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“DO NOT LISTEN TO THEM”
Jeremiah 23:15-32

This is the most dangerous book ever written. The Almighty uses it {Jer 1:10} **“to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant nations and kingdoms,”** individuals and families and communities.

✦ Scripture is dangerous for at least four right reasons: 1) it threatens unrighteousness and injustice (individual and communal, private and public, theirs, mine and yours); 2) it upsets the sinful status quo in every dimension of life; 3) it demands a response; and 4) our response leads either to life or to death. Scripture is dangerous in all the best ways.

☠ Alas, in treacherous hands Scripture can be dangerous in all the *worst* ways. Often, {Ro 8:5, 7} **“Those who... do not submit to God’s law”** simply ignore it. But occasionally they try to destroy it and the messenger, as when King Jehoiakim burned the scroll and sent his henchmen to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch.

☠ Worse, they sometimes exploit the Bible for anti-God purposes. They utilize it as an instrument of injustice and unrighteousness. The Inquisition, anti-Semitism, slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, the oppression of women, segregation, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and more have been propelled, in part, by the misuse of Scripture.

Yet the abuse of God’s word frequently takes subtler forms. Many who shudder at blatant atrocities use the

Bible to justify their sins, advance a self-serving agenda, or control other people.

☐ Please turn with me to Jeremiah 23.

The LORD has ordained Jeremiah to speak his word. Roughly 1/3rd of the messages foretell impending catastrophe, future restoration, and the kingdom of God; the other 2/3^{rds} are condemnations of moral, political, economic and religious depravity, and exhortations to return to relationships of truth, justice, and mercy with God and neighbor.

☞ These messages have four defining features: 1) they originate with YHWH; 2) they are consistent with his heart and his law; 3) they zero in on real needs (when Judah is obedient or repentant, God reassures them of his mercy and kindness; when they are defiant, he warns them of his wrath and judgment); it follows that, 4) they are accurate and true.

In late 7th-early 6th c. B.C., Judah is spiritually bankrupt and morally rotten. A pat on the back will push them further toward self-destruction. What they need is to stop, turn around, and cry to God for help. Hence, most of Jeremiah’s messages are disquieting.

That brings us to Jeremiah 23. The topic is false prophets. *On what basis does God denounce them?*

■ V 16: **“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.’”**

☞ Their messages have human origins. They often incorporate Scripture into their oracles; yet they twist it to say what God does not say. These prophets are false.

- Verse 17: **“They keep saying to those who despise me,
‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’
and to all who follow the stubbornness
of their hearts
they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’”**

☞ Their messages are out of sync with God’s heart and law. These prophets are false.

- Now, down to verse 22:
**“But if they had stood in my council,
they would have proclaimed my
words to my people
and would have turned them from their
evil ways
and from their evil deeds.”**

☞ Their messages are tailored to felt needs instead of real needs. They say what the people want to hear, not what they need to hear.

☞ It follows that their messages are a toxic brew of exaggerations, half-truths, and outright lies.

But *what are they saying that is so bad?*

- Going back to verse 17, we read that:
**“They keep saying to those who despise me,
‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’
And to all who follow the stubbornness
of their hearts
they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’”**

📖 **“‘No harm will come to you,’ ‘You will have *shālôm*.’”** The Heb. *shālôm* is a lively and expansive word. It includes the absence of strife and war – and also physical, mental, and spiritual health, positive relationships, personal righteousness, systematic social, economic, and political justice, and shared prosperity and success.

☆ YHWH delights to give us peace – under the necessary conditions. First, since *shālôm* has its source in the Living God it is available only in right relationship with him. **“‘There is no *shālôm*,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked’”** (Isaiah 48:22).

☆ Second, we must pray and work to embody peace. *Shālôm* is not an object to be possessed, nor is it a static condition into which Holy God automatically places us. It is a dynamic process experienced through ongoing, intentional participation in his righteousness and justice.

☞ But these prophets preach *shālôm* apart from repentance, obedience, and peacemaking. “Go on, sleep with your neighbor’s wife; a sacrifice will make up for it. It’s no big crime to underpay a foreign laborer; your success is proof that the LORD is blessing you.”

This popular message tickles the ears of the royal house, the Jerusalem establishment, the big landowners, the prosperous merchants, and all who want to be blessed without quitting their injustice and unrighteousness. It sounds uplifting, and it is oh, so easy to swallow – but it has lethal consequences.

■ Please keep your finger in Jeremiah 23 and flip over to Jeremiah 6:13-14: **“prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”** Judah is gravely ill, but these prophets are lulling the nation into complacency. Their false message is preventing the people from turning to God for life and salvation.

■ Now back to 23:15: **“Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty says concerning the prophets: ‘I will make them eat bitter food and drink poisoned water.’”** Their message is provoking God’s judgment. But not only on the prophets!

■ Verse 19: **“the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked”** – *all* the wicked, including the false prophets and listeners who have bought into their soothing lies.

Keep in mind that these prophets do quote Scripture, mostly texts like Psalm 46: {Ps 46:8} **“our God ... makes” “the city of the LORD” “secure forever.”** It celebrates {Mays} **“the God who will help the people in whose midst he has chosen to be and who for a time chose [the] temple [as] his ‘dwelling.’”** But they are twisting it into an absolute promise that Jerusalem is an eternally **“impregnable metropolis of security.”** Their misreading promotes **“trust in a place”** rather than the presence of God. And so the people chant {Jer 7:4} **“This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!”**

Jeremiah 23 was not written to *us*. It was, however, written *for us*. Even now, Sovereign God is speaking through this text. What is he saying to us?

✈ 1st, be careful whom you believe.

■ Verse 16: **“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying...”** Christ has given {Eph 4:11-12} **“some to be pastors and teachers.”** Yet not every so-called pastor, teacher, evangelist or TV preacher has been called by the Lord. And some who were once called have since turned away from him. And none of us who are called and have remained true can claim perfect understanding of God’s word.

✈ 2nd, be true to the word of God.

■ Verse 28: **“let the one who has my word speak it faithfully.”** Everyone with biblical knowledge is accountable to {2 Ti 1:13; 2:15} **“keep [to] the pattern of sound teaching,”** and **“[handle] the word of truth” “correctly.”** We must measure our attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, speech, and conduct, our sexuality, economics, politics and religion against the standard of Scripture.

✈ 3rd, reject any interpretation that accommodates unrighteousness or injustice of any kind.

■ Verse 17: **“They keep saying to those who despise me ... ‘you will have peace.’ To all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’”** This is not an about pointing the finger at others! It is about humbly allowing Scripture to {2 Ti 3:16-17} teach, rebuke, correct and train *us* **“in righteousness,”** so we **“may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

✈ 4th, reject any interpretation that tribalizes the King of the Universe.

■ Verse 23: **“Am I only a God nearby, and not a God far away?”** The LORD belongs to no one. He owes his allegiance to no particular nation, race, social class, or political party. Sovereign God does not play favorites, punishing the immorality and injustice of group while overlooking those of another.

✈ 5th, (but most importantly), know the LORD and his word.

■ Speaking of the false prophets, YHWH asks in verse 18: **“Which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?”** In **verse 22** he declares: **“If they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.”**

This is the most dangerous book ever written. May it always be dangerous in our minds, our hearts, our mouths and our lives for all the right reasons, but never for the wrong ones!