

Jeremiah 23:1-40

False Prophets

Remember God's directive to Jeremiah when he was called as a young man:

- **Jeremiah 1:10** - "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant."

Most of his mission was to root out deception and pull down idols and false ideas among the people, but always with some word of hope - to "build and to plant."

This chapter reflects that - It starts off stating the general theme: A "Woe" upon the false pastors or shepherds of Israel who led their "flock" of people astray.

Jeremiah 23:1-2 - "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD. Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD."

Rashi - The "shepherds" were the kings of Judah. (Ancient kings often applied to themselves the image of the good shepherd protecting the people). The Targum has "governors," which would take in the whole ruling class including the king.

This is in contrast to Jesus, the true Good Shepherd. False shepherds were mere hirelings.

- **John 10:11-14** - "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine."

[Compare Jeremiah's diatribe against the false prophets and shepherds of Israel with Jesus' seven woes on the Scribes and Pharisees in **Matthew 23**].

But then immediately God offers hope for a future regathering to the Promised Land.

Jeremiah 23:3-4 - "And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the LORD."

A Reign of Righteousness

But then his vision expands past the historical return after 70 years of exile, to the coming of Messiah and His reign of righteousness.

Jeremiah 23:5-6 - "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."

The phrase "The LORD Our Righteousness" is only two words in Hebrew: "*Yahweh Tsidkenu*."

The Targum reads, "The Messiah of righteousness."

His righteousness extends to and covers us, His followers:

- **2 Corinthians 5:21** - "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

Martin Luther said the menace and terrors of Satan, the opposer, didn't bother him. "Why? There is one whose name is called the Lord our righteousness, on whom I believe. He it is who hath abrogated the law, condemned sin, abolished death, destroyed hell, and is a Satan to thee, O Satan."

The "Branch" is mentioned elsewhere by Jeremiah and the other prophets:

- **Jeremiah 33:15** - "In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land."

- **Isaiah 4:2** - "In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel."

- **Zechariah 6:12** - "And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD:"

- **Psalms 132:17-18** - "There (Zion) will I make the horn of David to bud (*šāmah*): I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed. His enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish."

The word for "branch" is *šāmah* - a branch, offspring, a shoot or sprout; a bud or a bloom; the fruit of the plant, vine or tree; the culmination of the plant's destiny, so to speak.

God had promised that none from the royal line of Jeconiah would sit on the throne of David (**Jeremiah 22:30**). It appeared that the Davidic tree had been cut down. But a shoot or sprout would come forth from a different pathway from David's lineage.

The Messiah would be a branch from the house of King David. In the same way, Jesus is the offspring of God, His only begotten Son.

The prophet Daniel saw a vision of the days of Messiah:

- **Daniel 7:13-14** - "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed."

In Christ, all Israel will be saved:

- **Romans 11:25-26** - "A hardening in part has come to Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come from Zion; He will remove godlessness from Jacob."

"All Israel" here means believing Gentiles and Jews together making up Christ's Bride/body.

And it is a sweeping, all inclusive promise:

- **Isaiah 45:17** - "But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end."

Therefore, or in light of the coming of Messiah....

Jeremiah 23:7-8 - "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land."

Meaning when they swear "As the Lord liveth..." it will no longer be about deliverance from Egypt, but instead about "redemption by the Messiah" according to the Talmud.

This passage is applied in the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Beracot, fol. 12. 2.) to the days of the Messiah.

Jesus continued this theme of Jeremiah's, casting many "woes" on the Pharisees and Sadducees - those who should have been feeding the flock.

So when spiritual leaders read these passages, we must take it to heart, because we will be held accountable. It's too easy to drift into complacency. Our job is not only to

"feed my sheep" as Jesus told Peter (**John 21**), but to guard against predators, wolves, and heresy.

The Damage Done by False Prophets

Jeremiah 23:9 - "Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine hath overcome, because of the LORD, and because of the words of his holiness."

Jeremiah was heartbroken and disturbed to the point of being sick to his stomach, "like a man whom wine hath overcome" - confused and unable to speak, over the result of these false prophecies. The people's ears and hearts were hardened against the truth. Nothing was getting through to them.

False prophets were preaching a version of the Prosperity Gospel. Relax, chill. I'm OK, you're OK. It will all turn out fine. God wants you to be prosperous. God loves you. God has a wonderful plan for your life. You are God's chosen people, etc.

Like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, they were taking away the people's ability to repent. They were whitewashing over the gaping cracks in their own faith.

Jeremiah 23:10 - "For the land is full of adulterers; for because of swearing the land mourneth; the pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up, and their course is evil, and their force is not right."

Jesus perhaps is quoting this, referring to His own "adulterous" generation:

- **Matthew 12:39** - "But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:"

- Adultery both physical and spiritual, bowing down to worship false gods.

The Mishnah (Misn. Sota, c. 9. sect. 9.) reports that adultery had become so common in Jesus' day that the courts no longer performed the Sotah ceremony testing a woman suspected of adultery (**Numbers 5:11-31**).

Yohanan Ben Zakkai: "When adulterers became many, the ordeal of the bitter water stopped, for the ordeal of bitter water is performed only in a case of doubt. But now there are many who see their lovers in public."

Swearing was allowed only if you completely fulfilled what you swore to. Or, this could refer to swearing in testimony at a trial, falsely accusing the innocent.

Jeremiah 23:11-12 - "For both prophet and priest are profane; yea, in my house have I found their wickedness, saith the LORD. Wherefore their way shall be unto them as slippery ways in the darkness: they shall be driven on, and fall therein: for I will bring evil

upon them, even the year of their visitation, saith the LORD."

This is really a charge of hypocrisy, like with the sons of Eli (**1 Samuel 2:22**).

Pretending to worship Yahweh, they also set up idols within the Temple precincts, as well as carrying on buying and selling in the Temple, according to the rabbis.

Jeremiah 23:13-14 - "And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused my people Israel to err. I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah."

He's saying that although the prophets of Samaria turned the people to worship Baal, Judah is guilty of even a greater sin, keeping people from a way to repent.

Comparing Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah is pretty harsh. But Jesus also compared Capernaum to Sodom:

- **Matthew 11:22-24** - "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee."

Describing the martyrdom of the two witnesses in Revelation, Jerusalem is again compared to Sodom:

- **Revelation 11:8** - "And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified."

Jeremiah 23:15 - "Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets; Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall: for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land."

Their punishment, according to the Targum, is "I will cause them to drink a cup of the curse, bad as the heads of serpents."

The head of a serpent holds its fangs, filled with deadly venom.

Wormwood - *la'ănâ* = accursed, poisonous, bitter. A desert plant noted for its bitterness -

- **Deuteronomy 29:18** - "Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood;"

- **Proverbs 5:3-5** - "For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell."

This is also mentioned in Hebrews:

- **Hebrews 12:15** - "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;"

Jeremiah felt like he was experiencing this curse personally as he meditated on the destruction of Jerusalem:

- **Lamentations 3:15** - "He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood"

Wormwood was also pictured as part of God's judgment in the Book of Revelation:

- **Revelation 8:10-11** - "And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

Jeremiah 23:16 - "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD."

What exactly were the false prophets preaching?

"a vision of or from their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD."

What's so bad about that?

-- **Jeremiah 17:9** - "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

The false prophets were speaking from the "flesh" what the people wanted to hear. Nothing about their sin and need for repentance.

Jeremiah 23:17 - "They say still unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil (or calamity) shall come upon you."

Peace seems like a good subject to promote. But...

- **Jeremiah 6:13-15** - "For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every

one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the Lord."

They prophesied with no command from the Lord.

Jeremiah 23:21 - "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied."

Prophecy should always in one way or another turn people away from self and sin and back to God.

Jeremiah 23:22 - "But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings."

The false prophets appeal to personal, mystical experience rather than scripture.

Jeremiah 23:25-32 - "I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; Which think to cause my people to forget my name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbor, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal. The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD.

"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbor.

"Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD."

"lightness" = frivolity, recklessness

The content of both their false prophecies and their dream interpretations are false hope, peace, prosperity, success and healing. i.e. "Things will go well for you!" They appeal to the flesh. They massage the ego.

Words of comfort, peace and reconciliation are not always inappropriate. In fact, after the Fast of Ab, Jews read the "Seven of Consolation" - passages comforting them with

the promise of return to the land and national healing and redemption.

But you can't get to the Resurrection without first going to the Cross.

Sin has to be dealt with and confronted before anything else can happen.

Jeremiah's predecessor Isaiah said it this way:

- Isaiah 59:1-3 - "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have built barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear. For your hands are stained with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters injustice..."

In contrast to their frivolous words that only address surface issues of what people want to hear, God's true word is compared to fire, to a hammer, to a threshing wind that separates the wheat from the chaff, the truth from lies.

- Hebrews 4:12 - "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

His word penetrates to the heart of things, even when we "hide ourselves in secret places." (**Jeremiah 23:24**)

The 'Burden' of the Lord

Jeremiah 23:33 - "And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What is the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the LORD."

The final section of this chapter is a play on words in Hebrew concerning the phrase "the burden of the Lord" or *maśśā'* from a root meaning to "carry."

The prophets often described a word of prophecy delivered to them from the Lord as a "burden." i.e. It weighed heavily on them until they spoke it to the people.

But people were turning this around, and mocking Jeremiah by equating "burden" with just another downer prediction that was only serving to depress them all.

God replies that if they don't like hearing this "burden" He will simply forget about them.

Jeremiah 23:39-40 - "Therefore, behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you, and I will forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and cast you out of my presence: And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten."

Summary: There are lessons here for us and for the New Testament kind of prophecy.

When God speaks through us, we don't want to repeat the words of others. To imitate someone else is to "steal one another's words." Speak in your own voice. All your previous experience has crafted you to fit into the Body of Christ as a unique member, so you can contribute authentically when the congregation comes together.

One thing I hated about the Charismatic movement was that people would speak in King James English, and imitate how others gave a prophecy.

Synagogue services in ancient Judaism included a Targumist. The reader would read the scripture passage in Hebrew. The Targumist would paraphrase what was read into the vernacular of the audience, usually into Aramaic, so that everyone could better understand.

Each generation's job is to targum the Gospel into the current vernacular so it can be fully lived out in this world. Like the Manna or the afikomen we need to chew on it, meditate on its meaning, ingest it and release the nutrients.

Bottom Line: The scripture (and our message, our preaching) should be like fire, like a hammer. It should penetrate into the secret places where we try to hide. Most importantly, it should always turn our hearts away from self and back to God.