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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“FALSE RELIGION”
Jeremiah 7:1-8; Matthew 23

☑ On Monday, March 14 a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck Japan. It was, by itself, destructive enough; but the 33-foot tsunami that followed inflicted greater devastation. In addition, four power stations were damaged and released significant amounts of nuclear radiation.

That trio of tragic events seems emblematic of life in the 21st century. People we trusted are letting us down. Institutions we counted on are proving unreliable. Truths we took for granted are being called into question.

Politics, the economy, spiritual values, weather patterns, it is all in flux – sometimes for better, often for worse. Threat and anxiety appear to be the new constant in North American culture. We are like {Amos 5:19} the man who flees a hungry lion only to meet an angry bear, who then runs into his house, slams the door, and collapses with relief against the wall – **“only to have a [venomous] snake bite him.”**

No wonder we, as a group, are quick to follow any god that promises safety and confidence! Counterfeit gods like coercive power, material wealth, and false religion.

I say *“counterfeit,”* for while those things can make us *feel* completely safe the protection they provide is limited in scope and temporary in duration. Worse than that, it lulls their victims into complacency, inhibiting

them from turning to the Living God who alone gives genuine safety and confidence.

One of the most compelling of these is false religion. That includes the obvious ones (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc.); but it also takes subtler forms which, at first glance, closely resemble the real thing.

Please turn to Jeremiah 7.

Verses 1-2: **“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ‘Stand at the gate of the LORD’s house and there proclaim this message: ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.’”**

The year is 608 B.C. The place is Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. The target audience is **“all you people of Judah.”**

Multitudes of worshipers pass through the gate, especially during the pilgrimage festivals. They come singing psalms, reciting prayers, and presenting offerings in observance of the law. Some will also listen to teachers explain the Scriptures, in particular the cherished Book of Deuteronomy. It was literally lost, forgotten for many decades, until it was found 14 years ago.

Its rediscovery fanned into flame a revival that was already flickering among God’s people. It started with the young King Josiah, who {2 Chr 34:2} **“began to seek the God of his [forefather] David.”** He pulled down the pagan altars and smashed the idols, and ordered that the temple of the Lord must be restored to its former glory.

In the process, a priest came across a dusty scroll of Deuteronomy. The king gathered his people, {2 Chr 34:30-33, NRSV} **“read [it] aloud... and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow [him], keeping his commandments ... with all his heart and all his soul...he had everyone”** else make the same pledge, and compelled them to **“worship the LORD their God,”** whom **“they [have] not [turned] away from following”** ever since.

It is to these people that God speaks through his prophet. His sermon is a message of potential safety interwoven with a terrifying threat, a declaration of possible comfort entwined with a frightful warning.

Verses 3-4 and 8: **“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. 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!’ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.”**

The geo-political context sheds some light on his words. Judah is located between the aging but still-formidable Egyptian Kingdom to the west, and the rising Neo-Babylonian Empire to the east. Both superpowers aspire to control the land bridge between Asia and Africa – that is, the territory of Judah.

But are the Hebrew people concerned? No!

“The temple of the LORD” is God’s residence, the instrument of his earthly work and proof that he is blessing Judah. It is the sign that they are special and their place in the world is exceptional. God will not let them fall, not after they destroyed the idols, restored his house, and renewed

the covenant. They feel completely safe. **“This is the temple of the LORD!”**

To which Holy God says in verses 5-7:

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, in the land I gave your [ancestors] forever and ever.

{Ps 75:3} **“When the earth and all its people quake,”** the LORD is the one **“who [holds] its pillars firm.”** Keeping fellowship with God is what enables us to abide in true safety and confidence. Breaking fellowship with him exposes us to danger and doubt.

The people of Judah have mistaken temple worship for fellowship with God. They see no incongruity between worshiping one day, then going out and {7:6, NLT} **“exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows”** the next. After all, they have **“the temple of the LORD!”**

And so he implores: **“Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.”**

We should not infer from this that worship is not important. God commands and is worthy of it.

Neither should we suppose that acts of compassion, mercy and justice earn salvation and guarantee security. They do not.

God is saying this: religion that detaches spiritual life (worship, Bible study, and prayer) from social, economic, legal and political relationships and actions is false, and any feelings of safety it gives are untrue.

Please turn to Matthew 23. This chapter records a sermon called “The Seven Woes.” In it the Messiah repeatedly hammers his enemies with the phrase: **“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”**

In verse 13 Jesus denounces them for preventing others from entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

In verse 15 he blasts them for making their converts **“twice [the children] of hell as [themselves].”**

In verses 16-22 the Lord criticizes them for breaking their oaths.

In verses 23-24 he condemns them for scrupulously adhering to the minutia of the law while neglecting **“justice, mercy and faithfulness.”**

In verses 25-26 Jesus slams them for keeping up external appearances while **“inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”**

In verses 27-28 he reviles them for acting like they are spiritually alive when they are dead on the inside.

In verses 29-32 the Lord blasts them for claiming to honor the Old Testament prophets while living in opposition to their teachings.

Christ’s harangue comes as no surprise to those of us who cut our teeth on flannel-graph Bible stories, but it is a horrible shock to the Pharisees.

Keep in mind that they bear little resemblance to their forebears who chanted **“This is the temple of the**

LORD!” They go to the temple and perform all the worship rituals commanded in the Scriptures, but they do not presume that it guarantees authentic fellowship with God or earthly security.

Their core conviction is that what really matters is practical obedience to God’s law – and they are right! **“We [can be confident] that we have come to know [God] if we obey his commands”** (1 John 2:3).

They also agree with Jesus that {Mt 22:37-40} **“the Law and the Prophets hang on”** the two great **“commandments”**: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”** and **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

The big question (and the point of radical conflict between Jesus and most of these guys) is: what does obedience look like? How is it defined?

To their credit, the Pharisees strive to obey the Law in every circumstance. But they have made three fatal errors: ① they have developed additional rules (mostly in an effort to avoid accidental disobedience) which they require others to obey; ② they overstress outward obedience and neglect inward transformation; and ③ they use the dietary and purity regulations to marginalize others (women, the needy, the sick, foreigners).

The scribes and Pharisees have mistaken legalism for fellowship with God. They do not see that in their zeal for the letter of the law they frequently overlook and violate the spirit of the law.

We should not infer from this that obedience to God's law is optional. Jesus has said: **“If you love me, you will obey what I command”** (John 14:15).

Neither should we suppose that self-discipline and good works are at odds with Christian discipleship. They are not.

I believe God is saying that religion that is legalistic, defined by externals, or oriented to self-protection (valuing only one's personal salvation) is false, and any feeling of safety it gives is untrue.

The fools in Jeremiah 7 and Matthew 23 are quite different, but they have this in common: both groups serve the counterfeit god of false religion.

Their false religions closely resembled the real thing, but they inhibited both groups from turning to the Living God. Jeremiah's people rejected him and his message – and to their shock were absolutely steamrolled by the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The scribes and Pharisees (with a few exceptions) rejected the Messiah and his message – and failed to receive the security of abundant, eternal life in Christ.

Friends: let us lay down the burdensome, soul-killing counterfeit god of false religion, and receive the genuine safety and confidence that Jesus gives.