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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“JEREMIAH MUST DIE!”
Jeremiah 26:1-24

Kind and merciful God is reaching out this moment, ready to provide us with what we need most. I don't mean money or possessions or easy circumstances (though the Creator has been generous with those). I am talking about greater gifts: *αγαπε* love, forgiveness, cleansing, reformation in Christ's likeness, the fruit of the Spirit, partnership in his Kingdom mission, and eternal life.

◆ Some of us are receiving Sovereign LORD's goodness in a trickle, if at all. His rebuke, correction, guidance or disquiet taste unpalatable. His affirmation, encouragement, strength and peace do not fully satisfy. We will be no closer to God when we leave the sanctuary as when we entered it. (This is Group A.)

◆ But some of us are already receiving his goodness in abundance today. The Living God is flooding our hearts and minds with rebuke or affirmation, correction or encouragement, guidance or strength, holy disquiet or peace – every blessing that we need to be drawn into deeper, closer communion with him. (This is Group B.)

Jeremiah 26 features the same two groups.

□ Verse 1 begins: **“Early in”** (lit., **“In the beginning of”**) **“the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah.”** So the time is most likely 609 B.C.

□ The event is the preaching of a message **“from the LORD,”** in YHWH's temple. Verses 1-2 **“this word”** comes to Jeremiah: **‘Stand in the courtyard of the**

LORD's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word.’”

Who sends the prophet? The LORD does. Who commands the prophet to preach? The LORD does. Who selects his words? The LORD does.

■ Verses 4-6 summarize the sermon. It is not the feel-good message the people want to hear! **“This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.”**

○ Does this sound familiar? It is the condensed version of Jer 7:1-15, in which the Living God warns...

① You are hypocrites. {Jer 7:5-6, 9-11} **“Change your ways and your actions ... do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow.... ‘Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury... then come and stand before me? I have been watching!’”** And,

② You are idolaters. {Jer 7:4, 8} **“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!’ ...you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.”**

○ Then in 7:12 he tells them to go and see Shiloh, which was the religious capital until Holy God destroyed it because of the wickedness of his people.

○ So his words in verse 14 could hardly be more disturbing: **“what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in.”**

Keep in mind that in their eyes, the temple is...

- God’s sacred dwelling, where they {Ps 42:2} **“meet with God”**;
- the only place where they can atone for their sins and receive forgiveness;
- the evidence and guarantee of their special relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;
- God’s earthly throne, and thus Judah’s real capitol;
- the national museum, containing the Ark of the Covenant, the tablets of the Law, and so forth; and,
- Judah’s arsenal, the icon of protection: they are convinced that the physical existence of the temple guarantees their national security.

The temple is the national cathedral *and* local church, the capitol building, the Smithsonian *and* the Library of Congress, our great monuments and memorials, the Pentagon, the U.S. flag, and the Statue of Liberty – all rolled into one.

This is where the audience divides into two groups. Group A is no closer to the Living God as they leave the temple than when they entered it. Group B is drawn into deeper, closer communion with YHWH. These groups are distinguished by their different responses to the word.

◆ Group A includes the priests, the false prophets, and initially **“all the people”** (the common folk who are in the courtyard at that moment).

□ In Jer 26:7-11 they seize Jeremiah and say: **“You must die! Why do you prophesy in the LORD’s name**

that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?” The judges (called **“the officials of Judah”**) take **“their places at the entrance of the New Gate”** and the priests and false prophets file the charges. They demand the ultimate punishment: **“This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city...!”**

☞ They respond to the word with pride, resentment, and rejection.

□ Jeremiah answers in vv 12-15. He has spoken in obedience to God. If they reform and obey the LORD he will not send this disaster. **“As for me,”** he says, **“do with me whatever you think is good and right.”** But, he adds, **“If you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.”**

□ Verse 16 records a surprising development. The judges and **“all the people”** say: **“This man should not be sentenced to death! He has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God.”** They speak more from fear than conviction. Still, their words help Jeremiah.

◆ Group B includes **“some of the elders of the land,”** spiritual leaders from smaller communities.

□ In verses 17-19 they step forward and remind the entire assembly that the prophet Micah:

“prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.’

“Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the LORD and seek his favor? And did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves!”

👉 They respond to the word with humility, attention, and acceptance.

Why do Groups A and B respond so differently?

◆ Let’s deal with Group A first.

☐ In verses 8-9 they say, “**Why do you prophesy in the LORD’s name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?**” And verse 11: “**he has prophesied against this city...!**” They speak the truth, but not the whole truth!

☐ Listen to what they leave out. In verses 4, 5 and 6 Jeremiah announces the word of God, that: “**If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, and if you do not listen to the words of my prophets... then I will make this house like Shiloh.**”

The threat is real, but it is not yet unavoidable. The hour is late, but not quite too late. YHWH is still reaching out, offering life and salvation.

☼ Without the “**if... then**” this is a death sentence. With it, the message is an invitation to be saved through repentance and reformation.

☐ That is God’s purpose in putting such hard words in his prophet’s mouth! Jeremiah 26:2-3: “**Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster...**”

★ Group A does not get it. **They assume that God’s goodness is always revealed in gifts that are easy and pleasant to receive:** affirmation, encouragement, peace, health and wealth. It does not cross their minds that rebuke, correction, disquiet, and strict guidance are the gifts they really need God to give them.

◆ Group B is different. They quote Micah, whose stern words inspired repentance. As a result YHWH forgave Judah and spared the nation from destruction.

○ Group B has taken to heart Proverbs 3:11-12 {NIV/ NRSV/NLT}: “**do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, for the LORD reproves the one he loves.**” They understand that {Heb 12:10-11} “**God disciplines us for our [benefit].**” Naturally, “**No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.**”

★ They perceive that Jeremiah’s unlovely warning is the blessing they need. Judgment is the

consequence of persistent sin, and returning to YHWH is the only way out; but Judah is not about to renounce hypocrisy and idolatry without a kick in the pants. Hence, this provocative sermon is a far better gift than any superficially uplifting, easy-on-the-ears pep talk.

Jeremiah 26 is not just a record of history. It is Sovereign God's living and active word for us. It is his desire that each and every one of us experience his goodness in abundance.

◆ The question is, *Are we Group A*, which receives only a trickle because we refuse the fullness of God's blessing?

◆ Or *are we Group B*, flooded with blessing because we accept his affirmation *and* rebuke, his encouragement *and* correction, his strength *and* strict guidance, his peace *and* holy disquiet as generous gifts that draw us closer to our kind and merciful God?

May it truly be said of us that {Jn 1:16} **“From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another”!**