

# Amend Your Ways

## JEREMIAH'S TEMPLE SERMON, PART 1 – JEREMIAH 7

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This morning I would like for us to begin a brief series of lessons based on a request that was turned in about a month ago, a request for more information on the “Weeping Prophet,” Jeremiah. The questioner wants to know why Jeremiah is described in this way, and more importantly, “In what way does this description apply to us today?” We have studied the prophet Jeremiah a number of times over the years, most recently with a series of lessons back in 2008 (so, almost eight years ago at this point). The prophet Jeremiah, though, is one of the most well-loved prophets from the Old Testament, so what I’d like for us to do is to go back and try to look at some different passages – there are so many.

To try to put the prophet Jeremiah in some kind of historical perspective, I have put a timeline up here, and the ministry of Jeremiah is indicated by the area that is shaded in purple over on the right hand side. As you can see, the prophet Jeremiah served toward the end of the 600’s and in the first part of the 500’s BC. But to truly understand what Jeremiah was facing, we need to go back and notice the reign of King Manasseh. Manasseh ruled for 55 years. Now, in our nation, it is hard for us to imagine someone ruling for 55 years. 55 years ago, for example, the year was 1960. What were you doing in 1960? I wasn’t even born yet; in fact, I don’t even know whether my parents had even met yet in 1960. Now think of who was president in 1960 – Dwight Eisenhower. Now try to imagine Mr. Eisenhower being president all the way from 1960 up to our present time. That is hard for most of us to imagine (starting with the fact that he would be 125 years old right now). But that was the case in ancient Israel as Manasseh ruled for 55 years. Unfortunately, though Manasseh was a horrible ruler. He ushered in what was a time of terrible spiritual darkness – the worship of pagan idols, cult prostitution, he brought in wizards and sorcerers from other nations. It got so bad, in fact, that the nation turned to child sacrifice. In 2 Kings 21, for example, we even learn that Manasseh took his own infant son and placed him on an altar to the pagan god Molech, where the king burned his own son as an offering. Solomon’s temple was completely desecrated as Manasseh brought into God’s temple all kinds of pagan idols. His influence on God’s people was so bad, in fact, the Bible says in 2 Kings 21:9, that **“...Manasseh seduced them to do evil more than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the sons of Israel.”** In other words, at this point in history, due to Manasseh’s influence, God’s people were actually worse than the Canaanites who were destroyed and pushed out back in the days of Joshua. It is hard for us to imagine how bad it was, but this went on for 55 years.

Well, Jeremiah was born at some point in the last few years of Manasseh's rule. Jeremiah grew up with this; this was "normal" for Jeremiah. In our pew Bibles, the book of Jeremiah starts on page 1176. And if you look back to the opening words, you will find that Jeremiah was born to one of the priests of the land. And starting in verse 4 of Chapter 1, we find that in spite of all of the evil in the land, God had a plan. And in verse 5, God says to Jeremiah, ***"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."*** And that is an amazing passage! Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet even before he was born!

Nevertheless, after the evil King Manasseh died, his son Amon took over. Amon was also evil, but the people couldn't take it anymore, and Amon was rather quickly assassinated by his own servants. Well, at that point, Amon's son took over as king, and he took over at the age of eight. The young man's name was Josiah – King Josiah, only eight years old. I don't know if you know this, but we have at least one 8-year old with us this morning. Jenna is 8 years old. So just imagine Jenna taking over as queen. I bet she would do a great job! And what is interesting is that King Josiah (at only eight years old) knew what was right, he knew what was wrong, and he tried to do something about it. Over in 2 Kings 22:2, in fact, the Bible says of the young king, ***"He did right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David, nor did he turn aside to the right or to the left."*** Notice – there is no reference to his actual father Amon or to his grandfather Manasseh, but he followed the example of a much earlier ancestor, King David, a man after God's own heart.

And almost from the beginning, King Josiah started making changes. He cleaned house, he started repairing the temple – the Bible tells us that money was not an issue. Now imagine our church treasurer telling to to renovate this building, and imagine him saying, "Here's the checkbook; now go down to Home Depot and do whatever it takes. Do not even write down the amounts of the checks you are writing." That is what Josiah did for the temple. Money was not an issue. Do not even keep a record of the funds that are used! And several years into this process, as they were cleaning all of the debris out of some of the back rooms of Solomon's temple, a priest by the name of Hilkiah finds a scroll – it is the word of God! It had been missing for many, many years, and here it is, buried under a pile of trash in some back room of the temple. Hilkiah gives the scroll to a scribe who brings it to the king – and Josiah immediately orders the entire law to be read publicly. They read the law, and the king weeps and tears his clothes in anguish over how far the nation has drifted. They are terrified of all of the curses back in Deuteronomy, curses that will come on the people if they ever leave God. And so the young king steps up his reforms, and some amazing things are accomplished.

By the way, if you are still in Jeremiah 1, I would point out how the book actually starts, ***"The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign."*** Did you catch Jeremiah's dad's name? Hilkiah the priest! We are not told whether this is the same Hilkiah who found the scroll in the temple, but I personally would assume that it is. This man finds the word of God that has been lost for so long, and his son (Jeremiah) is commissioned by God as a prophet, even before he was born.

This morning, I want us to fast forward a number of years. As far as I can tell, King Josiah and Jeremiah are almost the same age – so it's almost as if they have grown up together. But as he grows up, Jeremiah sees what is happening almost as an insider – his dad is a priest, and he is the same age as the young king. And as he grows up, as he sees some of these reforms taking place, Jeremiah realizes that although there were some good reforms, the common people were putting their faith not in God but in the temple that was slowly being restored. And so on the outside, they were making progress – they were keeping the feasts, they were worshiping, they were offering sacrifices – but on the inside, their hearts were still not right with God.

This morning, then, I want us to look at what is commonly referred to as Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon." This is Jeremiah's most significant sermon. The Sermon on the Mount is to Jesus as the Temple Sermon is to Jeremiah. And the sermon itself is found in Jeremiah 7. The people had come to worship, probably on one of the big feast days, and as the people started assembling together, God has a special mission for the prophet Jeremiah – a message demanding change from the heart. If you will, please look with me at the first 15 verses of Jeremiah 7 – Jeremiah 7:1-15,

<sup>1</sup> *The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,* <sup>2</sup> *"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!'"* <sup>3</sup> *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."* <sup>4</sup> *Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'* <sup>5</sup> *For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor,* <sup>6</sup> *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,* <sup>7</sup> *then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.* <sup>8</sup> *"Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail."* <sup>9</sup> *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,* <sup>10</sup> *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?* <sup>11</sup> *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.*

<sup>12</sup> *"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."* <sup>13</sup> *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,"* <sup>14</sup> *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."* <sup>15</sup> *I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brothers, all the offspring of Ephraim.*

We obviously do not have time to look carefully at every word in this chapter, but I want us to come away this morning with the main idea in the first half of this chapter, the idea that God wants heartfelt change, **"Amend your ways,"** as Jeremiah says over and over here.

We might expect some congratulations on at least being in the temple, we might expect a word of encouragement for cleaning the place up, we might expect a good word for kicking out the temple prostitutes, and yet there is none of that here – none of that. But instead, the prophet Jeremiah starts right in and gets to the real problem, **"Amend your ways and your deeds."** In other words, "Change! Change the way you are living! Amend your ways and your deeds!" Many have suggested that Jeremiah then quotes a popular song they sang back then, **"This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."** We sing songs today with some repetition like that, and so the idea is: Jeremiah was picking up on what they were singing, and he was basically mocking them to make a point, and the point is: You cannot trust in deceptive words like that if you go on living the way you are living! You cannot trust in the temple if you do not actually obey the Lord. **"Amend your ways,"** he says.

They were there to worship, but they needed to actually change their behavior. It's almost as if they thought that God's law did not really apply to them in the privacy of their own homes. As far as they were concerned, whenever they were not in the temple, God did not really care what they did. They were interested in the outward show of religion as opposed to what was on the inside. We might compare it to going through a car wash, and the outside gets all clean, but the inside is stuffed full of all kind of trash and fast food wrappers. The outside looks great, but the inside is filthy. The outside looks great, but when we open the door, all kinds of bottles and cans fall out. Or we might compare it to somebody who sees a banana, peels it, and then eats the peel instead of eating the banana. They have it completely backwards. And so, in verses 5-6, Jeremiah tells them exactly what God expects. The Lord God wants them to practice justice, he wants them to stop oppressing the outsider, the orphan, and the widow, he wants them to stop shedding innocent blood, and he wants them to stop worshiping other gods. Again, in verse 8, they were stealing, murdering, committing adultery, lying, and offering sacrifices to the pagan god Baal, and then they were coming to the temple thinking they were good with God, and that God would save them from whatever might happen. Jeremiah's message was: No! God sees this! God sees what you are doing! And when we look at those things they were doing, they were violating about six of the original Ten Commandments! **"Amend your ways,"** he says.

And to drive it home, the prophet Jeremiah basically says, "If you don't believe me, if you don't think that God will ever punish his people for wrongdoing, then just take a walk down the road a ways until you get to a place called Shiloh" [paraphrased]. Shiloh at that time was basically a ghost town, completely abandoned. But it had not always been that way. You might remember from our Wednesday evening studies a year or so ago, when the people crossed over the Jordan River under Joshua's leadership, the tabernacle was first set up and the Ark of God placed in it at Shiloh. It was at this location that Joshua divided up the land between the tribes. Tradition tells us that the Ark of God stayed there for 369 years. But you might remember how the Ark of God left Shiloh, and that is what Jeremiah is referring to here. There was a time in Israel's history when the people no longer trusted God, but they trusted in the Ark of the Covenant almost as a good luck charm. This was when the Ark was being cared for by Hophni and Phineas, the corrupt sons of Eli. And so at one point they were facing a big battle with the Philistines, and the people (with the blessing of Hophni and Phineas) sent the Ark into battle. They treated it almost like we might treat a rabbit's foot. It was a lucky charm, so to speak. "We have the Ark of God; therefore, we will win." And you remember what happened: The Ark of God was captured in battle and was taken away by the Philistines. We don't have a record of what happened to Shiloh after that, but we know that it was abandoned. Without the Ark of God, the city had no significance. And that is what Jeremiah is bringing up here. These people are gathered in the temple, thinking that they are safe, and Jeremiah says, "Remember Shiloh! Remember what happened to the Ark of God." God is not a good luck charm, but God wants our obedience from the heart. He wants us to change. **"Amend your ways,"** Jeremiah says.

As we apply this to our lives today, I think of James in the New Testament. James and Jeremiah had so much in common. We think about James' straightforward warning in James 4:8-10, where he said, **"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you."** And we certainly remember what James said back in Chapter 1:21-22, **"Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."** And then just a few verses after that is where we find that clear instruction, **"Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."**

- As God's people, do we care for children who do not have fathers?
- Do we care for the widows?
- Do we stand up for the innocent who are being slaughtered in our society?
- Do we stand up for strangers?
- Are we out there feeding the poor and clothing those in need?

If we are, that is what God wants. He wants us to obey from the heart. Yes, we need to worship, but if we come to worship and this is the only time we take God seriously during the week, if we come to worship every week but we fail to actually love those who need loving, then we have the same problem Jeremiah's audience had. We say, "Oh, but we do not burn incense to Baal! We do not sacrifice our children on any altars!" Really? How much time and energy do we burn watching TV, or playing online, or doing any number of other things, while the widows and the children are neglected? By wasting countless hours on various forms of entertainment, are we not following after the god of this world? And so, I am asking: Do we pay more attention to the things of this world than we do in serving the God of heaven? I do not know what the answer might be for each member of this congregation, but let us be sure that when we come together for worship every Lord's Day morning, that we are also honoring God during the week. **"Amend your ways,"** Jeremiah says. Do not trust in a place or in a building, but let us make sure that our hearts are right. Let us not show up here once a week assuming we are okay with God, all while living in sin the other 167 hours of the week. I'll give three examples:

First of all, the man who watches pornography, knowing that it is a sin to lust after a woman who is not his wife, and he continues to do this, all while making no effort to change that behavior. Let us not think we can come to worship and be okay with God without struggling against that sin. Sincerely ask for God's help, ask God for help in finding the way of escape he has promised, get advice from a trusted Christian brother, confess the sin, and fight back. But let us not go on sinning, trusting in God's grace, if we are not willing to struggle against it. Jeremiah would tell us, **"Amend your ways."**

Or secondly, let's think of those who have totally given up on everything the Bible says about building a strong and healthy marriage. Do we think we can be jerks during the week, completely ignoring Ephesians 5, and then show up on Sunday morning for worship, pretending to be all happy to see God? If you think you have fallen out of love, go back and do those things you did at the beginning. Pretend you are dating. And even if it is a struggle, treat each other with love and respect. Peter – as an apostle, as a preacher, as an elder (and therefore, as a married man), gave this advice to men in particular in 1 Peter 3:7, **"You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, ... and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered."** Do we see the connection? We cannot be inconsiderate clods all week long and then somehow think that God will hear our prayers on Sunday. Jeremiah would tell us to, **"Amend your ways."**

Or maybe a third example: Outspending our income on entertainment or new cars or whatever, to the point where we think we have nothing left to care for the poor, to the point where we give God only the leftovers. If this is what we have done, Jeremiah would say, **"Amend your ways! Make a change."** Dig in, stop making excuses, and start managing the finances in a way that we can actually care for somebody other than ourselves.

**Conclusion:**

Lord willing, I'd like for us to come back to this chapter next week. I would encourage you to read all of Chapter 7 during the week if you can. And then, we will read it again next Sunday as we bring out even more lessons from Jeremiah himself as well as the punishment that was warned about there at the end. But for this morning, though, we have what is basically a one-point lesson: We are not to come before God thinking we are okay if we are carrying on in sin during the week, and so the lesson is, ***"Amend your ways!"*** We are to change our behavior.

Next week we'll touch on how God keeps calling, even when we don't listen. But for now, we have a message from the word of God, calling all of us to repentance. Repentance is one of the most difficult things God has ever called us to do. Repentance is a change of heart that results in a change of lifestyle. We need to see sin for what it really is, and once we understand that our sin put Jesus on the cross, then we have the motivation to turn away from it. And it is a change that takes place over a lifetime. In response to God's offer of salvation, we turn from sin, we reenact the death, burial, and resurrection in our own lives through baptism, and at that point we are born into God's family. If you have any questions, we hope you will let us know – my contact information is on the front page of the bulletin, on the church website, and also on the sign out front. We would invite you to get in touch. Or maybe you know you need the prayers of the church right now. Maybe you are struggling with a sin that seems nearly impossible to overcome. We'd love to pray with you this morning. You can talk to me personally or write it down and bring your note to the front in just a moment. Or maybe you know that you are lost in sin, and you know you want your sins to be covered by the blood of Jesus in baptism. You can be born into God's family right now. If we can help in any way, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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