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# HOMILETICS

## SERVICE THEMES AND TEXTS FOR FEBRUARY

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Feb. 25	Oculi	Jer. 26:1-15	Accept God's Grace for All of Life

### *Sermon Study on Jeremiah 26:1-15 for Oculi*

Jeremiah's difficult ministry began approximately in the middle of the reign of Josiah (639—608), Judah's last God-fearing king, and came to an end shortly after Nebuchadnezzar had reduced Jerusalem to a rubble heap in 586 B. C. Under Josiah, the Prophet witnessed a temporary upswing in religious worship. Numerous people who had been misled by idolatrous Manasseh turned again in true repentance to the Lord and pledged allegiance to the only true God. But even under Josiah the evil influence of Manasseh's long reign could not be wiped out. Idolatrous practice and worship persisted and flared up almost overnight as soon as pious Josiah met an untimely death on the battlefield of Megiddo. Josiah's four successors, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, turned against the Lord, followed their own devices, and brought ruin upon themselves and their people.

A striking summary of Jeremiah's message to his people is recorded in Ch. 26:1-15. Near the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim, whose life is described in 2 Kings 23:34—24:5 and 2 Chron. 36:5-8, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah for a special heart-searching utterance in the Temple at Jerusalem. But before the Lord gave Jeremiah the word for the people, He had a particular word for the Prophet. "Thus saith the Lord" (v. 2) usually introduces the word that is to be conveyed to the people (cf. Jer. 2:2; 4:3). Here God takes His Prophet aside for a moment and impresses on his mind the importance of the message his lips would have to pronounce before the people. First the Prophet had to be fully prepared before he could be a fit instrument for God.

What a power the pulpit could be in the world if every minister understood the meaning of "Thus saith the Lord"! Then there could be no subjectivism, no exaltation of the preacher's own wisdom, no repudiation of God's revelation.

God's direction to His Prophet is very clear: "Take your stand in My court, and speak without fear or favor to all worshipers from all the cities in Judah. Conceal nothing. Tell them all My will." It is reasonable to believe that on this occasion the Lord did not convey any thought to His messenger which he had not heard before. Both Prophet and people had already heard this particular word, but since the people had failed to obey God and respond to His word, repetition was necessary.

The first words of verse 3, "if so be," "perhaps," are highly significant. What do they mean? The word "hear" runs through the Book of Jeremiah with a rising crescendo. It is instructive to note the instances of "hear" (6:10; 7:13; 11:7; 13:11; 25:3-4) and "hear not" (11:3,8; 12:17; 13:17; 17:27; 19:15; 22:5; 25:8 f.; 29:18 f.; 35:17). God cannot be faulted. He certainly used all His power to make a "perhaps" possible, but all His efforts seem to be in vain. In Jeremiah the fact is repeated forty-two times that Judah will not hear. Yet God says, "If so be," "perhaps." See the unlimited long-suffering and patience of God, and contrast that with the confusion, hardness, and stubbornness in man. Men readily lose patience when they experience one disappointment after another and are quick to say: "Further effort is useless. This man, these people, will not obey God's Word, will not return to God, will not repent."

In a special sense Jeremiah is the Prophet of repentance. Again and again the word "turn" is on his lips (Ch. 3; 4:1; 5:3; 8:5; 24:7; 44:5). In each instance "turn" means a turning away from evil, from idolatry, actually a returning to the one true God, who has revealed Himself through His special Prophets. "Way" and "doings," coupled together so often in Jeremiah (4:18; 7:3,5; 17:10; 18:11; 23:22; 25:5; 26:13; 32:19; 35:15), accentuate the idea included in "turn" in two directions. "Way" and "doings" are closely interlocked. "Way" points to the source and the channel that leads from within to the outside, "doings" refers to acts that make imprints within the man. The first word lays its finger on

the impulses of the heart, the second on the actions which reveal a person's disposition and mind (cf. 17:10; 4:18). If the heart is evil, no truer word can be spoken than that of Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (7:9). The pages of history, past and present, are lurid with innumerable inhuman acts because the mind of men was poisoned at the source. Turning from an evil way and evil doings is possible only where the Word of God in its fullness has touched the heart, changed and purified the way, and so provided a channel for pure, clean, holy deeds. Turning from evil and all its ramifications can be a reality only then when men earnestly pray: "Turn Thou me, and I shall be turned" (31:18).

If men will receive the Word of God and turn to the Lord wholeheartedly, there is no question about the attitude which God will take. He will repent Him of the evil He purposed to inflict on the evildoers, i. e., He will relent in His just anger against the sinner. The turning which He Himself effects through His Word, elicits His mercy and gracious hand that covers all sin and guilt. And this mercy is ready to operate whenever and wherever men sincerely turn to God.

After God had prepared His Prophet as a message bearer, He committed to him the message which he was to convey to the people. There seems to be a clash between the words of verse 3: "If so be they will hearken," and those of verse 4: "If ye will not hearken." God is making a last attempt to win His people. However, in His divine wisdom He is using a threat and will not let the Prophet intercede for the people (7:16). The structure of the conditional sentence in verses 4 and 5 is clear. There is only one condition: "Hearken to Me," but it can be fulfilled by walking in God's Law and by hearkening to the words of His Prophets. "Hearken to Me" expresses a personal relationship of the people to a personal God, who is very near (23:23-24), who wants to establish an unbroken, spiritual, living rapport between Himself and His people. This personal relationship is expressed by walking in God's Law and by hearkening to the words of His Prophets. Of the *Torah* God says: "I have sent it," of the Prophet's words, "I send it" (Hebr. — present participle). The *Torah* accordingly is fixed, completed, while through the Prophets God is not only inculcating

the Word already revealed, but from time to time is adding some Word which He knows the people need. *Torah* in the Book of Jeremiah is a technical term and means the Word of God committed to Israel through Moses (2:8; 8:8; 16:11; 31:32; 32:23; 44:10, 23).

Within the *Torah* there are statutes, ordinances, commands, testimonies which together comprise all the instruction God intended for His people. Through this *Torah* God wanted His people to understand and believe that He loved them (cf. Deut. 4:32-37; 33:2-5). This love of God for the people has but one purpose. Its reality and warmth was to elicit interest in God, arouse love toward God in the people, stir up in them an ardent desire to walk in the Law (*Torah*) of the Lord, and serve Him with all their being. If Israel recognizes in the *Torah* a gift of God's love and profound concern for people, it will be ready to hearken to its God and follow His direction. It will also be eager to amend its ways and its doings (v. 13).

In placing "My Law" (v. 4) and "the words of My servants, the Prophets" (v. 5), side by side, God did not want Israel to consider these two terms as separate concepts, each of which in its own right had a claim on "hearken to Me." The contents of the two terms lay in one another, since God was the Author of the Law and the Inspirer of the words uttered by His Prophets. One voice was speaking through both. In Jeremiah's day it was not out of place to dwell on this thought. Many prophets at that time were confusing the mind of royalty, nobility, and common people by broadcasting messages of peace, security, prosperity, the very opposite of what Jeremiah had proclaimed with tears in his voice and on his cheeks (9:1). With a show of sincerity that deceived many in Judah, these prophets protested loyalty to the Lord and brazenly claimed to be speaking with divine authority. They aped Jeremiah. They laid claim to the same source as he did for their pronouncements, but the Lord refused to accept their ministrations (23:21, 30-33). "My," therefore, is emphatic in "My Law" and in "the words of My servants, the Prophets." The Lord rejected the false, dreamy-eyed prophets and accepted only those who bore His divine seal and delivered a message which He had committed to them. In the mouth of the false prophets the words "Thus saith the Lord"

had a hollow, mocking ring. In the mouth of God's Prophets, "Thus saith the Lord" was the guarantee of truth, truth that might cut and hurt, but whose real purpose was to heal and save and establish proper relationship between God and the people. The false prophets had no interest in repentance, in turning away from evil, in amending ways and doings, in trusting in the Lord, in walking in His Law. In the message of Jeremiah, the true Prophet of the Lord, there is a distinct call for repentance, for trust in God, for intimate communion with the Lord. Heavenly music runs through chapter after chapter in the words: "I will be your God, and ye shall be My people" (7:23; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33).

In spite of all that God had done for centuries to gain all the people in seeing their God in the Lord and themselves as His children, they refused to walk in God's Law and hearken to His Prophets. Since they pushed His love and long-suffering aside, God said: "I will make this house like Shiloh" (v. 6). Shiloh had been the sanctuary of Israel from the days of Joshua to the death of Eli. When God took the Ark of the Covenant away from Shiloh, it deteriorated as a sanctuary, because God no longer dwelt there (cf. Ps. 78:60). The same lot shall befall the Temple in Jerusalem. God will withdraw His presence from it, let it sink into decay, and Jerusalem itself shall become a curse and a reason for hissing and wagging of heads among the nations.

This was a prediction the people could not understand. The false prophets had dinned "the Temple of the Lord" in their ears (7:4), had made them believe that the mere existence of the Temple was a guarantee for safety, an insurance against all trouble, a bulwark against the most insidious foe. They were very solicitous in persuading the people to go through the outward acts of religion without paying any attention to the inner disposition of the heart. Offerings could be brought, sacrifices made, tithes paid, but the heart need not be rent. There need be no reaching out for the grace of a loving God (cf. Is. 1:2-16; Amos 5:21-23). No wonder God characterized these thoughts as lying words, devoid of all truth (7:4, 8).

Priests and prophets should have been among the first to accept this word of God which was intended for their good and should have shouted it from the housetops throughout the land. They

should have taken the lead in changing their line of thought from superficial self-interest to real soul-interest, from half-baked politics to genuine religion. Instead, they deliberately threw God's appeal to their consciences into the wind. They wrapped themselves up in their false conviction and set out to liquidate Jeremiah (vv. 7-11). Without reason, out of pure prejudice issuing from stubbornness, these priests and prophets declared Jeremiah worthy of death. If no curb had been put on their rage, Jeremiah would have been put out of the way immediately.

But there was enough of a conciliatory spirit alive to rise in defense of the Prophet and throw a protective wall around him. Certain princes of Judah, upon hearing reports about Jeremiah's address in the court of the Lord's house, and the ill will which it had called forth in some prophets and priests, gathered in official capacity at "the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house" (v. 10) to listen to the accusations against Jeremiah. All the statements of the priests and prophets were denunciatory of the Prophet and his address, ending in raucous cries for his blood. After the ears of the princes had been bombarded by numerous tirades against God's servant, the princes gave Jeremiah an opportunity to speak in his own defense (vv. 12-15). The words he spoke were a summary of his previous Temple utterance with particular emphasis upon the fact that the Lord, the true God of Judah, had sent him to pronounce the message which was the cause of all this excitement. He was ready to die, if the princes thought it proper to order an execution, but he wanted all present to understand that he was a bona fide messenger from God and was pleading with them to turn to their God before it was too late, before God's long-suffering had come to an end.

Jeremiah spoke with such fervor and conviction that the princes at least were convinced of his sincerity and refused to declare him worthy of death. They acquitted him because he had spoken to them in the name of the Lord their God (v. 16). Yet there is no indication in the text that the princes applied the word of the Lord to themselves and began to walk in the Law of God. This is a good example of inconsistency, legal justice on the one hand, blindness to one's own welfare on the other. Though the people accepted Jeremiah's acquittal, they were not satisfied. They

still would have laid violent hands on him, if Ahikam, an influential man, had not provided a place of refuge for him (v. 24).

This pericope has a definite message for us. Like many Judeans of Jeremiah's day, numerous people within the present body of the Church are prone to wrap themselves up in the business of living. Immediate physical needs command most of their thinking. A job, clothing, food, modern home appliances, a car, vacations, politics, the world situation, occupy so large a place in their minds that God and soul receive only an afterthought now and then. Like the ancient Judeans, they are proud of the Church and are glad to pay lip service to charity organizations that had their beginning in the Church and are still under its wing. They may be loud in their praise of the art, architecture, literature, music, developed by the Church. They permit some of their money to flow into the Church's treasury. They look with mixed surprise and some satisfaction when they see the old costly Gothic edifices with beautiful stained-glass windows give way to modern streamlined structures. They may be regular in church attendance, and their appearance at the Lord's Table may not be infrequent.

Since the spirit of lukewarmness is rife within the Church, the words of Jeremiah are much in place for this present generation. A reawakening is necessary to gain a fresh understanding of sin and its vicious character, of God's love in Christ Jesus and the redemptive power of the Cross, of the forgiveness of sin and the hope of everlasting life, of the need for missions and the enlistment of every Christian in that blessed work.

Jeremiah's words: "Amend your ways," are a call from Heaven, from God, the Maker of all men, who knows what the destiny of men will be if they fail to heed His call. The loving, gracious character of God is written all through this text in the name "Lord" (Jehovah), which occurs fifteen times in the fifteen verses and is repeated in every "I," "Me," "My," that refer to Lord. God did not want Judah to suppose that He was going to hurl fire and brimstone against them immediately. Therefore He caused His Prophet to use the name "Lord," a name which should remind Judah of the covenant which He had made with Abraham, a covenant which He had never abrogated, nor would ever abrogate. The name "Lord" is the epitome of all of God's love culminating



in the Cross of Christ. God does not want people to suppose today that He has turned His back upon them. In spite of indifference and open apostasy He is moving His present ministers to speak Jeremiah's words with conviction and power. Every one who hears "Thus saith the Lord; Amend your ways," should feel a loving, gracious God tugging at his heart, pleading with him to get into proper relationship with his God while there is still time, and to accept the grace of God for his whole life, not only in youth and old age or when he sees death at the door.

#### SUGGESTED OUTLINE

*Theme:* Accept God's Grace for All of Life

1. It cleanses from sin
2. It puts a new purpose in life
3. It insures union with God forever

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