

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 3****“EMPTY RELIGION”****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah Chapters 7-9**

By its very institutional structure, Israel was a religious community. Its social and political life was interwoven with its practices of worship and the temple at Jerusalem, with its associated activities, served as the heart of the nation. Here the spiritual pulse of the people could be felt. The prophets were concerned for the spiritual welfare of their nation, and consequently their attitude towards the country's religious customs was a prominent note in their preaching.

1. WHY WAS ISRAEL'S RELIGION WRONG?

- (a) Jeremiah's Temple Sermon (7:1-20, cf. 26:1-6). Can you imagine the surprised reaction of the worshippers to Jeremiah's courageous outburst at the gates of the temple at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (7:2;26:1)? He attacked the religious dishonesty of the people. They had made a fetish of the Temple (7:4), and were relying on the practices of public worship (7:10) to keep in good with God. But the emptiness of their religion was to be seen in the injustice, oppression, cruelty and disregard for the Law which saturated the whole of society (7:6, 9). God's House had become like a robber's lair to which they retreated in between spoiling raids (7:11). Jeremiah now predicted the same fate for the temple as had overtaken the national shrine at Shiloh in the days of Eli when the Philistines had overthrown Israel and captured the Ark of the Covenant (7:12-15, cf. 1 Samuel 4:10-22).

Religion had become so empty that it now also included worship of the moon and other gods within their homes (7:18), and the plight of the people was even beyond the reach of prayer (7:16).

- (b) Religion and God (7:21-8:3).

It is not difficult to gain from this passage an idea of God's attitude towards empty religious practices. Here we see His reaction in Jeremiah's day.

Outward ritual, without inward obedience, was of no value to God (7:21-26).

People who were merely religious were not responsive to God's word (7:27-29).

God was going to punish such people (7:32-8:3).

- (c) Laments for Ignorant Worshippers (8:4-9:26).

Outward religious observance can deceive the performer into believing that all is well and safe, but such an attitude is foolish and dangerous. This is what Jeremiah was making clear in these utterances. His questions (8:4,5,8,9,12,14,19,22) and emphasis on the idea of wisdom (8:8,9; 9:12,23) point up the foolishness of his nation.



- 8:4-7 The people's ignorance of their true spiritual condition made them unwilling to turn back to God.
- 8:8-13 Dishonest dealings gave the lie to their impression of being spiritually wise.
- 8:14-17 Their assurance that peace would come was being dashed by the pronouncement of certain doom.
- 8:18-9:3 They were not aware of God's presence and so had not sought healing from the Lord.
- 9:4-11 Their failure to repent will cause God to put them to the test and "refine" them.
- 9:12-16 True spiritual wisdom will recognise the ultimate cause of the physical drought.
- 9:17-22 The sense of despair at the inevitable downfall of the nation is sensed in this death lament. The mourning of nature (v. 10, 11) and the mourning of the women (v. 17-22) denotes a total wave of despairing grief over the whole land.
- 9:23-26 True devotion for God will be expressed by obeying God, keeping his covenant and doing the things that please Him.

NB: Israel's ritual of circumcision was meaningless in itself without a true corresponding heart attitude (vs.25, 26).

Worship of God must be taken seriously. How easy it is to slip into habitual forms of worship which become empty when the worshipper's heart is not wholly given to the task. God does not want our religious rituals; He wants our hearts.

Of course, to have our hearts at the hour of worship means also to have our lives in their every other occupation. The value of our worship depends upon the quality of our lives, which is a measure of our relationship to God, and is to be seen in our daily conduct.

2. WERE THE PROPHETS OPPOSED TO SACRIFICES?

There is no doubt that Jeremiah (in 7:21,22) spoke very disparagingly of the sacrificial system. He mockingly called on his hearers to break the fundamental laws of sacrifice. The "el sacrifices" were the peace offerings which were, in large measure, eaten by the worshippers. However, not even the priests had a share in the "burnt offerings" (Lev. 6:8-11) which Jeremiah said ought to be added to the "sacrifices" and also eaten. Furthermore, he claimed that at the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, and the formation of the covenant, God had not given any commandments concerning offerings and sacrifice.

We must understand his statements in the context of his situation. He was not so much criticising the ceremonial system, as rather the people's attitudes towards it. The people might as well break the



fundamental laws of sacrifice - and do as they please, God would not care - because they had virtually already done it by their hypocritical and insincere attitudes! Jeremiah's argument was not that God had never instituted sacrifice, but that primarily He demanded obedience. He was not depreciating the value of the ceremonial, but denouncing the current practice of exalting the ceremonial into an end in itself. Moral loyalty, not ritual observance, is what truly fulfilled the Covenant relation.

This is how it is best to interpret similar statements by other prophets. Israel was constantly guilty of turning away from God on the moral and spiritual level, while at the same time, maintaining a punctilious observance of their sacrificial and ceremonial rituals. Time and again the prophets denounced the hypocrisy of this, and often they did so in similar mockingly sarcastic ways as did Jeremiah.

When God says that He desires "steadfast love and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6), He is not separating the two in contrast. He prefers them joined, love and sacrifice. However, when men separate them, of the two, love is the better. Charity is better than church-going, but only when church-going is severed from charity. The soul is of more value than the body, the spiritual than the physical, the moral than the ceremonial. But they are not contrasted unless they come into competition with one another.

God's prophets were sent to challenge God's people concerning their spiritual welfare. We will benefit most from our study of them as we let them challenge us personally.

QUESTION 1:

What horrors in Judah gave evidence to the meaninglessness of maintaining empty covenant rituals (7:30, 31)?

QUESTION 2:

In 8:8-13, what activities gave the lie to their impressions of being spiritually wise? What was involved?

QUESTION 3:

How must failure to repent be treated by God (9:4-11) and what will true spiritual wisdom recognize as the real cause of physical drought in Israel (9:12-16)?

QUESTION 4:

Instead of the multitude of sacrifices, what would God prefer from his people (Isaiah 1; Hosea 6:6; 8:11-13; Amos 4:4,5; 5:21-27)?

QUESTION 5:

In Malachi 1:6-14, what ways did their religious activities show that the Jews were half-hearted in their devotion to God?



QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What is Jeremiah saying in 9:23,24? What is the application for today? From this lesson we would do well to discern what are the priorities of our lives: ceremonial observance of worship, sacrificial service, or moral obedience? What do they each mean and how should they be combined?