

Our passage tonight underscores the necessity of obedience to God’s law
in order to obtain God’s blessing.

In our day there is considerable confusion over what this means *now*.

Some say that the Law was entirely set aside by Jesus.

But Jesus himself said, “I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.”

In response, others say that modern nations need to follow the judicial Law of Moses,
though they will grant that the ceremonial laws have been abrogated.

Some say that scripture is for the *church* – while nations need only follow the moral law.
Others say that rulers should heed the teaching of scripture.

I’m not going to try to solve all these questions tonight.

After all, most of you do not really face those questions from day-to-day.

Rather, most of *you* face the question,

“How does a believer live in the middle of a culture
that *sort of* believes – that *thinks* of itself as vaguely believing –
but does all sorts of stuff that is totally inconsistent
with that profession!?”

Because *that* is where Jeremiah lived.

Jeremiah 26 does not necessarily help us figure out how everything *should be*.

But it does help us think about what it means to follow Jesus
when everything around us is *not* the way it should be.

Our passage tonight helps us to see that Jeremiah was *not* alone.

There were others around him who saw the same problems.

Some of them died trying to change the system.

Others protected Jeremiah *without* getting in trouble themselves.

When the world is not as it should be, there will be a variety of callings necessary
for the people of God to survive!

Last time we talked about Jeremiah’s prophecy of the triumph of Nebuchadnezzar.

That was in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 BC).

Tonight we take a step back:

“In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim...”

This is the dreadful year of 609 B.C. –

the year when everything went wrong!
In the spring, King Josiah had gone out to meet Pharaoh Neco in battle.
King Josiah was a good king – a reforming king –
a king who feared God and did justice in the land.
Thirteen years ago – in 622 B.C. – Hilkiyah the priest had found the scroll of the Law,
and had brought to Josiah.
Josiah heard the Law of Moses – the first king in centuries –
and he repented and believed the word of the LORD –
and brought Jerusalem into conformity to God’s law.

Kings like Josiah are supposed to triumph over their enemies!

But Josiah fell in battle and the armies of Judah were defeated.
Josiah’s son, Shallum (or Jehoahaz), replaced him.
But Pharaoh Neco dethroned the pro-Babylonian Shallum
and set Jehoiakim on the throne,
with the expectation that Jehoiakim would be loyal to him!

And so, in 609 BC, just months after the death of his father Josiah,
and the exile of his brother Shallum:

1. Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon (v1-6 – see Jeremiah 7)

In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: ² “Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. ³ It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds. ⁴ You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, ⁵ and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, ⁶ then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.’”

The problem with Jerusalem is that they will not listen to the law or the prophets.

Notice v 4 – “if you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you” –
and v 5 – “and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets
whom I send to your urgently.”

If you will not listen to the law and the prophets, then God will destroy you –
just like he did to Shiloh.

We heard a more detailed version this sermon back in Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 1-15.

Jeremiah was sent to the temple –
the center of the problem that he has come to address.

If you repent and return to the LORD, then God will let you dwell in this place.
Words are not enough.

We saw in chapter 7 that you must amend your *ways* and your *deeds*.

The problem in Jeremiah’s day was that Jerusalem’s repentance was only half-hearted.

If you *say* that you are sorry, but you keep doing wickedness –
that is not enough.
Repentance is not just a matter of *words*, but of *deeds*.

And Jeremiah warned in chapter 7:

⁴ *Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’*

This is where Jeremiah gets radical.

The people of Israel had often repented.
They had cried out to the LORD, and the LORD saved them from their enemies.
Indeed, Solomon had prayed at the dedication of the temple,
“When your people Israel are defeated before the enemy
because they have sinned against you,
and if they turn again to you and acknowledge your name
and pray and plead with you in this house,
then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel
and bring them again to the land that you gave to their fathers.”
(1 Kings 8:32-34)

Solomon had told them to pray in this house.
The glory of the LORD had filled this house.
Israel’s failures and shortcomings were *covered* in this house!

But God says that the “temple of the LORD” is *not* why I will let you dwell in the land.
As Jeremiah had said in 7:5-7

⁵ *“For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.*

If you change your ways, then I will let you dwell in this place.

This is a dramatic challenge to Jerusalem and Judah.
The warning is very clear:
if you do not change, then you may not live here.

Yes, God promised the land to Abraham and his descendents *forever*.

But that does not mean that any *particular* descendent of Abraham
has a right to live in the land.

This is the point that Paul will make in Romans 4.

The promise was not made to Abraham’s genetics.

The promise was made to Abraham’s *faith*.

Without the faith of Abraham you may not receive the inheritance of Abraham.

And if you have the faith of Abraham,
you will also share the obedience of Abraham.

God will be faithful to his promises – and his salvation is *always* by grace –
but that does not mean that you can ignore his commands!

As Christopher Wright puts it,

“Obedience was never the means of earning the land.
But it was the condition in which the grace-gift
could be possessed and enjoyed....

Obedience is the only way to enjoy the blessing of God’s promise.” (p110)

As the old hymn says,

“Trust and Obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus,
but to trust and obey.”

Judah kept saying, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

But the temple of the Lord cannot save them!

What lies do you believe?

What deceptive words do you trust?

Well, let me ask you this:

what sins do you regularly confess every Sunday?

Jeremiah’s point here is that the people of God

are using the temple as a means of not really dealing with sin.

Their idea was that so long as we all “go to church” and say “sorry,”

we can live however we want!

How often do we do the same thing?

You hear the declaration of pardon every week:

“Believer in Jesus Christ, you are free from the guilt and the power of sin!”

If you respond to that by saying, “Oh, goody,

now I can go back and sin again this week!” –

then you are missing the point of the temple!

“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

By no means!

How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus

were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,

we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:1-4)

Jeremiah also had strong words for this in 7:11:

¹¹ *Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.*

A den of robbers is a safe place for robbers.

Robbers will go out and steal –

and then run back to their den – their hideout – for protection.

Here God asks, is *my temple* a robbers den to you?!

Is this house – which is called by *my name* – a safe place for those who reject my law?

Jesus quotes this verse when he drives out the money-changers.

I think that sometimes we only focus on the fact that they were *money-changers*.

But the idea of a “den of robbers” is not just about robbing.

It is the idea that this is a *safe place* for those who practice injustice.

The temple should not be a safe place for robbers.

The church should never be a “safe place” for those who want to go out and harm others.

And so God calls Jerusalem to remember what he did in Shiloh (v6)

The tabernacle had been set up in Shiloh.

The ark of the covenant had dwelt there –

until the days of Eli, when it was captured by the Philistines –

when the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, died in the battle –

and then, when he heard the news that the ark of God had been captured,

Eli fell over and died –

and then his daughter-in-law died in childbirth,

and as she lay dying, she named the boy “Ichabod” (no-glory)

because the glory had departed from Israel.

We sang about this in Psalm 78 –

and as we sang Psalm 78, you might have come away thinking,

“now that God has raised up David, Shiloh will never happen again!”

Certainly the crowd that was listening to the sermon in Jeremiah 26 –

the crowd that seized Jeremiah and demanded his death –

they thought that Shiloh would never happen again!

2. What to Do with a Renegade Prophet? The Response to Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon (v7-19)

I call Jeremiah a “renegade prophet” because he is not in line with the rest of the prophetic guild.

Verse 8 indicates that the “prophets” were allied with the “priests”

in laying hold of Jeremiah and accusing him of being a false prophet.

a. The Priests and Prophets and All the People: “You Shall Die” (v7-9)

⁷ *The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD.* ⁸ *And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, “You shall die!”* ⁹ *Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant’?”* *And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.*

Moses had been very clear that a prophet who speaks lies in the name of the LORD should die. The prophets in Jerusalem are convinced that Jeremiah is contradicting the promises of God.

But here is the *heartbreaking* part of the story:

Jeremiah had included in his message

the way to avoid God's judgment against Jerusalem:

“It may be they will listen, and everyone turn from his evil way,
that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them
because of their evil deeds.” (v3)

All you have to do is *repent* – *turn* from your evil deeds.

The ensuing trial provides us with insight into the legal system of Jerusalem at the time.

b. The Accusation Against Jeremiah: He Deserves Death (v10-11)

¹⁰ *When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD.* ¹¹ *Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.”*

The officials of Judah are summoned – and they take their seat in the entry of the New Gate.

The priests and prophets were convinced

that Jeremiah is a threat to the political stability of Judah.

They say that he deserves death for one basic reason:

“he has prophesied against this city.”

This is the challenge of adjudicating a case of “false prophecy.”

How do you prove the charge unless you wait for the event?

The priests and prophets think that they have an iron-clad proof:

“he has prophesied against this city.”

Jeremiah has spoken against the political-theological orthodoxy of the day.

This is the city where God's name dwells.

God had established Jerusalem to be a *permanent* house –
unlike Shiloh!

Earlier we sang Psalm 78.

Psalm 78 contrasts Shiloh with Mount Zion.

God “forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind.”

And “he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves.

He built his sanctuary like the high heavens...He chose David his servant.”

Shiloh – tabernacle – temporary.

Mount Zion – temple – permanent.

A literal reading of Psalm 78 would lead you to believe
that Jerusalem is fundamentally different than Shiloh.
The priests and the prophets of Jerusalem are choosing to interpret the scriptures
in a way that reads the curses and warnings as *entirely past*.

Yes, Moses gave those warnings – but they were *fulfilled* at Shiloh.
Now that God has established his covenant with David,
this temple will never be destroyed.

c. Jeremiah’s Defense: the LORD Sent Me (v12-15)

Jeremiah’s defense is very simple:

¹² Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. ¹³ Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you. ¹⁴ But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. ¹⁵ Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.”

God has told Jeremiah that Jerusalem is *not* going to repent.
But God is *always* ready to forgive.
As the prophet Jonah demonstrated,
when *Nineveh* repented, God forgave them!
If even *Nineveh* can repent – then *surely* God will listen if Jerusalem repents!

Verse 14 makes an important distinction between the prophet and his message.
Jeremiah submits to their authority.
“But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you.”
Jeremiah is a model of the sort of non-violent resistance
that Martin Luther King, Jr, would advocate in the 20th century.
He submits to the duly constituted authority –
even as he protests that it is acting unjustly.

Jeremiah’s speech does not appear to have convinced the priests and the prophets.
They remain hostile.
But notice that in verse 16, the people now appear to be on Jeremiah’s side.

d. The Verdict of the Officials (and All the People): Remember Micah and Hezekiah (v16-19)

You see the same thing with Jesus.
The same people who hailed him as the Son of David at the triumphal entry
will call out “crucify him” at his trial.
The people are fickle.

But having heard Jeremiah's defense,
the officials declare their verdict:

¹⁶ Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God."

When they say "in the name of Yahweh our God"
they don't just mean that he claimed to speak for the LORD.
Rather, "he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God"
means that his speaking is consistent with the name and character of Yahweh.

If he had said, "Yahweh says let's go worship idols,"
they would not have replied this way!
Speaking in the name of the LORD requires that the content of what you say
fits the character of the LORD.

But then the rationale for the verdict is found in verses 17-19:

¹⁷ And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying,

Notice who speaks in Jeremiah's defense:
"certain elders of the land."

They are not "officials" – nor even elders in Jerusalem.
They are "country elders" – outsiders in Jerusalem.
Perhaps they are not as intimidated by the temple establishment –
perhaps they see the corruption of Jerusalem like Jeremiah does –
but either way, they remind the assembly of the days of Hezekiah –
100 years earlier.

¹⁸ "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts,

*"Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.'*

¹⁹ Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves."

Micah had been a prophet in the days of Hezekiah.
We usually think of Isaiah – but that may be simply because Isaiah wrote more!
At least in Jeremiah's day, Micah appears to have been the more famous of the two.

The elders of the land remember back to the prophecy of Micah (found in Micah 3:12)
and how Micah had said that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins.

Micah had warned Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah –

Now, think about this:

Micah had said that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins.

That didn't happen.

Does this mean that Micah was a false prophet?

No!

The reason why God sends prophets is to call people to repentance:

If you do not repent, then you will die!

Hezekiah and all Judah responded by *repenting* and asking God for mercy –
and the result was that God relented of the disaster.

When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD

(i.e., his prophecy is consistent with what God has said in the past) –
then we should not kill that prophet!

Remember Hezekiah!

If we put Jeremiah to death, then we will bring great disaster upon ourselves –
because not only are we ignoring his warning,
but we are also guilty of murdering the innocent!

It seems safe to say that there was a portion of the elders of the land –
the elders from the villages –

who are concerned about the trajectory of the Jerusalem establishment.

Yes, Josiah was a great king.

But his son, Jehoiakim, does not appear to be following in his father's steps.

Rather than listen to the prophet, and ask God for mercy,
this king appears fixated on following his own self-absorbed policies.

In this way, you might see an echo of Rehoboam in Jehoiakim.

Solomon was the great king who built the temple.

Rehoboam, his son, refused the wise advice of the elders,
and threatened his people with hard labor.

Rehoboam lost the ten northern tribes for that!

Josiah was the last great king who heeded the law of the LORD.

Jehoiakim his son refused to listen to the elders of the land.

And Jehoiakim will lose the temple itself because of it!

In Jeremiah 51 we will hear about how Jeremiah wrote down his prophecies against Babylon
and sent them in a scroll to Babylon with Seraiah.

Seraiah would bring the message of Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles.

Seraiah's brother, Baruch, will bring the message of Jeremiah to Egypt.

The lesson of Jeremiah for the exiles is part of our story:
Jerusalem fell because they refused to listen to God's law.
Jerusalem fell because they would not heed the prophets.

If you do not listen to the Law and the Prophets, you are doomed.

3. A Tale of Two Prophets: Uriah and Jeremiah (v20-24)

And, as if to illustrate the problem:

²⁰ *There was another man who prophesied in the name of the LORD, Uriah the son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words like those of Jeremiah.*

This reminds us that there were many prophets –
most of whom never wrote anything down.

We know nothing else about Uriah, besides these few verses.
Uriah's words angered the King – just like Jeremiah's did.
But the contrast with Jeremiah is clear.
Because when Uriah heard of the anger of King Jehoiakim,
and how Jehoiakim sought to put him to death,
he became afraid and escaped to Egypt.

Jeremiah never ran away.

There was a good reason for this:

God had promised that he would protect him from his foes.

God gave no such promise to Uriah.

²¹ *And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death. But when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt.* ²² *Then King Jehoiakim sent to Egypt certain men, Elnathan the son of Achbor and others with him,* ²³ *and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and dumped his dead body into the burial place of the common people.*

Remember that Jehoiakim had been established as king by Pharaoh Neco.

Therefore, Neco would be quite happy to help his protégé take care of a minor nuisance.

But why does the book of Jeremiah tell us about Uriah *now*.

Remember the warning of Jeremiah in verse 15 –

“if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves...”

and remember the warning of the elders of the land in verse 19 –

“Did Hezekiah...not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD...”

What does Jehoiakim do?

He puts Uriah to death.

He does not fear the LORD – but he slaughters the prophets.

Indeed, the verb suggests that King Jehoiakim *himself* struck down Uriah with his own sword.

Later, in chapter 36, we will hear that Jeremiah hid from Jehoiakim at times in order to escape his wrath.

²⁴ *But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death.*

Good old Ahikam!

Ahikam had been present on the day when the Book of the Law had been found and was read to King Josiah (2 Kings 22:12).

In fact, his father, Shaphan, was the scribe who read the Book of the Law to Josiah!

Now, 13 years later, Ahikam protects Jeremiah from the wrath of Josiah's son.

Jeremiah will have reason to hide from Jehoiakim later (ch 36 – in the 4th year of Jehoiakim). For now, he relies on the protection of the royal scribe.

But we are much more like Uriah than Jeremiah.

We have no particular promise that God will protect us from harm.

We – like Uriah – only have the promise that God will raise us up at the last day!

We need to think seriously about this.

If you try to call rulers to repentance, you may seriously suffer for it.

It doesn't mean that you shouldn't do it!

But you need to count the cost *before* you do it!

Don't assume that there is a one-size fits all approach.

Uriah was called to die for his faith.

Jeremiah was not – but was called to be equally blunt.

Ahikam was not called to preach – but was called to protect Jeremiah.

The elders of the land were called to remind the people and the rulers of the importance of listening to the prophets.

When things are not the way they should be,

there may be considerable variety in the way that God calls his servants to respond!