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Day 209 - July 28

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## **Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)**

### ***Jeremiah Rebukes an Unfaithful Nation***

**Readings: *Jeremiah 7:1-34; 8:1-22; 9:1-26***

#### ***Reflections:***

- Jeremiah opens with the prophet giving a very strong message while standing at the main entrance leading into the temple. Once again we see the incredibly irreligious message of God to his people. "Do not trust in the 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 alien, 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." Again we see a complete rejection of the form of religion (temple sacrifice and ritual) and a challenging of the people to return to the matters of God's heart (caring for the poor and vulnerable as well as rejecting false gods).
- The people were actually breaking virtually every command found in the Ten Commandments (the moral law) and trusting that by keeping the religious ritual, they were "safe." "A den of robbers" is a place where people who break the law go to hide out after doing all their crimes and believe that they are safe. When Jesus comes, he will use this same phrase and will again use this phrase for the Jewish leaders within the temple. He will use the Greek word ("lestes") which can be translated thief/robber or mercenary/revolutionary. The second translation option of this word would definitely apply to the religious leaders of their day as they secretly hoped for the fall of Rome and intentionally excluded the Gentiles (non-Jews) from having a chance to seek God at the temple. We see once again in the unfolding story of what doesn't work, that religion never ultimately changes the human heart nor does it then satisfy God who is seeking people who have hearts like his, full of compassion and grace for the broken.
- In Jeremiah 7:12, the prophet calls Israel to go back into their own history to see clearly how their own rebellion and rejection of God's heart led to an experience of God's judgment. In the same way, each generation needs to have a firm grip on the history of God's work with people so that we learn the lessons of "what doesn't work" and "what does work."

- Jeremiah 7:16-29 is an extended section just on listening. Essentially God says, “If you refuse to listen to me and do what I say to you through my prophets, then I will refuse to listen to you. In fact, I will even tell my prophets not to pray for you because you have refused to listen to me.” Here we see again how important it is to actually seek out a real relationship with God where you can identify those times God is actually speaking to you. God didn’t just expect the people to get the Torah and then live the rest of their lives knowing, in a sense, what the Bible says. He wants them to actually hear him when he speaks so that he can help them learn to trust him, live dependent lives on him, and be led by him in expressing his compassion to the world. Simply handing us a text sets us up for turning that text into a legal document and then creating our own standard of righteousness. This is why Jesus not only gave the new Torah, his teaching/truth, but also the Spirit of God to guide us into all truth. Only as we listen to God can we truly be in relationship with him and him with us.
- Jeremiah (Jeremiah 7:30-8:3) casts yet another powerful image. It is the image of a valley where Israel had sacrificed their children and in turn, would experience God’s wrath. “Tropheth” or “the valley of Ben Hinnom” or in Jesus’ day “Gehenna” is the valley of destruction, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem. (For more on this place, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gehenna>) It was one of the places Jesus used to describe a place of ultimate judgment. Passages on Gehenna have often been viewed by Christians as describing Hell. In fact, Gehenna was a real place and here in Jeremiah we see one of the most powerful images of this place of judgment. It is called the Valley for Slaughter where people are judged by God and their bones are left open and exposed (not buried respectfully). It is a place where there is no joy or life (no “sounds of joy and gladness” of “voices of bride and bridegroom” – no marriage – this may be a subtle reference to God as husband and Israel no longer being his bride). The image of the bones being exposed suggests that the people aren’t ultimately dead but almost like zombies. Dead skeletons but still lying in torment wishing to be at peace in their death. It is no doubt a reference to the nation going into exile and being held as prisoners (“Wherever I banish them, all the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life”) and their “dead but not dead” state. Now as terrible as this valley of bones is, there will one day be a message of hope. Ezekiel 37:1-14 (see September 2 of this study) returns to this image of the valley of dry bones and prophecies that God will one day resurrect from these bones and place of destruction a mighty army that will serve him. Out of our broken and fallen humanity, God will call out a people who are strong because of the transformational power of his Spirit. What an awesome image of what God wants to do through his people, through the church.
- In Jeremiah 8:8-9 we see again that having God’s written word (in this case the Torah) is not enough. “How can you say, ‘We are wise for we have the law of the Lord,’ when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?” If we don’t have God’s Spirit and listen to what we say, the written word of God, even if it is perfect, will be misused

by us. How many Christian leaders today have fallen into this trap and have mishandled the written word?

- The following verses of Jeremiah 8 and 9 repeat many of the very same warnings and images he has already spoken about. God sending venomous snakes no doubt brought forward images of the judgment against the Israelites in the desert when God sent snakes to kill them (See Numbers 21:6). It would have also reminded them of the ancient serpent in the garden. The power of Satan is not cast out of Israel, but here we see that God may very well be casting it into Israel, handing them over to the enemy to be judged.
- Jeremiah 9:4 and following describes the breakdown of community as well. When we fail to trust and follow God, in time, all of our relationships start to break down. “With his mouth each speaks cordially to his neighbor, but in his heart he sets a trap for him.” This is what happens when self-centeredness takes over and people refuse to live other-centered lives of loving dependence on God.
- Jeremiah 9 helps us see that God weeps over our sin. He weeps over his broken creation (the mountains and desert pastures) and he weeps over his people. Our hearts become shut down from this kind of sensitivity and so God through Jeremiah calls women to openly weep, not for a funeral of a person, but for the death of creation and his people. One of the ways God softens our hearts is by having other people cry for us until we ourselves cry. See Romans 8:26-27 on the Spirit interceding through God’s people with expressions of groans and moans, of deep emotional expression, that goes beyond words but reflects a broken and submitted heart crying out to God.
- Jeremiah concludes with two powerful thoughts. “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom or the strong man in his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me (relationship first and foremost), that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth, for in these I delight.” We are a delight to God when we know him, understand his heart and love the things he loves. It is as simple as that.
- The second powerful thought is: “I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh – (note Israel is listed among their enemies) – and all those who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations, even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.” Here God reminds us that it is not our externals that matter but our internal heart condition. The only value an external sign (like circumcision) has is to remind us of something internal within our heart of hearts. Praise God through Jesus and the work of the Spirit, God changes us from the inside out, transforming our hearts through his love, joy and peace.