

Jeremiah 7:1–10, 16–19 (NRSV)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. ³Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. ⁴Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."

⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations?

¹⁶As for you [Jeremiah], do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. ¹⁷Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? ¹⁸The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. ¹⁹Is it I whom they provoke? says the LORD. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt?

Mark 11:15–19 (NRSV)

¹⁵Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"

But you have made it a den of robbers."

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

If your life goes "over the cliff," will anyone be there to catch you?

Jeremiah and Jesus. Both pronounce God's judgment. And both are vindicated.

A few decades after Jeremiah's pronouncement, the Babylonian Empire rolls over Jerusalem, exiles tens of thousands of Jews, and destroys the majestic temple built by Solomon.

A few decades after Jesus' pronouncement, the Roman Empire rolls over Jerusalem, kills hundreds of thousands of Jews, and destroys the majestic temple built by Herod the Great. And seventy years after that, the Romans finish the job, clearing the Jews out of the area and erasing the Roman province of Judea from their geography books.

Why did all this happen? Certainly, the biblical view is that it was God's judgment, a verdict rendered and carried out. For most people, that conjures up images of a God who looks for every transgression, great and small, and then smites the offender – judge, jury, and warden all rolled into one. Little wonder then that many people have difficulty embracing the God they believe they find in the Old Testament.

Even when it comes to Jesus many people don't grasp what it really means when Jesus invokes the words and actions of Jeremiah at the temple in Jerusalem. They forget that when the disciples are gawking at the magnificence of the temple, Jesus tells them that the

giant stones were going to be thrown down (Mark 13:1-2; Mt. 24:1-3; Lk 21:5-7). If you visit Jerusalem today, you can see the giant cut stones that were levered off the temple mount by the Romans in 70AD. They still sit on the sidewalks below, right where they fell.

God's judgment. How does it work? What does the Bible really say about judgment and punishment? Is it God's retribution, i.e. a smiting, or is something else going on?

To begin, as we saw last week, sin is quite real and leads to often horrifying consequences. We see this in our lives all too often. Sometimes we say "what goes around, comes around" or "we reap what we sow." Abuse others and you'll find yourself abused. Treat others with kindness and you'll find that it too boomerangs back to you. These commonplace observations about life get us close to what the Bible teaches about God's judgment and the "punishment" that ensues. Here are three verses from Jeremiah that illustrate the point:

- "Hear O earth: I am going to bring disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not given heed to my words; and as for my teaching, they have rejected it. (Jeremiah 6:19)

Yes, God created the moral order, the moral fabric, which governs the cosmos. But when the people shred that fabric by ignoring God and his teachings they reap the fruit of their *own* schemes. God doesn't have to launch lightning bolts at them; they are reaping what they have sown. God gave them a beautiful garden that should have been theirs for all eternity, but, instead, they have planted a garden that kills.

- "And the people to whom they [false prophets] prophesy shall be thrown into the streets of Jerusalem; victims of famine and sword. There shall be no one to bury them – themselves, their wives, their sons, and their daughters. For I will pour out *their* [emphasis added] wickedness upon them. (Jeremiah 14:16)

Here again, it is the people's wickedness that is rebounding on them. What goes around, comes around. God will no longer mediate the consequences of their sin; they will reap what they have sown. And if you think that it all seems somehow out of proportion, read again Jeremiah's indictment in today's Scripture passage (7:6-7).

- "I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the Lord; I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it." (Jeremiah 21:14).

This one is a bit trickier. The Hebrew word translated here "punish" by the NRSV translation committee is actually simply the Hebrew word *paqad*, the everyday word for "visit." In some places, the translators translate it straightforwardly, for example: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children, and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Visiting the sins of one generation upon another. Cycles of abuse, for example. A better and clearer translation of 21:14 would be something like this: "I will visit upon you the fruit of your doings. . ."¹

The fruit metaphor makes it clear that what is about to happen is the result of the people's own plantings, not some arbitrary punishment by God. Retribution is simply not in the picture.

Over the cliff

God's people have driven themselves over a cliff and now there is no turning back. It is too late; it is a "done deal" (see Jeremiah 4:28 for example). They have passed the point of no return. The "ifs" of Jeremiah 7:5-7 are not about righting the ship or drawing back from the

¹ This point is highlighted by Terence Fretheim in his commentary on Jeremiah.

brink, as was the case in other times. Instead, Jeremiah drives home the point that the time of reckoning has come. The “ifs,” the warnings, proved fruitless before (see Amos!) and now the poison fruit that the people have grown is about to be their undoing.

We, of course, ask where God is in this as his people plunge over the edge. We ask the same thing in our own lives all the time. And we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that God promises to insulate us from all the troubles of life, those of our making and those that are not. But this is not God’s promise. However, God does promise us restoration after the fall. God does promise that we will never abandon us.

It isn’t that God is always waiting to catch us when we fall; it is truer to say that God is always ready to restore us after the fall. The choices we and others make every day are often destructive and carry terrible consequences. Sometimes those choices are seen in the actions we take; in others, they are seen in our inaction and the blind eye we turn to those we could help.

But, as we’ll see in the coming weeks, just as Jeremiah forthrightly tells the people of the destruction and exile that lie ahead, he also brings them messages of hope and restoration. Yes, they are going over the cliff and the crash at the bottom will be terrifying, but God will still be with them and will bring them new life and new hope even in exile.

Den of Robbers = Cave of Brigands?

In his commentary, *Mark for Everyone*, Tom (N.T.) Wright helps us to understand what Jeremiah and Jesus mean by calling the temple a “den of robbers” (NRSV).

. . . Although God had promised to bless Israel through the Temple, if Israel began to take it for granted, to use the Temple and the promises attached to it as an excuse for immoral and unjust behavior, then the Temple itself could and would be judged. That’s what the early chapters of Jeremiah are all about, including the quotation that comes here: God’s house has become a brigand’s cave.

In what sense was it a brigand’s cave? Not in the sense that people were using it to make money on the side. The word ‘brigand’, in Jesus’ day, wasn’t a word for ‘thief’ or ‘robber’ in the ordinary sense, but for the revolutionaries, those we today would call the ultra-orthodox, plotting and ready to use violence to bring about their nationalist dreams.

Part of Jesus’ charge against his fellow-Jews was that Israel as a whole had used its vocation, to be the light of the world, as an excuse for a hard, narrow, nationalist piety and politics in which the rest of the world was to be, not enlightened, but condemned. We can see something of this attitude both in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the tendency to violent revolution throughout the period in which Jesus lived. The Temple had been intended to symbolize God’s dwelling with Israel for the sake of the world; the way Jesus’ contemporaries had organized things, it had come to symbolize not God’s welcome to the nations but God’s exclusion of them. The holy brigands who were bent on violent rebellion against Rome—which in Jesus’ view was exactly the wrong way to bring about the kingdom of God—looked to the Temple as the central focus of their ideology. And the guardians of the Temple itself were notorious for their rich and oppressive lifestyle. Violence towards outsiders; injustice towards Israel itself; that was what the Temple had come to mean. As with the fig tree, Jesus’ only word for the place was one of judgment.

How did his actions in the Temple mean that? The purpose of the Temple was to be the place of sacrifice. Hour by hour worshippers came to the Temple, changed money into the official coinage, bought animals that were guaranteed perfect for sacrifice (if you brought an animal from some distance, there was a good chance it might be attacked on the way and so no longer be a perfect specimen, able to be sacrificed), and brought them to the priests who completed the killing and offering. The sacrificial system, and with it the reason for the Temple’s existence, depended on money-changing and animal purchase. By stopping the entire process, even just for a short but deeply symbolic moment, Jesus was saying, more powerfully than any words could express: the Temple is under God’s judgment. Its reason for existing is being taken away.

The Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 7:18 from today's selection)

In his commentary on Jeremiah, R.E. Clements helps us to understand the reference to the "queen of heaven," as well as what this message would have meant to those who were living in exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. They would have asked "What does Jeremiah's message mean for us today?" This is our question as well.

The temple sermon proper in 7:1-15 is followed by a section drawing attention to the sharp contrast between the true forms of worship and unacceptable forms that must inevitably inflict harm and hurt upon those who pursue them. The first of these contrasts in verses 16-20 points to the prevalence of a simple, popular ritual practice in Judah of making cakes devoted to "the queen of heaven" (v. 18). Entire families were involved in this activity, the children collecting wood and their fathers making the sticks into a fire. The women then made dough for the cakes, almost certainly bearing some symbolic marking (possibly crudely sexual in character) to indicate that they were eating in honor of the goddess to whom the title "the queen of heaven" is given. Probably the goddess Anat, who appears in Canaanite tradition as the consort of Baal and as rescuer from the power of "Death," is being referred to here. The title and the ritual activities linked with it, however, belonged primarily to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Most likely the title was popularly applied to various goddesses who fulfilled the role of mother-goddess and protectress against death (cf. further 44:17). It has been used here, not out of a deliberate desire for vagueness, but out of a realization that this type of worship had continued long after the time of Jeremiah's original temple sermon. Most probably the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. had encouraged a revival in this popular and seductive form of religion. All the greater importance, therefore, was attached to emphasizing Jeremiah's outright condemnation of it.

The apparently innocent sounding activity of making cakes for the queen of heaven certainly would have contained links with deeply detested forms of fertility ritual, even if only by association. Such associations had shown themselves time and again in Israel's history to lead to ritual activities of a crudely sexual kind. The semi-magical expectations of engaging in ritual to induce life and fertility had, in reality, only led to the confusion and destruction of life within the family group. Religion had in fact been used to promote immorality. Through the pages of the Old Testament no other single issue concerning the right understanding of religion is given greater emphasis than this repudiation of the Baalistic sexual rituals. Time and again the linking together of the ideas of life, blessing, and fertility had led to a relapse into sexual immorality as a misguided means of promoting "life." The religious conflict and rivalry between the Lord God of Israel and Baal, whose sister-consort Anat was, derived from conflicting ideas of religion. One essentially moral and protective of the family social order and the other essentially the pursuit of a semi-magical life-force through rituals involving sexual acts disguised in the mythology of death and rebirth.

This conflict certainly had not come to an end once the temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed, and probably rather a reverse effect had taken place. Spurning belief in a God who had allowed his sanctuary to be destroyed, many had turned back to the worship of "the queen of heaven," since it had ancient roots and had been practiced in the most simple and unpretentious "high-places" of the land.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here's the idea: Sin (all the ways we fail to love God and neighbor) leads to judgment (the consequences of those bad choices), from which God rescues us and restores, though, often, only after we've thrust ourselves over the cliff. What in this sequence makes sense to you? What does not? How well does it match up with what you've always thought the Bible teaches? With what you believe Jesus taught?

But what about after the fall, after the bitter fruit has been eaten? Anyone can see that God doesn't swoop in and save us from any bad thing that might happen to us. Certainly, the Jews of Jeremiah's day found themselves carted off to exile a thousand miles away with, seemingly, no hope of return. Yet, God brought them the promise of return from exile and restoration; a promise kept in and by their Messiah. Is rescue something different from restoration? How would you explain this to someone else? How has God restored you in your own life? Have there been occasions when you felt like you went go over the cliff? Have there been occasions when God has picked you up after the fall?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

My recommendation on reading through Jeremiah is to read it in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. If you don't have a copy, you can read it for free at www.youversion.com. The outline here is from Fretheim's commentary on Jeremiah.

Monday, Jeremiah 11:1-17 Covenant violated	Tuesday, Jeremiah 11:18-12:17 Jeremiah's laments and God's responses
Wednesday, Jeremiah 13 Symbolic actions and violent words	Thursday, Jeremiah 14:1-15:9 It is too late!
Friday, Jeremiah 15:10-21 More laments from Jeremiah	Weekly Joys and Concerns

