

**W**e plan our vacations often asking each other, “Where would you like to go this year?” Of course, we often prefer simply to revisit our favorite destination. But in the mind of God’s people Israel from Old Testament times on, on one side lay all other journeys, and on the other lay one without compare: pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For to make this trek was not only to arrive at what the Psalmist calls *the City of Our God*, but also to behold with one’s own eyes *the House of THE LORD*.

To Jesus’ contemporaries the Jerusalem Temple was never merely a sacred location, an historical site; it stood as the visible reminder that the Jews were the ones to whom God had made great promises, and that he is a God who never forgets his promises. For Israelites scattered around the globe to ascend Zion and gaze upon the House of the Lord was to be reminded who they were!

Even long before King David – right after the Hebrews had left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea – Moses had sung them a song that ended with this promise:

*You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,  
the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,  
the holy dwelling, O LORD, which your hands have established.*

The Israelites entered the wilderness, in other words, singing a song of Jerusalem & the Temple, the City of God & the House of the Lord, his mountain & his holy dwelling.

What lived in those ancestors as a distant hope, by God’s power & mercy became a physical reality. The Lord God of Hosts, whose footstool is the entire earth, nonetheless gave out his address to all Israel as Mt. Zion. There he invited, coaxed, and commanded his beloved to seek his face. God, not David, made Jerusalem the city of David. And God chose Jerusalem, not for David’s glory, but for his own glory.

Soon thereafter, the Lord appointed David’s son Solomon to build the Temple itself; and now the God of Israel invited, coaxed, and commanded all nations and tongues to come and seek him there. The God of Abraham promised the whole world that at that Temple he would listen to anyone’s prayer. What a blessing to the whole human race that Yahweh, the one and only true God who ever was, is, or shall be – Yahweh not only revealed himself to Israel, but could be found at his address – “Jerusalem.”

But all these things God also established under terms of both his Law and his Promise. The well-known and well-loved promise, he made to David: one of your sons will forever sit on the throne in Jerusalem. But this promise did not erase or supercede the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. And at Sinai Israel had pledged herself;

*“All that THE LORD has spoken, we will do.”*

After Moses would come servants like Joshua, and Samuel, warning God's people:

*If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.*

But this is exactly what they did: They clung to the City-of-David Gospel but turned their backs on the Sinai Law. The throne-and Temple promise they held dear; this command from God they dismissed:

*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

Alongside the Temple they soon built a wall – a wall between business ethics and ritual life, between sexual ethics and sacrifices. Between ceremony and the true gods of their heart.

Under these conditions a priest or prophet could make a good living. The priest would proclaim, "Bring your sacrifices to the House of the Lord, the House of the Lord," and the prophet would assure everyone of Jerusalem's peace and security under Nathan's promise to David. But no one taught the people the holy life; idolatry and immorality were rampant while the populace remained certain that both the City and the holy House were invulnerable.

To such wicked people, the Lord in his mercy gave a young man, the son of a priest living four miles outside Jerusalem. His office was hard and thankless, for God laid it on Jeremiah to give sermons that sounded like this:

*"You shall die... He who stays in this city shall die."*

The civic leaders, naturally, saw him as a traitor to the Covenant of David. But he told them most bluntly:

*"The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city..."*

What else could they do, but rob him of his freedom, throw him down cisterns, and secure for him the death penalty? But they never shut him up, because God loved his Jerusalem; and so he revealed to Jeremiah at the start of his ministry that a tiny handful would listen to his sermons and repent. This is why Jeremiah never preached doom without adding:

*Mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you.*

He kept extending this offer from God right to the end, when Babylon came and breached the wall and carried off the exiles – Jeremiah among them. He hung in there for the sake of the remnant, knowing the Temple itself was about to become a pile of rock and smoldering ash. He preached against both the City and the House, but Jeremiah always preached repentance, because he knew that God still loved that city.

These things were written for our warning & encouragement. Where there are today people who believe the Gospel and walk in step with the Gospel, that is the City of God. Where the Word

of God is taught in its truth and purity, and the Sacraments are given and received in faith according to Christ's command, that is the House of the Lord.

We are the Temple of Living Stones, with Christ crucified as our cornerstone. The Church is the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb who died for her and rose from death. Any promise ever made to Jerusalem, any Psalm of Ascent written for going up to the Temple, are fulfilled in the Passion of Christ and apply to us, his Church.

Yet, we live under a Gospel God has spoken, not only to redeem us from this world, but also to transform our behavior in this world – and it is a Gospel, therefore, that gladly makes room for the commands of the Law. If we, like the people of Jeremiah's day, turn our face from God to the world, and learn from the world how to flaunt sin in the face of God, then we are as condemned as the rest of the world.

If we build a wall between Baptism and business ethics, between the Supper and our sexual behavior, between the Promise and our "privacy" – then there is no promise to save us. There is no baptismal grace that sets aside the call to glorify God with your body. There is no Communion rail that is a hiding place from the wrath of God on those who live to feed their greed. There is no church which, if she falls away, is not torn down by her Lord himself. God chastises churches just as surely as he did Israel.

We should rejoice, therefore, each time we hear the voice of Jeremiah summoning us from a phony Christian confidence – which is really nothing more than self-confidence. We should love and adore God for sending to us rebuking words, chiding words, warning words; because we know that his steadfast love endures forever for those who turn to him from their sins. We know that God will bless a repentant church. If we faithfully cling to his promises – even as under this grace we submit to his rebuke, we remain his City and his House, until we reach that destination where nothing is built by hand, and the city shines with a glory flawless and indestructible. ✠