

## JEREMIAH 7

Let me read to you from a newspaper account dated 30<sup>th</sup> September 1938:

The British Prime Minister has been hailed as bringing 'peace to Europe' after signing a non-aggression pact with Germany. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain arrived back in the UK today, holding an agreement signed by Adolf Hitler, which stated the German leader's desire never to go to war with Britain.

The two men met at the Munich conference between Britain, Germany, Italy and France yesterday, convened to decide the future of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland.

Mr Chamberlain declared that the accord with the Germans signalled 'peace for our time', after he had read it to a jubilant crowd gathered at Heston Airport in West London.

You probably know what happened next. Within a few months, Britain was at war with Germany, despite Hitler's reassurances. History came to show that Chamberlain – and those celebrating with him upon his return home – had trusted deceptive words. Hitler never had any inclination for peace. His words led many to false security for the future.

That idea gets us to the heart of Jeremiah 7. The people Jeremiah addressed were trusting in 'deceptive words', which had given them false security for their future.

Let's dig into this chapter in two sections.

First – verse 1-15 – **trusting in religion is deceptive**. Verse 1:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message: 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD...."

The chapter opens with a touch of street theatre. God tells Jeremiah to speak at 'the gates of the LORD's house' – the entrance of the temple.

The temple was by far the most important building in the nation. It was the centre of religious and national life. Throngs of people would have streamed past and stood apart is a lone figure: the prophet Jeremiah.

And notice who he's addressing – verse 2 – 'all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.' This is important: Jeremiah is speaking to religious people. He's not addressing those going over to the dodgy parts of town on Saturday night. He's speaking to those who assemble to worship on Sunday morning. Let's listen to his message – verse 3:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless....

Do you see the issue? The people are trusting in deceptive words, and they have false confidence for their future.

As we saw in the first part of our series in Jeremiah before Christmas, Jeremiah prophesied over many decades in a period of international upheaval. At this time, the relatively small nation of Judah was often threatened by the superpowers of the day, most notably Babylon. And here, we have a glimpse into the mindset of the religious people for at least part of that period. Were they scared about the threats being made against them? No, apparently not. They felt safe. Why? They felt safe because they'd believed the words of the false prophets that dominated the airwaves of the day.

The false prophets effectively were saying this: "Listen, so long as we do our duties at the temple – so long as we perform the right sacrifices – we can do what we like for the rest of the time and the LORD will keep us safe in the land." According to the false prophets, it was as if the LORD had made a deal: "You offer me sacrifices, and I will keep you safe in the land." They portrayed the sacrifices in the temple as almost a lucky charm that would keep them safe. It may well be that they described the temple as a 'den' – not the flimsy den you made in the lounge as a child, but maybe the den of a bear – a place of safety to bring up offspring where nothing can touch you. It seems that they saw the temple in that way.

The key phrase is in verse 4 – "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" The people viewed the temple like Chamberlain's non-aggression pact, signed by Hitler. So long as the temple stands, so long we do the sacrifices, we can write Jeremiah off as a scaremonger. He may preach but we respond, "Jeremiah – look: the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD. We're doing our duty – and that will lead to peace for our time, Jeremiah."

Can you imagine how uncomfortable Jeremiah's message must have been, then? Verse 3:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.

And the very obvious undertone: if you don't, then I will remove you from the land.

So here's the scene. The people are bustling in and out, wearing their Sabbath best, Scripture under their arms. To one another in that moment, they look fine – they look obedient, they look good. But Jeremiah looks them in the eye and says: "Reform your ways and your actions. God isn't impressed. He knows how for the rest of the time you're making a quick buck from vulnerable – people like foreigners and orphans and widows – people he cares for very much. He knows the other gods and idols you're living for and which dominate your thoughts and dreams. In this moment, all of that may be out of view, but God knows the reality of it all. You think you're safe? Think again. Your promise of peace is worthless. The only way you will ever stay in the land is if you change your ways. God does not want your outward religiosity in the temple. He doesn't want your performance and duty. He wants you. He wants your heart."

Jeremiah makes the same point using different words in verse 9:

'Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe" —safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.'

You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool the living God. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart. And he does not want to be represented on earth by a group of hypocrites – a nation who imply that they the blessings of life with God can be retained outside of relationship with him.

You might notice the repeated phrase God uses here to describe the temple – 'this house, which bears my Name.' It's as if God is saying: I am ashamed of having my name associated with a group who treat me as a cosmic vending machine, but who don't love me or my ways. So you may describe the temple as a den, he says, but it's a den of robbers.

And for that reason, he is moved to judge. Let's read from verse 12:

‘Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

Here’s what Jeremiah is saying: you may think that maintaining outward religiosity will keep you safe, but history will tell you otherwise. Go to Shiloh, he says. Shiloh was the place in which the tabernacle – the precursor to the temple – was put up after the people of Israel first entered the land. He’s saying: go on an excursion to Shiloh, and tell me what you can see.

Here’s what they would have seen: nothing.

The tabernacle *used* to be in Shiloh. But God’s people in Shiloh had shown a very similar attitude towards him – making the right sacrifices, formal religiosity, yes – but they had no desire to know him or to love him or his ways. And so the tabernacle – the temple of the LORD – was no more in Shiloh. God allowed the place to which he’d attached his name to be destroyed. Or go to Ephraim, says Jeremiah. You’ll see exactly the same thing.

So here’s the point. Knowing God is not like having an insurance policy. It’s not that you pay your dues and then God is obligated to do his bit. And it had never been like that. The Lord rescued Israel from oppression in Egypt – they hadn’t earned it, they didn’t deserve it. But with a mighty hand, he’d rescued them. He poured his love and blessing on them and said: “I’m a God of relationship, and you’re now my children. So I want you to live before the nations like members of my family – that you might enjoy the blessings of knowing me, and that the surrounding nations might see the kind of God I am, and the kind of relationship I offer.” And he promised that Israel would experience supernatural blessing if they were obedient to this – but that they would also experience his discipline if they disobeyed: discipline they now faced.

So Jeremiah is saying: God has never wanted outward religion. He wants to be a father to you. He wants your heart.

Now how might this this speak to us today?

The people weren't wrong to look for safety – for refuge – for a den. Chamberlain wasn't wrong to look for peace. What this people shows us, though, is that we don't often look for security in very good places. And perhaps the very worst place we can look for safety for the future is in religion. The people said, "This is the temple of the LORD." The LORD himself says, "You have made it a den of robbers."

Six hundred years or so after Jeremiah, Jesus refers to this passage as he visits the temple in his day, and sees the religious hypocrisy that remains there. Turn to Matthew 21, and we'll read from verse 12:

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

Notice how little has changed. Just as in the day of Jeremiah, Jesus shows that God is sick of those who mistreat the vulnerable, who use religion for a quick buck, and who then hide behind it. And as Jesus confronts what he sees in the house that bears his name, we see that here is a God who will turn up at the religious epicentre and who'll throw the furniture around because he is so distressed by the hypocrisy he sees there. To people who would turn to religion to further their own interests, to people who can talk God language but live without any sort of relationship with that God, Jesus echoes Jeremiah's words: "Your gathering is not a righteous one, it does not please God. You have made it a den of robbers." And so what do we see? In Jesus we see a God who sees and who will not let hypocrisy, self-righteousness and greed have the final say, not matter where it's found – even if that's in the house that bears his Name.

And that is good news – but it's also sobering.

Probably each of us knows how easy it is to be a religious hypocrite. On many Sundays, we're not so much here to worship the Lord and to realign our hearts with him; we're here to show our faces or because we're on the rota. Even here at Grace Church, it's easy to hide a lot of ugliness under a religious façade. And God says: I know what's going on. And that means that our only hope of being right with him is not in our religiosity – but rested in Jesus. If even the temple worship in Jerusalem was a vain refuge, how much more a service in a school hall in Doncaster. Our only hope is in Jesus, who welcomes all who trust him – even religious hypocrites – and who makes us right with God through means of his own blood, which he willingly shed for us on the cross. It's only in him that true security for the future can be found.

So God doesn't want our religiosity. He wants you to cast ourselves upon him for mercy. He doesn't want your Sunday attendance. He wants *you*. He wants you to be here for the right reason. Do you need to realign your motivation for being here this morning?

But before we move on, let me make one more application. We should notice that Jeremiah 7 warns us not to turn to outward measures to judge spiritual health.

People point out that, a few decades ago, UK churches had more people attending than today. Some hold a wistful nostalgia for those days. What Jeremiah 7 asks us, though, is this: was it really *that different* back then? See, we live in a culture where it's very acceptable *not* to come to church; back then, you were frowned upon if you *didn't* do your religious duties and attend. Today people show the nature of their hearts through not coming to church. Perhaps back then people showed their cold-heartedness through turning up for the wrong reasons – not because they wanted to grow in relationship with God, but to be socially acceptable to others. But Jeremiah 7 says: God was watching the heart.

The lesson is this: just because numbers in church are down, we shouldn't necessarily think that our nation is much different today to then. We might also recognise that, in Jeremiah's day, God allowed his own name to be dragged through the mud. He'd rather that the temple that bore his name was destroyed – he'd rather be a laughing stock – than to be represented by a group of people who are big on God talk but small on relationship. Perhaps today, the UK church is experiencing a time of discipline and cleansing; that we might be refined and made ready to live again for him amongst our culture.

So we've seen the stark warning. Jeremiah has said that the people really do not have peace for their time – rather, they are in grave danger. But how do the people respond to all this? Have a look at verses 16-29 – and here we're going to see secondly that **deception begins in a refusal to listen**.

Listen to God's words to Jeremiah in verse 16: "So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you." Does that shock you? God speaks to his prophet and says, "Don't pray for them. I'm not going to listen." How can that be?

God has addressed the hearts of the people. His offer to them in verse 3 is real: "Reform your ways and I will let you stay living here." It is a real offer – but God is not caught surprised by their response. He knows the future. And he knows that, even with such a provocative and clear message, the people won't listen to Jeremiah. They are that stubborn – so the die is cast, and there are consequences – consequences described in verse 20:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place—on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land—and it will burn and not be quenched.

Jeremiah will preach – but God knows how they will respond. They will not have him. They refuse to give him their hearts. So God knows what he must do. Here he’s predicting the exile: the people vomited out of the land, taken away in chains to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

It’s a devastating verdict – but notice how the nation got to this point. Let me read from verse 21, and see if you can see the repeated refrains that describe the people’s problem:

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. **But they did not listen or pay attention**; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, **day after day, again and again** I sent you my servants the prophets. **But they did not listen to me or pay attention**. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.’ **When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer**.

Do you hear the repeated refrains? They didn’t listen, they didn’t listen, they didn’t listen. Look at verse 25: day after day, again and again, generation after generation, God spoke to them – but they didn’t listen.

You can unwittingly ignore somebody once. You might even miss what they’re saying a handful of times. But the point comes when if you keep not hearing, they can rightly say, “You’re not listening.” And when we stop listening to someone, we show what we really think of them.

The people of Judah kept telling God what they thought he was like and what they thought he wanted. They kept offering temple sacrifices. They thought he wanted payment in that way. They conned themselves into thinking that that’s what he wanted. They were quick to tell God what he wanted, but refused to *listen* to him.

Tragically, it builds to the point where God brings disaster upon them. In his mercy and patience, he'd withheld it, generation after generation. But he could not let it continue forever. God is too committed to his world to see its means of hope turn ignore him. He cannot smile on the injustice this people are inflicting upon the most vulnerable. So judgement falls in human time and space – but the root cause was this: they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't hear, and so they didn't obey.

So, as we finish, here's the challenge: will we tell God what we think he wants and what we think he's like – or will we *listen* to him?

The challenge comes whenever we read or hear the word of God. And it's especially true as we gather to hear God's word together in worship.

It's very easy, isn't it, to take the idea that God speaks to us for granted. If I was to tell you that the living God – the one true God, who threw stars into space – was to speak personally to you today, you'd probably think he was worth hearing. But we can take the Bible for granted. We can sometimes be not unlike those of Jeremiah's day – inoculating ourselves against hearing from God because we think we already know what he's like and what he wants.

So as we come together to hear God's word, let's come with the right expectations. Not to be seen or even primarily to do or to serve, but to *hear*. The burden on hearing means that we'll do our best to come along on some Sundays even when we don't feel like it, or when it feels inconvenient, saying, "Lord, I'm here. I need to hear from you." Listen, we all find it harder listening to Bible messages on some occasions more than others – whether that's down to our tiredness, or because we don't get on with the style of the speaker, or just because our hearts are cold. But in those times in which I'm finding it hard to listen, I try all the harder because I know that I'm ultimately listening not just to a human voice, but being addressed by God. My duty and privilege is to prayerfully seek to listen well and to sit under Scripture as God addresses me.

Then, as we submit our hearts to God – to listen to him and not to tell him what we think he wants and what we think he should be like – we will find that in Jesus he has given us a firm hope and security that vastly supersedes what our own religious activity could ever achieve. And as we do so, we will not only find that he is more worthy of praise than we often imagine, but we will be formed – as individuals and as a group – to be less hypocritical, to have a firmer hope, and to be better placed to offer the life he's graciously brought us into in Doncaster and beyond. Let's pray to that end now.