

Under Duress

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The Life and Times of Jeremiah

Amend your Ways

Jeremiah 7:1-15, September 27

For two years, in the 11th and 12th grades,
I had a high school English teacher, Miss Zeller,
who was so passionate about good grammar and writing
that she *terrorized* us students with her high demands.

If any of us made a grammatical error in speaking,
she would say, *loudly*, "I beg your pardon?"
We would invariably think she hadn't heard us, and would repeat the error.
She would respond, *even more loudly*, "I beg your pardon?!"

Then we would realize what we had done, and rack our brains,
trying to recall what we had said, and attempt to correct it.

I still have a book from Miss Zeller's classes, *Handbook of English*,
From time to time, I get rid of books I no longer need, but this one I keep.
Actually, there's a stamp from Donegal High School in the front,
so maybe I shouldn't even *have* the book . . .
though I doubt that Donegal still wants a book copyrighted in 1961.

Amid all the trauma of those English classes,
there was one activity I really enjoyed.
Miss Zellers called them writing *précis*, by which she meant a brief summary.
She would give us a wordy and garbled paragraph,
and, according to the *Handbook* (now in my possession),
we were to *rewrite* the paragraph to be clear and concise.
We had to choose our words carefully, and arrange them skillfully
to get the maximum amount of meaning into the least amount of space.

So I would rewrite the garbled paragraphs in a better way.
Then I would see something else I could change, and rewrite it again.
Usually, I would keep finding ways to improve the paragraph—
through *three* or *four* or *five rewritten versions*—
until I got to one that *might* satisfy even Miss Zeller's high demands.

That is what God and we, together, are doing in our lives.

By successive improvements, over time,
the Holy Spirit is helping us to *amend our lives*—
our words and our ways—

and moving us toward our Heavenly Father's high standards, which are measured by the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:13)

The people in Jeremiah's day were *not* amending their ways. They were attending temple services, celebrating the religious holidays, mouthing the right words, and going through the motions. They gave the appearance of genuine faith, but their *lives were a mess*.

In the prophetic message we are looking at this morning, Jeremiah confronted people so powerfully, that they were *infuriated*—so angry that they rushed at Jeremiah and tried to kill him.

This means that, if I preach Jeremiah's message correctly today—if I get this this right—*just in case* you react the same way, I've parked our car right over there, with the doors unlocked—ready to make a mad dash to safety!

Jeremiah 7:15

Last week the word from the Lord through Jeremiah was, "**I Will Contend.**" This week the prophet's word, in a phrase, is "**Amend your ways.**"

We find this inflammatory sermon in Jeremiah 7:1-15. If you have your Bibles, or Bible App, turn with me to Jeremiah, chapter 7.

Jeremiah *not only* courageously preached the words God gave him; the prophet *also* made sure his prophecies were *vivid* and *memorable*. Jeremiah's achieved explosive impact for this sermon by the *time* and *place* that the Lord told him to speak.

At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim, a critical *time* in the life of the nation, as a great crowd of people streamed into the *temple* Jeremiah stood at the most sacred *place* in the entire country. with this prophetic word from the Lord.

I'll begin with verse 1 in the English Standard Version.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in

these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

"For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, 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, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

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

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. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight . . .

The reaction of Jeremiah's listeners, as we learn in chapter 26, verse 8, was this:

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!

Only the *timely* and *courageous* intervention of some elders spared Jeremiah from being lynched by mob violence that day.

To understand the *extreme* response to Jeremiah's message, we need some background.

This temple was the one that King Solomon had built 300 years before. In its holy simplicity, it was magnificent. Through all the ups and downs of the nation, it stood firm

as the place where the Lord God was most fully present with them and a reminder, they thought, that the Lord would *always* protect the temple and the city.

They came to this mistaken conclusion 103 years before, when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem. The city had no alternative but to surrender until the prophet Isaiah assured King Hezekiah:

“Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the king of *Assyria*: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

The city—and the temple—were spared, as Isaiah prophesied, and the people concluded that this was a word from the Lord—*for all time*. The temple of the Lord, and the city Jerusalem, would *always* be secure.

Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, was the next king, and reigned for 55 years, for over half a century. He was a thoroughly bad man. His government was totally corrupt. He actively promoted pagan worship. He filled the temple with idols, magicians, and prostitutes. He was absolutely the worst king the nation ever had.

At long last, he died, and his grandson Josiah was placed on the throne at 8 years of age. The young king was determined to reverse **the evil** of his predecessors **and** began by cleaning up the temple.

As the temple was being repaired, the workers found an old book, the book of Deuteronomy. When the book was read aloud to the king, he would have heard this:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns

away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deuteronomy 30:15-18)

Josiah recognized that *this* promise of blessing & protection was conditional, *contingent on* keeping the commands and statutes and rules of the Lord. In a swift response, Josiah initiated a thoroughgoing reform. Foreign cults were suppressed. Pagan priests and "sacred" prostitutes were banished. Conspicuous crime was stopped. And true worship practices were restored in the temple in Jerusalem.

Having done all this, the people relaxed. The divine demands, they thought, had all been met. They could anticipate the fulfillment of Deuteronomy's promises.

But 12 years after the reform was initiated, Josiah was killed and his army crushed by the Egyptians. The people felt abandoned and double-crossed by the covenant promises. "We looked for peace," they cried, "but no good came, for a time of healing, but, behold, sudden terror! (Jeremiah 8:15).

They rushed to the temple, the *one remaining support* of their shaken faith in God, and feverishly participated in its festivals and ceremonies.

At *this time*, just after Josiah's death perhaps even at the inauguration of the new king, Jehoiakim, when the nation was most *vulnerable, insecure, and fearful*, people clung to the temple as the last *sure* place of support and security, and that's *when* and *where* Jeremiah preached this message—*and he kicked that one support right out from under them.*

It's no wonder the people were so mad they tried to kill him.

Jeremiah saw that, despite all the *outward* changes of reform, the *inward* changes in the people were barely skin-deep. Yes, *they were to worship* at the temple, but also to amend their ways.

The people had taken the *whole* truth of Deuteronomy and reduced it to a single phrase—to a mantra, a slogan, a cliché.

Genuine Spiritual Turnaround

My friend, Elmer Martens, in his commentary on *Jeremiah*, writes this:

Tradition-worn clichés can be deceptive. When people tout a cliché without a genuine experience of a spiritual turnaround together with appropriate actions, they are like the Jerusalem temple worshippers [who] announced their orthodoxy, "This is the temple [of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.]"

Are we doing this today?

Are we hanging on to *clichés* that

become substitutes for "a genuine experience of spiritual turnaround?"

If so, what might those be?

If we are basing our relationship with God on *comparisons*, we may say:
I'm as good as the next guy, the next guy, and next guy.

If we are trusting *in our good life*, we may say:

The good outweighs the bad, outweighs the bad, outweighs the bad.

These clichés are not even true.

What about some that are *valid*, but *partial*?

If we are Pentecostal or Charismatic, we may say:

I speak in tongues, I speak in tongues, I speak in tongues.

If we are Roman Catholic, we may say:

I take the Eucharist, the Eucharist, the Eucharist.

If we are a member of a Bible church, we may say:

I believe the Bible is inerrant, inerrant, inerrant.

If we are evangelical, we may say:

I'm born again, born again, born again.

If you have been listening to my preaching, you may say:

I am saved by grace, saved by grace, saved by grace.

And this is all well and good; it's fine as far as it goes,
as long as we have truly encountered Jesus, trusted him as our Savior,
and are experiencing a *genuine spiritual turnaround*.

The good news, for us who *have* trusted Jesus as Savior, is that the Holy Spirit is *already working* within us to amend our ways.

The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:6

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

But we do have a part in this.

A few paragraphs later, the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, as you have always obeyed, so now . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

As we work to amend our ways, the Spirit of God is working within us to give us the will—the desire—and the strength to obey him.

We begin with big sins, the ones named in the Ten Commandments, where Jeremiah begins in the second point of his message, verses 9-10:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go to other gods you have not known, and then come and send before me in his house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing these abominations?

If there is any wrongdoing in our life named in the Ten Commandments, as the most foundational summary of God's ways, we begin by crying out to God for help, and getting all the human help we need, to make the necessary changes.

If we are complicit in *social* wrongdoing, we extricate ourselves, to the extent that we can, as Jeremiah demands in his *first* point in his sermon, verses 5-7:

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, 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 harm, then I will let you dwell in this place.

Boulders, Rocks, and Pebbles

The way the Spirit strives within us to amend our ways can be illustrated by thinking of a family that buys property in the PA mountains, sight unseen, with the intention of building a cabin.

The family goes to the land in the spring, ready to start building immediately. They discover that the land is covered with *boulders*, so they spend the spring and early summer removing all the boulders.

They step back to admire their good work and realize how many *rocks* are strewn across the property, so they spend the rest of the summer removing all the rocks, expecting to come back the next spring and start to build.

But when they come back in the spring, with their building supplies, they see that, over the winter, the ground has frozen and then thawed, and pushed lots of *pebbles* to the surface; Having done so much work already, they sigh, grab buckets, and pick up all the pebbles.

When we come to Jesus for his mercy and forgiveness, we are *often aware* of big sins in our lives, like boulders, and we cry out for his help to be rid of them.

Then we relax, thinking all is well, until we notice rock-sized sins. *misbehaviors* that we didn't even know were wrong. But now they bother us, and we want to change; and, again, with the help of the Spirit, we amend our ways.

For awhile we think we are pretty good . . . until some *attitudes* crop up that are not at all like Jesus, and we realize we have to "work out our salvation" in still deeper ways.

That is how the Spirit amends our ways. the *boulders*, the *rocks*, and the *pebbles*—all must go—in an authentic, ongoing turnaround, measured by the full stature of Christ.

We do not amend our ways by our own *grit, determination, and willpower*.
No, God and we, together, amend our ways.

By successive improvements, over time,
the Holy Spirit is amending our attitudes, our words, and our ways,
progressively moving us toward our Heavenly Father's high standards.

Our part is to stay close to Jesus.

Whoever abides in me [Jesus said] and I in him, he it is that bears
much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

And we partner with Jesus in this transformative work:

Therefore, as you have always obeyed, so now . . . work out your own
salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both
to will and to work for his good pleasure.

And when we do, this is the promise:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you [referring to
Jesus] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

By the grace of God, we *can* amend our ways
and as we make progress, we can rejoice
in a life of increasing *righteousness* and *peace* and *joy*.

Warren L. Hoffman
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