

The Truth Exposed

Jeremiah 7:1-8:3

The best known verse of Scripture is John 3:16 – ‘that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life’

It’s a verse that countless Christians have held tightly on to as a verse of hope and assurance in the face of their sin.

Our consciousness of our many failings can make us ask: could God really forgive me? And then we look to this verse and remember: God is not eagerly vengeful – ready to drop the axe at the first opportunity, no, he so loved the world that has sinned against him that he sent Jesus so that we WOULD NOT perish.

And as we feel the burden of our guilt, we look to this verse to remind us that this loving God does not require us to atone by labouring to achieve some level of spiritual achievement and purity that few if any could reach to make up for our wrong, but to put our trust in the perfect saviour who has achieved perfection for us, and died in our place.

Does the message of John 3:16 connect with you?

Does it give you heart and hope?

Does it make you look to the God who has loved you so much and cause you to love him deeply in return?

Well, it may surprise you to hear then that for some the message at the heart of John 3:16 is actually repulsive.

I was in Brisbane during the school holidays for my niece’s wedding. And I was chatting to a lady who believes what most of us here believe, and she was doing some further study to prepare for ordination in Brisbane.

Her lecturer said to her face: ‘your God is a monster’.

A God who would judge people’s sin, a God who would punish his innocent Son in our place, is, not loving at all. Far from it.

It comes down to how fair you think that phrase is: ‘will not perish but’

Because it is a reminder that whoever does not believe in Jesus... WILL.

Later in John 3 it is put plainly:

‘whoever believes in the son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life because God’s wrath remains upon him’

‘God’s wrath remains upon him...’

Does God have a right to expect obedience from us?

Does he have a right to be angry at our sin?

Does God have a right to punish it?

Is our sin serious enough to provoke such a response from God?

Your answer to those questions will go a long way to determining whether you love the gospel of Jesus Christ or are offended by it.

Well last week we began a new series in the book of Jeremiah which we have entitled 'the hard word'. Well today that hard word truly begins.

Jeremiah is called to confront Judah with the truth of their rebellion against God and testify that consequences are coming...

Chapter 7 begins with a warning.

The Truth Exposed

A warning to change (7:1-7)

Jer. 7:1

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

² *"Stand at the gate of the LORD'S house and there proclaim this message:*

The Lord calls Jeremiah to stand where people had to funnel through to get into the temple and walk out of to leave.

So Jeremiah's sermon would be ringing in their ears as they began their worship, and would be what stayed with them when they went back to their homes.

And this sermon will be an intervention.

You have heard of interventions. They seemed to start springing up as a thing back in the 90's. Interventions are a kind of a surprise party for those struggling with some kind of addiction that they are in denial about.

Their friends and family and other loved ones would be gathered in a room which the person would be led into on some pretext and they'd all confront the person with their problem.

It is a way of showing some tough love – here are all the people that care about you standing together, cutting through the politeness to say what needs to be said. This is what you are doing – this is something that has to change...

Maybe then the person would listen.

But this is kind of an intervention in reverse.

Instead of the one loved being confronted by the many.

This time it is the many who are loved being confronted by the one – pleading with them to turn from their self-destructive path.

And the intervention begins with a warning that they must change...

"Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.

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.

⁴ *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!"*

So the sermon has two main points.

First: the people of Judah, the ones who are walking through those gates claiming to worship have some habits and practices that urgently need correcting.

And Second: they are not to trust in deceptive words and be misled by them.

But I want you to notice who is the one actually addressing them.
This intervention is not being led by Jeremiah, but by God. The Lord almighty.
Now remember, 'almighty' is more than saying 'The Lord who is heaps strong' it is literally – the Lord of Hosts.
The Lord of armies, the Lord you do not mess with, the God of Israel, has a thinly veiled warning to give them.
Reform and I will let you live in this place: the land he has given them, and the temple where he dwells in their midst...
The flipside of this is obvious: fail to reform... and I will not let you live in this place.

Why? What are they doing wrong?

*⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly,
⁶ 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,
⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.*

If changing their ways means acting with justice, NOT oppressing the weak and the poor, NOT shedding innocent blood and NOT following other gods to their own harm...
Then it is clear what they are doing now isn't it?
Their remaining in the land God has given them is contingent upon their repentance.
They mustn't continue to think that they can live in God's land while betraying him and each other and expect no consequences.

The Lord's command through Jeremiah is inherently reasonable isn't it?
He is not calling upon them to scale some unassailable moral heights here is he?

What's more he is giving them clear warning...
And he is reassuring them of his graciousness at the same time.
The whole thing is even put in the positive – if you reform... then I will...
He is reassuring them that if they repent they will receive his grace.
Love is at the heart of the intervention – but resolve as well.
Without repentance, God will act.

But there is a second warning too: that warning about trusting in deceptive words.
Those deceptive words are this repeated slogan 'the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

What is going on here and how is it deceptive?
Well they are taking for granted God's promises.
The temple, the one they are walking into and out of even as Jeremiah preaches, is where the God who made the universe has caused his name to dwell.
He has promised to be with them and be their God.
But Judah has developed a dangerous complacency.

This temple has stood there for about 350 years.

Just a century earlier the terrifying Assyrians had Jerusalem surrounded with an army of hundreds of thousands of men, and made arrogant boasts about Israel's God, and the Lord sent a plague through their forces and they retreated back home.

As long as the Lord's temple is here, we are safe...

But the Lord is saying 'when you keep chanting to one another this slogan, you are deceiving yourselves'.

Judah's deadly self-deception (7:8-15)

And this is why... the warning now ratchets things up a notch or two...

Jer. 7:9 "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury,
That's commandments 6-9 blown...

burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known,
Ahh.. that's commandments 1 and 2

¹⁰ 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?

¹¹ Has this house, **which bears my Name**, become a den of robbers to you?
But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

Sure the temple of the Lord is a safe place to be when your enemies are outside it... but what if the one you have made your enemy is already INSIDE – the very God whose temple it is.

They are like a gang of bandits seeking safety in their secret hideout, only for that hideout to be in full view of the one whom they need to hide from.

They are playing a deadly game of self-deception.

And we hear those ominous words... 'but I have been watching!'

Judah should have learned from their past and what happened to their former countrymen, the Northern Kingdom of Israel – so the Lord, through Jeremiah, gives them a history lesson. If you think you are safe, go check out Shiloh...

Jer. 7:12

"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.

Before the temple was built in Jerusalem, for many years the tabernacle at Shiloh was the place of Israel's worship.

Shiloh was just across the border in the area of Ephraim in what was the Northern Kingdom.

A kingdom God sent the Assyrians to destroy in 722 B.C. as punishment for Israel's wickedness in doing exactly the kinds of things that Judah is doing now.

Jeremiah says: go there now, and see how much of Shiloh is left...

¹³ 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.

14 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.

15 I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.'

You have become complacent and ignored warning after warning.

Do NOT deceive yourselves with this 'temple of the Lord' talk. I will ACT.

Now, here's the thing about interventions – it never hurts for those who witness them to reflect as well.

Their warning can serve as a warning for us.

Are there any areas of complacency that we have let settle in?

Any areas where we are taking God's grace for granted?

Are there any areas where we are turning a deaf ear to God's word – refusing to be corrected by it...?

Well, let's make sure we listen in now.

Because the next sentence in Jeremiah 7 should shake us awake from any complacent slumber.

I will have something more to say about these words later, but for the moment let's hear their tragic resolve...

Verse 16...

Generational idolatry (7:16-20)

Jer. 7:16

"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.

Back in Genesis, Abraham repeatedly pleaded for the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah...

He said to the Lord, if there are 50 righteous people will you spare them? And the Lord said he would.

What if there are 45... 40... 30... all the way to just 10...

So how tragic that now, with his own people he says to Jeremiah – 'don't even ask.'

Don't intercede.

Don't plead for them.

They are on their own.

There will be no mediation from a godly advocate whose righteousness I will accept on their behalf.

They either repent, or they will fall because they are hardened in their rebellion.

And it is all of them.

Don't you see? Their idolatry has become a family activity – the worship of false gods passed on from generation to generation...

17 Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?

18 The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire,

*and the women knead the dough and make cakes to offer to the Queen of Heaven.
They pour out drink offerings to other gods to arouse my anger.*

The queen of heaven was a title for Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of war and of fertility of crops animals and people.

So the family would gather together and make cakes with the produce of the land stamped with an image of Ishtar and offer it as a sacrifice of tribute.

And they did this as well as present offerings to other gods.

Men, women and children all complicit.

Instead of passing on the worship of the Lord and making that central to family life, whole families were instead having idolatry and false worship ingrained in them.

God cares about the faith of families not just individuals.

Faith begins at home – idolatry can be modelled and passed on as easily now as it could then...and so can the love of God

Christian parents, grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins... all have an important role to play in one another's faith.

Do the members of your family ever see you picking up your Bible and reading it? Or are they more likely to see you devouring a shopping catalogue, or researching house prices and holidays.

Do they witness you seeking FIRST the kingdom of God during the week or is that something they only tend to witness on a Sunday.

In other words, who or what would your family say *you* are devoted to?

God wants his people to teach their children, and their children's children about him.

To love God and keep his commandments, to love our neighbours as ourselves...

To know his ways and to grow godly habits...

What is happening in your home?

What habits, attitudes and priorities might your loved ones witness and repeat because you have modelled it to them?

Which of these model faith, and which might be modelling disobedience or idolatry?

Generational deafness (7:21-28)

Back to the intervention.

Judah's problem was not just their generational idolatry that had earned God's judgment. So did their generational deafness...

Israel's problem was not a complete abandonment of worshipping the Lord.

They still maintained all the rituals and routines for offering sacrifices...

It's just that they *also* persisted with idolatry and disobedience.

That is why so often in Jeremiah, God describes their sin as being adulterous.

They would 'cheat' on God but then still come 'home' to the temple as if all was fine.

So as the worshippers walked past Jeremiah that day, on their way to offer their sacrifices to the Lord, Jeremiah would call out to them and say ‘don’t worry about sticking to the rules in there... why bother...’

Jer. 7:21

“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!

The burnt offering was the sacrifice of atonement – the one that was there to pay for sin. That sacrifice was to be burnt up completely because your sin was placed on that animal and so it was symbolically destroyed along with it.

Other sacrifices you could eat parts of, but not the burnt offerings.

But Jeremiah says ‘Naaahh. No point. Eat what you want. Mix it all up – that’s what you’ve been doing with the rest of your worship – ignoring me and doing whatever you want, so you may as well do it here too!’

And he points out that before God ever commanded about offerings he called them to far more fundamental instruction on worship.

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.

It’s not rocket science is it – that God might expect his people to treat him like... I don’t know... GOD?!

That God might actually want people to listen to him... and do what he says...

And it is not like what he says is unreasonable either...

To love and reverence him, and love and respect others.

It is not unreasonable for him to say ‘I am God, so I am the one who defines right and wrong, not you’

Is God unjust or unfair to expect people to honour that?

Is it unreasonable that he might get angry when his creatures to whom he has given everything reject him and show contempt for him?

But from the beginning of their nation God’s people had turned a deafness to his commands into an art form...

²⁴ But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts.

They went backward and not forward.

²⁵ From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets.

²⁶ But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.’

Oh, and by the way Jeremiah...

Jer. 7:27

“When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you;

Generational evil (7:29-8:3)

Did God have a right to be angry with Judah?

Well, if Judah's idolatry, and refusal to listen was not considered worthy enough of God's wrath, then maybe setting up idols IN the temple itself and burning their own children to death will seal the deal...

Jer. 7:30

"The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the LORD.

They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it.

³¹ They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.

Now, God's wrath at such wickedness is truly unveiled...

³² So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

³³ Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away.

³⁴ I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.

IN 8:1-3 we even read that this will punishment will even endure even beyond death – the people themselves will be dead offerings uncovered before the dead gods they had worshipped...

You know the valley of Ben Hinnom would later be the place that the people of Jerusalem would burn their rubbish and renamed Gehenna. And Jesus would use that valley, with its history of burning and horror, as a metaphor for Hell.

The just anger of God

People don't like being told they are wrong.

They don't like being told they will be held to account.

Not everyone responds to interventions. And Judah didn't here.

If, as is likely, this is the sermon referred to in chapter 26, then they seized Jeremiah with the intention of killing him.

But God had every right to judge the sin of his people.

They had earned every last drop of it – and the punishment fit the crime.

How could God see all this, be treated this way, and NOT hold them to account?

The amazing thing was how reluctant and slow to judge God actually was – hundreds of years, repeated warnings from the prophets, repeated rebukes, repeated acts of salvation when they did call to him...

They didn't respond to rebuke, they didn't respond to grace.

This scene with Jeremiah is a scene repeated around 600 years later

Jesus comes to the temple, full of money changers and, quoting Jeremiah calls it a 'den of robbers'.

And he too prophesies it's destruction, telling his disciples that not one stone will remain upon another.

Israel had not changed.

But they were not special in that regard.

Sin was no more ingrained in them than it is in the rest of us.

As Paul writes in that passage from Romans that was read to us earlier:

It's a passage that reminds us that God is rightly angry at sin.

And everyone is guilty of it.

Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:

11 *"There is no one righteous, not even one;
 there is no one who understands;
 there is no one who seeks God.*

12 *All have turned away,*

We have all exchanged the truth of God for lies

We have all failed to Glorify him as God and give him the thanks he is due and instead given that glory and honour to other things, created things, idols of our own making.

Whether we grew up in a religious home or not, we know what right and wrong is.

Enough to point the finger at others while doing the same things ourselves.

And these are not rare, exceptional, once in a blue moon, failings.

They are ingrained and habitual.

So here's the intervention:

Should God not be angry at MY sin and yours?

Should God not hold me or you to account for it?

Is it not worthy of punishment?

The answer is: he IS angry at sin and he WILL judge.

The just mercy of God

But here is that majestic truth of the **gospel**.

²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Unlike that day with Jeremiah, for us there IS someone whose DOES intercede.

Whose pleas on our behalf God readily and continually listens to.

The perfect saviour who bore ALL that wrath FOR US when he took our punishment and died in our place on the cross.

The one whose cleansing work is so thorough and so complete that 'though our sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. As far as the East is from the west, so far has he removed our sin from us'

Is that offensive to you? Or is it the best news you could ever hear...?

Because God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.