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Hear the Word of the Lord: Jeremiah 7

GLENN PEMBERTON

My grandfather, R.G. Hatter Sr., loved the church and preaching. He was a preacher at heart who got his start in the early 1900s, going from schoolhouse to schoolhouse with his father-in-law, making a ten-minute speech before communion. Later he served as a “located” preacher for three churches for a short time. By trade he was a carpenter, but wherever his work took him, Granddad preached, taught, served. He loved the church and loved preaching.

In 1980, when Granddad found out that I was going to Abilene Christian University to become a “preacher boy,” he was proud. And once I began school, the tradition started: every trip home followed the same routine. Mom would tell me that Granddad wanted to see me—he had something he just had to talk to me about. I was usually reluctant. I was home for the weekend and had people to see and things to do. But most of the time I went to see Granddad.

When I arrived, my 80-year-old grandfather would crawl down off the roof (I would hold the ladder) or come out of the garden, dropping whatever he was doing the moment he saw me. He would lead me back to a converted walk-in closet that he used as his study, put a book in my hands, and begin to talk to me about the church, about preaching and preachers. I have many of those books in my library today. One special volume is a copy of the New International Version, a family gift to my grandfather when this translation first appeared in the late 1970s. Inside the front cover of this Bible, written in Granddad’s scrawl, is a simple statement: “This is a wild translation!!!”

Apparently, I was not a very good listener, because soon after the conversations began, Granddad started to write letters to me. One is dated November 1981:

Hello Glenn David:

Since you were by here a few days ago, I have been thinking about a long talk with you and now I have decided to put it in writing. You are the only grandson I have who is trying to make [yourself] a preacher. And having some years of experience, I [am] quite sure that I can help you cut a few corners.

First of all I hope that you will study the Bible to learn what it teaches and not to find out how you can defend what some of our brethren teach. The old preacher prayed, “Lord help me to get started right; you know how hard I am to change.” Don’t even believe what I tell you—till you can see that it is in line with the Bible. We as a people [claim] to “Speak where the Bible speaks...” I wish it were true.

I began to preach at a small church outside Abilene, twenty-five in attendance on a good Sunday. And sure enough, as soon as he could get Mom to bring him, Granddad was there. The last time I preached in my hometown when Granddad was still living, it was a big occasion, an all-church homecoming. He was anxious for me that night. He sat on the second row to my right, inside aisle—and slept through my entire sermon.

The first dated letter that I have from Granddad, March 16, 1980, reads:

Hello Glenn David:

I am glad that I have a Grandson who wants to be a Gospel Preacher. I am thankful to the Lord Jesus Christ, and I pray that you will never look back—but will press on toward the mark of the high calling of God which is in Christ Jesus...

I want to suggest a sermon topic for you to study: It is a subject that I do not think any has studied deep enough and if any—very, very few: The Value of the Church That Jesus Bought. The Holy Spirit tells us the Lord purchased the Church “with his own blood.” The Church has very high value. . . The greatest sermon on the value of the Lord’s church has not been preached. It is in the future for some young man who will dig deep. Jesus loved the church and gave himself for it—he is the savior of the body. . . It is a great subject—so dig deep.

I have thought about my grandfather’s challenge for twenty-seven years and tonight, on an occasion I never imagined, from a text I would have never considered—I think I’m trying for the first time to preach that sermon.

When Jeremiah preached the sermon that is our text, his audience nearly killed him.¹ They listened to Jeremiah and heard a traitor to God and country. So the priests, prophets, and people seized Jeremiah—he was a dead man. No one says what he has said and just walks away.

The Jerusalem officials caught wind of what was about to happen and immediately intervened, holding court at the new gate of the temple. The prophets and priests spoke first: “Jeremiah deserves death. He has spoken against the city (and temple) and thus is a turncoat to his own people and the Lord.” Jeremiah offered little defense: “The Lord sent me to proclaim what you have heard. Now I am in your control and you can do whatever you want. But know that if you kill me, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourself and everyone in the city. The Lord sent me to speak these words.”

It had happened not long before—not to Jeremiah, but to a prophet by the name of Uriah. He had preached the same basic sermon and angered the same people. The only difference was that Uriah was faster; he ran to Egypt for safety. But it didn’t work. King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt, extradited Uriah to Judah, and then executed him. Jeremiah’s trouble was neither imagined nor exaggerated.

In their defense, Jeremiah had caught the people off guard with his sermon. The Lord had sent Jeremiah to speak, most likely at one of the annual festivals when people from all over the country were coming together to worship. Jeremiah took his stand in the gate of the temple—no one could miss his sermon on opening night—and said:

Hear the word of the Lord, you people who have come to worship on this special occasion. Listen, you people who think you have heard the word of the Lord all your lives. The truth is, you have not heard the word of the Lord at all, not really, not for a long, long time. If you had heard the word of the Lord, then you would not be coming in here like this, saying, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” when your lives stand against everything the temple of the Lord stands for.

Your actions toward others are oppressive. You take advantage of the powerless at every opportunity. Your practices break the heart of God’s covenant. You don’t love others. You cheat, lie, murder, steal, and commit adultery. And you don’t love the Lord. You chase after every other god you can imagine.

1. Jeremiah 26 provides an account of the reaction to Jeremiah’s sermon in chapter 7.

But worst of all is your attitude—your smug, complacent, self-assured attitude. You are so sure that I am with you and will always support you that you have turned my house—my presence in the world, my temple—into a brothel of criminal activity. And you think you are safe just because it is my temple!

Hear the word of the Lord! Only if you change your actions and your attitudes will I live with you again in this place. But now the curtain is falling on your charade. The Lord is going to destroy this place and throw you out.

Hear the word of the Lord!

Oh, Jeremiah, we've heard this sermon a million times. Every year, at every festival, at every lectureship, some young prophet feels compelled to get up and criticize the temple, criticize God's people, and criticize the kingdom. Here we go again.

Let me tell you, Jeremiah, we've been down this road before and can only say that the demise of the temple and of the kingdom of God is greatly exaggerated. Only one hundred years ago, Micah said the same things. He said that Jerusalem was going to be like a plowed field and the temple grounds like a forest. Micah got everyone all stirred up, like a so-called expert predicting the end. And when the Assyrians invaded, laid siege to Jerusalem, and threatened to destroy the city and the temple, the people froze in a dead panic. But it didn't happen. One night God struck the Assyrian camp and they woke up dead! 185,000 dead. The small bunch of survivors tucked tail and ran home like a scolded puppy.

So, Jeremiah, give us a break with the opening night doom-and-gloom sermon. We are sick to death of prophets criticizing God's people, not giving any credit to those who came before us, and predicting terrible consequences if we don't change this or that. Jeremiah, this is the temple of the Lord!

Hear the word of the Lord.

Now, Jeremiah, you're young, so I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that you just don't know better or understand the implications of what you are saying. So, Jeremiah, let me tell you the word of the Lord. This land is God's gift to our people. The Lord appeared to Abraham and told him: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12.7). Then the Lord brought our people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and gave it to them. This palace, the residence of the Davidic king, is also God's gift. In fact, not only did God give us the Davidic monarchy, God promised that there would always be a descendant of David on the throne and that no matter what happened, God would never take his love away from David's heir (2 Sam 7.4–16). And this temple is perhaps God's greatest gift to us. Inside the temple is the Holy of Holies; and inside *that* is the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord's throne. Jeremiah, the temple is the Lord's palace; the Holy of Holies is his throne room. You don't know your Bible—what you are saying means that God will take away the land, suspend the Davidic monarchy, and destroy the temple. Such things are impossible to imagine—we have God's promises, scripture itself—this is the temple of the Lord!

Hear the word of the Lord. If you change your ways...

Wait a minute, Jeremiah. Let me ask you a question: If things are "so bad," then tell me why things are so good? Look at us, Jeremiah: the kingdom is in great shape. Our economy is sound. Yes, the tribute we are sending to Egypt is costing us an arm and a leg, but we're doing fine. We are secure. Yes, as soon as we get the fence built down on the southern border to keep out the Egyptians, we will be better off. And then, sure, we will need to build a fence in the north to keep out the Babylonians. But we can do these things. Life has never been better, at least for those of us here tonight.

Best of all, Jeremiah, the temple is in great shape. Yes, it used to be in bad repair. But now, with Josiah's building program, we have a first-class facility. We have a new state-of-the-art altar that can incinerate a

bull in forty-five seconds. No wasted time or awkward silences in our worship services! We have the latest edition of the paperless psalms, chiseled right up there on the side of the temple. Admittedly, the selection is limited, but we are working on that—perhaps some sliding granite tablets. Our attendance is up, especially since all those people moved to Jerusalem out of fear of the Babylonians. In fact, we have so many more members that plans are under development to add new classroom space, perhaps even an actual lion's den. We'll never have trouble with the junior high boys' class again.

We had over one hundred circumcisions last year! We are in the 100 Club; pictures are on our scroll-site if you don't believe it. Yes, we admit that all of these were our own infant sons. But do you realize how difficult it is to get any outsiders over the age of eight days to do something like that? Jeremiah, our temple is in great shape. This place is, after all, the temple of the Lord!

Hear the word of the Lord. If you will change your ways and your actions, I will live with you in this place.

Jeremiah, I am too busy for any more of this ludicrous special pleading. I don't have time to stop and listen to you go on about "hearing the word of the Lord." I'm on my way to worship. I've got psalms to sing, prayers to pray, and sacrifices to make. Then, after the assembly, I have an important committee meeting. Jeremiah, if you want to talk about real problems that need to be dealt with—just come to my meeting. We've heard that there is a temple of the Lord that is planning to use a single song leader instead of a temple choir to sing the psalms. They don't have torah for that! We've heard of another temple of the Lord that is considering the addition of a Sunday morning non-instrumental worship service. Can you imagine? We are good Sabbath people—and sources tell us they are even planning to offer sacrifices at their "worship" assembly. And we have just gotten word that some temples of the Lord are considering selling their buildings, giving the money away, and meeting in homes. What are they thinking? How much lower can they stoop in their value for the temple?

Jeremiah, we have to do something about these real, pressing situations. We don't have time to stand here and listen to you tell us (of all people) to "hear the word of the Lord" while the temple of the Lord goes to Sheol in a handbasket. So excuse me for not wasting my time listening to you drone on and on about changing our ways. We're not the problem here. Before you know it, if we don't take action, temples will be dismissing their priests and saying that everyone is a priest. Then temples will claim the autonomy to read and apply torah to their own cultural situations. Someone has to stop this foolishness, this apostasy in the making. Jeremiah, this is the temple of the Lord!

Hear the word of the Lord. If you will change your ways and your actions, I will live with you in this place or I will do to you as I did to Shiloh.

Oh, I get it. Finally. Sometimes I am a little slow and hypersensitive when I hear a sermon. I see what you are doing now; I don't know how I missed it. Jeremiah, please accept my apologies and let's start again. In fact, let me help: "*Hear the word of the Lord.*" Amen! Preach it! You tell *them*, Jeremiah. You tell those people from Northern Israel the way it is going to be. No? You tell those liberal Christian universities they better change their ways. No? You tell those city churches. No? Those country churches. No? Oh sure, you tell those denominations they better hear the word of the Lord.

We are the church of Christ, the church of Christ, the church of Christ. More, we live in the United States of America—one nation under God. A nation built, as everyone knows, on Christian principles. In God we trust; even our money says it. We are God's church in God's land, so you tell them, Jeremiah. You tell them they had better listen to the word of the Lord or they are going to get it like Shiloh.

I would never say this to anyone else, Jeremiah, certainly not in public, but have you ever wondered what God would do without us, without the church of Christ in America? We are God's chosen people, the

elect, God's plan for the world. We have restored God's truth, God's church (that is, the church of Christ), and we live in God's country. Do forgive my jumping to conclusions before; it is going to be a great lectureship this year. Hear the word of the Lord! Hear the word of the Lord! Hear the word of the Lord!

No wonder Jeremiah is the "weeping" prophet. He can see what few others dare to consider. The very institutions God created to mediate his presence in the world have degenerated into cheap imitations of the real thing, losing their true value. The palace and the temple are no longer conduits of God's presence in the world, but obstacles. The nation is no longer a vehicle of God's grace, but a roadblock. But they cannot see it. And they can't see it because their measures of success have blinded them and caused them to lose sight of the purpose and value of the gifts, especially the temple—or if I may say at this point—the value of the church.

They cannot see that what makes a church of Christ is not having the right sign on the building or being correct on all the hot doctrines, as if these are what distinguish a true temple of the Lord from a fake. They cannot see that what makes a temple of the Lord is not employing shallow, meaningless, worldly standards to gauge their success. And then, since they have the right name on the building, signs of success, and all the right answers, they become God's enforcers, waging holy war on anyone who dares to differ. After all, they are the temple of the Lord.

Blinded by these standards, they have lost the true value of the church of Christ and become deaf to the word of the Lord. They cannot hear and they cannot imagine that what Jeremiah says could be true about them—or us. When the vehicle of God's grace becomes an obstacle to God's way in the world, God will destroy it. But surely not the church of Christ? It can't be. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt 16.18). The church of Christ is God's plan for reaching the world. God could not, would not ever do such a thing to us.

Our reaction indicts us. We react exactly as did Jeremiah's audience. The truth is that God has already done it, not just once (at Shiloh), but twice (Jerusalem). Why would we want another replay?

To hear the word of the Lord requires our recapturing the true value of the temple of the Lord, the church of Christ. What identifies and gives value to the church is first and foremost the presence of Christ. Let me live with you in this place, in this temple, this body. And then, second, a people transformed by the presence of Christ: a people who will no longer practice oppression or be party to oppressive structures. A people who love others and the Lord alone, above all allegiances to social status, to race, to church, to country. This is the temple of the Lord. This is the church of Christ.

Jeremiah's challenge is clear. He stands at the entrance, at every door of this arena with simple appeal: Hear the word of the Lord. And he speaks not to the person in front of you or behind you, but to you and me—asking us to set aside all the entitlements that tempt us to think everything we hear is about someone else, or that make us believe that the incidentals are the real issues we need to face and confront. Jeremiah is hoping that for just the next few days, the next few pages, we will hear the word of the Lord, perhaps as we have not heard it in a very long time: a word of the Lord *to us*.

Hear the word of the Lord.

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