

When God Removes Worship
Psalm 78, Jeremiah, 7, 27; Luke 21

Turn to Psalm 78. Right now, a combination of Covid-19 and govt mandates have taken away from us our normal and much loved worship gatherings. Because we are worshippers of the one true God, it's important that we understand these things in the ways God's word gives us.

What is going on when human authorities take away our normal worship gatherings?

God himself removed worship from his people three times in the biblical story, and we will talk about those three today. God took their worship away first at a place called Shiloh. Moses and the Israelites built the tabernacle in the wilderness, while they were at Mt. Sinai.

Forty years later, Joshua led Israel across the Jordan River and into the promised land, and they set up the wilderness tabernacle at a place called Shiloh. Somewhere during Samuel's life time, God brought in Israel's enemies to destroy it. That's the 1st time God removed worship.

About 500 hundred years later, God did this again. The Babylonians came and destroyed the temple that Solomon had built. That happened during the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

And about 650 years after that, God did this a third time. This was in the year 70, about 40 years after Jesus died and rose again. It was Herod's temple in Jerusalem. Jesus told the disciples that not one stone of this incredible temple would be left on another. Jesus said that within one generation, the temple would be destroyed, and it was.

We'll talk about the first of these, and then the third, and lastly the second, about which the Bible says more. In all three of these stories, there was sin in Israel, and in all three of these stories, there were faithful servants of God mixed in with the sinners, and both the righteous and the unrighteous were worshipping God at these places.

These three are more than just God destroying a building. In Israel, God dwelled in that structure, it was the central "meeting God" place for the whole nation. God set this up so he could live among his people. By destroying these places, God left the people empty. They did not have an alternative.

Nothing like that is happening in our day. What happens to us is much milder. It is the same in this, that God has taken away from us a worship gathering that he gave and that we loved.

In a sense, the most important thing we need to hear today is already clear: sometimes God does this. God gives us ways to worship him, but that does not mean our worship is a guaranteed right before God. When God has had enough of something, he takes it away, and the righteous and the unrighteous are caught up in this together, and can no longer worship as God had given.

Tabernacle at Shiloh Destroyed – Psalm 78:60-64

*God abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent he had set up among humans.
He sent the ark of his might into captivity, his splendor into the hands of the enemy.
He gave his people over to the sword; he was furious with his inheritance.
Fire consumed their young men, and their young women had no wedding songs;
their priests were put to the sword, and their widows could not weep.*

This happened during the lifetime of Samuel, at the end of the times of the judges, but we don't get the story in Samuel, only Ps 78. At the beginning 1 Samuel 4, the tabernacle and ark are still in Shiloh, and then the Philistines have the ark a little while, and then the ark comes back to Israel, but it does not go back to Shiloh. By then the tabernacle is gone, and that is all we hear.

God did this with the hands of the enemy, and the swords of the enemy. But these enemies of Israel, when they destroyed the tabernacle, they were not fighting God. They were doing God's work. Psalm 78 makes that clear. God destroyed the tabernacle.

Herod's Temple Destroyed in 70 CE – Luke 21:5-6, 20-23

V5 Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

V 20 When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. It was the time of God's punishment.

Jesus predicted this in about the year 30, and the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple about 40 years later, in the year 70.

In Matthew, during the trial of Jesus, Pilate wanted to free Jesus, and the crowd did not want that. So Pilate took water, and washed his hands in front of the people, and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood." All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children." (Mt 27:24). That is how the Gospels understand the destruction of the Temple.

The thing is, a lot of godly people worshipped there. Paul visited Jerusalem in about 58, 12 years before the fall of Jerusalem. In 58, there were thousands of devout Jewish Christians. The church of 3000 on the day of Pentecost had grown. And those Jerusalem believers all still worshipped at the temple. When Paul was in Jerusalem, he worshipped at the temple, too, says Acts.

God still ended it. God got the church out of Jerusalem before the siege, the believers escaped, says Eusebius. But the beloved temple worship of these believers was over, because God brought the Romans in to take down that city and temple. That's the third one.

Now turn to Jeremiah 7, and we'll read about the 2nd time God ended worship.

Solomon's Temple Destroyed – Jeremiah 7 and 27

*Jer 7:1-8, 12-14 - This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: "'Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. 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** ... If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, 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, **then I will let you live in this place** ...*

Twice we read, "then I will let you live in this place." God gave them a city and a temple in which to meet him. But he can take that away when he wants to.

Jer 7:12, Jeremiah continues God's words: Go now to the place in Shiloh where I [God] first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. [Shiloh was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem.] While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors.

This is Jer 7. In Jer 26, Jeremiah tells us what happened after he preached that. The priests and the prophets and the people were furious with Jeremiah, and they wanted to execute him for blasphemy. In their minds, the priests and the prophets, to say that God himself would destroy Solomon's temple in Jerusalem was like saying "I am God's enemy."

"You must die," they said. The priests and prophets told the officials, "This man must be sentenced to death for speaking about God and the temple in this way." And the officials said, "not so fast, maybe he's right," and so Jeremiah's life was eventually spared, not by much.

Understand that it was the Babylonians who were going to come and destroy the city and destroy the temple. Babylon was the huge superpower of the day: godless, arrogant, cruel, idolaters.

Let's look at Jeremiah 27 as well. The burning question in Jerusalem was not, "how can we keep our temple." No, the burning question was, "what are we going to do about the Babylonians?" Jer 27 tells us about an international planning conference in Jerusalem.

Judah and several other nations right around them got together to figure out how they might bind together to defend themselves against the coming Babylonians. How might they be stronger if they worked together against the Babylonians? That's what they gathered to plan. God told Jeremiah to go speak at this international conference.

God said to Jeremiah: (27:3) *Send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon through the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. Give them a message for their masters and say, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.*

People, we are a little weak on this. The Jews did not like this, and we do not like this. When unpleasant people come to power, we don’t think that is true, that God gives this to anyone he pleases, even people like arrogant and vicious Nebuchadnezzar. The Bible says this quite often.

27:8 - If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the Lord, until I destroy it by his hand.

God says, if any people do not serve, and will not bow their neck to Babylon, I will punish them, I will destroy them, and I will use Nebuchadnezzar to do it.

27:9 - So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon.’ They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish. “If you believe them, I will banish you,” says God, “and you will perish.”

There will always be prophets and visionaries from inside God’s people telling you something else. There were plenty in Jeremiah’s day, and there are plenty now.

27:11 - But if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there, declares the Lord.

Every one of those kingdoms hearing this were exiled, taken to Babylon, and none of them needed to be. If they would have submitted to Babylon, who would have let them stay on their land. Babylon? No. God himself says, “I will let that nation remain.”

Jeremiah said it to the whole conference, then again just to Judah’s king: *27:12 - I gave the same message to Zedekiah king of Judah. I said, “Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the Lord has threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon,’ for they are prophesying lies to you.*

If Judah would have done what Jeremiah said, they would not have been exiled, and Solomon's temple would not have been destroyed. But they could not get their heads around Jeremiah's message, that God wanted them to submit to the pagan arrogant vicious idolatrous Babylonians. There were plenty of prophets who told them not to submit. Solomon's temple was destroyed.

Do you know why the temple was destroyed in 70, as Jesus predicted? Because the Jews would not submit to Rome. In 66, the Jews organized a strong rebellion against Rome. They chased out or killed all the Roman soldiers and officials in Judah and Galilee.

So in 67, Rome sent a big army to subdue them. The Jews were fierce, Rome had a tough time of it. Roman progress was slow. By the time Jerusalem finally fell, in 70, the Romans were in a very bad mood, and when they got to the temple, they did not leave one stone on another.

But if the Jews had treated the Romans the way Jeremiah had told them to treat the Babylonians, that temple might still stand.

Paul and Peter repeat Jeremiah to Us

In the NT, the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter repeat Jeremiah's message as basic instruction to all Christians. In Romans 13, Paul wrote to the church in Rome during the time of the Emperor Nero. The Romans were corrupt at the best of times, and Nero was probably the most tyrannical and debauched emperor ever.

Writing to Roman believers, living under Nero, Paul urges them to submit. Three times in that paragraph in Romans 13, he says there is no authority except what God established. And three times he says that the governing authorities are God's servants. That's just what God called Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah, "my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

Why does Paul repeat himself, that God established this authority, and that the authorities were God's servants? Because the Roman Christians do not want to believe it any more than Jeremiah's Jews wanted to believe Jeremiah. People, this is God speaking to us.

Peter writes 1 Peter from Rome. How does he end this letter? "The church in Babylon greets you." Check it out, end of 1 Peter. "The church in Babylon greets you." Peter knows Rome is just another Babylon. Peter writes from in Rome, and Peter also writes in the time of Nero, the worst expression of a bad system.

What does he write? *Submit yourselves **for the Lord's sake** to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by God to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. **For it is God's will** that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves... **Fear God**, honor the emperor.*

Later in the letter he tells them, *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

Paul and Peter both, writing to Rome or from Rome, in the time of Nero, no better than Nebuchadnezzar, repeat Jeremiah's message to all believers. God's people have never liked this.

Eight ways to submit to God.

1, let's agree that we do not like this. God's people never have.

2, let's never deny Christ or his words. We will die first.

3, let's never bow to another god. We will die first.

4, let's give God the right to remove the worship we love. God claims that right for himself, to remove our gathering. He's done it before. We will do what the faithful always did in response, they grieved, but they found other ways to worship God, be faithful, and continue on.

5, let's give God the right to bring a govt we don't like: *With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.*

6, for the Lord's sake, let's submit to the govt God gave. We submit because Jesus is our Lord, because it is the will of God, because we fear God. That's how Lord's the apostles tell us to act.

7, let's use the Scripture to decide which prophet speaks God's truth.

8, let's trust God. By God's power, the Israelite slaves in Egypt became a powerful nation in terrible circumstances. By God's power and Spirit, any submissive church can thrive in these times. Let's trust God. Amen.

PRAYER: Our Father, whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool the earth, may your holy name be honoured. May your kingdom come, may your will be done, may earth be just like heaven. Give us each day our daily needs. Forgive our sins, as we forgave those who sinned against us. Don't lead us into testing or temptation, we don't do well. Rescue us from evil and the evil one, we need your help. You are the King, you have the power, so yours be the glory. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that works within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.