

TEXT: Jeremiah 23:1-40

TITLE: FALSE PROPHETS DENOUNCED

BIG IDEA:

COUNTERFEIT SPIRITUAL SHEPHERDS SUBSTITUTE THEIR OWN PEACEFUL IMAGINATIONS FOR GOD’S AUTHENTIC REVELATION OF JUDGMENT

INTRODUCTION:

Jeremiah understood what was involved in faithfully proclaiming God’s Word – no matter how unpopular the message. He was willing to pay the price of being mocked and flogged and cast into prison and thrown into a deep pit of quicksand type of mud that required 30 strong men to haul him out. He refused to recant or soften his message or accommodate the demands of sinful leaders. He looked forward to the day when God would raise up a Righteous Branch from the root of David who would administer righteousness and faithfully shepherd God’s people. He denounced the destructive influence of counterfeit shepherds – calling them to account and exposing the futility of following their manmade counsel. Ultimately, God will have the last word and mock those who mock the faithful proclamation of God’s strong word of judgment.

MacArthur: Other significant chapters which condemn evil shepherds and false prophets include chaps. 14, 27, 28; Is 28; Eze 13, 34; Mic 3; Zec 11.

COUNTERFEIT SPIRITUAL SHEPHERDS SUBSTITUTE THEIR OWN PEACEFUL IMAGINATIONS FOR GOD’S AUTHENTIC REVELATION OF JUDGMENT

I. (:1-2) EVIL SHEPHERDS FACE DIVINE ACCOUNTABILITY

A. Evil Practices of Counterfeit Spiritual Shepherds

1. Injurious Shepherding

“Destroying and Scattering the sheep of My pasture”

“Scattered My flock and driven them away”

Parunak: *“Destroy and scatter”*: the sin for which they are judged.

1) First sin: they destroy the sheep, cause them to perish. By implication, what a shepherd should do for the sheep is protect them from outside dangers.

2) Second sin: they scatter the sheep. By contrast, a shepherd should keep the flock together, gather them into a safe fold, and if one is missing, go out and find it.

3) We will see these two features over and over in this paragraph. It’s worth noting at the outset that they correspond perfectly to the two great dangers that Paul pointed out to the elders at Ephesus in **Acts 20:29-30**, the dangers of wolves coming in to destroy and of false teachers scattering sheep away.

2. Inattentive Shepherding

“Concerning the shepherds who are tending My people”

“Have not attended to them”

B. Emphatic Warning Woes

1. Pronouncement of Woe

“Woe to the shepherds”

2. Promise of Impending Judgment for Evil Deeds

“Behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds”

Feinberg: By a play on words, Jeremiah uses the double sense of the Hebrew word *paqad* (“to care for,” “to chastize”): the shepherds had “*not bestowed care on*” the flock; so God would “*bestow punishment on*” them in judgment (v. 2).

Jamieson: just retribution. Play upon the double sense of “*visit*.” “Visit upon,” namely, in wrath (Ex 32:34).

II. (:3-8) GOD’S FAITHFUL SHEPHERD (THE MESSIAH) WILL ULTIMATELY REIGN IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

A. (:3-4) Future Restoration to Fruitfulness and Security

(Both near term and eschatological fulfillment)

1. The Bringing About of Restoration – How will God accomplish it?

a. Recapturing / Gathering

“Then I myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them”

MacArthur: The restoration of Judah from Babylon is referred to in language which in its fullness can only refer to the final restoration of God’s people under Messiah. . . . Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others were small fulfillments compared to the consummate shepherding of the Messiah Jesus.

b. Relocation

“bring them back to their pasture”

c. Raise Up Faithful Shepherds

“I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them”

2. The Blessings of Restoration – What will God provide?

a. Feeding – pleasant grazing

“and bring them back to their pasture”

b. Fruitfulness

“and they will be fruitful and multiply”

c. Security

“and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified”

d. Permanence

“nor will any be missing”

Matthew Henry: Here is a word of comfort to the neglected sheep. Though the under-shepherds take no care of them, no pains with them, but betray them, the chief Shepherd will look after them. When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord taketh me up. Though the

interests of God's church in the world are neglected by those who should take care of them, and postponed to their own private secular interests, yet they shall not therefore sink. God will perform his promise, though those he employs do not perform their duty.

B. (:5-6) Faithful Shepherding of the Righteous King (the Messiah)

1. (:5) Righteous Characterization of His Reign

*"I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;
And He will reign as king and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land"*

Parunak: "a legitimate scion." The point of "righteous" is not that the king is morally upright (though of course he is), but that he is legitimate, entitled to the throne. The suggestion is that the current Judean kings are not legitimate. They were set up by foreign powers, and were only puppets.

2. (:6a) Righteous Results of His Reign – Salvation and Security

"In His days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely"

3. (:6b) Righteous Name

*"And this is His name by which He will be called,
The Lord our righteousness."*

C. (:7-8) Favorite Testimony Switches from Historical Exodus to Eschatological Restoration --

The newer demonstration of God's mercy and power trumps the former demonstration

1. (:7) Testimony of Historical Exodus

"Therefore behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when they will no longer say, As the Lord lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt."

2. (:8a) Testimony of Eschatological Restoration

"but, 'As the Lord lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.'"

3. (:8b) Territory of the Promised Land Possessed and Enjoyed

"Then they will live on their own soil."

Parunak: Passages like these led the Christians of the first three centuries to believe in a national restoration of Israel. Not until Constantine did amillennialism become the predominant belief of the church.

III. (:9-15) EVIL SHEPHERDS DESERVE GOD'S CONDEMNATION

A. (:9-12) Corrupt Leadership Calls for Calamity – Deserving of Punishment

1. (:9) Lamenting Over Corrupt Prophets

"As for the prophets: My heart is broken within me, All my bones tremble; I have become like a drunken man, Even like a man overcome with wine, Because of the LORD And because of His holy words."

2. (:10-11) Lamenting Over Corrupt Priests as Well

“For the land is full of adulterers; For the land mourns because of the curse. The pastures of the wilderness have dried up. Their course also is evil, And their might is not right. For both prophet and priest are polluted; Even in My house I have found their wickedness,’ declares the LORD.”

3. (:12) Promising Their Punishment = Calamity from the Lord

“Therefore their way will be like slippery paths to them, They will be driven away into the gloom and fall down in it; For I shall bring calamity upon them, The year of their punishment,’ declares the LORD.”

Dyer: These leaders had such a low view of God’s holy character that they would even pollute His temple with their wickedness. Because of their sin God vowed to bring disaster on them.

Jamieson: “Jerusalem” and Judah were even worse than “Samaria” and the ten tribes; the greater were the privileges of the former, the greater was their guilt. They had the temple in their midst, which the ten tribes had not; yet in the temple itself they practised idolatry.

B. (:13-15) Cancerous Idolatry Degenerates to Depravity – Deserving of Poison

1. (:13) Offensive Idolatry

“Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an offensive thing: They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray.”

2. (:14a) Horrible Spiritual Adultery

“Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; And they strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one has turned back from his wickedness.”

3. (:14b) Disgusting Depravity

“All of them have become to Me like Sodom, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.

4. (:15) Pollution Deserving of Poison

“Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets, ‘Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood And make them drink poisonous water, For from the prophets of Jerusalem pollution has gone forth into all the land.’”

IV. (:16-24) FOLLOWING EVIL SHEPHERDS LEADS ONLY TO FUTILITY

*“Thus says the Lord of hosts,
‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you,
They are leading you into futility;”*

7 Reasons:

A. (:16) Because the Source of Their Message is Human Rather than Divine

“They speak a vision of their own imagination.”

B. (:17) Because the Security They Offer is False

*“They keep saying to those who despise Me,
The Lord has said, ‘You will have peace’,
And as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart,
They say, ‘Calamity will not come upon you.’”*

C. (:18) Because the Stiff-Necked Nature of These Prophets is Evident

*“But who has stood in the council of the Lord,
That he should see and hear His word?
Who has given heed to His word and listened?”*

D. (:19-20) Because the Severity of God’s Judgment Will Soon Be Seen

*“Behold, the storm of the Lord has gone forth in wrath,
Even a whirling tempest;
It will swirl down on the head of the wicked.
The anger of the Lord will not turn back
Until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart;
In the last days you will clearly understand it.”*

E. (:21) Because the Sending of These Prophets Carries No Authority

*“I did not send these prophets, but they ran.
I did not speak to them, but they prophesied.”*

F. (:22) Because the Senselessness of These Prophets is Incredible

*“But if they had stood in My council,
Then they would have announced My words to My people,
And would have turned them back from their evil way
And from the evil of their deeds.”*

Thompson: Here lie two important features of the true prophet – the divine sending and the divine word. In the absence of these, prophets had no authority and no clear understanding of the purposes of God. Not having been in his council (cf. **14:14; 27:15; 29:9**) they had no word to proclaim, nor could they turn the nation away from its evil course and its evil deeds. Indeed, they could not discern in their fellows the kinds of activities which were an offense to Yahweh. The task of the true prophet was to convict people of their sinfulness. To do that he himself would need to have a clear understanding of the nature of the covenant and its demands upon the people of God. The only acceptable response to their election and their high calling was in terms of holiness and righteousness and utter loyalty to Yahweh the sovereign Lord of the covenant.

G. (:23-24) Because the Sight of God Reaches to All Corners of the Universe

*“‘Am I a God who is near,’ declares the Lord,
‘And not a God far off?’
Can a man hide himself in hiding places
So I do not see him?’ declares the Lord.
‘Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?’ declares the Lord.”*

MacArthur: Let not false prophets think they can hide their devices from God, who declares Himself omnipresent and omniscient, in both an immanent and transcendent sense.

Mackay: Zion theology emphasized the indwelling of the Lord in the Temple and tended to limit God and restrict divine freedom. The Lord simply had to act on behalf of Jerusalem because he had presenced himself there. Over against such a comfortable theology with a narrow and localized conception of the divine, the question denies the possibility of restricting God to any physical locality. He is transcendent, and his lofty majesty must ever be kept in mind. His sovereign power is a function of his exalted status. His power is not limited by his transcendence as though God was removed to a distance and so rendered impotent. Divine exaltation does not impair God's ability to see into the hearts of all people (**Ps. 33:13-15**) and to judge what they do (**Pss. 11:4-5; 113:5-6**).

V. (:25-32) GOD OPPOSES FALSE PROPHETS THAT DECEPTIVELY CLAIM DIVINE REVELATION

A. (:25-27) The Obscuring of Truth by False Prophets

1. (:25) Invalid Claims to Divine Revelation – God is not fooled

“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, ‘I had a dream, I had a dream!’”

2. (:26) Initiated in Deception and Propagating Falsehood

“How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart?”

3. (:27) Intended to Promote Idolatry – not a new strategy

“who intend to make My people forget My name by their dreams which they relate to one another, just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal.”

B. (:28-29) The Omnipotent Nature of God's Word

1. (:28) Huge Distinction Between Divine Revelation and Personal Thoughts

“The prophet who has a dream may relate his dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have in common with grain?’ declares the Lord.”

2. (:29) 2 Analogies Proving the Power of God's Word in Judgment

a. Analogy of Fire – Devours and Consumes in Judgment

“Is not my Word like fire?” declares the Lord”

b. Analogy of a Hammer – Smashes and Obliterates in Judgment

“and like a hammer which shatters a rock?””

Jamieson: As the "fire" consumes the "chaff," [Jer 23:28], so "My word" will consume the false prophets (**Mt 3:12; Heb 4:12**). "My word" which is "wheat" [**Jer 23:28**], that is, food to the true prophet and his hearers, is a consuming "fire," and a crushing "hammer" (**Mt 21:44**) to false prophets and their followers (**2Co 2:16**). The Word of the false prophets may be known by its promising men peace in sin. "My word," on the contrary, burns and breaks the hard-hearted (**Jer 20:9**). The "hammer" symbolizes destructive power (**Jer 50:23; Na 2:1**, Margin).

Longman: God's word is like fire and a hammer, two images that suggest devastating judgment. We may presume that the false message of the lying prophets concerned peace and not judgment.

C. (:30-32) The Opposition of God to False Prophets – Characterizes their Counterfeit Ministry:

1. (:30) Copy Cat Plagiarism (instead of divine revelation)

“Therefore behold, I am against the prophets,’ declares the Lord, ‘who steal My words from each other.’”

2. (:31) Outright Lying

“Behold, I am against the prophets,’ declares the Lord, ‘who use their tongues and declare, The Lord declares.’”

3. (:32a) Deceptive and Reckless

“Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,’ declares the Lord, ‘and related them and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting.’”

4. (:32b) No Divine Authorization or Spiritual Benefit

“yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit,’ declares the Lord.”

Feinberg: Jeremiah describes three classes of false prophets. Three times he declares that the Lord is against the false prophets; each verse begins with a statement of the opposition of God to the godless seers. The first group of lying prophets are those who misappropriate the prophecies of the true prophets, giving them out as their own (v. 30). To their lies they add plagiarism; their words were not original but stolen from others. Here was spiritual bankruptcy indeed! A second group are accused of using their tongues as the main weapon in their deceptions. They use their tongues too freely (v. 31). They “wag” them to introduce their lies by the formula of the true prophets “*The Lord declares.*” They did this to give their words a ring of authenticity. They merely pretended divine authorization. The last group included those with whom national interests were paramount (v. 2). Their words – true or not – must, they felt, lift national morale. No wonder the prophet refers to their speech as empty talk.

VI. (:33-40) GOD WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD – GOD SARCASTICALLY MOCKS THOSE WHO MOCKINGLY REJECT THE HARSH TRUTH OF GOD’S LEGITIMATE REVELATION OF COMING JUDGMENT

Read this section in The Living Bible for impact of sarcasm:

When one of the people or one of their “prophets” or priests asks you, “Well, Jeremiah, what is the sad news from the Lord today?” You shall reply, “What sad news? You are the sad news, for the Lord has cast you away!” (23:33)

A. (:33-38) Four Responses to Those Mocking Faithful Preaching

1. (:33) First Response: The Lord will Abandon you

“Now when this people or the prophet or a priest asks you saying, What is the oracle of the Lord? then you shall say to them, What oracle? The Lord declares, I will abandon you.”

2. (:34) Second Response: The Lord will Punish you

“Then as for the prophet or the priest or the people who say, The oracle of the

Lord, I will bring punishment upon that man and his household.”

3. (:35-36) Third Response: You have Perverted the Truth

“Thus will each of you say to his neighbor and to his brother, What has the Lord answered? Or, What has the Lord spoken? For you will no longer remember the oracle of the Lord, because every man’s own word will become the oracle, and you have perverted the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts, our God.”

4. (:37-38) Fourth Response: Stop Mocking God’s Revelation

“Thus you will say to that prophet, What has the Lord answered you? And what has the Lord spoken? For if you say, The oracle of the Lord! Surely thus says the Lord, Because you said this word, The oracle of the Lord! I have also sent to you, saying, You shall not say, The oracle of the Lord!”

Wiersbe: Their attitude toward God’s message was careless and disrespectful: they weren’t taking seriously God’s message or God’s messenger. The false prophets had distorted the truth to make it mean what they wanted it to mean, and yet they called their messages the “*oracles of God*.”

Dyer: God said He would punish those who claimed any other oracle. The people were misusing the term so much in claiming divine authority for their own words that God told them not to mention the word again. Its misuse had caused the people to distort the true words of the living God. Those who continued to claim divine oracles would be judged. God vowed to cast them out of His presence along with the rest of Jerusalem. These false prophets faced the threat of unending disgrace and shame for their wicked words.

B. (:39-40) Four Promises of Final Condemnation

1. Abandoning You

“Therefore behold, I will surely forget you”

2. Rejecting You

“and cast you away from My presence; along with the city which I gave you and your fathers”

3. Shaming You

“I will put an everlasting reproach on you”

4. Humiliating You

“and an everlasting humiliation which will not be forgotten”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) In what ways do false teachers today mock the message of those who faithfully proclaim the entire counsel of God?
- 2) How can you recognize injurious and inattentive shepherding?

3) What safeguards (checks and balances) can we maintain to make sure that the source of our teaching originates from God's authority rather than man's imaginations?

4) How can we tell whether the shepherding we are receiving is consistent with the righteousness of God?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Thompson: The condemnation of the false prophets was severe. They were seen as men of low moral standards (**vv. 13-15**), purveyors of a message of peace when judgment was imminent (**vv. 16-17**), men who had not stood in the council of Yahweh (**vv. 18-22**), men who depended on dreams for their message and who borrowed ideas from one another (**vv. 23-32**). Jeremiah stood in striking contrast to the false prophets. He was a man of high moral integrity. He preached judgment. He had stood in the council of Yahweh. He had no recourse to dreams but depended on a direct revelation from Yahweh himself.

Feinberg: Let us not think that Jeremiah took his condemnation of the false prophets lightly. It cost him tremendous emotional and physical stress. He was disturbed and shocked at the enormity of their offenses and was so overcome with the trauma of it that he could only liken himself to a drunken man. He showed no vindictiveness against those who tried to nullify his life's work, only heartbrokenness. Next to the ungodly kings, the false prophets were most responsible for bringing about the nation's ruin. When Jeremiah contrasted their evil ways and words with the holy words of God, it was more than he could contemplate without deep agony of soul.

Constable: Having given a true prophecy about the future, Jeremiah proceeded to announce God's judgment on the false prophets who were misleading His people with false prophecies (cf. **v. 1**). This section consists of six different messages that Jeremiah delivered at various times, which the writer placed together in the text because of their common subject (**vv. 9-12, 13-15, 16-22, 23-24, 25-32, and 33-40**). . .

Dreams were one way that Yahweh communicated His revelations to people in ancient times (cf. **Gen. 28:10-17; 37:5-11; 40; 41:1-45; Num. 12:6-8; 1 Kings 3:5-15; Dan. 2; 4:4-27; 7; Joel 2:28; Zech. 1:7—6:8**). The pagans also viewed dreams as a way the gods communicated with them. Consequently it was possible to claim a revelation in a dream and to obtain an audience. The person who received a revelation from Yahweh in a dream knew it, but it was very difficult for someone else to know if the dream that a prophet claimed really came from Yahweh.

Wiersbe: To begin with, the false prophets offered the people a false hope (**23:16-20**). . . they also ministered under a false authority (**23:21-24**). . . Jehovah wasn't a local deity like the pagan idols, but a transcendent God who reigns above all things and fills heaven and earth (**vv. 23-24**). Nor was He blind like the idols (**Ps. 115:5**), unable to see the sins of the people . . . Finally, the false prophets were speaking under a false inspiration (**vv. 25-32**). They depended on dreams and delusions of the mind, and they even plagiarized messages from one another! Compared to the nourishing wheat of the Word, their messages were only straw; you couldn't eat it, build with it, or even be warmed by it.

Parunak: In our last study, we completed the exposition of the earlier warnings against the royal house. Now we take up the oracles against the false prophets (**23:9-40**). There are three sections here, each with inner structural cohesion, and each condemning a different sin of the prophets:

a) 9-15, Impurity. Jer. shows that the root of the problem of spiritual adultery lies with the prophets. Instead of being examples of piety to the nation, they are corrupt and impure.

b) 16-32, Deception. Their prophecy is not really from God, and thus it is ineffective to change the people.

“Vanity” literally means “vapor, breath,” and is a common title for idols, representing their insubstantiality, their nothingness. Like the cloud of breath on a cold morning that rapidly disappears, Jer. warns the people that if they follow the prophets, they will become insubstantial, empty, nothings. Their moral fiber will be destroyed.

The rest of the section substantiates this pithy warning in two panels (**23:16-22; 23:23-32**). Each has the same three sections:

- 1) The prophets’ message is false.
- 2) By contrast, God’s word is true and effective.
- 3) Because God has not authorized their word, it can only harm God’s people.

c) 33-40, Rejection. Not only can they provide no true prophecy, but they mock the real Word of God when it comes from Jeremiah.

Application: Beware these three signs of false teaching: personal immorality; lack of authority and effectiveness; a rejection of the truth.

Peter Wallace: Justice, Truth and a Heart to Know the Lord

Derek Kidner summarized Jeremiah 23 by saying “Without justice, a nation suffers, but without truth it sickens.”

And chapter 24 reminds us that without a heart to know God, a nation is a very bad fig. Have you ever been eating pistachios – or dates – or some other fruit or nut – enjoying a tasty snack – and then you come across one that is spoiled, and the foul, rotten flavor just explodes in your mouth?! What do you do? Well, you look carefully at the next 4 or 5 in order to get the good flavor back!

But the remnant of Jerusalem are like bad figs – so bad that they could not be eaten. That’s right. The remnant. The exiles – those people who were driven out of Jerusalem for their sins – they are like the good figs – the first-ripe fig that my soul desires! But the remnant are spoiled figs that no one can eat.

But God has a habit of turning the world upside-down. This is why (as I look at our topsy-turvy world) I begin to wonder what God might have up his sleeve!

1. Without Justice, a Nation Suffers (23:1-8)

a. Behold, I Will Replace the Shepherds Who Scatter the Sheep (v1-4)

The house of David was called to shepherd the flock of God. But the sons of David did not care for the flock. They scattered the flock and drove them away. And yet God says that he drove

them away. David had been called to succeed where Israel had failed. If you go back to the days of the Judges, the prophet Samuel watched the demise of Israel – when the ark of God was taken captive by the Philistines, and the priests were slaughtered, and Shiloh left vacant. Israel had failed to do justice – to do the truth. Israel did not have a heart to know the LORD. And so God called David and his sons to succeed where Israel had failed. Indeed, the people of Judah had grown proud and short-sighted. They thought that God’s promise meant that Jerusalem would never fall – God’s promises to David would never fail – and therefore they had eternal security.

Eternal security is the doctrine of ‘once-saved-always-saved.’ It is one of those doctrines that is true in one sense, but false in another! It is true in that those who are elect will never finally fall away. It is false in the sense that there are many who are outwardly “saved” who do fall away. I have heard some people say, “My son prayed the prayer when he was seven, so I know he’s okay.” That mentality is exactly the same as Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day. We prayed the prayer, so we’re in! God promised, so we’re good!

Eternal security is only true when it is paired with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. You are only secure if you persevere. This, in fact, is the fundamental problem for Israel. We don’t persevere. Oh, I don’t doubt that there were some faithful Israelites – and it would appear that a couple of kings may have persevered to the end. But just look at Israel’s history! The people of God never persevere for more than a generation or so. If our eternal security depends on our perseverance, then we’re in trouble. And seriously, that hasn’t changed much. Just look at the history of the church! The security of Israel – the security of the church – does depend on perseverance: and first and foremost, it depends on the perseverance of Jesus! (read v5-6)

b. Behold, I Will Raise Up a Righteous Branch for David Who Will Execute Justice and Righteousness (v5-6)

When there is a Son of David who executes justice and righteousness in the land, then Israel will dwell securely. But so long as the sons of David keep dying, then the “security” is only temporary. Temporary security – temporary salvation – is hardly worth calling salvation at all! We need a Son of David who will never die. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’ There is an irony in this name. The last king of Judah was Zedekiah. Zedekiah’s name means “the LORD my righteousness” We need a Zedekiah. But this guy ain’t it! We need a king whose name is lived out in his life. And the third “behold” focuses on the result of what will happen when we have such a king:

c. Behold, a Day Greater Than the Exodus Is Coming (v7-8)

The exodus was the great redemptive act of God. All of Israel’s history was oriented around the Exodus. The book of Genesis is important – but in the five books of Moses, the book of Genesis functions as a historical preamble to the Mosaic covenant, explaining the background to the Exodus! 4 But when the LORD our righteousness comes – when the righteous branch, the great Son of David, comes – then even the Exodus will pale in comparison with that greater deliverance. Until then – without justice – a nation suffers. Jeremiah then turns to the prophets – pointing out that without truth, a nation sickens.

2. Without Truth, a Nation Sickens (23:9-40)

a. The Prophets of Jerusalem Strengthen the Evildoers (v9-15)

When Jeremiah hears the holy words of the LORD, he becomes like a drunken man – he staggers and reels because of how potent God’s words are. 10 For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil,

and their might is not right.

Verses 9-15 lay out the basic charge: the prophets of Jerusalem strengthen the hands of evildoers. Two hundred years before – in the days of Elijah – the prophets of Samaria had led Israel astray. But now it is worse. The prophets of Jerusalem are encouraging people to remain mired in their sin. “All of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.” (v14) You think that Sodom and Gomorrah were bad? Jerusalem is worse! Why? This is the central point of the passage in verses 16-32:

b. Do Not Listen to Prosperity Preachers (v16-32)

i) They Speak Visions of Their Own Minds (v16-17)

I want you to pay attention to this. What is the problem with the “prosperity preachers” in Jeremiah’s day? They are saying to the people of God, “It shall be well with you.” Shalom! They are preaching “if God be for us, who can be against us!” What can separate us from the love of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?! Jeremiah says that they “speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.” But how do you know? False prophets do not wear nametags saying, “Don’t listen to me, I’m a false prophet!” They are simply known as prophets. 6 And in Jeremiah’s day they appear to have been a very orthodox bunch of preachers. When Jeremiah says, “they commit adultery and walk in lies” (v14) that could be referring to their spiritual adultery. But the LORD warns us not to listen to the words of the prosperity preachers. And in verses 18-22 he gives us a clue for how to identify them:

ii) One Who Has Stood in the Council of the LORD Will Warn of His Coming Wrath (v18-22)

A true prophet will warn my people. A true prophet will turn my people from their evil way. Preachers who never rebuke people – but allow them to wallow in their sin – are not sent by God. Verse 23 may sound a little odd:

iii) “I Am Against the Prophets” Declares the LORD (v23-32)

We are so used to hearing the opposite! God often emphasizes how he is not distant – but near! But there is a danger in over-emphasizing the nearness of God! The prosperity preachers keep saying that God is near – God will bless – God’s on your side – he’ll make it all work out! And so the LORD himself points out: “Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away?”

Don’t think of me as your “pet deity”! This is a serious danger today. If your primary notion of God is that of a close personal friend – a buddy who’s got your back – then verse 23 is what you need to hear! “Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away?”

24 Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. Yes, God is a God who is near – but he is also far away! He dwells in a high and holy place – but is near to the contrite in heart! Notice that God is near to the humble – to those who recognize that they are small and insignificant. As soon as we think that we are somebody – and that God’s chief end is to make me happy – then we are just creating a god in our own image.

And so God says that he is against the prophets. These prosperity preachers refuse to warn the people of God – and so they “lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness.” Walter Brueggemann summarizes this beautifully: “Behind the dispute concerning true and false

prophets is a dispute about the character of God. The ideological prophets of the establishment celebrated and affirmed God's nearness and God's abiding commitment to and presence within the Jerusalem establishment. God had become a part of that social arrangement. In sharp contrast, Jeremiah bears witness to a God who is 'afar off' – free, sovereign, and not a mere appendage to the established religion... Until Judah is clear about the character of Yahweh, it will never be clear about... what the message will be." (214-215) If you are listening to teachers who are saying that God is there to make you happy, then run away!

c. So Stop Asking for a Message (v33-40)

The word translated "burden" in verses 33-40 has a double meaning. It can mean a "burden" – something you carry. Or it can mean an oracle or message. So when someone comes asking "what is the burden – or message of the LORD" Jeremiah is supposed to answer: "you are the burden – or message of the LORD, and I will cast you off, declares the LORD."

The point of verses 34-40 is that the people, the prophets, and the priests have all become an intolerable weight that God will no longer bear – precisely because they have emphasized their own message (burden) and rejected his.

And the result (v39-40) is that: Jerusalem itself will be cast away from the presence of God. And this sets up the final point. It is not just that the people have been cast out of Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself is under God's wrath.

3. Without a Heart to Know the LORD, a Nation Is a Very Bad Fig (24:1-10)

Without justice, a nation suffers. Without truth, a nation sickens. But without a heart to know the LORD, a nation is a very bad fig! Chapter 24 comes from the time in between Nebuchadnezzar's first and second siege. In 597 he took Jeconiah captive – along with Ezekiel and many leaders of Jerusalem. Many undoubtedly thought that the captives were the "bad figs" – after all, they had been the leaders in Jerusalem. But Jeremiah sees a vision in verses 1-3.

a. The Vision of Two Baskets of Figs (v1-3)

There are two baskets of figs – "placed before the temple of the LORD." Which is which? Well, think about it. Jeremiah has been preaching for years – decades – that God's judgment would come upon Jerusalem, and that the king and the people would be taken into captivity. So is this the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy? Undoubtedly some thought that this was all that Jeremiah had prophesied. Soon it would all be over. The king would return – the temple would be restored – and the glory of the kingdom would resume.

But then in verses 4-7, the LORD overturns the expectations of Israel:

b. The Exiles Are the Good Figs – I Will Give Them a Heart to Know Me (v4-7)

The exiles are the good figs. This is unexpected. These people were run out of Jerusalem by God because of their infidelity to God – and yet God says that he will do good to them. All the language of blessing from Jeremiah 1 comes out in God's promise to the exiles.

Notice that the LORD does not say that the exiles are particularly holy. Rather, the emphasis is on what the LORD will do: "I will regard as good... I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down. I will plant them, and not pluck them up. [and above all] I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD. And in the words of the great covenant promise, "and they shall be my people and will be their God,

for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

How can people return to the LORD? Jeremiah has made it clear that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. How can we return to the LORD? When God gives us a heart to know the LORD we then return to him. This is an act of grace – sovereign and free – well worth overtaking the Exodus as the greatest event in redemptive history! In contrast:

c. The Remnant Are the Bad Figs – I Will Make Them a Horror (v8-10)

It is simply a matter of God's free election and grace. As Paul says in Romans 9:18, "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills." [read and comment on Romans 9:18-29 – especially "We would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah"] God makes "the future with those whom the world judges to be without a future."
(Brueggemann, 220)