

Jeremiah 7 — False Worship

Lesson Seven of 52

For the last few chapters, the “weeping prophet” Jeremiah has been addressing the Jewish people from an undisclosed location. Today he is ordered by God to relocate and set up his preaching station at a gate outside the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Not in the Temple itself, even though he is the son of a priest, but at one of its gates.

What will God speak through his prophet today? And what about the next few chapters? The next four chapters form a single sermon, and we are breaking it into four parts so that we can seriously consider the message for ourselves. The main themes of Jeremiah, as we have said, are truth and consequences. This four-fold sermon deals with that first theme in the converse: chapter 7, False Worship; chapter 8, False Prophets; chapter 9, False Confidence; and chapter 10, False Gods.

So today: False Worship.

Let’s dig into this chapter and hear, really hear, what God is saying to our people. Jeremiah will list several things that do us no good at all.

I don't know which gate was appointed, and for our purposes it doesn't matter. What matters is what the gate represented. The city gate was a place where rulings of consequence were made, business was conducted, and travelers came and went. It also had an important military function. The gates would be shut if an invasion occurred, watchmen were stationed on the walls, and the gate was the center point for their reporting. It was a place of welcome or rejection and, in many ways, the public face of the city. At whichever gate Jeremiah was stationed, this is where the prophecy of chapter 7 takes place.

Our Worship Does Us No Good — Jeremiah 7:1–15

Luck. Good-luck charms. Amulets. Hamsa necklaces. People sometimes want something tangible that they believe will bring protection or favor. I have had people come into our shop wanting to buy a hamsa for good luck. A relative is having a tough time, and they want to send the hamsa as a favor for their mate. I appreciate the love that one person has for another, but a hamsa has no power to aid anyone.

How do I know that? Both Isaiah and Ezekiel blast those whose hopes were linked with charms, sorcery and other supposed sources of spiritual protection. Isaiah 47:9–15 warns people who felt secure despite their sorceries and spells that those things would be powerless to save them when disaster came. Ezekiel similarly condemns those who used magic bands and other devices in their spiritual practices (Ezekiel 13:18–20). The charms, the astrologers, the sorcerers and the false preachers will not save us. They are utterly false.

Here in chapter 7 of Jeremiah, we see the people hiding behind the Temple, as if it were a magical “home” in a celestial game of tag. God’s anger was raging against the Jewish people as

we continually rejected his sovereignty and made our own rules. We trusted in the worship taking place in Jerusalem, as if the sacrifices and prayers, the choirs and pronouncements there could wash us clean. Our sins were front and center, and the name-drop of the Temple was useless. The problem was false worship.

“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!”’” (Jeremiah 7:1–2).

To worship. לְהִשָּׁתַחֲוֹת לַיהוָה. To bow down before the LORD. This isn’t just popping in to sing in church. This is visible and personal. We bow; perhaps all the way down!

Then God says, “Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place” (verse 3). The word translated “amend” has at its root the word *toṯ*, good. Make good your ways. That’s simple. You were wrong. You were doing no good and now turn around and do good. Verse 5 tells us to practice justice; verse 6 tells us not to oppress the alien, the orphan or the widow, not to shed innocent blood, and not to worship false gods. Do those things and we can live in the land. But Judah does not make good. What we are doing is “not good.”

Life Application

Judah had turned the Temple into something like a giant hamsa. They trusted the presence of the building rather than the presence of God. We can do the same thing. A congregation, denomination, ministry, Bible knowledge, Jewish heritage, Christian heritage—even years of faithful service—can quietly become something we trust instead of God himself. None of those things is bad. The danger comes when we begin to think that possessing them means everything must be all right between us and God. Jeremiah asks us a more uncomfortable question: Are we trusting God, or merely the things associated with God?

Just because we had a Temple didn’t mean we were secure, as is evidenced in 586 BCE at the tail end of Jeremiah’s prophecies. The Babylonians will destroy our Temple, and we see that same narrative playing out again in 70 CE under Rome. Hiding behind the religion of our people never advances our station with the Almighty.

Jeremiah records God’s accusation: “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?” (Jeremiah 7:8–10).

God accuses us for breaking at least five of the Ten Commandments and then hiding in the Temple as if it’s our safe haven, declaring, “We are delivered.” In other words, we thought we were untouchable. We neither know the state of our sins nor the God of holiness. In each case, getting ourselves wrong or getting God wrong will lead us into captivity and failure.

LIFE APPLICATION

It's only when we know ourselves, admit our sins and cry to him for mercy—and know him who is above it all, the God of all grace and kindness—that we find eternal life and the joy and voice and presence of the Lord.

Verse 11 says the Temple has become a “den of robbers.” Yeshua says the same at the end of his own public ministry (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). And what is the contrast? “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (Isaiah 56:7).

God wants his people, us, the Jews, to help other nations come into God's economy and into relationship with him. Our misbehavior prevents their coming and thus enrages the Lord. His love is for all people. Simeon understood this when Miriam and Yosef brought the baby Yeshua to the Temple. He called God's salvation “a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32). God always had the Gentiles in mind when he called Israel to represent him. We were not called to be so special that we prevented others from coming, but rather to be used to call others to the Lord of Life.

Verses 12–15 say there is no escape. What God did through the Assyrians to Israel—here Israel is labelled *Ephraim*—in 722 BCE, he will do to Judah very soon. There is no way out. You rejected God. You went off to the Temple, but your ears were closed by your own volition.

2. Your Prayers Will Do Them No Good — Jeremiah 7:16–20

Now we come to something genuinely disturbing. God tells Jeremiah, “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” (Jeremiah 7:16).

Don't bother praying for them; your prayers won't do them any good. This is the first of three occasions when the Lord specifically warns Jeremiah not to pray for his people. That sounds outrageous and plain WRONG! What's the point of warning if there's no way out?

I believe God is saying here that the people have reached the point of no return. God was done shaking his head; now it's a done deal. This is not a general instruction telling us not to pray for people who have wandered from God. It is a specific and terrible judgment upon this generation of Judah after their persistent refusal to hear him.

What's God's problem with our praying? God has already listed our having broken five of the Ten Commandments. Now he says false worship characterizes the people, and this spills over into the next generation. The children gather the wood, the fathers kindle the fire and the women knead the dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven. Whole families are participating together in the false worship of other gods.

Don't get distracted by the identity of the Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah's point is idolatry. False worship can attach itself to anything or anyone—to a celebrity, a sports hero, a preacher, a

national leader or some personality with enough magnetism to charm the public. Give to anyone the allegiance that belongs to God and we have wandered into dangerous territory.

And notice the terrible irony in verse 19. God asks, “Do they spite Me?” Then he answers his own question. Ultimately, they are bringing shame upon themselves. False worship does not diminish God. It destroys the worshipper.

3. Their Sacrifices Won’t Do Them Any Good — Jeremiah 7:21–26

Their sacrifices fail. And God says, “I never asked for those.” Wait a minute, you say, God DID ask for such sacrifices. Have you never read Leviticus? So which is it? Did God, or didn’t he?

This is one of those places where many people can get things badly wrong. We focus on the obedience of actions; we want God to be pleased with our deeds. But throughout the prophets of the Old Testament, the warning is visible again and again: religious activity is no substitute for a heart that listens to God.

Listen to verses 23–24: “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.’ 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.”

Jewish Insight

Jeremiah says the people “went backward and not forward” (7:24). The Hebrew behind “forward” is *l’fanim*, related to *panim*, “face.” There is something wonderfully personal in that picture. God’s desire for his people was not merely that we move in the correct direction or tick the correct religious boxes. He wanted us moving toward his face—toward his presence. The problem with Judah’s false worship was not simply that they were doing religion badly. They were moving away from the One whom their worship was supposed to bring them near.

Stop measuring your own good deeds as if that would satisfy God—or, if we’re honest, even satisfy ourselves. There are only two possible results of living in a checklist religion: either you accomplish the deeds and feel smug and proud, or you fail and feel condemned. Neither pride nor condemnation is what God wants for his people. He wants us to love him.

I once spent time with my oldest grandson working on a project involving painting, nailing, measuring and, of course, putting things away. It was very satisfying, but the most important part wasn’t how well he hammered, although he was excellent at that. It wasn’t how he held the paintbrush or any of the physical enterprise. It was that we were together.

He listened to my instructions, and we did a good thing. But I was already pleased because we were together. *Good* is the result of fellowship and relationship, and that’s what God has been after in his people from the beginnings.

4. God's Correction Won't Do Any Good — Jeremiah 7:27–34

God's correction won't serve any purpose in the final section of our chapter today. The people are so depraved that they literally burn their children in the Valley of Hinnom as an offering to the gods. This valley, by the way, is the Gehenna of Yeshua's "hell" imagery. God says of this horror that it was something "which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:31).

Think about where we have arrived. Worship has done them no good. Jeremiah's prayers will do them no good. Their sacrifices will do them no good. And now even God's correction will do them no good. Jeremiah is told, "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" (verse 27).

We today use the term "heartbroken" to describe the pain of someone who cannot fix the problem of another. In romantic comedies they use the phrase "unrequited love," and it feels sad. I think God's love, knocked back by ancient Judah, is still available today—for you and me, for all our mates and even our enemies.

A man I knew a few years back, who had been coming to our gatherings for a couple of years, ended his life, even after one of our volunteer sisters had spoken with him about humbling himself to Yeshua and receiving his Lordship and grace. His death was terribly sad, and it reminds me that God's love is ever reaching out to all—in Orthodox circles, in your circles, wherever you and I are.

Please don't knock it back.

Don't say *no* to the Lord of life.

Say yes. You want good in your life? Turn to Yeshua. Say yes to him. Tell others of your new faith and you will have reason to go on and to live life abundant. At Advent, people sing "Joy to the world." The song continues, "the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room." Dear friends, let your heart prepare room for Yeshua, now and forevermore.

Conclusion (Key takeaways)

Jeremiah 7 is a sobering chapter. The people were still religious. They still had the Temple. They still worshipped, prayed and offered sacrifices. From the outside, there was plenty of evidence that religion was alive and well in Judah.

But God was not looking for religious activity separated from relationship with him. Their worship did them no good. Jeremiah's prayers would do them no good. Their sacrifices would do them no good. Finally, even God's correction would do them no good because they had determined not to listen.

That is the tragedy of false worship. It can look remarkably like true worship. It can use the right building, the right words and the right ceremonies while the heart remains far from God.

God calls each of us to know Him and walk with Him. He calls us not merely to perform religious duties but to hear His voice, turn toward Him and live in relationship with Him. Don't knock back the love of God. Don't say no to the Lord of life. Turn to Yeshua and say yes to Him.

What's Next?

Jeremiah 7 exposed false worship: trusting the Temple, sacrifices and religious activity while refusing to listen to God. But where did people learn that everything was all right?

In Jeremiah 8 we will encounter the next problem: false prophets. Four voices begin to sound—the voice of God, the voice of Judah, the voice of Jeremiah and the voices of those who insist, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. The result is what I call a four-voice choir, but it is hardly harmonious. It is a cacophony.

Next: Jeremiah 8 — Four Voice “Choir”

Bibliography

Barnes, Albert. *Albert Barnes' Commentary on the Old Testament*.

Craigie, Peter C., Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard Jr. *Word Biblical Commentary: Book of Jeremiah*. 1991.

Henry, Matthew. *Commentary*.

Wiersbe, Warren. *Be Decisive*. Colorado Springs: David Cook, 1991.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Message of Jeremiah*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014.