's word, if we fill our hearts with "thus says the LORD," we will be in God's will because we will be in his word.

This morning we come to chapter 7 of the book. This text is a poignant and powerful sermon (or excerpts from a sermon) which God instructed Jeremiah to deliver at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem. Chapter 26 refers to the same occasion or a similar one. If this is the same incident, then the timeframe for this text is the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, about 608 B.C. Josiah, the king who did right in the eyes of the Lord and tore down altars to Baal and Astarte, putting an end to the idolatry of the nation, is dead. The temple had been restored and the Torah was being read. But by the time Jehoiakim began his reign, cultic practice was again the norm. Things had deteriorated to such a state that by end of the chapter, we learn that Judah was engaging in child sacrifice.

Jeremiah 7:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, "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!' 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. Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of

the LORD.' For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, 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, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. 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, 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? 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. (Jer 7:1-11, NASB)

The Lord instructed Jeremiah to stand at the temple gate and give this word: "Thus says the LORD." This was the most sacred place in Judah, and probably the most public place in all of Jerusalem. Doubtless a very large audience gathered to hear Jeremiah's sermon. For us, this would be like hearing a Fourth of July speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, a site that is held sacred by all Americans.

The temple was where the people gathered to worship Yahweh, to bow down and give him honor. Jeremiah's message would be very upsetting to the establishment, because it was delivered at the very gate of the temple. In fact, in chapter 26 we learn that the prophet almost lost his life as a result of giving this message: "The priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, saying, 'You must die!'" (Jer 26:8). Jehoiakim had already put to death Uriah the prophet. But the elders and officials remembered what happened when Micah spoke during the days of Hezekiah, and they intervened on Jeremiah's behalf, sparing his life. Ironically, Jesus would replay this temple scene when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Then, the priests and the people also cried out for his life, but he would not be spared.

The text opens with two commands designed to get the attention of the people of Judah: "amend your ways and your deeds," and, "do not trust in deceptive words." The commands are repeated twice, the second repetition filling out the first. The same promise is given after the command to "amend your ways": "that you may dwell in this place."

Jeremiah's opening word is, "amend your ways." He means, make good, do well, do right, do what is pleasing. This doesn't have anything to do with how Christians dress for church, how much money we give or which hymns we sing. It is concerned with very practical elements of everyday life: practicing justice, loving our neighbor, caring for the orphan, the widow and the alien, and not walking after false gods. The people of Judah were failing to do good. They were worshipping

the wrong god, to their own ruin. They were being selfish, exploiting people for their own gain. Idolatry leads to exploitation! But "doing good" is the very essence of religion. James says, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). True worship is not found in the words that we say but in the deeds that we do. God's true temple is made up of living persons doing what he commands. Jeremiah challenges us to evaluate our ways and our deeds.

The second word for the people of Judah builds on the first. Jeremiah says to not trust in deceptive words, saying, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." "Deceptive" means to deal falsely, to lie, which is the very opposite of being faithful and true. This word is used 113 times in the scriptures, one-third of which are found in the prophecy of Jeremiah.

The deception, the lie that the people were trusting in was the notion that they could do anything they wanted – steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely – and then find safety in "the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." They thought this was a magical charm that safeguarded their lives. They imagined that the house of the Living God was sacrosanct and therefore impregnable to all attack. Jeremiah is not rejecting the liturgy or the temple claims in principle. What he is rejecting is the fact that Judah was violating Torah and covenant at the very time they were going to the temple to conduct liturgy, as though they were obedient to the LORD of the liturgy!

The reality was that the temple, God's dwelling place, his house, had become a den of robbers. The people of Judah were acting like thieves who forayed into the countryside to plunder unprotected travelers and then returned to hide in their den. Jeremiah charges that Judah was acting in whatever way they wanted all week, thinking they could return to the temple and find safety: "the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD; we are delivered." The temple had become a hideout for thieves, a façade for the corruption and abuse that was going on behind the scenes. Judah's religious performance was impeccable, but their everyday lives were rotten. Jesus applied the same term 630 years later with regard to the second temple. Are we also trusting in deceptive words? Are we hiding in church? Is our life in the community consistent with our life in the congregation? This is a difficult word for us, too, one that slices its way into our hearts.

If we were honest, we could name many idols that compete for our devotion. We climb the hillsides of money, power, possessions and prestige. We sacrifice our children to a start-up company. We put our own benefit ahead of our neighbor's well being. We are locked in a battle to ensure blessing for our own lives, not God's name. I know that this is true of me. Every day we are confronted with moral and ethical choices, between our ways and our deeds, and we are tempted

to fudge. We think, “God will forgive me. I’m born again, born again, born again!” We are tempted to trust in the lie that we are delivered by a label instead of an internal reality. At times Christians have the worst reputation in the community and the workplace. Jeremiah reminds us that God sees all of this. The church is not a safe house. We are deceived if we think it is. Whenever the church becomes an external façade that does not match internal reality, God speaks harsh words.

As a child, I went to church every week, but when I went away to college, I stopped attending. However, toward the end of my college years I became a Christian. One of the first things I did afterwards was go to the church where I grew up to tell one of the pastors that I had come to Christ. I was thrilled to be able to tell him the good news, but he said to me, “That’s great. But we don’t want to get too excited about it.” Religiosity can douse the flame of genuine and exciting faith. Church can become a place of comfort and safety that deals only with insignificant issues — an insurance policy for our self-consumed lives.

Eugene Peterson has an excellent word for us in this regard:

The people stood in the holy place and spoke the current religious cliché and supposed that everything was just fine. They were in the right place, and they said the right words – but they were not right. For religion is not a matter of arrangements or places or words, but of life and love, of mercy and obedience, of persons in a passion of faith... Places are important – immensely important. Sites and buildings are places where we gather ourselves for fresh action and assemble ourselves for new endeavor. But standing in a church singing a hymn doesn’t make us holy any more than standing in a barn and neighing makes us a horse. And words are important – immensely important. What we say and the way we say it express what is most personal and intimate in us. But mindlessly repeating holy words no more creates a relationship than saying “I love you” twenty times a day makes us skilled lovers.¹

Will God stand by and let us live a double life? Can a building or a label protect idolatrous and rebellious people? The text continues:

“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. 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, 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. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brothers, all the offspring of Ephraim.” (Jer 7:12-15)

God will not stand idly by while we live out our deception. God is not mocked. Judgment is certain. The rest of this chapter sets out the horrible judgment that God plans for Judah. The valley of Topheth, or the son of Hinnom, lies just outside the city to the south. This was a garden of the Canaanites and later a center of Baal worship, where child sacrifice was carried out. The name means “fireplace.” Jeremiah says that the valley of Topheth would become the valley of slaughter. The word Topheth rhymes with the Hebrew word for shame. The valley of the son of Hinnom would become Jerusalem’s garbage dump. In the New Testament, the shortened name becomes *gehenna*, a word for hell. Verse 34 says, “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” (Jer 7:34). Jeremiah says that Jerusalem would suffer the same judgment as Shiloh.

A glance at chapter 26 reveals that this is what really made the priests and the people mad. Shiloh was the first place of worship in the land. This was where the tent of meeting was set up and the inheritance divided. The yearly feast was held there and the ark of the covenant resided there. Shiloh was where Hannah went to pray for a son. It was where Eli and his two evil sons, Hophni and Phineas, were priests. Recall the story. Israel went out to battle with the Philistines and brought along the ark with them to ensure victory. But because of the evil of Hophni and Phineas and that of the people, the Philistines defeated them, captured the ark, and the glory departed from Israel. When Eli learned of this, he fell down dead. His daughter-in-law gave birth to a son and named him Ichabod, “no glory.” Shiloh lost its significance when the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines. Later, the temple there was destroyed. “He abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh, the tent which He had pitched among men” (Psa 78:60).

Jeremiah is saying that the same thing would happen in Jerusalem. Judah could not fathom how they could be in jeopardy. After all, they possessed the temple, God’s dwelling place. But this very temple, the temple of doom, was destroyed in 587 BC. The second temple was destroyed in AD 70. We cannot contain God’s glory. His protection cannot be bought through religious activity. Shiloh was destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed. If the church is not faithful to God’s covenant, the name alone will not save us from judgment.

God will take away our most treasured possessions in order to remove idolatry from our lives. Nothing is sacred. Nothing in our lives is beyond God’s reach. And no minor surgery will touch the worship of false gods. God will even remove and destroy his most holy places on earth — Shiloh, Jerusalem, Eden — in order to get our attention. God craves our worship and devotion so much, he loves us so much, that he will even remove his presence from our lives so that we might learn how foolish we are. Life is not worth living if we don’t have

God. That is the horror of judgment — God's presence removed from our lives. That is why David pleaded with God, in Psalm 51, "Do not cast me away from Thy presence, And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psa 51:11). For David, that would be a fate worse than death. And this is why Jeremiah laments in verse 29, the only poem in the text:

**"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." (Jer 7:29)**

Because of our idolatries God might strike our bodies, take away our jobs or allow our children to struggle. He might let the start-up go belly-up. God even causes churches to undergo demoralizing decay. Judgment is the furthest thing from God's mind, and yet Shiloh and Jerusalem remind us that he will do whatever is necessary to remove idols from our lives.

So what should be our response to such a foreboding word? Look at verse 21:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. 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. 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.'" (Jer 7:21-23)

A key word in the text is the Hebrew word, *shema*. It appears eight times in chapter 7 and is translated both listen and obey. The word obedience comes from the verb *audire*, which means to listen. God desires a simple obedience from a heart devoted to him, a heart that listens to him. He is not seeking religion or sacrifice or success or numbers. "A broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise" (Psa 51:17). This is what God is seeking. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22). "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6:6).

And if we do that, this is what God says later in the book:

"Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way, that I may repent of the calamity which I am planning to do to them because of the evil of their deeds." (Jer 26:3)

This is an amazing verse. Can God change his mind? Prophecy is different than promise. When God makes a promise to be faithful to his covenant people, his promise will not change. But how we live in that covenant depends on the kinds of choices we make. If we repent and listen, God relents. There is no need for judgment that is designed to get our attention. This is part of the unchanging character of God.

The word obedience fosters all kinds of fear and smacks of legalism. But consider this. The word absurd includes the term *surdus*, which means deaf. Not listening to God is absurd. The absurd life is the opposite of the obedient life. There is great freedom in simple obedience. We don't have to wrestle with wondering whether we can have our cake and eat it too, whether we can serve God and our idols. We don't have to worry about ensuring our blessing. We obey, and leave the outcome to him. And God promises that we can dwell in the land. We struggle in this respect because we failed to make the proper choice earlier. We dabble and wait while God wants us to listen and choose to follow his ways.

A simple obedience is what is required. We don't have the power to do, but we have the power to choose. When we take a step of faith, God's Holy Spirit will empower us to do what he asks of us: do justice, love our neighbors, and show kindness to the poor and disadvantaged. C.S. Lewis said: "The Christian life is different: harder and easier. Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want you.'"

The proper response to the temple of doom is saying a simple yes to everything that we are, everything that we have, and everything that we do.

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1. Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983) 64-65.