



BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS

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 Jeremiah 23:9-40
 18th Message
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In our studies in the book of Jeremiah we have looked at the lives of the kings of Judah, the political and economic leaders of the nation who reigned prior to the fall of Jerusalem. These men were supposed to be shepherds. God held them responsible to maintain justice and righteousness in the land so that the disadvantaged of society were cared for and not oppressed. But, because they failed to fulfill their responsibilities, the house of David would soon come to an end.

This morning we will focus on the prophets of Judah, the spiritual leaders of the nation. These men occupied a very important position in Israel. They spoke in the name of the Lord, revealing the utterances of God: *"thus saith the LORD."* The prophets were trained in special schools for this responsibility. In Jeremiah's day, there were competing claims for truth. He was saying one thing, but most of the other prophets were saying something else. Jeremiah would be vindicated by the historical process, but at the time it was unclear as to who was telling falsehoods and who was speaking God's will and purpose.

As was the case with the kings, the prophets of Judah were failing in their responsibilities, with the result that the spiritual life of the nation was being eroded. Corruption in political leadership is one thing, but it is much more serious when corruption and evil invade the spiritual leadership. Behind the government is the church. "Without justice a nation suffers, but without truth it sickens."¹

Our text is Jeremiah 23, verses 9-40. The opening verse is an introduction to the prophets of Judah.

**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.
 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. (Jer 23:9-11, NASB)**

Both prophet and priest had become "polluted" (literally, twisted, defiled). God's house was worldly. The

temple had become the site of sexually oriented fertility rites. The text reflects Jeremiah's pain and intense grief. He is so overwhelmed he is like a drunken man. The many lies spewing out of the mouths of false prophets have sickened him. He is fighting to keep his head clear.

The land also is in pain. It is in mourning for the drought that has come upon it, and experiencing the curse of Deuteronomy. It is so overburdened with evil that it cannot function. The land reflected the spiritual state of the nation. It is a universal truth that perverted religion produces public crisis.

Every age must deal with spiritual counterfeits, people who claim to be speaking for God but really are speaking lies about him. Jesus warned about this: "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many" (Matt 24:11). We can be certain of two things: there will always be false prophets until Jesus comes again; and there will be many victims in the war for spiritual truth. This is a serious matter. People's lives, the welfare of entire nations are at stake. Let us not be naive. We must be prepared so that we can recognize and respond to the things that we hear being said about God.

Our text gives some helpful insights into the characteristics of false prophets. It also helps us deal with well meaning people who are spiritually misled. Time does not permit us to go through the entire text, so I will highlight some verses that reveal four characteristics of false prophets.

A. False prophets strengthen the hands of evildoers.

**"Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria
 I saw an offensive thing:
 They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel
 astray.
 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.
 All of them have become to Me like Sodom,
 And her inhabitants like Gomorrah. (Jer 23:13-14)**

The comparison with Samaria is a foil designed to get at the southern prophets. Judah was worse than Samaria. The idolatry of Jerusalem was more shameful than the Baal worship of Samaria. In fact, the evil so repulsed God that in his eyes Judah was no different than Sodom and Gomorrah.

Here is a great insight in one characteristic of false prophets: they strengthen the hands of evildoers rather than turning people back from sin. False prophets have an agenda other than God. It is social or political in nature. They endorse a public policy that violates God's covenant. They are more concerned about aligning themselves with people than they are with God.

Religious leaders have enormous power to make public policy legitimate. This is one of the problems we face in America. Some of our own spiritual leaders have political agendas. When the church endorses abortion, divorce or homosexuality, it strengthens the hands of evildoers. When spiritual leaders compromise truth to cater to people's wishes, they strengthen the hands of evildoers by making sin seem permissible. When spiritual leaders seek popularity and acceptance from the populace over justice and righteousness, they strengthen the hands of evildoers.

One of my great joys as a pastor is officiating at weddings. But at times, I am asked to marry a couple who are living together contrary to the Scriptures. I love people and want to be supportive, but as a representative of God, I can't endorse anything that is inconsistent with God's word. If I do, I will strengthen a wrong view of God and promote sinful behavior. This can be a very unpopular position to take, but all of us share in the responsibility to be faithful to what God has said.

B. The source of a false prophet's message is not God.

They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the LORD. (Jer 23:16b)

"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, 'I had a dream, I had a dream!'" (Jer 23:25)

"Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who steal My words from each other. (Jer 23:30)

False prophets get their message from "a vision of their own imagination," literally, their own hearts. They are legends in their own minds. They base their message on dreams and visions: "I had a dream, I had a dream!" If a false prophet can't come up with a message of his own, he will borrow the words of another false prophet. Spiritual counterfeits listen for catchy phrases and popular ideas that are in vogue. They are no different from the television producers who copy one another's work.

How relevant this is for our own day, when so many people are enamored with getting a special revelation from God. My son, who is attending college in San Luis Obispo, told me about a Bible study meeting he attended a couple of weeks ago, a gathering of about 20 people. After a time of singing and worship, people prayed to get a message from God concerning others in the room. "I had a dream." My son immediately sensed that something was wrong. He detected that these messages were not from God but were spoken by people

who wanted to be known for possessing spiritual insight. I don't deny that God can work in unique ways, but the Old Testament prophets never received a divine revelation through dreams, even though Num 12:16 allowed it. Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar had dreams, but their dreams were interpreted. Saul was denied answers through dreams, in 1 Sam 28. Revelation by dreams is inferior to revelation from the prophets.

Some people are naive and easily misled. So hungry are they to get a word from God they will accept fantastic and imaginative things. This is why they get drawn into cults. Even the well meaning can be led astray.

C. The content of their message is filled with lies and false assurances.

"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.' (Jer 23:17)

The message of the false prophet is filled with slogans about peace and prosperity. Eugene Peterson labels this the "Everything Will Turn Out Fine," the "Nothing Bad Will Ever Happen to You"² sermon. We all have heard this kind of message: You can do anything you want and God will still love you, because he wants you to be happy. You can run off with your neighbor's wife, you can cheat on your income tax, you can have premarital sex. As long as you follow what your heart tells you, everything will be fine. There is no responsibility, accountability or judgment for sin and evil. God just wants you to be at peace. The last thing he wants you to have is a difficult life or to experience pain. False prophets preach an easy message and give a false sense of security.

What a stark contrast this is to the word of the LORD:

"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. "Is not My word like fire?" declares the LORD, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock?" (Jer 23:28-29)

There can be no comparison between the word of God and the dreams and imaginations of a false prophet. "What does straw have in common with grain?" The idle dreams and self-induced visions of the false prophet are like straw. They are without substance. But the word of God is like grain: it has a nourishing quality. And it is powerful. It is a refining fire that burns within us. It is a sledgehammer that shatters our selfish dreams and stubborn hearts.

The word of God is absolutely true. Part of that truth is comforting and assuring, but part of it runs counter to what we want to hear. When we hear the word of God, we are convicted of sin. We repent and turn from our evil ways. It breaks down our walls and pretences

and exposes our hearts. The word of God assures us that we will face struggles and difficulties. The message of the false prophet, on the other hand, is accommodating and anemic. It panders to popular wishes. But the message of God is like a fire and a hammer.

I remember the first day I attended Peninsula Bible Church, in 1973. I was a new Christian, even though I had gone to church every Sunday when I was growing up. One of the pastors opened the Bible and began to teach the word of God. I had never heard the Scriptures taught with such power. The words he uttered burned within me, probably in the way that the disciples' hearts burned within them when Jesus taught them on the road to Emmaus .

Dreams and visions will not nourish the soul. The word of God is what feeds us and instructs us on how to live. It calls us back when we begin to go astray. This is the very reason why over the years PBC has been committed to expository preaching – faithfully expounding the word of God and allowing it to have its effect on people's lives.

John Wesley read hundreds of books on a wide range of subjects and published approximately six hundred works on various themes, but "he continually referred to himself as *homo unis libri* – a man of one book. ... In the preface to his Standard Sermons, Wesley exclaims, 'O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! ... Here is knowledge enough for me.'"³

D. They claim authority from God, but they have no authority.

**"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?
"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.
"I did not send *these* prophets,
they ran.
I did not speak to them,
But they prophesied.
"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. (Jer 23:18-22)**

This scene describes a council meeting that takes place behind closed doors. The false prophet is like a journalist who speculates over some matter of government which is discussed in private. The true prophet is the government spokesman who emerges from the meeting to speak with the ruler's authority.

Jeremiah had stood in the council of the Lord; the false prophets had not. Jeremiah was sent; the false prophet were not, but they ran anyway. Jeremiah was given the word of the Lord; the false prophets were not, but they spoke nonetheless. Jeremiah had the authority of God; the false prophets did not.

Had the false prophets sat in the council they would have told the people that a storm was about the break. They would have preached repentance and sought to turn people from their evil ways. Therefore these false prophets had no mission, no message, and no authority.

People everywhere claim to have authority from God. Have they sat in the council of the LORD? If they have not, they don't have the authority of God or the message of God. They claim to, but they don't. Just because they claim they have it doesn't make it true. One who has God's authority and message never has to claim anything or convince people concerning his or her credentials.

What does God think about false prophets? He knows all about them.

**"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. (Jer 23:23-24)**

God sees all and knows all. Several times in the text he promises judgment on false prophets.

**"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 will bring calamity upon them,
The year of their punishment," declares the LORD.
(Jer 23:12)**

False prophets are on a slippery, perilous slope. Soon their footing will give way and they will be cast into darkness.

**"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.'" (Jer
23:15)**

Wormwood is a fatally poisonous herb. Eugene Peterson paraphrases: "I'll cook them a supper of maggoty meat with after-dinner drinks of strychnine."⁴

"Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who steal My words from each other. Behold, I am against the prophets," declares the LORD, "who use their tongues and declare, 'The LORD declares.'

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; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit," declares the LORD. (Jer 23:30-32)

God's response to false prophets is clear: He is against all false prophets and anyone who misrepresents what he has said in his word.

What should be our response to them?

**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; (Jer 23:16a)**

We are commanded to simply not listen to false prophets. Counterfeit spiritual leaders will lead us into futility, into things that are worthless and profitless. Many among us have wasted years listening to things promised but not delivered by false prophets, things that did not fulfill us and did not contribute to our spiritual growth.

When I became a Christian in 1972, I started attending Bible studies. Back then, many Christians were talking about the "end times." People had timelines and charts that purported to show how certain things were going to happen in the future. I was a brand new Christian. Trying to keep away from going to bars was hard enough for me without well meaning people shoving timelines in my face. It seemed everyone was talking about the book of Revelation and reading "The Late Great Planet Earth." That was 30 years ago. Looking back now, that activity did not profit me in the least. Every so often a new prophetic book hits the stands and everyone gets excited about new revelations. Lately there has been a lot of discussion about the book of Revelation. I know one thing for certain: the cheapest books in the bookstore are outdated prophetic books!

God says, don't listen to false prophets; don't waste your time. We don't have to read every hot new book, listen to every new idea that promises some magical formula for successful living or pay attention to every Bible teacher on television, just because they have an open Bible in front of them. Much of what they say is nonsense. It is not of God, even though they claim it is. It is a waste of your time and it takes your focus off Christ and off God's word.

The other danger we must avoid is getting all worked up about everything we hear that sounds a little off. We can get as badly off-track by stamping out every lie as we do by paying attention to the lies. Ray Stedman once was asked how he controlled false teaching at PBC. He replied that we welcome it, because it makes the truth shaper and clearer. Deuteronomy 18:22 says that we should not be afraid of false prophets. In every age

there will be spiritual counterfeits uttering lies about God and prophetic words about what is going to happen in the future. None of this should surprise us. There is "nothing new under the sun." All of these false ideas are recycled over time.

How up to date is Jeremiah's prophecy! Let us be wise and discerning without being self-righteous. Let us deepen our spiritual walk while remaining humble. Let our vision be of the glory, the majesty and the splendor of God.

"you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him" (Deut 13:3-4).

1. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1987), 91.

2. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Prophets* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2000), 217.

3. Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition*, quoted in *A Guide To Prayer For All God's People* (Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1990), 79.

4. Peterson, *The Message: The Prophets*, 218.

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