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Homiletics: Outlines on the Old Testament Eisenach Series

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HOMILETICS

Outlines on the Old Testament Eisenach Series

By HERBERT E. HOHENSTEIN

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

JER. 7:1-11

As I read and reflected upon these Bible words this question arose in my mind:

Must I Be a Jeremiah?

Pastors have much in common with this prophet.

Jeremiah was often torn in his proclamation of God's Word. God commanded him to confront Israel with her sins, to pull no punches in spreading their guilt before them, to preach destruction to a doomed people. That wasn't an easy task. For Jeremiah deeply loved his fellow Israelites and felt deeply involved with them in their sins and sorrows. It was not with glee but with a torn and bleeding heart that he reluctantly called attention to his people's sins and then forecast their destruction.

Do you suppose that it's any different with your pastor? Do you think he enjoys pointing out your sins from his pulpit? Do you think he takes pleasure in preaching the harsh words included in the sermon he will deliver on this day? No, like Jeremiah it is with a sad and torn heart that your pastor must often set before you your sins and urge you to repentance. But, like Jeremiah, your pastor can with joy point you to the mercy of God, speak to you of the Christ who has sponged your sins away.

I. Pastors and Prophet proclaim the judgment of God

Like Jeremiah, your pastor can stand in the gates of God's house preaching these

words: "Hear the word of the Lord, all you men, women, and children of [fill in the name of your own parish] who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of America, the God of [fill in the name of your own city]."

A. "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place" (vv. 3:5-7).

1. This is what God was saying to Israel: "Do you want to continue living in this land of milk and honey? Then change your sinful ways."

2. Must I be a Jeremiah and speak words like these to you? Do you want to continue living in America, an America that is wealthy, strong, and free? Then each and every one of you, both big and small, must change your sinful ways and amend your unholy habits. It is not just the United Nations or our skillful diplomats who can prevent our being shipped off to some Siberian slave camp, it is you by your godly conduct. Your stay in this land of the free and the home of the brave hinges largely upon your personal holiness.

B. Don't put the motions of worship above works.

1. The Israelites were doing just that (vv. 4:8-11). What fools these people were! They thought that mere Saturday attendance at the temple, mere mouthing of religious words, and an empty thoughtless performance of worship rituals was enough to please God and to stave off any trouble or misfortune. They thought that God had His eyes

open only one day of the week, Saturday, when they went through their religious routine. The rest of the week they lived as if those divine eyes were shut. Wasn't the mere performance of Saturday worship enough to deliver them from any anger God might harbor against them for their week-long sins?

2. Is there a lesson here for us? Must the Lord ask us these searching questions as we comfortably seat ourselves in this place of worship: "Will you murder?" and we reply: "Who, me, Lord?" But what of the people we have killed during the past week with the dagger of hateful thoughts or cruel words? The Lord asks, "Will you steal?" and we reply: "Who, me, Lord?" But what of the good names we've stolen by gossiping and slandering words? The Lord asks: "Will you commit adultery?" and we reply: "Who, me, Lord?" But have there been evil pictures we've looked at, filthy jokes we've told or listened to, adultery of the heart we've committed? What of the greatest idolatry of all — loving goods and fun and job and loved ones more than God, the Giver of all these benefits? God asks: "Will you swear falsely?" and we reply: "Who, me, Lord?" But what of the lies we've told, the truths we've left untold that should have been spoken? What of the swearing itself, whether true or false, this taking of God's name in vain, using it carelessly in casual conversation? They stoned such offenders in the Old Testament. "Will you do all of this?" asks the Lord, "and then come and stand before Me in this place of worship and say with the Israelites in this text, 'we are delivered from God's anger, delivered by our mere act of churchgoing.'" Will you put your trust in deceptive words, have the confidence that a mere mouthing of the liturgy in this place puts the Lord on your side, no matter how conscious and frequent your weeklong sins? "Will you do all this?" asks

the Lord, and we reply: "We will, and we do, O Lord; therefore have mercy for the sake of Jesus who lived, died, and rose for us. For His sake blot out the sins of hypocritical worship."

3. This is what acceptable worship involves. (a) The service on Sunday is vital. Worship is commanded by God. It is, as it were, the service station where we fill up on the gasoline of God's power and strength for weeklong Christian living. (b) Week-long works. This is the message of Ps. 15, of Rom. 12:1 ff., of James 1:26, 27, and other passages. These Scripture references make it absolutely clear that Sunday morning worship is meant to inspire us and to enable us to worship God during the week with lives of love and service and ministry to others.

C. Learn a lesson from Shiloh (v. 12).

1. Once there was a beautiful temple at Shiloh. And why wasn't it there any more? Because the worshipers at that temple called on God's name once a week and then spent the rest of the time despising the Lord's name by their unholy conduct. Therefore God destroyed both the temple and its worshipers.

2. Are there any modern Shilohs? How about the bombed-out churches of Europe? This is not to say that the worshipers there were any worse than we are. This is to say that these church ruins can be our Shiloh, our grim warning to repent before hydrogen blasts level the great cathedrals and the little chapels of our fair land.

II. *Pastors and Prophet proclaim words of comfort* (Jer. 31:31 ff.; 33:14-17)

I will be a Jeremiah. I must, like him, tell you of:

A. God's new agreement.

1. He does not remember those sins of yours. They're buried in the depth of the

sea, now that Christ was buried for three days and then rose again.

2. The new agreement is sealed in blood, the blood of Jesus. Just as surely as Christ spilled His blood on the cross, so surely are your sins washed away. And you can receive the body and drink that blood every Sunday in the Holy Supper. As surely as you receive Christ in that sacred meal, so sure can you be that God has forgiven your sins, thrown them out of His sight forever.

B. The Lord, our Righteousness.

Why do we persist in worrying about something that we already possess, namely, the righteousness of God? Because of our frailties and sins we are often full of fear that God will reject or abandon us since we do not live up to His laws. How can we worry about what we already have, God's righteousness, given to us who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? God Himself is what He asks us to be. He is perfectly righteous for us in the person of Christ, His Son.

Must I be a Jeremiah? Indeed I must.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

DAN. 9:15-19

In these words we see

The Heart of Daniel

I. *It was a crushed heart*

A. Daniel's prayer was accompanied by fasting, sackcloth, and ashes (v. 3), the traditional marks of a penitent person. True, these practices are not mandatory, nor do they prove genuine repentance. Yet fasting and similar practices may well serve to curb unholy, fleshly appetites. There is little doubt that we would be more healthy and robust both in body and in spirit if we would deny ourselves some of the food and fun we so dearly enjoy, for it is difficult to re-

member that the sinful drives of the flesh should constantly be checked and suppressed when one overindulges the body.

B. Crushed because of the sins of his people (v. 16). Daniel could not view himself apart from the people of God to whom he belonged. Throughout his prayers the first person plural is employed. It is *our sins*. Do we have such a view? Do we live in a constant awareness of the body we belong to, the body of Christ, the church? Dare the heart ever criticize and censure the stomach for its failure to perform properly? Dare the stomach in anger against the heart decide to ignore the heart and digest food only for itself? Impossible! For the heart and the stomach both are parts of the one whole body and constantly share in the entire body's sickness or health. So it is in the body of Christ. Remember Jesus taught us to pray in the plural. It is "*Our* Father . . . give *us* this day *our* daily bread, and forgive *us our* trespasses." There is no name calling here, no finger pointing, no looking down at, or feeling sorry for, other poor miserable sinners. It is only "forgive *us our* trespasses." It is "lead *us* not into temptation, but deliver *us* from evil."

C. Crushed because of his own sins. It may be the plural that Daniel uses, but it's still the *first person* plural. He includes himself, and so must we. Sometimes we Christians become quite self-righteous as we view the troubles that beset, and the perils that threaten, our dear country. "You see," we say, "this happens because of all the evil people we have in our land. They are the cause of God's anger against us, those vile criminals, those people who don't go to church or give God a thought." Those people? Is it possible that our nation is threatened with atomic annihilation also because of our unruly tongue, our ungoverned temper, because there are too many unkind words and bitter arguments in our Christian families?

D. Crushed because he and his people had grievously sinned in the face of great divine grace (v. 15: "Who didst bring thy people out of Egypt with a mighty hand"). With these words it is as if Daniel were saying: "O Lord, how could we rebel against Thee in the light of all Thy redemptive goodness?" Yes, how can we? For the redemption we possess shrinks the rescue from Egypt by comparison. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, His Son, God has set us free from the clutch of Satan, hell, death, and sin. The Israelites wailed their pleas to God for deliverance from the tortures of Egyptian bondage, and God liberated them. Yet they were scarcely free when they returned to a bondage far worse than that of Egypt, the terrible slavery to sin. In place of the gracious God, they substituted a golden calf as the object of their adoration. And will we return from the freedom of Calvary to the bondage of our same old sins? Will we substitute the golden calf of goods and people in place of God, who laid His own bleeding heart on love's altar when Jesus died and then rose again for our pardon and eternal safety?

II. *It was a confident heart*

A. Confident that God's ears were open (v. 18). Sufferings may have closed in upon Daniel and his people, yet the ears of their rescuing God would never be closed to their earnest cries for delivery. We can be equally confident that God's ears are ever open to our pleas for pardon and rescue from distress. We are sure that God hears everything we say only because of Jesus, His Son. By the death of Christ we know God hears all our prayers and especially our penitent prayers for pardon. In fact, God's ears are always more ready to hear than our hearts and mouths are to act.

B. Confident that God's eyes were open (v. 18). Though the prophet and his people could see nothing but trouble around them,

they were confident God could still see them, that He hadn't lost sight of them because they were buried beneath an avalanche of affliction. We are sure God's eyes are open to us because He once closed them for three days. The eyes of Jesus were sightless in cold death as He lay in His tomb. And because the eyes of Jesus were shut in death and then opened again on Easter, God's eyes are always upon us. And we know they are smiling eyes, eyes that are set in a shining face, that beams love and favor and forgiveness, not eyes that flash anger from a frowning, scowling countenance. In fact, the last words you hear at each Sunday's worship service are about the Lord's smiling uplifted face, and this is the face of favor and forgiveness that beams down upon you all week long. No wonder you respond to the Benediction with the triple "It is true, it is true, it is true (Amen, Amen, Amen)!"

C. Confident because the plea for pardon was based upon God's mercy, not upon his or his nation's merit (vv. 18, 19). Daniel realized the folly of asking God to be gracious and forgiving on the basis of his own or his people's goodness. It just wasn't there. One could never be sure of God's pardon or of deliverance from affliction if such divine activity were dependent upon holiness. For as we pray, we would always be haunted by the nagging fear: "Perhaps I've been too bad, or perhaps I haven't been good enough to have God grant my request." But our prayer is based upon God's great mercy and is for the sake of His name, says Daniel. "For His name's sake," that is, for the sake of all that God is and does for us. It is for His name's sake that we pray, the name we have come to know as Jesus, who gave His life upon a cross and rose again to bring us to God and glory forever. That's why we pray for everything from food to forgiveness with a confident heart, for we base our prayer on God's mercy, not on our own merits, and God's mercy is always there.

In fact, He has promised mountains will walk off the face of the globe and that we will be able to command the sun to stop rising and setting, and it will obey, before His mercy will leave us. And it's trust in this fact that changes a crushed heart into a confident heart.

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Is. 29:17-21

There is both a stern warning and solid comfort in these words, words that tell us about:

The Big Change

I. *It could happen you know, the big change*

That is, the change from a cultivated fruitful field into a wild forest (v. 17)

A. God is here talking to Israel by means of picture language. The forest is the Gentile land of Lebanon, a land unblessed by the cultivation of God's electing love and grace. Israel, on the other hand, is the fruitful field, patiently, lovingly, ceaselessly tilled by God's hand of mercy. But a big change will take place. The forest will become the field and the field the forest. Lebanon will become like Israel, chosen by God's grace and love. Israel will become like Lebanon, a wild forest uncultivated by God's merciful hand. This is the big change.

B. And it isn't far off. God promises it will happen in a little while. Yet that little while left Israel room for repentance, for a return with rent hearts to an offended but forgiving God, whose mercy would still take them back.

There would be a big change. The field would become a forest and the forest, a field.

C. Why? We turn to Is. 5:17 for the answer. Despite all the loving cultivation and care which God lavished upon His vineyard, His only return was the wild grapes

of wickedness. It is precisely for the same reason that our Lord had to tell the church people of His day that harlots and corrupt politicians would enter God's kingdom before them and that God's kingdom would be taken from those who imagined themselves ultraholy and would instead be given to a nation producing the Kingdom's fruit.

D. It's time for a few applications. Do you suppose that the big change could happen to us? Are we not the fruitful field, the field tilled and blessed beyond measure by the Lord? Isn't the non-Christian world the wild forest? Could this field become a forest? Will today's harlots and tax collectors enter God's kingdom before us? Learn the lesson of history. Those nations and peoples who have received a double and overflowing measure of God's grace and goodness are the ones who stand under God's closest scrutiny and are in peril of losing that divine love by their smugness, conceit, and complacency. For God's mercy demands the response of constant and wholehearted obedience to the merciful Lord. And if that response is withheld, what then? If instead of the ripe, luscious grapes of righteousness God finds only the wild grapes of repeated wickedness on the entire arbor as well as on the individual branches, what then? Then there will be a big change, and the cultivated field will become a wild forest. Would we be shocked, irritated, offended, if our Lord Himself were to stand before us this very day and tell us, as He did the church people of His day, "Sinners of the street will go into heaven before you"? Could it be that our very shock itself at such words indicates how much we need to hear them? For a sinner is never shocked at being confronted with his sins, and it's only sinners who will enter heaven — forgiven sinners, it is true, but only sinners. Who will leave this church today justified and forgiven? He who says: "God, how thankful You

should be, and how grateful I am, that I am not as other people are, that I am not as grumpy, irritable, and complaining as some of my relatives and friends; that I am not as gossipy as Mrs. So-and-so; that I am not as cruel and as vile as all these criminals I read about; that I am not as immoral and without character as others I know and see"? No, if you want to leave this church forgiven, this alone must be your prayer: "God, for Christ's sake and sacrifice, for the sake of Jesus whose perfection is mine, and whose death and resurrection paid for my sins, be merciful to me, a sinner."

St. John the Baptist once said that the ax was already at the root of the trees. He urged Israel to start producing fruit. The urgency of this admonition also applies to our life. Start producing fruit. Produce it as you think more upon the fruit of the virgin's womb, Jesus Christ, who died and then rose again to take away the sin of your barren and fruitless life. Eat more fruit, the fruit of the vine, wine which is the blood of Christ poured out for your salvation. Eat more fruit, the fruit of the soil, bread which is the body of Christ slain and then revived again for your pardon and endless joy. And then work day after day, fight your godless flesh, your unholy passion.

The big change. It could happen!

II. *For your comfort remember it will happen*

Not the change we've been talking about, the change from a fruitful field into a wild forest. No, this is another change, change from the worse to the better. (Vv. 18-21)

A. There will be a change from blindness to sight and from deafness to hearing. Yes, there has been, in the life of our Lord. Christ's miracles of healing were not just eye-catching and breath-stopping publicity stunts designed to draw people to Him. Christ's miracles mark the beginning of the new world, the world without sickness and

pain and death. Do you doubt that you'll one day live in that happy world, that world without doctors, hospitals, medical bills, funeral parlors, and cemeteries? Do you doubt it when that glad day has already dawned? For, you see, our Lord's miracles of healing are both the beginning and the pledge of that wonderful new world. In a sense, you are already living in that world. It was born with Christ.

B. There'll be a big change, change in the status of men (vv. 19-21). In the new world there won't be any more ruthless people, people with hearts of flint and steel, people whose only goal in life is to get ahead and to satisfy their own cravings even at the cost of other people's hurt. Nor will there be any more of this ruthlessness inside us, this ignoring or turning of the back on the wants and needs of others because such kindness would put us out and demand too much sacrifice. In the new world there won't be any more scoffers, those folks who enjoy poking fun at others, who delight themselves by capitalizing on the weaknesses of others, who upset and disturb by insisting that we prove and demonstrate the truths of our faith. In the new world faith will give way to blessed sight. In the new world not the mighty but the weak will be happy. Their joy will be in the Lord. This will be a permanent joy, a joy that never fades or lessens. For the joy will be in God Himself, who is eternal and not in the gifts of goods and loved ones that are so much like a wilting flower or a thin curl of smoke quickly driven away by the wind. Our trouble now is that our joy is too often and too much in God's fading gifts rather than in Him, the fadeless Giver, and therefore we fear and worry. It won't be like this in the new world. Then all our joy all the time will be in the Lord Himself, and since He won't wilt or fade or change, neither will our joy. What a world it will be, the world of the big change!

**THIRTEENTH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY**

ZECH. 7:4-10

The question of our text, of course, is this:

Should We Fast?

I. The folks at Bethel had a problem (v. 2)

For many years these Bethelites had been faithfully and religiously fasting and mourning in commemoration of Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. But now the captivity was over, and the temple was once again rising out of ruins. Naturally the question arose: Is this fast really necessary? And so a delegation was sent up to Jerusalem to obtain the answer from the priests and prophets. It was through the prophet Zechariah that the Lord gave His answer (vv. 4-10). Now there are two points that God makes in His answer to the inquiring Bethelites. First of all, He indicates that fasting and mourning do not profit Him in the least. Religious rites and observances are for the benefit of man.

II. Shall we make a few applications?

A. Let's take prayer, for example. We have been told prayer changes things. How do you interpret that statement? Do you think that the Lord is bound by your prayers, that He must wait until you pray before He can bless or rescue you? Things are bad, loved ones are sick, a danger is imminent, but prayer changes things. Therefore quickly pray so that things can become better, loved ones are healed, and hovering dangers pass. Pray, and pray quickly and fervently, because God cannot help and heal without those prayers. Is prayer a means or a guarantee of receiving from Him what we want? We sometimes think and act as if it were. (1) Please understand, we are not preaching against prayer. All of us pray all too little. And God wants us to pray to Him for food and forgiveness and protec-

tion. The point is, He has never indicated that He needs our prayers and that without them He cannot feed or protect us. How many of you asked the sun to rise this morning? How many of you prayed for God's protection on the way to church? Yet is the sun still beneath the horizon waiting for your prayer? Did you have an accident on the way to church? Jesus once said that God sends His showers and sunshine on both the just and the unjust, on those who pray and on those who don't. And are we not glad and eternally grateful it is this way, that rain and sunshine and food and forgiveness and protection do not depend upon our prayers? For if they did, I fear we would be living in a rather dry, dark, and barren world. Besides all this, it is well to remember that God is already in action for us long before we pray. He tells us that before we call, He is already answering, and while we are speaking, He already hears. (2) Now please understand, we are not saying here that prayer never moves nor affects the Lord, never persuades Him to change His mind. Take the case of the Israelite king Hezekiah. God told him to arrange his affairs because he was on the very threshold of death. And, oh, how the king prayed that the Lord would spare his life, and God did just that! He extended Hezekiah's life for another 15 years. This doesn't mean that He'll do the same for you under similar circumstances if you should be at the point of death with a fatal cancer. Of course, the Lord could make you or your mortally sick loved one another Hezekiah and prolong your or your dear one's life another 15 or 20 years. That's up to God and His good and gracious will. (3) Then why pray? Because God has commanded it, and because you need the discipline of prayer. Prayer helps you to see how much you need the Lord in your life. Prayer is God's gift in your heart and on your lips as a means of praising your Maker for each precious beat of your heart, for the

loved ones about you, for every blessing of body and life. God never intended prayer to be a means of getting things out of Him or of griping to Him. Prayer first and foremost ought to be praise.

B. Now what we have said about prayer can be applied to all our religious rites and observances, our churchgoing, our giving, our participation in parish activities, our holy conduct itself. These things are not means by which we put the Lord under obligations to us. They are means by which we profit the brother and ourselves, means designed by God through which we grow and progress in our faith and holy behavior.

III. *Should we fast? God answers, "That's up to you"*

"For fasting is for your profit, not Mine." That's the first answer the Lord gives to the question of our text. This is the second: "Of course you should fast, that is, you should deny yourself for the sake of your brother" (vv. 8-10). This, then, is the fast God demands of us, that we starve ourselves on evil and lovelessness and feast on a constant doing of good. Isaiah's words are quite pertinent here (Is. 58:3-12). Israel thought the Lord would continue to love, bless, and befriend her no matter how wickedly she lived, just as long as she continued religiously to observe the prescribed fast days and holy days. Therefore God had to make it perfectly clear that the fast He desired, the fast that He would regard favorably, was a con-

stant and complete abstinence from sin and a feasting of oneself on goodness. Is this the fast that you observe? Perhaps a bit more literal fasting would help you. Perhaps if you and I would literally deny ourselves some of the food and some of the goods so dear to our hearts, it would help us to remember how narrow the gate is that leads to eternal life and that only those get through whose hearts and lives are not overweighted with too much worldly goods and pleasure.

IV. *Should we fast? By all means*

We should abstain from sin and make our meat the daily and diligent performance of God's will. But we don't. The truth of the matter is this, we abstain too much from holiness and instead feast at the table of sin. Therefore God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, who gave up not just things but His very life, in order that we might have forgiveness for failing to observe the fast of God. Christ Jesus fasted of life itself for three days and then rose again that God might pardon our sins and that we might not endure the fast of hell, the fast of being without God's presence forever. Christ fasted of life itself and then rose again that we might feast on the joys and glory of heaven. And the more you reflect upon this fast of Jesus, the more you partake of this Christ, who fasted for you, partake of Him in the Lord's Supper, the better you'll observe the fast of God, the more you'll abstain from sin and eat the bread of righteousness.

ED. NOTE: During the Church Year 1961—62, sermon studies and outlines of the Standard Gospel Series will be presented.