

The Vanity of False Worship

Jeremiah 7

Jeremiah 7:1-16 - *"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 in at these gates to worship the Lord!'" ³ Thus says 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 Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.'*

⁵ "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, ⁶ if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, ⁷ then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

⁸ "Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. ⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, ¹⁰ and then 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 Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the Lord.

¹² "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name 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 works," says 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 this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. ¹⁵ And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren—the whole posterity of Ephraim.

¹⁶ "Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.

Background Notes

Jeremiah 1-6 contained two prophetic messages or sermons that Jeremiah gave to the people of Judah during the days of King Josiah. The next sermon, recorded in Jeremiah 7, is often known as Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon," for obvious reasons. At the Lord's direction, it was delivered at one of the Temple gates (v1-2).

Jeremiah 26 revealed that this sermon was given shortly after King Jehoiachin ascended to the throne, following the untimely death of King Josiah in 609 BC. You can imagine that this scathing Temple Sermon made Jeremiah a very unpopular prophet to Jerusalem. In fact, chapter 26 says that Jeremiah's life was threatened as a result of this sermon.

Doctrinal Points

1. Religious buildings do not avert God's judgment.

The people of Judah thought that they were safe from God's judgment because the Temple of the Lord was located in Jerusalem (v3-11). After all, they thought, God had miraculously delivered Jerusalem from the Assyrians during the reign of good King Hezekiah, about 100 years earlier. They thought that all they had to do was to say "the Temple of the Lord" three times for emphasis and "good luck," and they would be protected from God's judgment! They believed that the site of the Temple was invincible.

Because they had the Temple in their midst, they thought they could go out and sin all they wanted, including lying, stealing, adultery, idolatry - even murder (v9). Then, while continuing to live sinfully, they would come to the Temple and claim that they were delivered, because they thought having the building of the Temple in their capital city provided protection from disaster. They were using the Temple as a "good luck charm."

Those are deceptive words, said Jeremiah. The Temple can't save you from God's judgment! You must end your sinful ways, cease from your idolatry and practice justice. Then maybe God's judgment will be averted. There's nothing sacred about the building itself - the person of the building and how the building is being used are what counts.

In Jeremiah's day the Temple had become a den of thieves (v11) - and it would be destroyed. The Lord Jesus quoted this verse when He cleansed the Second Temple - and the Second Temple was destroyed as well. Religious buildings don't avert God's judgment. Many years before, Shiloh was not saved from destruction just because the tabernacle was located there (v12). Now Jerusalem would not be saved just because the Temple was there.

Religious buildings without true worship will not avert the judgment of God - then or today. And yet people today still think that because they have a beautiful church building, cathedral, or sanctuary, that somehow God is pleased with their beautiful building, and will overlook their sin. But **nothing could be further from the truth!** In fact, the judgment will actually be greater, because "judgment must begin with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Religious buildings do not avert God's judgment.

2. Religious ceremonies do not avert God's judgment.

Jeremiah 7:17-34 - *"Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸ The children gather wood, 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, that they may provoke Me to anger. ¹⁹ Do they provoke Me to anger?" says the Lord. "Do they not provoke themselves, to the shame of their own faces?"*

²⁰ Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Behold, My anger and My fury will be poured out on this place—on man and on beast, 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 meat. 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 or sacrifices. ²³ But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.’ ²⁴ Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but followed the counsels and the dictates of their evil hearts, 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 even sent to you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them. ²⁶ Yet they did not obey Me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

²⁷ “Therefore you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not obey you. You shall also call to them, but they will not answer you. ²⁸ “So you shall say to them, ‘This is a nation that does not obey the voice of the Lord their God nor receive 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 desolate heights; for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath.’ ³⁰ For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,” says the Lord. “They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it. ³¹ And they have built the high places of Tophet, 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, nor did it come into My heart.

³² “Therefore behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room. ³³ The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away. ³⁴ Then I will cause to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. For the land shall be desolate.

These verses tell us that God was not judging Judah because they weren't religious. In fact, one of His reasons for judging them was because they **were** religious. They were very sincere about their religious rituals - but **it was the wrong religion**. It was **false religion!** It doesn't matter how sincere you are about your religion - if you're not worshiping the one true God, the God of the Bible, your “worship” is worthless to God.

Notice the religious ceremonies that the people were involved in. They were presenting special cakes to the so-called “queen of heaven” (v18) - the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar. This goddess of Babylon apparently was not appeased by their worship, because Jerusalem was destroyed – by the Babylonians (v20)! The truth is that there is no person or idol that should be worshiped as the “queen of heaven.” Not then, and not today.

The point of verses 21-23 is that they might as well eat their offerings for food, because God was not accepting their sacrifices. There was no true worship in these religious ceremonies when they were deliberately continuing to practice wickedness. God did not command this kind of empty religious ceremonies. Apart from obedience to the Word of God and true repentance, religious rituals will not avert God's judgment (v24-29).

The people of Judah had gone so far away from God in their false religious rituals that they had actually brought pagan idols into the Temple courts! The horrific practice of child sacrifice was being practiced in the Hinnom Valley, just outside Jerusalem. These practices were not only futile – they were totally foreign to the mind of God (v30-31).

What does this Scripture have to say about the deliberate sacrifice of unborn children today? Child sacrifice was one of the sinful “religious” ceremonies that would bring about God’s judgment upon Judah. The Hinnom Valley became a mass grave for the inhabitants of Jerusalem when the Babylonians conquered the city (v32) – in fact, many of the dead would not even be buried (v33). All joy in Jerusalem would end (v34).

Do you think God’s judgment upon our own nation can be averted if we just go through the motions of religion? Perhaps burning some incense, or saying some formal prayers - without true repentance and true worship of the Lord? I think we know the answer. Religious ceremonies do not avert God’s judgment.

Practical Application

Don’t pray for God’s blessing on everyone.

In verse 16 God told Jeremiah: *“Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.”*

Years ago I was invited for dinner in the home of a spiritual leader in the church where I was preaching. The man asked his ten-year-old son to give thanks for the food, and in his very nice prayer, the boy prayed that God would “bless all the people in the world.” The father thanked the son for his prayer, but then said to him, “But cut out the ‘universal stuff’ in your prayers!” I was a little taken back by the father’s lack of tact - but he meant exactly what God told Jeremiah in verse 16. *“Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.”*

Jeremiah was told ***not to pray for God’s blessing*** on the people of Judah. They had turned their backs on the Lord. They were involved in immorality, idolatry and injustice. So God said, “Don’t pray for My blessing on such people!” We should rather pray for God’s judgment on them if they will not turn from their wicked ways.

Does this sound harsh? Well, the reason is that the righteous and holy character of God must be vindicated. So don’t pray for God’s blessings on everyone.