

The lost opportunities

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to that passage that we read in the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 8 and verse 20. Chapter 8, verse 20.

The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved. Some of you perhaps went to Petaudry hoping that something would happen to you spiritually there, and nothing did.

You're still in the same condition in which you went. And perhaps you feel that you missed a great opportunity in that preaching of the gospel.

Perhaps some of you didn't go to the mission meetings at Petaudry to hear Billy Graham, and perhaps now you feel that maybe you should have.

Something kept you back from going there. Perhaps you've even been to Petaudry for a football match. But something kept you back from going there to hear the preaching of the gospel.

[1 : 22] Perhaps something that you couldn't really justify if you tried to explain it. That you would go there for a football match, but you wouldn't go there to hear perhaps the greatest living preacher of the gospel.

And perhaps again you feel that you have missed a great opportunity. Perhaps you come here to hear the gospel. You come here not just out of habit, but because you want to hear the gospel, and you know that there is a need that you should be saved.

And you know that it is the gospel by which you can be saved. Perhaps you've come throughout this past year. Perhaps you've come regularly, perhaps on and off.

But you've come. Perhaps you've come here over many years. And over that period, however long or short it is, you have had opportunities when you know you've been confronted by the claims of Jesus Christ, and you know that you've been invited to come and to believe in him.

There are times of great and of special opportunity. We know that this time of the meetings at Petaudry was a time of great opportunity.

[2 : 59] A time of opportunity that, by the power and grace of God, some people grasped, and others missed.

There have been times of opportunity in this church where the gospel has come home in a special way to your heart, perhaps. It's always difficult for the preacher to know these things exactly, how his words are being taken in or responded to.

But I know it's my own conviction that over the past number of weeks, God has been speaking in an unusual way, we may say, in this very building.

There are times of special opportunity. There are times when we know that the Spirit of God is present in a special way. Just as we noticed some time ago that when the Lord Jesus was in a particular place, the power of the Lord was present to heal.

And I believe, in my own experience, there are such times when God's Word comes in a special and powerful way. a time of great opportunity.

[4 : 28] And I know too that in my own experience, these are special times. It is very unusual or very remarkable for these times to go on and on.

We've had a special time recently when perhaps the membership of this church, the Christian people here, have been stirred up to think about the importance of the preaching of God's Word and the importance of praying for the effectiveness of that Word.

Long may these things continue. But we have at this present time, I'm convinced, a time of opportunity.

A time when indeed people are concerned and there seems to be a heightened awareness of the essential things of the Gospel and the urgency of the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These opportunities have come and they've gone and still you are not saved.

[5 : 44] Perhaps that's your condition tonight as I speak to you. The condition expressed here by the people recorded by Jeremiah. The harvest has passed, the summer has ended and we are not saved.

I think I see in these words, first of all, a sense of need. These people, whatever else we may say about them, they had some idea of a sense of need.

They knew that there was a need to be saved. We are not saved. Whatever they meant by that expression, they knew that they had a need in their lives. And the very fact that you are here this evening speaks in some way that you have a sense of need in your life.

And I hope a sense of spiritual need. For here, you hear the Gospel. You hear the Word of God. And here, that need by God's grace may be satisfying.

What was the particular need of the people at this time of which Jeremiah speaks? The need that the people had then, the specific contemporary need, was that they were in dire fear of an invasion by Babylon.

[7 : 09] There was this tremendous world power that appeared on the scene. And it was sweeping all before it. And it was soon, it seemed to them, about to swallow up the Jewish nation, the land of Judah, and the city of Jerusalem.

Now, why were these things taking place? Well, we're told quite clearly in the prophecy of Jeremiah, as in other of the prophets, that this was not just an accident of history.

These things don't just happen. God is sovereign over all. And God was still working out his purposes in these things. And his purpose in the history of this time was judgment upon the nation of Judah.

Judgment upon the Jewish people. we read in verses 13 and 14 something of that judgment. I will take away that harvest, declares the Lord.

There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree. And their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them. Why are we sitting here, they say?

[8 : 27] Gather together, let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there. for the Lord our God has doomed us to perish and given us poisoned water to drink because we have sinned against him.

The whole of this passage, the whole of the book of Jeremiah speaks of God acting in judgment in the history of that time. What were some of the judgments that God was bringing upon them? What were some of the things because of which these people were crying out, we need to be saved and we're not saved? Well, in some of the verses we've read, we read of fruitlessness.

We read of the fact that God took away their harvest. Now sometimes we hear at the present time of famine in other parts of the world.

sometimes even in our own type of economy there's times where there seem to be austerity, there's times when prices go up, wages go down, or wages don't seem to go up, and so on, all these problems.

[9 : 50] Now here was a case of that kind of thing taking place fruitlessness. In the land of Judah. Physical, literal fruitlessness.

And these things may still happen in the world. But I want to think of this in terms of spiritual fruitlessness. Because you see, we may have plenty of things materially, even with all the supposed economic problems there are.

We still live in one of the richest countries of the world. Yet are we happy? Where are all the happy people that this modern secular materialism promised us?

If we could overthrow religion, if we could get rid of all the hang-ups that made people long-faced and unhappy, everything would be all right. Where are all these happy people? people. We have people whose lives are fruitless.

They seem to have nothing to live for. What about yourself? Have you got something to live for? Have you got something so important you'll be prepared to die for it? Or is there a certain pointlessness in your life?

[11 : 07] You don't know where your life is going or what you want to do with your life. You don't seem to be getting anywhere. You don't seem to be producing anything. There's this fruitlessness in your experience.

Then also there was hopelessness in verse 14. Why are we sitting here? Gather together. Let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there. For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish and given us poison water to drink.

They weren't fleeing to the fortified cities so that they were going to escape. They were just really putting off the evil day. They were going to die there. They didn't have much hope in going to these fortified cities.

And again, the world we live in today, there's a certain streak of hopelessness in it. A certain feeling that we can't make sense of life. A certain feeling that there are problems that always seem too great for us.

No matter what clever people come along, no matter how many advances we may make in science or any other discipline, there seems to be so many more problems. And we cannot change the heart of man.

[12:17] We cannot get rid of the violence in his heart. We cannot get rid of the lust in his heart. And so we begin to feel a certain hopelessness, a certain despair.

There's not really anything worth living for. There's not really any truth worth dying for. And so there was also fear in verse 15.

We hope for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing, but there was only terror. Here they had a very real physical terror of this advancing world power of Babylon.

But people have fear today. People have fear that sometimes it's self engendered. Those who have become embroiled in the occult.

And their lives are dominated by fear, fear of evil. But how many people today, just in ordinary ways, are living in fear, fear of what's going to happen tomorrow, fear of being found out, fear of the future, fear of what lies beyond death itself.

[13:31] We may push these things under, we may sometimes treat them as jokes, but they're there. And they come out to haunt us, often when we're alone. And of course, death was the final thing of which they were afraid.

And death was the thing that was most certainly coming upon them, God warned in his judgment. In chapter 7, and from verse 32 on, we read there the graphic description of how the very place where they had rejoiced in their idolatry was going to become a place where carcasses of human beings were going to be thrown like the carcasses of animals.

And so this specter of death haunted them. Now, physical death perhaps is something that is shut away from us today in our antiseptic society, shut away in hospitals, and we don't see something of its gruesome physical reality.

Maybe that explains partly the obsession with horror films that we have. But there is death in our society in a way just as surely as there was this great physical death coming in the land of Judah when the king of Babylon swept into it.

Francis Schaeffer once wrote a book called *Death in the City*, based on the book of Jeremiah. and he applied it to today in our modern society. And seeing that maybe there wasn't the physical death and thousands of people dying as a result of a foreign invasion, but there was spiritual death.

[15:17] The kind of thing we've been talking about, the fruitlessness, the hopelessness, the fear. Because where there is sin, there is death, that separation from God, which is the real principle of death.

So all these things, we're told in this passage, were coming as the judgment of God. And the people could see and feel these things.

They could see that they had this tremendous sense of need to be saved, to be delivered from these things that were wrong. Now maybe you can sense some of these things, maybe you know some of these things in your own experience.

Or maybe there's one thing, maybe there's just one point in your life, where you know you are not self-sufficient. Maybe in every other area, things seem to be going fine in your life, but there's one area that you feel you're not in control of.

There's one area that causes you to come out in a cold sweat. There's one area of need, there's one point where it really hurts, there's one point where you can't cope, and you wonder, why is this thing here?

[16:37] Why am I bothered by this? Why am I plagued by this one thing? If it wasn't for this, everything else would be fine. Well the answer is that God is in control, and God is dealing with us, dealing with us as sinners, and the things that are wrong in the world are there because of human sin, sometimes directly because of an individual sin, sometimes indirectly, but these things are there because we live in a fallen world, and it is part and partial of the judgment of God against sin.

Why was this judgment coming upon the people in Jeremiah's day? Well it was coming quite simply because of sin. God's judgment always comes because of sin.

It's not arbitrary, God is not capricious, he doesn't just visit one with misfortune and another with blessing, just arbitrarily. God acts in judgment in the world, and when things happen in the world we've got to ask the question, what is God teaching us by those things?

God was acting in a very special way in bringing judgment upon this society, judgment because of their sin. There was a sin of idolatry, right back in chapter 7 and verse 20, verse 30 we read, the people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord.

They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my name and have defiled it. Then he goes on to talk throughout this passage of the idolatry of other people at that time.

[18:22] Now idolatry has several applications to our own situation today. No, you don't see people at street corners bowing down to images like you do in certain cultures like in India or in the Paris.

You don't have that kind of idolatry, at least it doesn't seem to be in the open very much. But there is idolatry nonetheless. But what was idolatry?

Idolatry was the worshipping of physical and natural processes or of aspects of human society, worshipping these things as God, worshipping material things as God.

Scorn was poured by the Hebrew prophets on idolatry because people bowed down and worshipped the things that were so much less than themselves. They bowed down and worshipped the things that had ears but could not hear, that had mouths but could not speak, that had hands and feet but couldn't handle or walk.

And isn't the same charge to be leveled today against our own idolatry? That we live for material things. We see our meaning and our status and our prestige in terms of material things.

[19:48] We think, contrary to what Jesus said, that a man's life consists in the abundance of his possessions and it is not so. There is idolatry.

There is idolatry inextricably bound up in the human heart. But also, there was another aspect of this idolatry, referred to in verse 2 of chapter 8.

There was astrology. He is referring here to the judgment at first. They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and the stars of heaven. Point being here that the time was going to come, as was a custom in those days when a conquering nation came and defeated another.

they wouldn't only act in cruelty and brutality and barbarity to the living. They would also bring shame upon the dead.

They would take the very tombs and they would open them and they would scatter the bones of the great and revered people of that nation out like the bones of animals.

[20:58] And here God is speaking with great irony, concerning this judgment. These bones were going to be scattered under the very stars and under the very heavenly bodies that people worshipped and lived for in an ancient form of astrology.

Do you know that today this is one of the areas of growing interest in our society? In astrology and other occult areas, these ideas are ancient.

They go right back. Before this time we're reading of here. And yet they are still here today, still in a civilized society when men have ceased to believe in God.

They do not believe in nothing but they believe in anything and everything. But then of course there was an idolatry in theology.

Because we're told here in verse 30 of chapter 7, they have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my name and have defiled it. And one of the great characteristics of the 20th century has been the carrying in of the ideas of the world, the ideas of human philosophy into theology.

[22:21] so that what is taught in theological colleges and faculties throughout our land is not what is taught in the Bible but is merely a pale echo and reflection of the ideas of human philosophy dressed up in theological clothes.

And so we have another form of idolatry referred to again in chapter 8, verse 8. How can you say we are wise for we have the law of the Lord?

When actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely. The wise will be put to shame, they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have?

Therefore I will give their wives to other men and their fields to new owners. From the least to the greatest they are greedy for gain. Prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. Peace, peace they say when there is no peace. Again, a scathing attack upon this false theology that we have too in our own day.

[23 : 35] The idea that we can introduce our own ideas into the way we think of God. And it's not just those who are typified as modern theologians who do that.

We all do that in our sin. We try to make God in our image. We try to have a God that will fit in with our ideas. A God that is pleasant to live with.

A God that is easy to deal with. One who will not object to the things that we delight in that are sinful. But also in that society there were other sins involved in that idolatry.

again back in chapter 7 and verse 31 they have built the high places of Topheth in the valley of Ben-Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire.

Something I did not command nor did it enter my mind. And here we have the tremendous crime against children. The destruction of children in this false worship.

[24 : 37] And today yes we have destruction of children. We have destruction of children in the sense of the destruction of unborn children. But today throughout our land there are incinerators burning the remains of unborn children.

We have it physically and literally. Should be a stench in the nostrils of any civilized nation. But yes we also have it spiritually so that children are being destroyed spiritually.

But even when they are being given something that is called religious education in school so often what they are being given is a false impression. The impression that you can come with a neutral humanist stance and look at all these different religions and sort of judge between them.

But nobody ever examines the falsehood of the neutral humanist stance that you stand on. And look at it as another competing philosophy.

And so again children are being destroyed. And again throughout our civilized nation abuse of various kinds, physical, sexual, and ritual abuse.

[25 : 55] All these things there and people know about them but it seems that nobody can do anything about them or do so little. Always in every situation where the brutality and the violence of man begins to erupt.

It's against the weakest. Because man in his sin is basically a coward. There are no great heroes eventually in man the sinner.

That is the kind of society in which we are living. The kind of society that was there in Jeremiah's day. The kind of society that he goes on to talk about in chapter nine. man where it is full of adulterer and full of deceit.

Again our society these are the things that are considered to be great. Those who are able to commit sexual sin. Those who are able to fool and deceive their fellow men.

These are the great people. This is the kind of society Jeremiah spoke of. This is the kind of society in which we live. This is the kind of society that impinges upon us.

[26 : 59] This is the kind of society that we are in and we stay in until we declare that we are opting out of it. This is the kind of society that we are in by choice until we say no I will not any longer have any part of it.

I will decide to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. I will go against the stream. We stand in this society identified with it and condemned by God in it.

until we decide to turn from it. So these people had some sense of need as they considered the judgment of God against their sin.

But they also had a sense of desperation. We may say it may have been despair but we'll call it desperation. They had a sense of desperation.

We are not saved they said but before that the harvest is past summer has ended and we are not saved. Here they speak of the passage of time.

[28 : 11] The harvest and the summer have come and gone. The year has gone far on. Still nothing has happened. They were looking for God to do something perhaps to save them from Babylon.

I think especially in the light of what Jeremiah says elsewhere they were looking for a specific thing that God would do to bring the king of Egypt against Babylon. They were looking to Egypt and they

were trying to work out schemes to ally themselves to Egypt so that Egypt would save them. And so the time for the time when kings went out to war in summer and harvest when there was plenty to supply troops it had come and it had gone. The time of opportunity it had passed and nothing had happened. The time of good opportunity it was gone. We began by looking at the opportunities that we've had in recent days. The opportunities perhaps that you have had in recent days to accept the Lord Jesus Christ. To opt out of this society and opt in to the society of the Lord Jesus Christ and relationship with him. [29 : 31] You have all had these opportunities but nothing has happened you say. I've listened to these sermons. Maybe you even listen to Billy Graham's three nights in Pitauabri.

I don't know. Maybe you've listened to me preaching the gospel many more times than that and you say well nothing has happened. I expect God to do something but he hasn't done anything. Summer has passed and we are not saved. What's wrong you ask? And that's a great question we must consider here in the context of this passage. What is wrong? What is wrong? There have been these opportunities. What is wrong? There is all this background of God's judgment against our sin. we have a sense of our need. We have perhaps an urgent sense of desperation. How are we going to do something about it? [30 : 29] Or perhaps it may have tipped over into despair and the shrug of the shoulders that says well we're not saved so what can we do? What's wrong? Well Jeremiah consider is God unable or unwilling to help?

verse 19 listen to the cry of my people from a land far away is the Lord not in Zion is our king no longer there?

And then again in verse 22 is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

Jeremiah considers and it seems as the people are asking these kind of questions too. Is it that God is uncaring?

Not unable to do anything? No. the whole implication of what Jeremiah is saying here is that this is a rhetorical question is there no balm in Gilead?

[31 : 44] The center of the Jewish nation? The place where healing could flow from? Of course there is healing in the land of God's people where God himself is.

Is the Lord not in Zion? Of course he is. And he is as able and willing to heal and to forgive and to receive as he ever was.

Is it that tonight you think God is unwilling to deal with you? God is unable perhaps to deal with you? Perhaps you think your situation is too involved?

Perhaps your situation is too difficult for God to deal with? Even to say the thing shows how impossible it is. But maybe you feel God is uncaring.

He doesn't care about your situation. The God who sent his own son into the world to save sinners. The God who came to seek and to save the lost.

[32 : 49] He cares all right. He cares about you just as he has cared about others just as bad or just as far away from him as you. No, the answer is not that God is unable or unwilling to do anything.

Well, perhaps the question is that nobody cares. No human being cares. There's nobody left to pray for this situation, to pray for you or to pray for our situation today.

Well, was that the case then? Well, we know there was at least Jeremiah. Jeremiah, it's Jeremiah who's saying, is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because he cared.

He cared deeply what was happening to his own people, to his own countrymen and to his own country. And is the problem tonight that you are here and you are seeking salvation and you have a sense of need and nobody cared?

[34 : 03] It is not so. There are those who are praying for you.

There are those who are praying for salvation. There are those who are praying for God's spirit. to be poured out upon you and upon all who are in need.

That is not the problem. What is the problem then? The problem lies not with God. The problem lies not with the people of God, for they are praying.

They are concerned and they are caring. Maybe not as good as they ought to be, but there are those who are, there are those who are caring, there are those who are praying. So what's the problem?

What was the problem in this day? The problem in this day was quite simply twofold. One, they were still not looking to God.

[35 : 08] And secondly, they would not repent. You see, as they asked this question, or as they made this statement, and we are not saved, were they really looking for the salvation that God was willing to give them?

Or were they looking merely for some kind of material escape out of their material and political problem? They were looking to Egypt to deal with those problems.

They had their own schemes by which they would be saved. And perhaps tonight you've got your scheme, and you think, well, if only God would deal with this little situation in my life that I can't handle, then everything would be all right.

And I want God to deal with it this way. And I don't want God to get too serious about things. I don't want really this business of handing my whole life over to God.

I just want a little help. Well, there are all kinds of ways in which we try to make God fit into our categories and to make Him come down to our level.

[36 : 15] but it is an utter failure. We must look to God properly and completely and we must simply stand before Him as we are and ask Him to take us just as we are and ask Him to deal with us and ask Him to speak to us and to show us what we need and ask Him to analyze our situation and to provide the remedies for it and we've got to be willing to hand ourselves completely over to Him.

The people it seemed were unwilling to do that but also they were unwilling to repent. They were unwilling to give up sin. In chapter 8 verses 4 to 7 we have this frightening expose of their unwillingness to repent.

Say to them this is what the Lord says when men fall down do they not get up? When a man turns away does he not return? Why then have these people turned away?

Why does Jerusalem always turn away? They cling to deceit they refuse to return. I've listened attentively but they do not say what is right. No one repents of his wickedness saying what have I done?

Each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. Even the storm in the sky knows our appointed season and the dove the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration but my people do not know the requirements of the Lord.

[37 : 56] God through Jeremiah is saying even the very birds of the air even animals can teach you if you're willing to listen and to look. These birds know when to return when to come back at the right time but God is saying my people do not know and God is saying to you tonight the great problem is this you're unprepared to turn from your sin.

You may be seen something of the judgment of God against sin. You may be seen something of the depravity of sin. You may be seen something of the violence of sin.

You may be seen something of the tragic reality of sin in our society today. but there is sin in your life personally in your life and you are unprepared to give that up.

You are unprepared to turn from it and to cling to Christ. You are unprepared to turn to him and to yield your life to him. And that is it in a nutshell.

There is no person in hell who was willing to turn to God. sin. No person in hell who wanted to give up sin and couldn't do it.

[39 : 16] That's the problem tonight. Our willingness to turn to him. And tonight he calls us. And tonight we are challenged again by his invitation to come now to him.

We've had those opportunities. The harvest has passed the summer has ended. But Todrie has come and gone. This sermon has come and it's nearly gone. But again God pleads with you tonight. The Lord Jesus stands tonight as the beggar knocking at your door. He will not always knock. He will not always appear as a beggar.

but tonight tonight tonight he is and tonight he asks you to turn from your sin and to accept and to confess that with your mouth that you turn to him and that you love him and that you live for him.

Let us pray. our loving heavenly father Lord we pray that you would bless your own word to us.

[40 : 41] we pray that those here who feel their opportunities slipping away may tonight by your grace not let this opportunity slip but may grasp it by your grace be changed and transformed we

pray your blessing to accompany the preaching of your word here and throughout this city right across the land remember the coming days of mission in Glasgow may your word have great effect there and we pray that this time when the gospel has been on the front pages of newspapers and on television programs that this would not be an isolated thing but we pray that people would discover that it is not a seven day wonder but the reality of the gospel is true and sure and dependable day by day in everyday life relevant to our situation we ask all of these things in Jesus name Amen