

The Branch of Righteousness

Jeremiah 23

Jeremiah 23:1-2 - *“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord. ² Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the Lord.”*

Background Notes

In chapters 21-22, Jeremiah pronounced four messages of judgment against the last four kings of Judah - all of whom were wicked kings – Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Most likely these four evil kings were the four “shepherds” that Jeremiah primarily had in mind in Jeremiah 23:1. In the Old Testament, the figure of a “shepherd” was frequently used for the king. The king’s primary responsibility was to care for the welfare of his people, just as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

The last four kings of Judah were anything but “good shepherds.” In fact, they were causing the sheep to be scattered (v2). Because they were not attending to their sheep, the Lord would attend to them: *“Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings”* (v2). The Babylonian takeover would put an end to the line of evil kings in Judah.

Doctrinal Points

1. God revealed the character and mission of the Righteous Branch.

Jeremiah 23:3-8 – *“But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. ⁴ I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,” says the Lord. ⁵ “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. ⁶ In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely. Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.*

⁷ Therefore, behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that they shall no longer say, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ ⁸ but, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ And they shall dwell in their own land.”

It doesn't take much insight to realize that this passage is a Messianic prophecy. In contrast to the wicked kings of Israel and Judah, in the future God will raise up a "Righteous Branch" in the family tree of King David. The last four kings of Judah were in the line of David, but they certainly were not righteous kings. However, in the future a *Righteous Branch* will come! Isaiah had also predicted this coming Righteous Branch. Jeremiah 23:6 revealed that one of His names would be "**THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.**" This title leaves no doubt that **this coming King would be God Himself**, because that is one of the names of God.

During His days, Israel and Judah will be restored (v6). Has this prophecy been fulfilled yet? No - certainly not completely. The return of the Jews from their 70-year captivity in Babylon was a foretaste of what was to come in the future, when the Lord will return to earth. Notice that at *that* time, the Jews will return from **all the countries** where they have been scattered - not just Babylon (v3&8). The present return of the Jews to Israel today is, we believe, part of the fulfillment of this prophecy. But there's more to come! Notice that under the righteous Branch, there will be righteous shepherds, and no more fear or terror (v4). Clearly, this part of the prophecy has not yet been fulfilled.

Some people teach that this prophecy is being fulfilled today, in a spiritual way, in the Church. However, **in the context**, it's clear that this was not how Jeremiah understood this word from the Lord. This was certainly not what Jeremiah intended to teach the people who were listening to him - and this was certainly not how the people listening to Jeremiah understood this prophecy! When Jeremiah said that Israel and Judah would be restored from all the countries where they had been scattered, and that they would live on their own soil and in their own land (v8), Jeremiah (the inspired writer of this Scripture) intended to teach that there was a coming day when the Jewish people would literally return to their own Land - **the Land of Israel**.

Let's be very careful in our interpretation of Scripture. Let's be careful not spiritualize clear prophecy about the literal Land of Israel and turn it into some kind of "spiritual land of the Church." That would be "**bad hermeneutics**!" This prophecy will be fulfilled - literally - when the righteous Branch of David, the Lord Himself, returns to establish His earthly kingdom. God revealed the character and mission of the Righteous Branch.

2. God revealed the character and message of the false prophets.

⁹ *My 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 has overcome, because of the Lord, and because of His holy words.* ¹⁰ *For the land is full of adulterers; for because of a curse the land mourns. The pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up. Their course of life is evil, and their might is not right.* ¹¹ *"For both prophet and priest are profane; Yes, in My house I have found their wickedness," says the Lord.* ¹² *"Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery ways. In the darkness they shall be driven on and fall in them, for I will bring disaster on them in the year of their punishment," says the Lord.* "And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria. They prophesied by Baal, and caused My

people Israel to err. ¹⁴ I have also seen a horrible thing in the prophets of Jerusalem: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they also strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. All of them are like Sodom to Me, and her inhabitants like Gomorrah. ¹⁵ "Therefore thus says 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 profaneness has gone out into all the land.'" ¹⁶ Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord. ¹⁷ They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The Lord has said, "You shall have peace" and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'" ¹⁸ For who has stood in the counsel of the Lord, and has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? ¹⁹ Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord has gone forth in fury - a violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked. ²⁰ The anger of the Lord will not turn back until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it perfectly."

Verses 9-40 contain messages that Jeremiah gave at various times. Jeremiah was very distraught over the idolatry and immorality of the false prophets (v9-12). He compared the false prophets of Judah to the false prophets of Samaria and the northern kingdom, that had already fallen to the Assyrians (v13-15). All of them would be judged like Sodom and Gomorrah - they would reap what they had sown.

In verses 16-20 the false prophets were denounced for leading the people into the false hope that there would be peace, when in reality the judgment of the Lord was about to fall on them. The "latter days" (v20) referred to the last days of Jerusalem before the Babylonians destroyed it. The Lord said that that these men were proved to be false prophets because they did not turn the people from their evil ways (v21-22).

Jeremiah 23:23-30 - "Am I a God near at hand," says the Lord, "and not a God afar off? ²⁴ Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord. ²⁵ "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶ How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams that everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. ²⁸ "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream, and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?" says the Lord. ²⁹ "Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? ³⁰ Therefore behold, I am against the prophets who steal My words, every one from his neighbor. ³¹ Behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.' ³² Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams, and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore, they shall not profit this people at all," says the Lord."

Through Jeremiah the Lord said that no one could hide from God - because He created the universe! Verses 23-24 are good verses for teaching **God's omnipresence**. God denounced the false prophets for claiming to have dreams from Him, and thus leading the people astray from the true message of God's Word (v25-32).

Jeremiah 23:32-40 - *"So when these people or the prophet or the priest ask you, saying, 'What is the oracle of the Lord?' you shall then say to them, 'What oracle?' I will even forsake you," says the Lord.³⁴ "And as for the prophet and the priest and the people who say, 'The oracle of the Lord!' I will even punish that man and his house. ³⁵ Thus every one of you shall say to his neighbor, and every one to his brother, 'What has the Lord answered?' and, 'What has the Lord spoken?' ³⁶ And the oracle of the Lord you shall mention no more. For every man's word will be his oracle, for you have perverted the words of the living God, the Lord of hosts, our God. ³⁷ Thus you shall say to the prophet, 'What has the Lord answered you?' and, 'What has the Lord spoken?' ³⁸ But since you say, 'The oracle of the Lord!' therefore thus says the Lord: 'Because you say this word, "The oracle of the Lord!" and I have sent to you, saying, "Do not say, 'The oracle of the Lord!'" ³⁹ therefore behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you and forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and will cast you out of My presence. ⁴⁰ And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, that will not be forgotten."*

In the ancient world, great weight was placed on oracles, because they were considered to be direct messages from God. In verses 33-40, the oracles of the false prophets were declared to be untrue, and their words did not come from God. When Jeremiah was asked if the oracle or burden was of God, he was to respond that these oracles were the *problem* and burden of God! Therefore, God would abandon them, along with the city of Jerusalem. The judgments of verses 39-40 all took place when the Babylonians conquered Judah and Jerusalem, proving that the false prophets were indeed false prophets. God revealed the character and message of the false prophets.

Practical Application

Let everything be tested by the Word of God!

"The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? ²⁹ "Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (v28-29).

The standard - the bottom line - is always the Word of God. All experiences, all dreams, all claims of "the Lord told me" (and so on) must be tested by the truth of God's Word. Does the message conform to the Word of God? God can use dreams and experiences (and anything else He chooses), but these things are like straw and chaff compared to the wholesome grain of the Word of God. The God's Word is like penetrating and refining fire. It is powerful - like a hammer that shatters a rock.

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