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A Religion that Betrays

Jeremiah 7-8:3

Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it."

Here in Matthew 7 there is a contrast between "gates" and "ways". In essence Christ tells us that there are only two gates through which a person can enter when it comes to salvation.

The “wide gate” is broad; in fact so broad that entire communities can traverse it at a single time (that is the idea behind the word “wide”). But the “narrow gate” brings to mind the idea of a turn-style which only allows the entrance of one person at a time. In the world in which we live there are two different roads on which a person can walk; and only two! Both are labeled as going to heaven, but only one gets there! Accordingly, those who enter upon the “broad way” think they are going to heaven. Yet the sign identifying the path on which they walk betrays them!

And yet, Matthew 7 isn’t the first time this message is proclaimed in the Bible! A good 600 years before Christ’s teaching we read Jeremiah 7, a message which Jeremiah preached to his generation. In this passage, he too spoke of the religion of the people of God which ultimately would betray them! That is the subject of the Jeremiah 7.

Jeremiah lived in the tumultuous days of the final forty years of Judah. He saw many kings sit on the throne. And while he was a young child, he saw Judah at its best (and worst) when Manasseh reigned from 696-642 BC, nevertheless this king’s regency would have an impact upon the world in which Jeremiah ministered.

One way to remember the reign of Manasseh is to think of “Manasseh the Maniac” as he used his fifty-five year regency to run headlong into sin! And yet, it wasn’t only him. He led the nation into gross rebellion which brought about a “regression” when it came to the people of God. The people of God under Manasseh became worse sinners than the Canaanites ever were- engaging in unspeakable sin... on the temple mount... going way beyond the base and morally bankrupt practices of Canaanite religion!

2 Kings 21:11, “...Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols...”

In fact, because of Manasseh’s reign Judah would lose its status as a “Christian” nation (as Israel did before them). Accordingly, God abandoned Judah to be disciplined by its own sin.¹

2 Kings 21:10, 12, “Now the Lord spoke through His servants the prophets, saying, ‘Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations...¹² therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Behold, I am bringing *such* calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle.””

Although Manasseh did in fact repent toward the end of his life (2 Chronicles 33:10-16), the damage had been done such that everything the king did to “undo” the harm which he brought on Judah was “*too little too late!*” Because of Manasseh, judgment would come!

This brings us to Amon (642-640 BC), his son (named after the chief god in Egypt, Amon-Re). When we think of this king we think of “Amon the Apostate!” The sins of Manasseh were embodied by his son such that Amon fit the fifty-five years of his father’s sinning into two! And

yet unlike his father, he didn't repent. In fact, it was so bad that Amon was assassinated two years into his reign! In his place, his son, Josiah, was placed as king over Judah at the age of 8.

Now we are into the era of Jeremiah. But again notice, the damage had been done. Jeremiah, Josiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk were all living on borrowed time. The end of the nation was coming and there was nothing they could do to prevent it! And yet, out of a love for God, they labored to bring the people of God back to a healthy relationship with God; such was the regency of Josiah (640-609 BC).

2 Kings 22:1-2, "Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name *was* Jedidah the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. And 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."

Recall that Josiah was THE bright spot in the final forty years of Judah's kings. When we think of Josiah, we think of "Josiah the Genuine Servant of the Lord" (cf. 2 Kings 23:25). Josiah's regency primarily revolved around religious reformation which came about in three phases:

- The First Phase (632-628): This began when Josiah at the age of 16 essentially was regenerated (cf. 2 Chronicles 34:3). For the next four years he would study and grow as a man of God until...
- The Second Phase (628-622): In 628 BC when Josiah was 20, the king set about cleansing the land of Judah AS WELL AS the northern territory (formerly called Israel) of all forms of false worship, idolatry, wickedness, corruption, and more. It was at this time (~627 BC) that Jeremiah was called to the prophetic ministry (cf. Jeremiah 1:2).
- The Third Phase (622): after cleansing the land, Josiah set his focus on restoring the temple of God to its proper form and re-instituting the worship of the Lord!

Under Manasseh's reign, the Temple Mount was utilized for the worship and service of the Canaanite and Assyrian gods, specifically Baal and Asherah. Walls were erected and altars established for their evil and debauched worship practices. Josiah determined to restore the temple such that a demolition project was fast underway. It was during this demolition that a copy of the book of Deuteronomy was found, brought to Josiah, and read! What Josiah heard cut him to the core such that the king led Judah in a covenant renewal ceremony by which the nation was re-dedicated to God (2 Kings 23). Sadly, this time of "Reformation" was superficial and Jeremiah frequently called upon the nation to repent with genuineness and brokenness.

Jeremiah 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem..."

The nation clearly did not listen, for years later when Josiah died, so also did the revival! God's word indicates that Josiah's death (which occurred in 609 BC), served a twofold purpose: It was the beginning of the nation reaping the consequence of Manasseh's evil reign. Listen to the preface of the section detailing Josiah's death:

2 Kings 23:26, “However, the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him...”

Josiah was killed in battle as a consequence of his grandfather’s sin! This was the beginning of much, much more! And yet we do not weep for the king for it also served to “graduate” Josiah into the presence of God and keep him from the evil that soon was coming to the land in just four years. Prior to Josiah’s death, God told him this:

2 Chronicles 34:28, “Behold, I will gather you to your fathers and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, so your eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring on this place and on its inhabitants.” (cf. Isaiah 57:1)

That brings us to Jehoiakim, Josiah’s second-born son. It should be noted that Jehoahaz (Josiah’s fourth-born son) had a short stint as king (three months) prior to Jehoiakim. Yet he was deposed and his brother was placed on the throne.

Jehoiakim (609-598 BC) was perhaps the most out-of-touch Judean king to sit on the throne. Like Nero of Rome, he was so preoccupied with himself and his building projects that he neglected the people of God, the state of the nation, and the impending doom that was coming upon them!

The revival of Josiah was quite shallow. Very few individuals actually were affected such that when Josiah died, the nation gave themselves whole-heartedly to worship and service of Baal! That is where the nation was when Jeremiah in our passage was called to stand at the doors of the temple and preach this very famous sermon:

Jeremiah 7:9-10, “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 [the word for “stand before” is covenant language expressing one’s devotion and willingness to serve and obey!!!], which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’- that you may do all these abominations?”

The people of God were so deceived they thought that so long as they placated Yahweh, they could worship and serve any and all gods; they could “do all these abominations”!

Jeremiah 7:18, “The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven [this was Ishtar/Anath who in the Canaanite pantheon was Baal’s lover and so one of the key figures in the cult]; and *they* pour out libations to other gods in order to spite Me.”

Ironically Ishtar/Anath was a favorite among the women of Israel. Along with her place as a key part of the worship of Baal, she also could be worshipped in the kitchen via the making of bread

cakes in the likeness of her image (cf. Jeremiah 44:19). J. A. Thompson put it this way:

Such worship could remain hidden by its very nature, requiring only a pinch of incense, a libation, or a cake in the shape of a woman, crescent moon, or star (all symbols of Ishtar). (Thompson, 1980, p. 285)

Jeremiah 7:30-31, “For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight,’ declares the Lord, ‘they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth [which in the Hebrew is related to the name for “shame”], 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, and it did not come into My mind.”

Alongside the Baal-worship which was a favorite among the men and the worship of Ishtar which was a favorite among the women, God’s people also practiced child sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom which in the New Testament was called Gehenna (just south of the Temple Mount)! It was at this time in 609 B.C., that God gave a bold command to Jeremiah, just four years prior to the first exile!

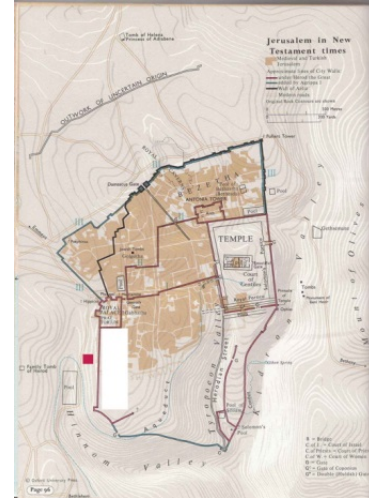
Jeremiah 7:1-2, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, ‘Stand in the gate of the Lord’s house and proclaim there this word, and say, “Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the Lord!”’”

It is significant that Jeremiah was called to give this sermon shortly after the death of Josiah! Any respect for the dead, any decorum that was to be paid to Josiah in honor of His memory was thrown out the windows (rightly so)! All going to the temple seeking a word from the Lord would receive the message of this Jeremiah 7!

This is the background from the perspective of the history of God’s people at the time. Now, let us examine the background from the perspective of God. As we just saw (2 Kings 23:26; 2 Chronicles 34:28), the death of Josiah was indeed a seminal point in redemptive history! From Moses onward, God’s people had become a Theocratic nation, which means God had bound himself to the nation and the nation to God. Though there were earthly leaders, nevertheless God was king! Accordingly, the nation’s welfare was tied exclusively to their covenant obedience and so their submission to the Word of God. If the nation were allowed to rebel (that is, the king, prophets, or priests did nothing), God would remove His covenant presence. And if the nation remained in rebellion, eventually they’d be given over to their enemy (cf. Leviticus 26:14ff; Deuteronomy 28:15).

Throughout this time, God’s people enjoyed a dual status before God:

- Individually, they had an unconditional relationship with God by which they would never be forsaken!
- Corporately/nationally, they enjoyed a conditional relationship with God by which they



could be abandoned by God if they rebelled.

Now we know that, Judah's sister, Israel, reaped the consequences of their national rebellion in 722 BC, the nation was wiped off the face of the earth. Judah was closely following behind her sister as the southern kingdom exceeded Israel in terms of sinning (Jeremiah 3:6-10). Accordingly, the death of Josiah marks the time that the preserving grace of God, God's covenant presence, was withdrawn from His people and they were left

- (1) to run headlong into the sin for which they so eagerly longed, and so
- (2) to reap fully the consequences of their national rebellion.

In light of this, 609 BC is a seminal year for Judah! It was the beginning of the end! To mark this, Jeremiah was to stand in the Temple gates and proclaim a message of judgment against the nation and its people.

With this, notice the background from one more angle: the perspective of the people of God, fueled by the false prophets. In spite of the death of their godly king (Josiah), God's people at the time were not in dismay nor were they burdened. They believed that they had something that would protect them forever, and the false prophets made sure everyone knew it.

Jeremiah 8:11, "...they heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace."

The delusion began with multiple references to the Davidic covenant and passage like 2 Samuel 7 which is the promise God made to David at the Covenant Renewal Ceremony in which David was made King over the nation.

2 Samuel 7:16, "And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."

How could any harm come to a people whose king/nation received a promise like this? And yet, this is just the beginning. Notice what God said about the Temple in the Song of Ascents in Psalm 132, which would have been sung every year as God's people approached the holy city, Jerusalem, and the temple mount.

Psalm 132:13-14, "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it."

From these passages and many more, it was believed that for God to be true, no harm could overtake His dwelling-place or any who took shelter in it! In fact, it was believed that in an emergency God would intervene directly to save Zion, His sacred mount. Jeremiah describes the preaching of the false prophets:

Jeremiah 14:13, "But, 'Ah, Lord God!' I said, 'Look, the prophets are telling them, 'You will

not see the sword nor will you have famine, but I will give you lasting peace in this place.”“

That was the message of the false prophets! Accordingly, so long as the nation maintained the temple and its worship (forget about whether or not it was genuine or true), and all would be well! These are the “deceptive words” referenced by Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 7:4, “Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’”

That was the mantra of the false prophet.

- When things were bad, they’d say, “*But this is the temple of the Lord; God won’t let it come to harm!*”
- When the foe threatened...
- When drought came upon the land...
- When disease and pestilence flourished...
- When a crazed prophet stood at the gate of the temple and pronounced a message dire warning...

The response of the false prophet, the priest, and even the king was, “This is the temple of the Lord! What could happen?” Accordingly, Jeremiah exhorted the nation this way:

Jeremiah 7:8, “Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail.”

In other words, the Temple would not deliver them! It was not a lucky charm which would protect the city and so the nation from destruction! To believe otherwise truly was to “Trust in deceptive words...”!

One must see that the “temple” which God referenced throughout His word as forever standing was not a building made by hands, but the hearts of the people whom He would deliver by grace. Stephen in his historical survey of God’s covenant dealings with His people, said in his trial before the Sanhedrin:

Acts 7:48-50, “However, the Most High does not dwell in *houses* made by *human* hands; as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord; ‘Or what place is there for My repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?’”

This would have been a shocking statement even in Christ’s day. Yet it was true! In fact at the founding of the temple, Solomon himself said this:

1 Kings 8:27, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!”

Solomon understand that the Temple that he was privileged to build was just a building! It ultimately could not serve as the dwelling place of God! O.K., so where was God's temple? Paul gave the answer in no uncertain terms. Speaking of the individual, he said this:

1 Corinthians 6:19,: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"

From this we conclude that God's unconditional promises of never forsaking the temple have reference to Christ's abode in the heart of the believer! Throughout their history, Israel missed this and so transformed the promises that God made in relation to the Davidic Office and the Temple into a lucky charm! *So long as they maintained its worship, Jerusalem would never fall!* And so their religion betrayed them!

It is important that we see that Jeremiah's day is our day! What is the Mantra of our day? Is it not, "Peace! Safety!" as predicted by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:3? And in their blindness, just as in Jeremiah's day, many today will be betrayed by their religion. Christ described the fruit of the many false prophets of the Last Days in the church:

Matthew 7:22-23, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

How is it that the end times will be much the same as it was in Jeremiah's day? Because the inclination of our heart is to tie God's blessings to physical things or activities, the formal term for this is called Neo-Platonism. Negatively, this is the movement which says evil can reside in things- like a song, a food, a place. Accordingly today there are Christian fundamentalists who espouse separation from drinking, smoking, music, and much, much more. Positively, Neo-Platonism also is manifested today through many who say God's blessing/grace is tied to

- A communion wafer.
- The reading of the Bible.
- Doing morally upright things.

Yet you must see that God's grace is not confined to any physical act or corporal substance on this earth! In light of this, many religious inclinations are shown for what they really are, foolish!

Yet this is our religion today! Think of the false believer in the body of Christ. They think that a drop of water on the head when they were a baby will protect them from God's wrath. They believe that a perfect record of church attendance or Christian service will assuage God's displeasure on account of sin. They also think that quoting a verse will make everything better; such as yet we know that "...the righteousness of man is filthy rags" before God (cf. Isaiah 64:6)!

Think of the genuine child of God facing difficulty. What does he do? Where does he flee? For many, the first impulse is to flee to religious activity. We become much more devout in our walks. Quiet times once again are held with a sense of urgency. We are quick to witness, not caring what other people think. We do all of this in the hopes that these activities somehow will secure a brighter future and so an easier path!

Christian, with Jeremiah let me ask you this: To what have you come for salvation? A tree? A stone? A temple? Something that can be manipulated by man? Or have you come to the living, eternal Lord who

- Has loved you with an everlasting love?
- Is working all things- even when we don't understand it- for His and our good?
- Does not only does good, but IS good?
- Upholds all things by the word of His power?
- Beautifies the afflicted with salvation?

Beware of a religion of external show. Rather, let us always cling to Christ and His cross-work as the basis and foundation of our lives! And let this passion and devotion transform our lives! May we, in love, say and mean what Jeremiah's generation said but didn't mean when they "stood before the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:10) and so dedicated their lives to God as a living sacrifice! May our lives be a drink offering (2 Timothy 4:6) by which we live for His glory and pleasure in and through all things!

Bibliography

Thompson, J. A. (1980). *A Book of Jeremiah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

End Note(s)

¹ Cf. also Jeremiah 2:18-19.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on November 3, 2013. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.