

SESSION 6

Rules

God promises to give His people a trustworthy, righteous Ruler.

JEREMIAH 23:1-12

MEMORY VERSE: JEREMIAH 23:5

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most people would agree that leaders should possess good character. Often when leaders fail morally, their followers rationalize: “Well if they can do that, so can I.” Leaders must lead not only by words, but also by example. Through Jeremiah, God promised that one day He would give His people a trustworthy and righteous Ruler. This Ruler has already come. He is the Lord Jesus Christ who will reign on His throne for eternity.

(In PSG, p. 55) **What should be the relationship between a leader’s words and a leader’s actions? What happens when leaders’ words and actions don’t align?**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JEREMIAH 21:1–25:38

Judah’s King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray for God’s deliverance (21:1-2). However, Jeremiah replied that God would use Babylon to judge Judah (21:3-14). The people could surrender and live or remain in the city and die. The prophet warned Judah’s officials to rule justly lest God sweep them away.

Jeremiah encouraged Judah’s royal house to follow God’s ways (22:1-5). Obedience would bring blessing but disobedience would bring ruin. Judah’s fall would astonish many nations (22:6-9). Judah’s King Shallum (also known as Jehoahaz) would die in Egypt and never return (22:10-12).

King Jehoiakim also received a word of judgment (22:13-23). His beautiful palace illustrated how he thought only of himself, unlike his father, Josiah, who followed God’s ways. Jehoiakim would experience a shameful burial since he never had followed God’s commands. Jeremiah also pronounced judgment against Jehoiakim’s son Coniah (also known as Jehoiachin, 22:24-30). He would never return from exile.

Judah’s rulers were like shepherds who had destroyed and scattered God’s flock (23:1-2). God promised to one day raise up faithful shepherd-leaders for His people (23:3-8). A Righteous Branch of David would bring justice and salvation, and God would rescue His people from foreign lands just like He rescued them from Egypt.

Meanwhile, false prophets and evil priests led the people astray (23:9-40). Jeremiah compared these false prophets to the prophets of Baal a few generations earlier. He also described them in terms of the wicked city Sodom and warned the people not to heed their words. These ungodly preachers spoke their own minds and falsely promised peace. The Lord stood against them because they did not speak His words.

The Lord showed Jeremiah two baskets of figs: one good and the other rotten (24:1-10). God compared the good figs to the exiles in Babylon whom He one day would bring home. However, the bad figs represented Zedekiah and his supporters, whom the Lord promised to judge.

God had sent prophets to turn Judah back to Him, but the people had refused to listen (25:1-7). Therefore, the Lord would bring calamity through Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (25:8-14). Judah’s exile would last

seventy years, but the Lord would judge Babylon for its wickedness. All nations, including Judah, would experience God's wrath (25:15-33). Judah's shepherd-leaders would be unable to escape judgment (25:34-38).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

NEW SHEPHERDS (JER. 23:1-4)

Verses 1-2

¹ “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” This is the LORD's declaration.

² “Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who tend my people: You have scattered my flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I am about to attend to you because of your evil acts”—this is the LORD's declaration.

Woe to the shepherds targeted Judah's leaders of all kinds. The image of leaders as *shepherds* and God as the ultimate Shepherd is a common theme in the Old Testament. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Zechariah all utilized it (Isa. 40:9-11; 44:28; Ezek. 34:1-23; Mic. 5:4-6; Zech. 11:3-17). This image also carries over into the New Testament (1 Pet. 5:2-4) and finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus (John 10:11-18).

Shepherds were responsible for the flocks they oversaw. However, God accused Judah's leaders of trying to *destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!* The expression *sheep of my pasture* denotes God's people, who ultimately were under His care. (See also Ps. 100:3.)

The expression *this is the LORD's declaration* occurs seven times in today's core passage (vv. 1,2,4,5,7,11,12). It stresses the divine source of Jeremiah's words. His message came directly from God and carried His authority, meaning Judah's situation was serious. Again, the text stresses the divine source of Jeremiah's words. The word translated *tend* comes from the same root as *shepherds*.

God had seen the practices of the evil leaders and spelled it out in His threefold indictment. They had *scattered* the people, *banished them*, and had *not attended to them*. The shepherds should have protected the *flock* and not allowed it to be threatened by predators. The Hebrew for *banished* is a strong word that implies an intentional disregard. *Attended* denotes the careful attention the leaders should have demonstrated.

The Lord affirmed that He would *attend to* the evil shepherd-leaders. The leaders had not protected their flock, so God would protect them from what was coming their way.

Verse 3

³ “I will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands where I have banished them, and I will return them to their grazing land. They will become fruitful and numerous.”

God affirmed that He Himself would participate in His people's restoration. He promised to *gather the remnant of my flock*. The Hebrew emphasizes God's personal role in the gathering. *Remnant* literally means “remainder,” and it often denotes a faithful group of God's people who see His salvation (Isa. 10:21; 37:31; Ezek. 6:8-10; Rom. 11:5). This group would receive the Lord's personal attention.

God said He would gather His people *from all the lands*. The leaders failed to shepherd well, leading Judah astray. As a result, they bore significant blame for God's judgment. Ultimately, however, God had *banished* His people because they had failed to follow His commands. God now promised that He would bring them back to *their grazing land*. He would lead them home and provide for them once again. The word translated *grazing land* describes a good place for shepherds to feed their flocks (2 Sam. 7:8; Ezek. 34:14). God promised that in this restoration the Jews would *become fruitful and numerous*. The wording also appears in creation when God commanded animals and people to populate the earth (Gen. 1:22,28). In a sense, God was starting over with His people.

Verse 4

⁴ “I will raise up shepherds over them who will tend them. They will no longer be afraid or discouraged, nor will any be missing.” This is the LORD’s declaration.

God also assured His people that when He brought them home, He would *raise up shepherds over them who will tend them*. He would provide good leaders who would serve faithfully. The word *tend* translates the same word that Jeremiah used in verse 2.

God affirmed that His people wouldn’t be *afraid or discouraged* under these good shepherds. Sheep are naturally skittish and need supervision. Straying from their shepherd meant trouble and perhaps death (1 Kings 22:17; Zech. 13:7). However, the good shepherds would seek the welfare of everyone. None would go *missing*. The words recall Jesus’s parable about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to search for the one missing sheep (Matt. 18:12-13). These leaders would display such a level of care.

Leaders are accountable to God for their actions. When leaders fail to lead well and instead steer their people toward evil, God holds them accountable. On the other hand, leaders who serve faithfully will be a blessing to their people and also enjoy God’s blessing.

(In PSG, p. 58) **How is a leader like a shepherd?**

RIGHTEOUS BRANCH (JER. 23:5-8)

Verse 5

⁵ “Look, the days are coming”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land.”

Jeremiah’s words *Look, the days are coming* appear again in verse 7 and throughout the book (7:32; 9:25; 19:6; 31:31,38; 51:47,52). Sometimes they anticipate God’s impending judgment (7:32), but here, they anticipate the good news of God’s future plans. As before, *this is the LORD’S declaration* emphasizes the message’s certainty.

The Lord declared that He would raise a *Righteous Branch for David*. God made King David an incredible promise that his descendants would occupy Israel’s throne as long as they remained faithful (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 1 Kings 2:4). The concept of a *Righteous Branch* also occurs in other prophetic books. Isaiah foretold a coming day when the Branch would be glorious (Isa. 4:2) and become a standard for the nations (Isa. 11:1,10). About a century after Jeremiah, Zechariah described the ultimate fulfillment of the Branch prophecies in the Messiah, who would bring together the offices of king and priest (Zech. 3:8; 6:11-13). Jeremiah anticipated a day when God’s people would not only have good shepherds, but the Shepherd of all shepherds would be leading them.

Jeremiah affirmed this Branch *will reign wisely*. The original wording has the sense of unusual insight and abundance. Kings needed wisdom to rule well, and this King would do just that. Most importantly, He would *administer justice and righteousness*. He would make just decisions and enact godly laws that would guide people toward righteous lives. He would reflect God’s will because God loves these qualities as well (Jer. 9:24).

Verse 6

⁶ “In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.”

Jeremiah affirmed that *Judah will be saved*, while *Israel will dwell securely* under the Branch’s leadership. During the days of the divided kingdom, the Northern Kingdom of *Israel* and the Southern Kingdom of *Judah* remained separate, but God was planning to reunite them. The word translated *saved* can denote either physical deliverance or spiritual salvation. Both senses may be intended here. The assurance of Israel’s safety would have brought

peace to the people's hearts. Israel was relatively small, and hostile forces surrounded it. Nevertheless, in the day of the Branch, God's people would know everlasting security.

Jeremiah announced that the Branch's name would be *The LORD Is Our Righteousness*. The Branch's *name* pointed the people toward the God who is identified by righteous judgments and actions. *Righteousness* flows from God's character, and the Branch would demonstrate that to everyone. Isaiah's prophecy also associated the Messiah with the attribute of righteousness (Isa. 11:4-5). Interestingly, the Branch's name in Hebrew is similar to the name of Zedekiah, Judah's evil king. The Branch, however, would prove to be truly righteous.

Verses 7-8

⁷ "Look, the days are coming"—the LORD's declaration "when it will no longer be said, 'As the LORD lives who brought the Israelites from the land of Egypt,' ⁸ but, 'As the LORD lives, who brought and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the land of the north and from all the other countries where I had banished them.' They will dwell once more in their own land."

Verse 7 opens with the same words as verse 5. Jeremiah repeated this challenge to pay attention to *the days* to stress the amazing nature of the news he was announcing.

Jeremiah anticipated a day when God wouldn't just be known as the One who *brought Israel from the land of Egypt*. The Old Testament often points to God's redemption of His people from *Egypt* as the central event of the Old Testament. Israel suffered for more than four centuries, but God raised up Moses and delivered them from their oppressors.

God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt was indeed amazing, but God had more in store. One day, people would know Him as the God who brought His people from the *land of the north* and from any other *countries where I had banished them*. When God used the Assyrians to punish the Northern Kingdom, He scattered them first to the *north* and then elsewhere. He soon would use the Babylonian army to do the same to Judah. However, Jeremiah affirmed that one day, God would find His people and bring them back. The prophet Isaiah expressed similar sentiments when He described God's careful gathering of His people in the latter days (Isa. 27:12). Jeremiah's declaration that the Jews would *dwell once more in their own land* guaranteed the people were coming home.

We can trust Jesus as our righteous King. Many kings reigned throughout Israel's history. The writer of 1,2 Kings tells us that all nineteen leaders of the Northern Kingdom were evil, whereas only eight of Judah's twenty kings sought to follow God. Jesus's reign will surpass them all. Even the best of Israel's kings—even David—falls short of the Messiah. God's people will live well under the reign of Jesus, the Righteous Branch.

(In PSG, p. 61) **How does faith in Jesus give a person hope for a secure future?**

IMPENDING DISASTER (JER. 23:9-12)

Verse 9

⁹ Concerning the prophets: My heart is broken within me, and all my bones tremble. I have become like a drunkard, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD, because of his holy words.

The phrase *concerning the prophets* reveals a shift in Jeremiah's focus. In verses 1-8, he had denounced the evil shepherds and assured God's people that He would provide new, righteous leaders—particularly the Branch (Jesus). In verse 9, Jeremiah returned to his present context and pronounced judgment against *prophets* who misused their power and led the nation toward ruin.

Jeremiah said his *heart is broken* and *all my bones tremble*. The word *heart* often represents the mind and sometimes the seat of human emotions. Jeremiah was living in a fragile emotional state because of these false

prophets. The image of trembling *bones* recalls Habakkuk's turmoil as he anticipated Judah's judgment (Hab. 3:16).

Jeremiah felt like *a drunkard, like a man overcome by wine*. The sense here is of one who has lost control. Jeremiah was sober, but God's *holy words* left him reeling. Jeremiah knew God had appointed him to preach the truth. Tragically, false prophets contradicted Jeremiah and convinced the people that peace was coming (Jer. 6:13-14).

Verses 10-11

¹⁰ For the land is full of adulterers; the land mourns because of the curse, and the grazing lands in the wilderness have dried up. Their way of life has become evil, and their power is not rightly used ¹¹ because both prophet and priest are ungodly, even in my house I have found their evil. This is the LORD's declaration.

Jeremiah lamented that *the land is full of adulterers*. He likely referred to spiritual adultery through idolatry, though physical adultery might be included. A century earlier, Hosea had decried Israel's idolatry, likening it to spiritual adultery against the Lord (Hos. 1:2; 2:8; 7:4). Jeremiah also used *adulterers* to describe Judah's unfaithfulness to God (Jer. 9:2).

In addition, *the land mourns* and *grazing lands* had *dried up*. God sent famine and drought as a *curse* against Judah, causing *the land* to wither. The word *curse* probably designates God's impending judgment, which would climax in Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Jeremiah then focused specifically on the evil leaders. First, he affirmed *their way of life has become evil*. Their general direction in life promoted wickedness at every turn. Second, Jeremiah said *their power is not rightly used*. As leaders of society, they had the *power* to lead, but they sought their own gain at the expense of their weaker neighbors.

Jeremiah concluded that *both prophet and priest are ungodly*. *Prophet and priest* comprised most of Judah's spiritual leadership. Priests oversaw the temple service, and prophets were called to point people back to God. When these groups failed in their assignments, everyone suffered.

God testified He had *found their evil* everywhere—including *my house*, the temple. Ezekiel also spoke of the absolute wickedness of priests and others on the temple grounds (Ezek. 8:8-13,16). Things were getting progressively worse in Judah, and soon judgment would come.

Verse 12

¹² Therefore, their way will seem like slippery paths in the gloom. They will be driven away and fall down there, for I will bring disaster on them, the year of their punishment. This is the LORD's declaration.

The word *therefore* introduced Jeremiah's prophetic conclusion. The leaders would not prosper, because they were not fulfilling their God-given responsibilities. Consequently, they would stumble on *slippery paths in the gloom*. The leaders' course of life and example would not provide stability or satisfaction. Rather, it would become *slippery*, causing them and the people who followed them to *be driven away and fall*.

Through Jeremiah, God announced *disaster* on these unfaithful leaders. The word *disaster* is the same word translated "evil" in verse 11. Indeed, the disaster God brought would include the consequences of their evil ways. The expression *the year of their punishment* also occurs in Jeremiah 11:23 and 48:44. The word *year* probably denotes the time when Jerusalem would fall. The expression *this is the LORD's declaration* concludes this section just as it began (23:1).

Sometimes dynamic leaders lead people's hearts astray by promising easy success or simpler ways. A former pastor of mine once told our youth group, "Show me who your friends are, and I'll show you what you're in the process of becoming." In reality, that statement applies to everyone. We can root our attitudes and behavior in God's Word, or merely chase the opinions of those who do not know Him. If we choose the latter, we ultimately will find ourselves on shaky ground.

(In PSG, p.62) **Why would a person willingly follow a false prophet? What attributes should believers be looking for in those they allow to influence them?**

KEY DOCTRINE

The Scriptures

All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation. (See Luke 24:27; 2 Pet. 1:19-21.)

BIBLE SKILL

Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Jeremiah 23:5 promises the coming of a Righteous Branch. Jeremiah 33:15 repeated these words, and the Branch concept also occurs in Isaiah 4:2; 11:1; and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12. Read through those passages. Read several verses before and after the passages to understand their contexts. What do these passages add about Jesus and His reign?