

Jeremiah's Message

Devotional Reading: Luke 6:40–46

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 7:1–26

Jeremiah 7:1–11, 21–23

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 ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord.

3 Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.

4 Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these.

5 For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour;

6 If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt:

7 Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

8 Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.

9 Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not;

10 And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?

11 Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the Lord.

21 Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh.

22 For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices:

23 But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.

Key Text

This thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.—Jeremiah 7:23

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 2: Jeremiah and the Promise of Renewal

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State what the Lord had commanded the people when He brought them out of Egypt.
2. Contrast the Judeans' daily activities with their temple worship practices.
3. Write a note that expresses gratitude to God for His rescue during a time of injustice.

Lesson Outline

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II. Change Needed (Jeremiah 7:3–4)

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IV. Hypocrisy Exposed (Jeremiah 7:8–11, 21–23)

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- B. Sin and Idolatry (v. 9)
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Comfort in God's Ways

Conclusion

- A. Trusting the Wrong Thing
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Anathoth	<i>An-uh-thoth.</i>
Baal	<i>Bay-ul.</i>
Jehoiakim	<i>Jeh-hoy-uh-kim.</i>
Jezreelite	<i>Jez-ree-el-ite.</i>
Josiah	<i>Jo-sigh-uh.</i>
Manasseh	<i>Muh-nass-uh.</i>
Nebuchadnezzar	<i>Neb-yuh-kud-nez-er.</i>
Pharaohnechoh	<i>Fair-o-nee-kow.</i>

Introduction

A. Trusting Lying Words

While doing short-term missions work in a foreign country, I once bought a name-brand wrist-watch for a low price. I was told by the seller that his watches were “seconds” from a factory in China that he obtained because they had minor defects. I loved that stylish timekeeper for a couple of years until it quit working. When I took it to a jeweler to have the battery replaced, he told me the watch was a fake. It was so convincing, he did not realize it until he removed its back and saw its cheap innards. Have you ever trusted in lies or deception, buying something you later realized was a fake?

Jeremiah identified the danger of trusting “lying words” as he spoke to the people of Jerusalem 2,600 years ago. The reason for his warning still holds true today, and the consequences in spiritual matters are far more serious than that of a fake watch.

B. Lesson Context

As mentioned in Lesson 5, chapters 7 and 26 in the book of Jeremiah seem to be describing the same event, sometimes called the “Temple Sermon.” This is shortly after the death of King Josiah in a battle against the Egyptians in 609 BC (2 Kings 23:29). Various indicators suggest that Jeremiah’s message in today’s lesson was delivered early in the reign of King Jehoiakim (originally named Eliakim), son of Josiah (Jeremiah 1:3; 26:1). Jehoiakim had been installed by Pharaohnechoh as a vassal ruler who was required to pay a steep tribute to Egypt (2 Kings 23:34–35). Jehoiakim ruled for 11 years but was eventually exiled to Babylon after he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:5–6). Jehoiakim’s evil influence is evident in the nearly two dozen mentions of his name in the book of Jeremiah.

By profession, Jeremiah was a priest who lived in the village of Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1), about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Regarding his appointment to be a prophet, see last week’s lesson. A trip from Anathoth to the temple would have taken him an hour or so. This made it possible for him to come quickly to the temple in his role as a prophet and deliver a message from the Lord.

I. Message Introduced

(Jeremiah 7:1–2)

A. Imperative for the Prophet (vv. 1–2a)

1–2a. 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.

The primary task of a prophet is to communicate God's *word* to whomever He directs. And Jeremiah receives direction in this regard numerous times in the book that bears his name.

The gate of the Lord's house, where the message is to be proclaimed, is a strategic choice of location. The content of the message that is to come establishes why this is so.

B. Imperative for the People (v. 2b)

2b. Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord.

The message is targeted specifically toward those Judeans who *enter in at these gates to worship the Lord*. The sheer size of the territory of Judah, encompassing some 3,400 square miles, means that not all Judeans can make it to Jerusalem on a weekly basis to worship at the temple. So we don't really know how big the prophet's audience is. If it's during a yearly pilgrimage observance, the crowd could be many times larger than the average weekly attendance (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16).

II. Change Needed

(Jeremiah 7:3–4)

A. The Right Solution (v. 3)

3. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.

Jeremiah identifies the source of his message with the synonymous expressions *the Lord of hosts* and *the God of Israel*. The two are one and the same. This doubled expression is a favorite of Jeremiah's. The two designations occur together more than 30 times in this book, compared to fewer than 10 times in the rest of the Old Testament. The *hosts* in this sense are armies (see Jeremiah 50:25), the armies of heaven. Jeremiah's message is a simple if-then statement, with the words *if* and *then* being unstated although implied at this point; both will be stated plainly a bit later.

The positive action to take is stated with the word *amend*. The evil *ways* to be amended have just been specified in Jeremiah 6. These involve oppression, wickedness, and corruption (6:6–7, 28), among other sins.

B. The Wrong Solution (v. 4)

4. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these.

The foundational change is that the people must decide where they will place their *trust*. Will the people choose what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear, or vice versa? *Lying words* characterize the messages of the false prophets (Jeremiah 5:31; 14:14–15; 23:9–32). This problem is central to Jeremiah’s message throughout the book.

Apparently, the people have been told by these charlatans that *the temple of the Lord* is inviolable and eternal. Thus they place their trust in a building rather than in the one whom the building is to honor (Jeremiah 7:14). The people seem to reason that if God intended to preserve the temple, then they, too, were protected from harm, regardless of their actions. Yet Jeremiah reminded them that, as far back as the time of King Hezekiah, they had been warned that the destruction of the temple was a possibility (26:18–19).

What Do You Think?

What attracts people to believing or trusting in lies?

Digging Deeper

How might God’s people protect against believing falsehoods?

III. Outcomes Desired

(Jeremiah 7:5–7)

A. Be Just (v. 5)

5. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour.

Jeremiah goes on to specify the actions (*ways* and *doings*) that must change as trust is redirected. He demands an overhaul of the people’s behaviors that have brought the Lord displeasure. Right behaviors logically involve two general categories: things *to do* and things *not to do*. *To thoroughly execute judgment* fits the first category.

B. Cease Oppression (v. 6a)

6a. If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place.

Now the prophet turns to the second category, things *not* to do. Interestingly, *oppress not* later becomes the positive action “deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor” (Jeremiah 21:12). God’s concern is for *the stranger* (non-Israelite foreigners who live among the residents of Judah), *the fatherless* (orphans), and *the widow* (women who have lost the financial security of having a husband). God’s concern for this triad of the most vulnerable people is seen numerous times throughout the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 27:19, etc.). All three categories of people live day-to-day, destitute and susceptible to exploitation. That Jeremiah even needs to mention them indicates the callous attitude his hearers have toward the neediest among them (compare Jeremiah 5:28).

The person who seems to have led the way in the shedding of *innocent blood* is King Manasseh, who reigned over Judah a few decades earlier (2 Kings 21:16; 24:3–4). This refers to what have been called “judicial murders”: the execution of innocent people resulting from the perversion of the courts. This is the antithesis of justice. The fact that the courts are being used for killing indicates violation of the ninth commandment, against false testimony (Exodus 20:16) and the sixth commandment, against murder (20:13). An Old Testament example of judicial murder is that of Naboth the Jezreelite (1 Kings 21). The most obvious example of the same in the New Testament is, of course, the crucifixion of Jesus (Matthew 26:59–61; 27:4). Jeremiah himself barely escapes this fate (Jeremiah 26:12–15).

C. Reject Idolatry (v. 6b)

6b. Neither walk after other gods to your hurt.

The worship of *other gods* is warned against and condemned numerous times in the Old Testament and is the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). To engage in such a practice is to worship idols (Isaiah 2:8, 20). The false prophets and evil kings lead the way in this regard (2 Kings 21:1–11; Jeremiah 2:8).

The sins of King Manasseh were so great that they became the primary factor in the Lord’s decision to punish Judah (Jeremiah 15:4). Manasseh reached the depth of spiritual depravity by sacrificing his son to a false god (2 Kings 21:6). Thus the sin of shedding innocent blood (considered above) connects with idol worship (compare Psalm 106:38). As Jeremiah warns, the Lord will not overlook such horrendous wickedness. The sin of idol worship is so serious that it is likened to adultery (Jeremiah 3:6–13; Ezekiel 23).

This self-delusion results in self-*hurt* as the people miss out on blessings from the real God. Instead, the people reap a harvest of what they’ve sown (Proverbs 11:18–19; 22:8; Galatians 6:7–8).

D. Dwell in the Land (v. 7)

7. Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.

This verse completes the if-then statement. If the people repent and abandon their oppressive and ungodly behavior, a promise awaits. The Lord will allow them to continue to live in Jerusalem and the surrounding regions of Judah and Benjamin, *the land that the Lord gave to their fathers*. Reference to this land invites a consideration of the time scale involved: the residents of Judah have been in the promised land for over 800 years! This is more than enough time for the people to have noticed and taken to heart the consequences of disobedience and the promises of obedience. But the people continually misinterpret events.

IV. Hypocrisy Exposed

(Jeremiah 7:8–11, 21–23)

A. Misplaced Trust (v. 8)

8. Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit.

Jeremiah's message moves to the heart of the people's moral dysfunction. They have completely believed the *lying words* of their evil leaders and false prophets. This especially indicts the false prophets who have gained influence over the people. While lives built on lies may seem rewarding in the short term, God will not allow dishonesty and corruption to thrive in the long run. Those who believe lies *cannot profit* in the end. False prophets fail to yield profits!

Consequences of Blind Trust

Alana, a trusting young woman, met a charming young man online named Michael. They quickly forged a friendship, and soon Alana was falling deeply for him. Michael seemed genuinely interested in her. She became captivated by him.

Michael charmed her with gifts, making all types of promises of a fairy-tale future. She never questioned his stories, although some details seemed inconsistent. Michael claimed he was an only child and that his parents were dead. When asked about his friends, he gave excuses for why Alana couldn't meet them.

One day, Alana got a frantic call from Michael saying he had an emergency and needed to borrow a large sum of money. Assured that he would pay her back, Alana agreed without hesitation. She met Michael and handed over the money.

That was the last day Alana saw Michael. Weeks turned into months; he was nowhere to be found. His cell phone was disconnected. The company that he said he worked for

confirmed he was never an employee. It was all a lie. Have you ever been deceived by someone? Were there signs you missed seeing that could have cued you into the lies?

—S. S.

B. Sin and Idolatry (v. 9)

9. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not.

Jeremiah's indictment includes charges of breaking six of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:7–21). These are the prohibitions against theft (eighth commandment), *murder* (sixth), *adultery* (seventh), false witness (ninth), worship of *Baal* as an idol (second), and following *other gods* (first). The charge of idolatry is the most serious, and Baal is one of those “other gods.” Jeremiah refers to Baal 12 times in his book, and in two of those cases the designation *Baal* is plural (Jeremiah 2:23; 9:14). Prophesying a century before Jeremiah, the prophet Hosea warned the northern kingdom of divided Israel likewise concerning the Baals (Hosea 2:13, 17; 11:2). They didn't listen either.

What Do You Think?

Why is it so easy to justify sinful behavior?

Digging Deeper

Where do you see hypocrisy present in your own life?

C. Deluded Thinking (vv. 10–11)

10. And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?

It is not hard to imagine that Jeremiah's voice crescendos to a peak with this verse. He directly calls out their hypocrisy. Coming into the temple, “the Lord's house” (Jeremiah 7:2, above), and not experiencing pangs of guilt and remorse shows the depth of their depravity. They stand in the temple court believing they *are delivered* (allowed) to continue *to do all these abominations*.

11. Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the Lord.

Jeremiah's word from the Lord concludes this section by repeating the temple's designation as a *house, which is called by the Lord's name*. It is the Lord's “dwelling place” (Psalm 76:2), His “holy mountain” (Joel 3:17), a place where the people of Israel

come to encounter their God. But more than that, it is the “Lord’s house,” a place to which the Lord has allowed His name to be attached. This means God’s reputation is at stake. Unfortunately, since it has become *a den of robbers*, then the Lord’s name has been dishonored. Tragically, God judges this to be the case, affirming, “*I have seen it.*”

Centuries later, Jesus draws on the imagery of this verse when He cleanses the temple (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). At least one issue at that time will be the same as in Jeremiah’s day: the corrupt temple leadership takes advantage of the weak for their own gain. Even worse, the temple leaders of Jesus’ day plot His death so that they can hold on to their own power (John 11:48).

What Do You Think?

What are actions you deem inappropriate for doing inside a dedicated place of worship?

Digging Deeper

Are such actions inappropriate in some places but appropriate elsewhere?

D. Useless Sacrifice (vv. 21–23)

21. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh.

Jeremiah’s repeated use of the extended title *the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel* (see Jeremiah 7:3, above) underlines the serious tone of this section as the prophet introduces sarcasm. In effect, Jeremiah is saying, “Go right on ahead and continue violating the rules about *burnt offerings*, and see how things turn out!”

Burnt offerings were sacrifices in which a whole animal was burned on the altar in the courtyard of the temple, a task that Jeremiah himself had likely undertaken as a priest. Such a sacrifice would be fully consumed by fire (see Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1, 6:8–13). The phrase *unto your sacrifices* refers to the general (and generally improper) way the original readers are conducting all their sacrifices, burnt offerings being only one part of those.

What Do You Think?

What are ways Christians might perform the right action but lack the right heart posture?

Digging Deeper

How can we develop a greater awareness of when we are merely “going through the motions”?

22. For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices.

Some have claimed that this verse nullifies the entire sacrificial system of Israel and its temple as a later addition to the duties of the people of Israel, but this is unlikely. Jeremiah has high respect for the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), which include detailed instructions on *burnt offerings or sacrifices*. We must understand the message here in light of the next verse.

23. But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.

Simply put, proper sacrifices result from obeying the *voice* of God. While performing temple rituals may have quieted the consciences of some of the people, they must listen to the Lord's *voice* and walk *in all the ways* that He has commanded, not just some of them or just the ones that are most convenient. Obedience to the law is required. But that by itself isn't enough. God does not delight in insincere sacrifices (see Amos 5:22). Without the correct posture of heart and subsequent action, their sacrifices are useless and meaningless (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7).

In Jeremiah's situation, no one seems to listen and repent (Jeremiah 8:6). His numerous enemies include “the kings of Judah, ... the princes thereof, ... the priests thereof, and ... the people of the land” (1:18).

Some readers today may wonder whether Jeremiah holds out hope that some will heed his message, turn from their wickedness, and claim the promise of future blessing. That's a natural question to ask, but the more important idea is that when the fair warning proves to be true, the reality of who is a true prophet of God and who is not will be established (Jeremiah 28:9).

What Do You Think?

How does obeying God's Word affect your relationship with Him?

Digging Deeper

What are ways to foster obedience to God from a place of love, joy, and delight?

Comfort in God's Ways

When life feels full and difficult, I wrongly tend to seek comfort in control. At such times, if something doesn't go my way, I get frustrated. Too often I find myself fighting against the Lord's ways, insisting on my own instead.

However, as much as the allure of control may drive and attract me, eventually I realize that my actions are causing harm. Choosing my own stubbornness wreaks havoc on my closest relationships. Instead of submitting to the way of love and humility, I fume—alone—in my stubborn anger.

Once I finally yield to God's ways, I find true comfort and peace. Taking the Lord's way—heeding how He wants us to live our lives in relationship with Him and with one another—gives life. Along such paths, it will go well with us. When are times you struggle with submitting to God's ways, taking your own paths instead? How can you work toward returning to His ways more readily in the future?

—J. J. S.

Conclusion

A. Trusting the Wrong Thing

Like Jeremiah's audience for the "Temple Sermon," Christians have been known to place their trust in things that are temporary. Individual churches rise and fall in every community. Powerful preachers and teachers do not last forever. Glorious structures once full of worshipers may become condominiums or nightclubs. How can we avoid trusting in the earthly and temporary?

The false solution held by the original hearers of Jeremiah's sermon was a vacuous mantra, "The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord! The temple of the Lord!" They viewed the building itself as a kind of talisman or good-luck charm. They refused to face divine reality even after its destruction (Jeremiah 44:17–18).

The underlying themes of Jeremiah's plea still apply. The Lord wants a relationship based on our willing obedience, not insincere ritual. The Lord wants worship that comes from sincere hearts, not just the trappings of outward devotion. While Jeremiah died 25 centuries ago, his message is timeless. We are wise to heed his call to hear the voice of the Lord and respond with repentance and obedience.

B. Prayer

Father, may we listen to Your voice as found in Scripture and respond with repentance and obedience. We pray in the name of Jesus, who values mercy more than sacrifice. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

False prophets yield false profits.