False Spiritual Leaders  
Jeremiah 23:1-40

Introduction

Jeremiah begins his 10th sermon. The chapter will address Judah’s politicians, priests and prophets. The leaders had failed miserably to live up to God’s divine standards. Deliverance and restoration would have to take place by divine intervention. If there would be any hope God would have to step in and make a way for His people.

The ruthless leaders would still be responsible before God for the stewardship entrusted to them.

What is the task of leaders? Whether in the home or in church or in the nation; the task of leaders is to build people up; using their authority and leadership to point people to God, to Christ, and embrace godly living--to do what is right. He has shown you O man what is good and what the Lord requires of you. To do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Our job as leaders is to cultivate godliness, compassion, benevolence and promote service.

General Charles Gordon asked Li Hung Chang about the nature of leadership. “There are only three kinds of people in the world--those that are movable, those that are immovable, and those that move them.”

Robert E. Lee warned; “You must be careful how you walk, and where you go, for there are those following you who will set their feet where yours are set.”

The chapter is a complex set of warnings and promises!

The Ruthless Shepherds (vv.1-2)

Jeremiah 23:1 “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord.

Woe is the language of strong warning.
Once again the Lord delivers a warning for those who would destroy and scatter the sheep. The Bible uses the imagery of a shepherd to reflect the ideal king. David was a king who would nurture and feed the flock. These shepherds would fleece the flock.

Leaders influence.

The shepherds job was to guide and guard the flock. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem did not simply fail in their duties; executing righteousness; promoting justice; they were driving the people away from God!
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Jeremiah 23:2 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.

Spiritual leaders who abuse people will not go unpunished! The word “attended” and “attend” are both related to the Hebrew Word “paqad”—the first carries the suggestion “look after” and the second “punish”. In previous generations when a Father said to his son; “I’ll attend to you later”--everyone knew what it meant.

The Lord places the dispersion and captivity on the shoulders of Israel and Judah’s leadership. You scattered My flock, you drove them away, you did not attend to them.

The leaders were oppressing the people. The leaders were lying, cheating, stealing in order to increase their personal wealth and power. The leaders oppressed the poor and the needy. Some of the leaders imprisoned the innocent and executed the righteous.

In the New Testament Peter describes false teachers this way (2 Peter 2:14); “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed— an accursed brood”.

The Responsible Leaders (vv.3-4)

Jeremiah 23:3 “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.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah speak prominently of a remnant (Isa. 1:9; 10:20-23; 11:16; 46:3). The remnant are the survivors who pass through the judgment and emerge on the other side.

A hundred and fifty years earlier much of the Northern Kingdom was driven far away in Assyria.

In spite of the judgment God made a promise of a future restoration.

The blessings of repentance and restoration includes prosperity (see Deuteronomy 30:1-10).

After Moses broke the first set of tablets God allowed a second set to be given to the people. The Priests were required to (1) care for the ark (Num.3); (2) serve in offering worship; teaching and legal matters (18:1-8); and (3) blessing Israel (Num. 6:22-27).

Jeremiah 23:4 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.
The Lord promises a time when God will raise up leaders; the priority of the leaders will be the welfare of the people; the emphasis will be on those who are served and the will of God. Under the new administration the people would no longer be terrified by the threats of their leaders or their enemies! The Lord will one day erase fear and need!

The Lord will appoint faithful leaders. In order to safeguard leadership in the church; Paul provided us with a list of character requirements for leadership.

In the New Testament Paul gave instructions to Timothy concerning the qualifications for leadership (chapter 3:1-7). In the early church unqualified and spiritually immature people would sometimes lead people astray. Some were teaching false doctrine (see Acts 20:17, 28-31). Paul made a list; leaders should be (1) above reproach (a man with a good reputation); (2) the husband of one wife (morally pure); (3) self-controlled (balanced in words and actions); (4) sensible (wise and humble); respectable (a good role model); (6) hospitable (unselfish and generous); (7) an able teacher (a capacity to communicate with sensitivity); (8) not addicted to wine (not addicted to any substances); (9) not a bully (not abusive); (10) gentle (sensitive, loving, and kind); (11) not quarrelsome (not argumentative and divisive); (12) not greedy (not materialistic); (13) manages his own household well or with competence (a good husband and father); (14) not a new convert (a seasoned Christian); (15) a good reputation among outsiders (a good witness in the community at large)(see Gene Getz; Life Essential Study Bible; where Gene has this as A Principle to Live By- A Profile For Christian Maturity; p.1676).

The Righteous Leader Who Will One Day Come (vv.5-8)

Jeremiah 23:5 “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.

God had made a promise to David (2 Samuel 7:16); “And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.”

Isaiah 4:2: “In that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; And the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing For those of Israel who have escaped.”

The branch is the “off-shoot” of David and is righteous. Jesus is the branch, the off-shoot of David. Jesus is the Messiah.

Over and over again God promises human beings a Savior! God promised Adam and Eve; God promised Abraham; In Isaiah a child would be given a Son would be born and the government would be upon His shoulders. In Ezekiel, In Daniel, Zechariah and Malachi.
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There are at least 117 scriptural names for the Messiah, for Christ; including Adam and Advocate and Almighty and Alpha and Amen and the Angel of the Lord. The Messiah is called Anointed and Apostle and Author. Jesus is called, Babe, the Beginning of of Creation, the Begotten of the Father, Beloved, Bishop, Blessed, Brazen Serpent, Bread of Life, Bridgroom, Bright and Morning Star and BRANCH. That’s just the A’s and the B’s!

Jeremiah draws four sharp facts to contrast the righteous branch with the unjust and unrighteous shepherds;

(1) The Messiah will rule wisely and execute true righteousness and justice throughout the land. The return of Jesus to establish God’s kingdom will include the elimination of lawlessness; injustice, oppression, violence and immorality that plague the planet. The Psalmist wrote; “Thou (Christ) lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: there God (the Father), thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows” (Psalm 45:7). In the book of Revelation John said, “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he (Christ) that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war” (Rev. 19:11).

(2) The Messiah will save and reunite the remnant; God’s people and give them peace. They will have peace in their hearts; and their will be peace in society. When Jesus returns to the earth the people will dwell secure from all threats, all enemies, all temptations, and trials. Perfect peace will reign on the earth.

(3) The Messiah will be called “The LORD Our Righteousness.

Jeremiah 23:6 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.

Jesus Christ is our righteousness. What does righteousness mean? It is the basis on which we are accepted by God the Father. Jesus lived a sinless life on the earth. Jesus secured perfect righteousness; ideal righteousness. When people place their trust in Jesus; God credits His righteousness to our account. We become acceptable to God because Christ is acceptable to God. God counts or reckons us as righteous because we stand before God on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus and the faithfulness of Jesus. No wonder in the book of Acts (13:39) we read, “And by him (the Lord Jesus) all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses”.

In verse 5 and 6 the Messiah is the good shepherd in contrast to the false shepherds of Israel and Judah. One day Judah and Israel will be reunited (see Ezekiel 37:15-23).

(4) The Messiah will be the Savior who reunites a people who were separated at first by wicked leaders; the Messiah who bring about an exodus even greater than the exodus wrought by Moses.
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Jeremiah 23:7 “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,’”

Jeremiah 23:8 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.”

The ideal King, the good shepherd, will gather His people from all the countries of the world and bring them into the Promised Land of God (perhaps a picture of a literal Messianic Kingdom--or a picture of the Eternal Land in Heaven).

Warnings To Judah’s False Prophets And Unrighteous Priests (vv.9-40)

Jeremiah 23:9 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.

The word “heart” is a euphemism for the mind and may include both will and emotions. Here the heart means the person inside (the inner man).

Now Jeremiah will outline the false prophets’ perversions and the just and certain punishments. The perversions read like a checklist of wickedness and include adultery, blasphemy, idolatry.

The false prophets misrepresent God and ridicule God’s true prophet.

Warren Wiersbe writes (Be Decisive)

“What God said, as recorded in Jeremiah 14:14, summarizes this entire section: “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart” (NKJV).

Jeremiah 23:10 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.

The adultery may be a literal reference to sexual immorality and or to spiritual duplicity and idolatry.
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The wilderness here refers to those areas which were normally cultivated and fruitful. “their might” is a reference to royal power.

Jeremiah 23:11 “For both prophet and priest are profane; Yes, in My house I have found their wickedness,” says the Lord.

What was the job of the prophet? To speak for God. What was the job of the priest? To serve as care givers for the ark of God (JESUS); to serve in worship, teaching and legal matters. To serve as intercessors for the people! The priest’s job was to teach the Law; which included the commandments for discerning right and wrong; clean and unclean!

Profane means “evil” or “corrupt” or “unclean”.

“My house” is a reference to the Temple; the Temple had become polluted, unclean, because of the wickedness of Judea and Jerusalem’s leaders!

The False Teacher’s Punishment (vv.12; 15)

Jeremiah 23:12 “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, The year of their punishment,” says the Lord.

The false teacher and false priest’s paths are made dark and slippery; they are chased until they slip and fall.

Jeremiah 23:13 “And I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria: They prophesied by Baal And caused My people Israel to err.

Jeremiah 23:14 Also I have 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.

False prophets plagued the Northern Kingdom.

The false prophets were guilty of spiritual adultery, a life-style of lies; repeated false, vain dreams; promising peace and provoking God’s judgment.
Wormwood and “the water of gall” are references to bitterness and death by poison.

The punishment for false prophecy was severe. What was that punishment? Death (see Deuteronomy 18:20).

Is it harmful to listen to the words of false prophets? According to the Lord “they make you worthless” (empty, broken,).

The source of their prophecy is “their own heart”. When a person says “the Lord told me” should be very careful. If the Lord did not tell you--there are dire consequences.

The term “vision” used here and Jeremiah 14:14 (see also Daniel 1:17; 8:1) is a reference to a divine revelation!

What was Jeremiah’s message? “You are in trouble. Repent. Turn from your sin. Turn to the Lord. Judgment is coming. The armies of the North will invade our land. God is using the King of Babylon as an instrument of divine punishment. Some will be killed. Some will be taken into captivity.

The false prophets despised Jeremiah and his prophecy. The false prophets held out a false hope, a false peace, a false sense of security. God’s intention was to bring catastrophic judgment (6:14).

Jeremiah 23:18 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?
Who has access to the counsel of God? The person who hears, understands and obeys God’s Word.

Jeremiah provides one more reason not to listen to false prophets; they do not have God’s Word.

*Jeremiah 23:19* Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord has gone forth in fury— A violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked.

Jeremiah repeats the message of judgment using the metaphor of a violent whirlwind.

*Jeremiah 23:20* 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.

“...the thoughts of His heart” are a reference to the plans and purposes of God.

Hindsight is 20/20. “In the latter days you will understand it perfectly” is a reference to the times after the events of Jeremiah but also stretch the reader’s vision to the “latter days” (post-resurrection of Jesus).

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

The true prophet of God must be sent by God; with a Word from God.

The true prophet of God would confirm the character of God, the Word of God. A true prophet of God calls people to recognize their sin--and repent of their sin or evil and turn to God with a renewed confidence in the revelation of God and the Word of God.

*Jeremiah 23:22* But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings.

*Jeremiah 23:23* “Am I a God near at hand,” says the Lord, “And not a God afar off?”
The God of Israel, the God of the Bible is not some distant unknown, uncaring, unconcerned deity.

To the people of the surrounding nations--and to the idol worshippers of Israel--they would implore Baal; the god of rain and weather. The God of the Bible is near His people.

*Jeremiah 23:24* Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him? says the Lord; ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ says the Lord.

The God of the Bible is omnipresent. The God of the Bible see’s everything; knows everything. Nothing is hidden from God. Nothing goes unnoticed by God.

*Jeremiah 23:25* “I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’

The Hebrew construction is difficult; the phrase “lies” is singular--in the sense that it may refer to the quality of the word of the false prophet--it is a lie--the vision is a lie--and so all things that have their source in “the lie” are also lies.

In the ancient world the surrounding nations prized dreams--the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians all saw dreams as a portal--a gateway to divine revelation.

*Jeremiah 23:26* 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,

*Jeremiah 23:27* who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal.

*Jeremiah 23:28* “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.

The contrast with the dream and the word is dramatic.
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A dream is temporary, fleeting, like chaff in the wind. But God’s Word has the force of a hammer and fire. The chaff is the container for the wheat. One is symbol--one is substance.

Who has God’s Word? Why you do--if you have a Bible.

*Jeremiah 23:29* “Is not My word like a fire?” says the Lord, “And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

*Jeremiah 23:30* “Therefore behold, I am against the prophets,” says the Lord, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor.

*Jeremiah 23:31* Behold, I am against the prophets,” says the Lord, “who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’

God opposes and rejects the false prophets who use their mouth to false words in the mouth of God.

*Jeremiah 23:32* Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the Lord, “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.

The false prophet is reckless and ruthless; their false dreams delude the people and their weak character was based on lies and deceit.

In Deuteronomy 12 we find the story of Aaron and Miriam. Both siblings of Moses--used by God--and yet they defied Moses. In verse 6; “Then He (the Lord) said “Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. (7) Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. (8) I speak with him face to face, Even plainly, and not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant Moses?”

*Jeremiah 23:33* “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.
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Jeremiah 23:34 “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.

Jeremiah 23:35 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?’

Jeremiah 23:36 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.

Jeremiah 23:37 Thus you shall say to the prophet, ‘What has the Lord answered you?’ and, ‘What has the Lord spoken?’

Jeremiah 23:38 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!””

Jeremiah 23:39 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.

Jeremiah 23:40 And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.’ ”

Conclusion