

# THE SERMON NOTEBOOK

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Jeremiah's America, # 5

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SUBJECT: MISPLACED FAITH

TITLE: SERMON FIT FOR A TEMPLE

TEXT: JEREMIAH 7:1-27

INTRODUCTION. David Limbaugh, author of the bestseller, *PERSECUTION: HOW LIBERALS WAGE WAR AGAINST CHRISTIANITY*, was interviewed on Hannity and Colmes, December 26, 2003. They were seeking answers to their question, "Is there a war being waged against Christianity in America today?" In response to a question by Alan Colmes, who is Jewish, liberal, and a democrat, David Limbaugh stated, "There is a persecution going on in America, and it is not against religion, it is against Christianity." He sites court case after court case to support his claim. He and Sean Hannity pointed out the fact that the attacks by the ACLU against Christianity were intensified going into the 2003 Christmas season. There seems to be the attitude that, "We have the Christians down and they are not fighting back, so we can continue to attack them." Alan Colmes tried to make the point that you cannot call it a persecution when no one is being beaten, imprisoned, or killed for their faith. Limbaugh stressed that the persecution of Jews did not begin with the slaughter of large numbers of Jews, but with attacks like we are seeing against Christians in America today.

What has been the response of the church to this persecution? First, there are a few who see the problem and are beginning to resist the persecution. Sadly, many church members distance themselves from those who are getting involved in the spiritual warfare, fearing any identification with those "right-wing" fundamentalists.

Second, some have joined the enemy of the church. Every time someone attacks Christianity there will be some liberal preacher who will defend the attackers. There will be others who express their guilt, and apologize to those three people who contacted the ACLU - they "feel their pain." The media parades the Rev. Barry Lynn out to tell us how bad it would be for an atheist or a Muslim to have to walk by a display of the Ten Commandments and feel left out. Thus, we have the tyranny of the minority, as they prevail in case after case. This is not new. When I was in seminary I had a professor who applauded the Supreme Court decision that took prayer out of our school. I also spent some time with a highly placed denominational worker who unleashed a verbal attack on the president of the seminary because he had lost one professor (who did not believe in the Trinity or a personal devil, and did not think the virgin birth mattered) and he was in danger of losing another liberal theology professor (who doubted the Trinity, Satan, and the virgin birth).

There is a third response from the church - apathy. Millions of people who profess a faith in Christ seemingly couldn't care less. It is as though it does not effect them. There may be a fourth group, though they might be grouped with number three. These are the people who "just trust the Lord and

don't worry about it." After all, they reason, with all those churches spread all over America, the Lord is not going to let anything happen to us. We were discussing the creation/evolution debate once at a pastor's conference when a dictatorial, political associational missionary said, "you know what I think about that? I don't worry about it!" In that rural area, that settled it for many of the pastors present. Creation doesn't matter?! Genesis is the foundation book for the rest of the Bible. And Creation doesn't matter?!!

We find a disturbing parallel in ancient Israel, recorded in the seventh chapter of Jeremiah - Jeremiah's first Temple Sermon.

## I. GOD SENT JEREMIAH TO THE TEMPLE WITH A MESSAGE, 7:1-27.

### A. First, Let Us Look at the Background.

This did not happen in a vacuum. It is a part of a broader story, a story they all should have known - in fact, they did know it, they just refused to pay attention. Over one hundred years earlier, God sent Amos and Hosea to warn their kinsmen in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that if they did not repent and return to Him, He was going to raise up the Assyrian Empire and use it to judge Israel. They would be destroyed as a nation, with only a small remnant which joined itself with Judah being saved.

The Lord also sent Isaiah and Micah to the Southern Kingdom to warn them that if they did not repent, He would use the Assyrians to judge them. If they still would not repent, he would break the power of Assyrian and raise up Babylon to judge Judah. They would be taken into captivity for seventy years.

They had been warned over the years but they paid no attention. Then the Lord sent Jeremiah to warn them but they would not listen to him. After all, they were they in Jerusalem, they had the prophets, they had the priests, they had the sacrificial system, and they had the temple - the temple of the Lord. He would have to defend it! Had they forgotten what happened when Hophni and Phenehas, sons of Eli the priest, when they took the Ark of the Covenant out to try to force God's hand in a battle against the Philistines? Apparently so.

God is love, but God is also holy, and the holiness of God demands judgment against those who rebel against Him. The love of God holds out mercy and hope, but those who reject the love of God must face the holiness of God. Again and again, He tried to reach His Chosen People, to persuade them to repent and return to Him. This time, God sent Jeremiah to stand in one of the seven gates of the temple court and deliver His message. This was shortly after the accession of Jehoiakim to the throne of Judah following the death of his father Josiah, around 608 B.C.

### B. The Message Was as Simple as It Was Shocking, 7:3-4.

#### 1. There was still hope, 7:3.

*“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.”*

This is the theme of the message. God’s desire is not the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, or the deportation of His people. He has been longsuffering and patient with them, but nothing had turned them back to Him. He had tried blessing them but it did not help. He had withheld His blessings, but they refused to return to Him. They preferred idolatry, materialism, immorality, and all the sins of the world to the holiness of God. They had been warned time and again, but they refused to repent. Now, there is one more warning - they had better listen because the time was running out on them.

2. They are warned against a misplaced faith, 7:4.

*“Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’”*

When he says, “Do not trust deceptive words,” is He implying that they had been trusting in deceptive words? It seems that false prophets were deceiving the people with promises that God would never permit the temple to be destroyed. God tells Jeremiah to tell them these were “lying words” (NKJV). Their priests, prophets, national leaders, and ordinary citizens were convinced that since God had promised David and his descendants a kingdom that would stand forever (2 Sam. 7:12, 13), the temple would stand against any and every enemy. God would not let anything happen to it. Some wonder if the threefold repetition of the words “the temple of the Lord” may have held some superstitious or magical significance for the people of Jeremiah’s day.

In December, 2005, I turned on Fox News at noon and listened as they were discussing the execution of Tookie Williams in California. The “fair and balanced” network often presents two sides of an issue, but it often lets the liberal “have the last word.” They interviewed the step-mother of one of the victims of Tookie William, who as my son John points out, founded the Crips, who have been responsible for hundreds of murders. As a prosecutor, he is more than a little familiar with youth gangs. The step-mother had witnessed the execution, and though she found no pleasure in his death, believed it was right, in part because it is the law in California.

Next, they turned to a very young priest who just happened to have one of those prissy little smiles that reminded me of the little guy in the Pen and Teller comedy duo. He smiled, assured the step-mother that he appreciated her feelings but he had to disagree with her because execution is violence against another person. Tookie Williams had made this lady’s step-son lie on the floor and then he stepped over and shot him in the back twice with a shot gun. Then he bragged to his buddies about how the man “gurgled” after he shot him. And a lethal injection is violence? Tookie Williams committed four brutal, violent murders. I wondered if this priest has ever read God’s prescription for cold blooded murderers. You talk about violence! They were told to take the premeditated murderer outside the city and stone him to death. That is a violent execution.

I find it interesting that those oppose the death penalty are quick to point out the number of people who have been convicted of murder, who have later been exonerated. I wonder if they would want that kind of reasoning applied to everything else. Suppose a doctor had tried laser surgery on a patient back when laser surgery was in its infancy, and the laser had cut through an artery and the patient bled to death. Would we have canceled all laser surgery? From that moment until today for fear that another mistake might have been made? How do we know they haven't been made? They have pointed out that DNA evidence has proved some convicted felons to be innocent. Right! Now, DNA evidence can be used to fine-tune the judicial process.

3. Even in the warning there is hope, 7:5-6.

*“For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.”*

There is hope - if they repent and return to Yahweh, the God of the temple. They must return, not to symbol, ritual, or ceremony, but to the living God. If they “truly” repent, if the “truly” practice justice, if the genuinely repent and obey the Lord, He would let them continue to live in the Land of Promise. However, He is not going to be deceived by a shallow, hollow show of repentance. Nor will He be deceived by a show of religion - “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

Their faith must be in the true and living God, not in any symbol of His presence, whether the Ark of the Covenant, the temple, or any ritual or ceremony. Their faith must be in the living God. He desires a relationship, not religiosity.

C. Judah Was Closer to Judgement Than They Could Imagine, 7:8-15.

Let me read this passage and highlight the really shocking parts:

Verse 8: “Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit” - Their prophets were lying to them.

Verse 9: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know...” - They were worse than backsliding Israel (Ch. 3).

Verse 10: “And then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'? - Religion had become a license to sin.

Verse 11: “Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the LORD” - Hypocrites are at their worst when they use God's house for their own selfish purposes, a sin Jesus condemned when He cleansed the temple.

Verse 12: “But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel” - Joshua had erected the tabernacle at Shiloh, but when the people of Israel refused to repent God destroyed it.

Verse 13: - Here is the BECAUSE - “And now, because you have done all these works,’ says the LORD, ‘and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer” - They resisted God at every turn, rebelling against His every effort to persuade them to repent and follow Him.

Verse 14-15 - Here we have the THEREFORE: “therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren; the whole posterity of Ephraim” - If God would destroy Shiloh He would destroy the temple in which they placed their faith. They wanted no part of God, but they loved his temple with a selfish, nationalistic, hypocritical love. The temple was their good luck charm! How ridiculous, you say. And you would be right. Has everyone who wears a cross today taken up the cross to follow Jesus?

#### D. This Treacherous Nation Was Almost Beyond the Reach of Prayer, 7:16-20.

Verse 16 - “Therefore **do not pray for this people**, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you” - They are beyond the reach of prayer? I have heard preachers say that God answers all prayer: He either says yes, no, or let Me do it My way. However, in this verse we find that God will refuse to answer Jeremiah’s prayer. He can turn a deaf ear - why should he listen to hypocrites? He will not even listen to Jeremiah’s prayer for them.

Verses 17-20: “**Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah** and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough, to **make cakes for the queen of heaven**; and they **pour out drink offerings to other gods**, that they may provoke Me to anger. Do they provoke Me to anger?’ says the LORD. ‘Do they not provoke themselves, to the shame of their own faces?’ **Therefore** thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, **My anger and My fury will be poured out on this place**; on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground. And it will burn and not be quenched.”

The people of Judah thought they could live like the devil and still come under the protection of God just because they had the temple - “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” Well, He was about to remove their security blanket. But even after this warning they would not believe it. How could God destroy His temple? This was by far the most beautiful house of worship God had ever had. The Lord has just said, if you do not believe I will destroy the temple, look at Shiloh. The tabernacle served the same purpose for Him as the temple - and if they thought the temple was a beautiful and expensive edifice, they should see what He has seen throughout eternity. When Heaven is your home you are not going to be overly impressed with any physical building.

## II. THERE IS A MESSAGE FOR AMERICA IN JEREMIAH'S TEMPLE SERMON.

### A. The Moral Climate Is Mirrored in America today.

America is guilty of the same sins: drunkenness, drug abuse, immorality, violence, lying, cheating, political corruption, graft, oppression of those less fortunate, greed, prejudice, envy, covetousness with all the sins it spawns. Pornography is a national obsession. Millions are addicted to gambling. In addition, we have added the false gods. We welcomed millions of people from the Far East and they brought with them their false gods and before long famous people were embracing Eastern Mysticism, Buddhism, animism, and a host of other gods. Now we have added Islam, and with it a threat to everything this nation has always held dear. Muslims have to be taken into consideration in Germany, France, and Russia. Why do you think those nations refused to support America in the war against terrorism in Iraq? The riots in France in October of 2005 illustrate the problem for those nations that have a significant percentage of Muslims. Riots in Australia in December, 2005, underscore the message.

### B. Like Ancient Israel, America Is in a Backslidden Condition Today.

With the acceptance of evolution, America plotted its course from theism to naturalism, or materialism, with many people exchanging Christianity for Humanism. Once you accept godless evolution you open the door to a whole new attitude toward that which God calls sin. If God is not the source and origin of your life, how could He be the judge at the end of it? If you have no Creator you need no Redeemer - if you do not have Genesis One you do not need John One. If you do not have Genesis 3:15 you do not need John 3:16. Little did those Americans somewhere between 1925 and 1935 realize that they rejected the Creator of the universe for the universe itself. They arrogantly rejected the Designer for random chance. Before you say that only a small percentage really accepted evolution, let me remind you who they were. They were the Dewys and the Skinners, who had the ear of the great philanthropists of the day, the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Fords, and others who channeled great fortunes into the institutions those experts in education selected for them. The institutions they selected were the ones that taught young teachers to teach evolution and reject creation. Within a generation evolution was being taught in Christian colleges.

What has been the legacy of evolution? Abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, moral relativity. Where was the church when American universities were riding the train of evolution right into the post-Christian period of our history? They were compromising at every juncture! They were adopting theories that would accommodate evolution while maintaining the claim that they believed in the Bible. The American version of liberalism was spawned, incubated, and nurtured under the umbrella of evolution.

When the modern Creationist movement was begun, who fought Henry Morris, Dwayne Gish and other creation scientists almost as vehemently than the scientists who totally embraced evolution? Sadly, they were those professors who had adopted some compromise or accommodation theory: the Day-Age Theory, Gap Theory, or some other form of theistic evolution - God created the

building blocks and then stood back and let it evolve naturally. After all, modern science tells us the world is two billion - no make that six billion - maybe we had better make it twenty billion years old. Of course when they discover that their theory would not work without a few more billion years, they feel fully justified in adding a few billion years. Christians who accept evolution have not stopped to consider how inefficient evolution would be for God. Nor have they considered the fact that if you spell your God with a Capital "G" you should have no trouble accepting the Genesis account of creation, especially since many modern scientists today tell us that available evidence supports special creation rather than random chance.

Much of America today is a moral cesspool, feeding upon, defending, and being entertained by that which our grandparents would have called filth. Children today can hardly carry on a conversation without references to body parts and body functions. My wife has sixth graders to say, "Why can't I say that? I say it at home." She says, "But you are not going to say it here!" Sadly, now we have some teachers and administrators who are using the same language. Like Isaiah, we live among a people of unclean lips.

### C. The Church Is Not Without Guilt.

1) Liberalism spread from Germany to England, to New England, and then across America, spreading doubt, lies, and cynicism through churches and denominations. I watched a liberal in action in a classroom when Dr. Carl F. H. Henry was invited to speak to combined systematic theology classes. My professor's behavior was at first surprising, then incredulous. Before Dr. Henry got very far in the lecture, my professor raised his hand and demanded very loudly, "Do you mean God has a nose like mine and ears like mine?" (He was pointing to his nose and ears with jerky motions.) Dr. Henry paused and listened until the professor finished and then calmly said, "I don't think that is relevant," and continued the lecture. My professor gave a sudden jerk, dropped his head, slumped in his chair and waited for the bell. A student who had swallowed his liberalism told a group of us that the professor's wife called one of his favorite students and asked, "Will you come over here and try to calm (my husband) down? He's been cursing that man all evening."

I was asked to teach a book at a church in the Mississippi Delta about two years later. The pastor was one of that professor's disciples. He was also a veteran and several years older than I. I sat in his office before speaking at the evening worship service and he told me that a lady had spoken to him that morning and said that she was beginning to wonder if there really was a devil. He said, "Sshhh - a lot of people haven't found out about that."

Liberalism has had a devastating effect on many denominations in Europe. My nephew traveled all over Europe between his graduation from LSU and enrollment in medical school. He says that it seems that Christianity has not impacted the countries he visited. That same liberalism has been spreading across America, robbing the church of its vitality, its witness, and influence. Have you ever tried to watch any program about Jesus or the Bible on the Discovery Channel or the History Channel? They parade out those liberal theologians from certain universities and allow them to demythologize the Bible - Jesus did not walk **on** the water, He walked **toward** it. Peter did not walk

on the water, he waded in it. The three Hebrew children were protected from the flames by an insulation chamber between them and the fire. It goes on and on with nauseating predictability.

2) Many churches and denominations have rejected the authority of the Word of God. Episcopalian priests defended the election of an openly homosexual priest as a bishop, and when Sean Hannity asked them about the Bible, one of them rather smugly responded, “We don’t accept the Bible as our authority.” Thankfully, many Episcopalians are opposing the action taken by their church.

3) We have witnessed a denominational drift in America. When denominations drift they always drift to the left. A move to the right is a correction or course. Of all the denominations that have drifted to the left only one has gone through that correction of course and that is the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church. Some would place the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention in that category. Liberal churches and denominations have lost membership and influence.

3) Many churches have forsaken the Word of God for that which is expedient or popular. Some churches have ordained homosexuals, sanctioned same sex marriage, and condoned behavior once condemned by most churches. The pastors and lay leaders of those liberal churches are guilty of some of the same sins of which ancient Judah was guilty. They are deceiving the people, compromising the Word of God even while they claim to be preaching it.

4) Many modern preachers are as guilty of preaching lies as those ancient prophets. Those who deny the authority of the Word of God are preaching a lie! Those who condone same sex marriage are preaching a lie. Those who deny the miracles of the Bible are preaching a lie. Those who deny the existence of Satan or hell are preaching a lie. Those who offer any means of salvation other than the grace of God are preaching a lie. Those who would change the focus of the Scripture are preaching a lie.

When the Lord called me to preach His Word, He did not call me to entertain His sheep, or to traumatize His sheep, He called me to feed His sheep. The preacher who seeks to preach popular sermons may not be feeding His sheep. People are fed when the preacher preaches expository sermons, but expository preaching requires a commitment to serious work. No doubt that is why the late Stephen Olford stated that there is a famine in America, a famine in expository preaching. People need it and God expects it, but a lot of preachers today are preaching sermonettes for Christianettes.

5) Some colleges and seminaries are preaching lies. On a flight from Omaha to Dallas I sat with a couple who had gone through that battle against liberalism in the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Denomination. The wife stated emphatically, “It starts in the colleges.” I would add seminaries to that. I have often wondered if the shift might have come in our Christian colleges when we gave up the Bible department for the religion department! One former student in one of the oldest Christian universities in America told me that when Bill Clinton was running for president every office in the religion department had a Clinton/Gore sign on the door. Clinton was known for gross immorality



and for his cynical attitude toward anyone who condemned his behavior.

6) Many churches today are watering down the Gospel in order to appeal to the lost people in their community. Someone told me that a choir from Texas was planning a tour in California and they had scheduled a very large church for one performance. They received a call from a staff member asking for a list of songs. He told them that they did not want anything about the blood or anything else that was gory. They did not want to offend the people from their neighborhood. Churches that water down the Gospel are preaching lies. Churches that let lost people give them their marching orders are deceiving the people.

We could go on and on, pointing our specific areas in which some preachers today are preaching lies just as surely as those prophets of Jeremiah's day. But let me first stress that we have not gone as far as those ancient Israelites. God told Jeremiah to see if he could find one righteous man - there are many people today to whom His righteousness has been imputed - people who walk in His righteousness. At the same time, churches in America are filled with people who don't want to hear anything negative - the worst sin is accusing someone else of sin. Tolerance is the big lie that has penetrated the church in our day.

D. America, Like Judah, Should Return to the Lord and serve Him.

God had a word for ancient Judah: "For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds,..., then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever" (7:5-7).

I believe the message here for America is that if we truly repent and show by our lives that we have repented, God will heal our land and bless us. He knew those ancient people would not repent, and only He knows whether or not America will repent and serve the Lord. He told Jeremiah not to pray for those people because He would not hear them. I am convinced that it is not too late to pray for America - but we could reach that point if we do not return to the Lord and serve Him.

The world needs to receive a clear signal from Christians that they know the Lord and trust Him. If we are faithful to the Lord He will bless our witness. A year or so ago I heard from a man whom I have not seen since I graduated from high school. He was there that night when I had to make a big decision. Six players had been kicked off our starting football team for missing practices. Our coach had gone out of the state and our superintendent led in our Monday night practice. In the coach's absence, he took those six players back on the team (which is probably one reason the coach left at the end of the year).

At the beginning of that Monday evening practice the superintendent announced that he was taking those players back on the team, but that if anyone else missed a practice for any reason he was off the team. They he stopped and asked, "Now, does anyone have to miss for any reason." I raised my hand and he asked, "What's wrong with you? I said,

"I go to prayer meeting Wednesday night." The superintendent shook his head and either in

frustration or anger demanded, “AND YOU CAN’T MISS IT?!!!

I CAN’T MISS IT.”

He paused for several seconds and then asked, “Does anyone else have to miss for anything? No one said a word, but I doubt that anyone there doubted that I would have chosen prayer meeting over football without blinking.

Forty years later my brother James learned where Nicky was and called him. I remember Nicky well, even though he was two or three years behind me in school. Everyone remembered Nicky because he towered several inches over everyone else in high school - even when he was a freshman. James called me to tell me that during their conversation, Nicky said, “I knew one Christians in our high school, and that was your brother.” I can assure you I knew others, but I wondered why he would say such a thing. Then one day it came to me - Nicky was sitting there when the superintendent and I had our exchange. I was not thinking about who was listening, I just knew that ready to turn in my equipment that night rather than miss prayer meeting. To me, there was nothing special about what I had done. I simply made the decision to put the Lord first - and that I really meant to put Him first.

I do not know what would have happened if I had not taken the stand I took, but my stand that night may have been a serious factor in Nicky’s salvation a number of years later.

CONCLUSION. America is very religions - but so was ancient Athens. Polls ten year ago showed that America was becoming more religious, but that it was having less impact on our behavior. While we were becoming more religious we were becoming less righteous! Many professing Christians claim to have the kingdom of God in their heart, but refused to live in the heart of the kingdom. They can hardly be distinguished from the people on the other side. They drink, gamble, party, lie, cheat, commit adultery, and use profane and obscene language. They look like the people on the other side, they talk like the people on the other side, and some even smell like the people on the other side. There is something wrong in America today.

The Lord, I believe, is urging America to truly mend our ways - repent and follow Him. He is not going to be deceived by a show of repentance. He is not deceived by religiosity - “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” He is not deceived by the claim, “I’m a Baptist” (Methodist, Catholic, Pentecostal). He demands genuine repentance. I do not believe it is too late to pray for America, even though we are guilty of many of the sins of ancient Judah. The answer is the same - repent with all your heart, not in ritual, ceremony, and good works. We are saved by grace through faith. We must live by faith and our Lord with our whole heart.