

Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: ² “This is what the LORD says: 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. ³ Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. ⁴ Say to them, ‘This is what the LORD says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, ⁵ 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), ⁶ then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth.’ ” (Jeremiah 26:1-6)

Judgment is Coming

Do you know what it feels like to be driving along and you look into your rearview mirror and see flashing red lights? It’s not a good feeling, is it? You know you’re in trouble. You probably even know why, right? You hope you can talk your way out of it, but you’re probably looking at a fine and points on your license and probably an increase in your car insurance premiums. Those red lights are a signal that judgment is coming. And it’s no longer up to you what’s going to happen. One day last week on stretch of I-275 I passed three motorcycle cops with three different cars pulled over. Their flashing red lights were a warning to every other driver who was passing not to speed. Judgment had come to those drivers and it could come to us, too. We have a similar situation in our reading for today from the prophet Jeremiah. He warns God’s people about judgment that was coming on them, judgment that we know did in fact take place. In the warning God gave them, he gives us a warning, too, about a far greater judgment that the whole world will have to face. My friends, **judgment is coming.**

I.

God is the judge. Make no mistake about it, that’s more than just his job. It’s part of his nature. God is holy and perfect and that means he hates sin. He punishes sin. He must punish sin. But does that mean that he takes some kind of perverse pleasure in smacking us down? Not at all. It grieves God that sinners deserve to be punished. With every fiber of his being, he loves all people everywhere and wants to spare us all. So **judgment is coming, but God doesn’t want it to fall on you.**

We see that in what God told Jeremiah to do in our Old Testament lesson. God told him to go to the very heart of Jerusalem, to stand in the courtyard of the temple where a crowd would surely hear his message. He told him to publicly announce that 900 years of grace and patience were coming to an end. Judgment and destruction were coming. But notice what God says about that warning: **“Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done.”** God knew how evil they were. God knew that they had not listened to him for years. But still he chose to hope that they would repent. Still he chose to hope that he would not have to inflict that judgment on them, even though as God he knew all along exactly how this would all end.

That is the really sad part of this. God knew the history. God knew the people. God who knows all things knew there was no reason to hope. No reason, except the power of his word. God’s Word reaches into hearts and changes them. It is the only plan that he has to change hearts. So, in a situation in which you and I would’ve just thrown up our hands and given up, God told Jeremiah to stand in the most public spot in Jerusalem and warn his people what their sin would bring: judgment.

God’s threats are more than just words. The power of God is attached to those threats. They’re supposed to shake us up and make us afraid of what’s coming if we continue on the path of sin. God wanted to shake up a hardened and unrepentant people so that they would turn to him for mercy. Then he would gladly have come to them with the even more powerful message of forgiveness. Most of them didn’t turn to him. By the time Jeremiah’s ministry was done, Jerusalem was a smoking ruin. The people were gone. That was God’s judgment on this people. But God’s grace was not forgotten. Through the gospel Jeremiah preached, God preserved a remnant from Judah, the believers. Eventually he brought them back from exile and rebuilt his people. But for every unbeliever who died in the destruction or who was carried off to exile and never repented, the destruction of Jerusalem was pure judgment. It was what their sins deserved.

And every time we see God's judgment in the Bible, it reminds us that there is a greater judgment still to come: the Last Judgment when Christ returns. The fact that we call it "the Last Judgment" reminds us that there have been and probably will be others. But every one of God's acts of judgment in this life points us to the day when all judgments are merged into one great and terrible session in God's courtroom. On that day, Jesus will send every unbeliever to hell forever. On that day, the devil and all his angels will lose their power over the world, and they will be left only with pain and sorrow. On that day, there will be no chance for forgiveness or mercy. God the judge – in the person of Jesus Christ himself – will take his seat and open the books and without pity or remorse condemn to hell all those who refused to believe while they were here.

But God still wants to save all people. So while we wait for Jesus to return, our first purpose is to proclaim law and gospel so that the Holy Spirit works and brings people to faith. Certainly unbelievers need to hear that message. Certainly those who refuse to repent of their sins need to hear that message. The devil knows that so well that he has worked for generations to rob that message of its power. He tells people over and over again that there is no hell and death itself is natural. It's part of the great circle of life. That simply is not true. God created us to live forever. We die because we sin. And sinners go to hell. The devil's biggest problem is that God built his power into his message. So even though scientists and entertainers and opinion makers tell us again and again that we don't have to worry, the Holy Spirit still hammers at human hearts with the law. He still shatters our hearts like glass and leaves sinners desperate to be rescued.

He does that to us believers, too. You and I sin every day. Our sinful heart wants us to get so used to sinning that we don't even think about it anymore. Without the power of the Holy Spirit, most of us would probably end up so used to sin that our hearts were completely calloused over. But the Holy Spirit doesn't let that happen. He hits us with the law. He forces us to see our sin. He warns us about death and hell, because we are also going to have to die if Jesus doesn't come back first. Either way, we will have to face Judgment Day. So the power of God touches our hearts, too, and makes us wrestle with our own guilt.

But you know what? The Bible calls that power to terrify us God's "strange work" and his "alien task." It's not what God wants to do. It's something he does because he has to in order to be true to himself. But God's true work is forgiveness. His greatest power is the gospel. God tells us about Jesus again and again. Sometimes when I'm talking to believers and I remind them of Jesus' love, I almost feel silly because they know Jesus is their Savior, they know they're forgiven, they know they're going to heaven. And I'm glad they know. But you and I will need to hear that message over and over again for as long as we live here because it is God's power to free us from the fear of hell and despair over our sins. It's God's power to lift us up to heaven and to change our lives here. Jesus died and he paid for you and me. His blood washed all our sins away. We are holy and perfect in God's sight. Jesus rose to tell us that we will live with him forever.

And that is ultimately what God even wants unbelievers and the impenitent to hear. It's the only thing that will give them faith. God only preaches the law to show them that they need the gospel. But he loves them and us so much that he made the gospel even more powerful than the law. Even in a world that dismisses God every single day, he still reaches into human hearts through that message and gives them faith in Christ.

II.

That faith in Christ allows us sinners to escape from the coming judgment. God gives us a picture in our text this morning to show just how terrible that judgment will be. What effect will it have on this world? **Judgment is coming and it will erase everything we know.**

The picture is a little town called Shiloh. God said, **"If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you ... then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth."** When the children of Israel first came to the Promised Land, they didn't have a temple. They had the tabernacle – a very elaborate tent – where they worshipped. Joshua set up that tent at Shiloh. While it does appear to have moved from time to time, it spent most of the next 400 years there. In fact, it appears that it spent so much time there that a building of some sort was built. But the Philistines destroyed that sanctuary. In Jeremiah's time, you could go and see the ruins, but the people and the sanctuary were gone. God destroyed Shiloh because of the people's sin. God told Jeremiah he was going to do the same thing to Jerusalem, the place where King Solomon's temple had stood for another 400 years. The temple would be destroyed. The city would be burned.

Needless to say, the people who lived in Jerusalem didn't like what Jeremiah had to say. If you read on, you'll see that a mob marched him to court and demanded that he be executed. He wasn't – but what they did

shows how unbelievers react when God sends a messenger to warn them: they hate the messenger. That's still true today. Why? Because the power of God's word never leaves a person unchanged. God's power in the law drives us to repent and ask for God's mercy, or if their pride wins out, to despair and think we can't be forgiven, or to blame the messenger and attack anyone who would dare accuse us of sin. The world doesn't don't want to believe it, but God's judgment is coming. When the time is right, Jesus will return. When will that moment be? I don't know. The Bible tells us that Jesus is coming quickly. Yet it also tells us that people will scoff and ask us where he is. We need to be ready to face our Lord today. And we need to be prepared to live our whole lives without seeing his return. Every day, we watch and wait.

During this age of waiting, the world is full of sin. And it's getting worse all the time. But Jesus compares the evil in this world to birth pains. You know what those are like. A woman has a painful contraction. Then it stops for a while. Then another one comes. As the birth gets closer, the contractions come faster and are more intense. That's what we can expect. Every moment of life here is not one of poverty and persecution, or of warfare and loss. God gives us time between the contractions, time to love our spouse and our family, time to rejoice in his gifts and his love. But the contractions will always come back, until the Lord arrives.

When he comes, the world as we know will end. The dead will rise. The believing dead will get their bodies back and the living believers will meet the Lord in the air. Jesus will judge every person who has ever lived. Those who trusted in him will spend eternity with Christ. Those who didn't will spend eternity in hell. Then Jesus will wipe away the world as we know it. Why? Because everything we know here is contaminated by sin. Jesus is going to recreate the world as a paradise, a world without sin or sorrow, a world in which we are all perfect in our hearts and perfect in our bodies. We will live there with Jesus for all eternity. What will that world be like? I don't know. I've never seen it. God knows that sinners can't even imagine a perfect world or a life without pain or disappointment, so he doesn't tell us what it's like. It lies on the other side of the Last Judgment. That means that Judgment Day is not a scary thing for us. It's not like the red lights showing up in your rearview mirror. Jesus is not going to condemn us for anything we have done. For us Judgment Day means eternal life.

That is the message God gave us to proclaim. Everyone who hears that message is changed. Even unbelievers, when they reject that message, are not the same. Sadly, they're hardened in their unbelief. But the message has power, even greater power than the law. That message makes believers out of unbelievers. That message strengthens us in our faith. By the power of Christ, that message will give us eternal life when he comes back. Judgment is coming. Thank God it is. Amen.