Circumcision of the Heart
Jeremiah

Scripture Reading

2 "Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. 3 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. 4 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!" 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 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, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. (Jer 7:2-7)

INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah was born during the reign of King Manassah.

He was about the same age as King Josiah.

He prophesied for 41 years during the rules of Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoakim, Jehoachin, and Zedekiah.

His contemporaries included the prophets Zephaniah and Habakkuk.

Jeremiah was called to the prophetic ministry during the last 40 years of Judah’s history.

These were years of national and international turbulence.
Assyria lay to the northeast of Judah, Babylon to the west, and Egypt to the south.

All three were pursuing world domination.

Decades earlier the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria and was no longer in existence.

Now the tiny nation of Judah stood alone, struggling to survive.

It was a dark and bleak time.

- They were addicted to and enslaved by lust.
- They were obsessed with their false gods and sexual pleasure.
- They were like a wild vine or animals in heat… like a camel gripped with uncontrolled urges (2:23-24).
- They were like well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor’s wife (5:8).
- The land was polluted with prostitution, adultery & fornication.

They practiced human sacrifice.

They slandered, verbally attacked, and imprisoned Jeremiah.

They persecuted and killed true believers.

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They had forsaken the Almighty.

Why?

- The priests did not seek God and ripped off the poor.
- The judges ignored God.
- The leaders rebelled against God.
- The prophets followed idols and lied to the people.
- They exchanged the glory of God for worthless idols!
- They forsook the spring of living water for broken cisterns!

Imagine living in an age like Jeremiah’s.

An age when people were materialistic, covetous and idolatrous,

An age when people were half-hearted followers of the LORD.

Just imagine the hypocrisy.

- Professing to know God but living wicked lives.

How is it that people can be so far from God?

How is it that God’s people can be so far from Him?

How is it that they can go to Temple, offer sacrifices, keep the Feasts, and yet forget God?

Here’s what’s going on…
King Josiah had destroyed
the altars and centers of worship at Beth-el and Dan…
but the people would still go to the barren, desolate high places
to worship their fertility gods.

They were so idolatrous and carnal they wouldn’t break loose!

Do you see how dangerous idolatry is?

They were worshipping sex.

Sex consumed them their lives!

They yearned for the male and female shrine prostitutes
even though God was punishing them.

Even though God

    withheld rain,

    caused famine

    and brought the sword (14:12),

    they refused to repent.

Let me show you something that is beyond the pale of belief.

While worshipping Baal
and fantasizing about the shrine prostitutes,

They admitted that salvation could only be found in the LORD.

23 Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills
    and mountains is a deception;
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...surely in the LORD our God
is the salvation of Israel. (Jer 3:23)

While worshipping Baal and fantasizing about the shrine prostitutes,

They admitted that false worship had cost them everything.

24 From our youth shameful gods have consumed
the fruits of our fathers’ labor—
their flocks and herds,
their sons and daughters. (Jer 3:24)

While worshipping Baal and fantasizing about the shrine prostitutes,

They confessed their sin and their failure to obey God’s Word.

25 Let us lie down in our shame,
and let our disgrace cover us.
We have sinned against the LORD our God,
both we and our fathers;
from our youth till this day
we have not obeyed the LORD our God.” (Jer 3:25)

But they didn’t change!

They thought verbal confession was enough!

They thought repentance was saying,

“Did I do something wrong? Oh, I’m so sorry.”

but they had no intention of not doing it again.

But genuine repentance
requires more than admitting you’re wrong.
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It requires a change of life…
a turning away from sin and disobedience.

It requires obedience to God’s commands!

Just how bad had it gotten?

In chapter 36, King Jehoachin burned the scroll.

Yes, you heard me right.

He burned the Word of God.

This was their ultimate outright symbolic rejection of God.

Jehoachin thought to himself:

“I am so tired of hearing about God.”

“Who cares what he says?”
“‘I want to do what I want to do so I’ll just burn it.’”

That’s that, he thought.

But that wasn’t it.

You can’t treat God that way and get away with it.

At least not in a universe like this.

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Now, I’ve spent a considerable amount of time
Showing you how bad they were
because that’s what Jeremiah does.

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But Jeremiah also isolates the core issue in 4:4:

4 Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,  
circumcise your hearts,  
you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem,  
or my wrath will break out and burn like fire  
because of the evil you have done—  
burn with no one to quench it. (Jer 4:4)

This is a very interesting statement given Israel’s history,

Do you remember that God made the covenant of circumcision  
with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17?

Jeremiah is taking them back to their theological roots.

Every generation of Israelites  
was to be circumcised (Gen 17:9-14).

That is to say,  
every generation was to struggle with  
and work through  
what was to be its priority.

For Israel of the past  
and for the church of today  
that priority is singular.

WE MUST COME TO KNOW GOD.

Everything rises and falls…  
Everything begins and ends with knowing God.

And for the Israelites circumcision was to be touchstone of reality.

Man made God’s mark in his flesh as a sign of commitment.
Let’s go back to Deuteronomy 10:12-16 to see what God asked of them,

12 And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?  

(Deut 10:12-13)

14 To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. 15 Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. 16 Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.  

(Deut 10:14-16)

Here Moses outlines the circumcision commitment, which consists of 6 things:

1. “Fear God” (v. 12)
2. “walk in all his ways” (v. 12)
3. “love him” (v. 12)
4. “serve him with all your heart” (v. 12)
5. “keep his commands” (v. 13)
6. “recognize his grace.” (vv. 14, 15)

This is the commitment every Jew was to make and keep.

But look at Judah.

8 The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the LORD? ’ Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols.  

(Jer 2:8)

31 The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority,
and my people love it this way. (Jer 5:31)

13 “From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit. (Jer 6:13)

Yet they were going to Temple, offering sacrifices, keeping the Feasts, BUT

They didn’t fear God,
They didn’t walk in his ways,
They didn’t obey his commands.

Jeremiah teaches us an eternal truth here, the outward requirements of the covenant are not enough.

28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart. (Rom 2:28-29)

In other words, being a religious person outwardly does make one right with God.

God wants circumcision of the heart!

That means,

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’
31 ... ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Mk 12:30-31)

It’s like Jesus said to the Pharisees,
“...You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former...” (Mt 23:23)

Jesus wasn’t negating the importance of tithing.

But if you tithe

without being just,
without showing mercy
without being faithful,
it’s for nothing.

Jeremiah and Jesus say,

“You see, obedience comes from the heart.”

Once a youth minister wanted to teach his youth group and the church a lesson about justice, mercy and faithfulness.

So he had one of the young men
not take shower or shave for a week,
dress up like a bum
and lay on the church steps before everybody began to arrive.

To make it a little more interesting
the youth minister hid in the bushes with a video camera.

Well, people began to arrive on Sunday morning.

A few church members arrived and noticed someone on the steps.

So they drove down to the other end of the building
and went in the fellowship hall entrance.
Another couple slowly drove by and looked but went to the other doors.

Finally another couple drove up, climbed up the stairs and glanced curiously at the person while stepping over the bum (or so they thought.)

This was basically how it went for a long time.

Well, the real blow up happened the next week when the youth minister was scheduled to preach on Sunday morning.

He got up in the pulpit, read the “Parable and the Good Samaritan” and then announced that he wanted to show a video.

When the video was over the church was scandalized.

You could hear a pin drop.

But instead of repenting of their sin, they rebelled.

The church members were so indignant they couldn’t stand to look at him.

So instead of ripping the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” out of their Bibles and burning it, they simply ignored the truth, persecuted and fired the Youth Minister the next week.

CONCLUSION

You see Jeremiah and Jesus are saying the same thing.
“Do you think all God cares about
is that you come to worship services on a regular basis
and bring offerings and gifts?”

No, to be God’s people we have to embody the good news of God.

And that means through acts of compassion.

We have a very biased God!

To Him true religion is caring
    for the widows and orphans,
    for the poor and dispossessed.

Giving food to the hungry…
Water to the thirsty…
Visit and care for those who are sick.

We have to announce God’s present salvation in the midst of the world.

You see, what makes the Good Samaritan so interesting
is that he did what any good person would do.

How much more a child of God?