

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

The Lord Our Righteousness

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Jeremiah 23

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Jeremiah 23. We are in our 30th week of our WTTB journey – did you know that? If you have been tracking with the reading plan than you are 60% done, you are on the downhill slope, so way to go. As part of that journey we have been preaching backwards in support of the weekly readings. We try and identify which passages from your weekly reading will most profit from some additional teaching and this week we find ourselves in Jeremiah 23 which you will have read on Friday. This is a long text and so we may not be able to read every verse, much of it is poetry so there is a fair bit of repetition of the main themes, but I want to try and deal with the entire chapter as a whole. Let me begin reading to you and I will explain the basic meaning of the text as we go through it and then at the end we will draw out some important applications. This is God’s Word:

¹“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the LORD. ²Therefore 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. 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. ⁴I 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,’ ⁸but, ‘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.”

Woe To The Shepherds

Verses 1-8 form the first unit of this chapter and in this unit God is rejecting the human leaders, specifically the Davidic Kings of Judah. There is a bit of word play that happens in Hebrew in this text that can’t be translated into English. The king at this time was a man named Zedekiah, his name, roughly translated means “My righteousness is Yahweh”. The Hebrew word *sidiqi* means “My righteousness” and “*yah*” was of course short form for Yahweh. The problem is that Zedekiah is NOT righteous. He is a bad king. He has undone all of the reforms that happened under his father Josiah. He is a fool and a coward who ultimately refuses to obey God in submitting to the temporary rule of the Babylonians. He leads an ill fated rebellion, against the Word of the Lord through Jeremiah and he ends up instigating the fatal attack of the Babylonians that leads to destruction and exile.

The people had once hoped in this king. He was after all a descendant of David and God had made great promises to David and surely those promises would preserve them from evil. But Jeremiah says that the line of David will be like a tree that is cut down, but is not dead. In the future, sometime after the exile, a shoot will grow up out of that tree and he will have more than the name of righteousness, he will BE GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR GOD’S PEOPLE. He calls this coming shoot *Yahweh Sid-qenu* – The Lord Is Our Righteousness. Jeremiah is saying that human leadership, even Davidic human leadership is not strong enough to restrain us from running head long into sin. God himself will have to come and BE OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Messiah, David’s ultimate son and the perfect king will have to be more than a righteous man, we’ve had righteous men and still we are charging into disaster – the Messiah will have to be more than a righteous man, he will have to be in himself the holy and saving presence of

Almighty God. That's a big promise, that is an EPIC hope as our interns would say and that is the hope that ultimately looks forward to Jesus Christ, we'll say more about that at the end. Let's keep reading; Jeremiah now turns his attention to some of the other leaders that were also tragically failing God's people, the false prophets and the fallen priests, we'll pick up the story in verse 11:

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,
The year of their punishment," says the LORD.

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

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.

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.'"

¹⁶Thus 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.

God's primary rebuke of these prophets and priests is that they teach what is false and they live according to their false doctrines. Their teaching is actually ruining God's people. My friends, we live in an era of Christianity where the average person does not take doctrine very seriously. We read stories of how Christians in bygone eras took doctrine so serious that they severed fellowship over it and sometimes even went to war over it and we are almost inclined to think: "Maybe we would all get along a little better if we didn't take doctrine so seriously. Maybe we should just love each other and not quibble over the details." But the Bible says over and over and over again that what you believe entirely predicts how you will live. If you have your belief

WRONG then you will get your LIFE wrong. If your beliefs aren't straight you will live wrong and you will not be able to pass your broken and deficient beliefs off to your kids and your whole faith community can end up outside the covenant of God, living like the pagans and falling ever faster into hell. Doctrine matters. God is very concerned because false teaching is ruining and decimating the covenant community. These false teachers, he says were not called by him and they do not spend time in prayer and reading his word:

- ²¹ "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran.
I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.
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.

The other problem, God says is that they put too much stock in subjective religious experience instead of trusting in God's word. Look at verse 25:

²⁵"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶How long will *this* be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed *they are* prophets of the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which 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?"

God says here: "If you want to build your ministry off of your dreams and subjective religious experiences, go for it. You build a ministry off of your dreams and visions, and I will have another fellow over here build a ministry on the SOLID ROCK OF GOD'S WORD and we'll see who is still standing in at the end of the day. Your mamby pamby subjectivism will breed ruined lives, persistent immorality and one generation faith. The Word of God bears fruit a hundred fold." God is getting angry here and he is speaking his mind.

³⁰"Therefore behold, I *am* against the prophets," says the LORD, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor. ³¹Behold, I *am* against the prophets," says the LORD, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.' ³²Behold, 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 chapter ends with another play on words that does not translate into English. The Hebrew word for oracle or prophetic utterance is also the word for burden. That is why some of the older

English translations would have prophets saying: “The burden of the Lord is upon me” and that play on words grew out of the fact that the Word of God can be pretty heavy, I don’t know if you’ve noticed that, but it can be. So keep that in mind as we read these closing verses:

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.

That is the untranslatable verse here, the sense of it is: “What is the oracle/burden of the Lord?” answer: “You are the burden of the Lord and I will cast you down”.

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. ³⁵Thus 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?’ ³⁶And 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. ³⁷Thus you shall say to the prophet, ‘What has the LORD answered you?’ and, ‘What has the LORD spoken?’ ³⁸But 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!’”’ ³⁹therefore 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*. ⁴⁰And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.’” (Jeremiah 23:1-40. NKJV)

God is saying that in the end, those who hate the Word of the Lord are themselves a burden to God that he casts them out of his eternal presence.

Application:

That is a heavy word, isn’t it? Its heavy but we’ve heard it before. He said through an earlier prophet when describing who will be able to enjoy his eternal kingdom:

But this is the one to whom I will look,
to the humble and contrite in spirit,
who trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2. NRSV)

Ultimately the Word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ and unless we believe in him and trust in him and build our lives upon him and his Word, then we will be a burden to God and he will cast us out of his presence in eternity. The Word of God is very consistent on this and if that is true, if that is true in Isaiah 66 and it is true in Jeremiah 23 then obviously, there are some applications that we need to consider and we’ll use our last few

minutes to do just that. The first application I would suggest is universal, meaning that it is true for all people:

1. We need The Righteousness of God; We need The Good Shepherd

In the time of Jeremiah the hope of people in human leaders was pretty much entirely gone. There had been a lot of optimism among faithful people in the generation before Jeremiah when Josiah had been crowned as king over the land of Judah. Josiah was a wonderful king and a godly leader and he started a robust reformation based on the rediscovery of God's Word. But when Josiah died the flames of reformation quickly burned down to dust and ashes.

There are a bunch of short comings in human leaders but perhaps the most significant is that human leaders tend to die just when they are getting interesting. It's really inconvenient and it is a truth that some churches and organizations try very hard to ignore. It concerns me how many of the big ministries in our day and age seem completely driven by one dominant personality. What will happen when that person dies? I had a friend who was an Associate Pastor in a big mega-church here in Canada who was actually asked by his church to write a big report called "What To Do If _____ Gets Hit By A Bus". They had recognised that their whole church was really built around this dynamic leader and they were smart enough to figure out that he will die eventually and he might get hit by a bus tomorrow and so they better have a plan for that. Part of the problem with even good leaders like Josiah is that they die at a rate of 100%. And so often, the movement collapses in the handoff. Zedekiah was not his father. He was a coward and he was small. Good leaders are not enough, they cannot reverse the course of human nature, they die and they are often very bad at succession planning. Human leaders, good or bad are not going to solve this problem; we need a different kind of king. We need someone who won't die, we need someone who needs no successor and we need someone strong enough, righteous enough to reverse the course of human nature. We need a Shepherd like that and Jeremiah tells us that God will send just such a one. So when Jesus came and announced:

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11. NKJV)

People understood what he was saying. He was saying: "I am the solution to the problem Jeremiah talked about. I am the Messiah from God that can fix what is wrong with the human

condition.” That is the claim that Jesus makes. He is God in the Flesh, he is OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. That of course is the very claim made about Jesus by the Apostle Paul in Romans:

²¹But now **the righteousness of God** apart from the law is revealed, being **witnessed by the Law and the Prophets**, ²²even the righteousness of God, **through faith in Jesus Christ**, to all [£]and on all who believe. (Romans 3:21-22. NKJV)

This is it! Jesus is the Shepherd King Jeremiah said was coming! This is why I am not really a fan of just giving someone a copy of the New Testament. The New Testament contains answers to questions asked in the Old Testament. The New Testament presents Jesus as solution to all the problems raised by the prophets in the Old Testament. You have to read the question to understand the answer. You have to remember the problem to appreciate the solution. Paul says that in Jesus God was solving the problem raised by Jeremiah. He was saying: “You people will never be righteous. Even with all the help God has given you. He gave you the law, but you couldn’t keep it. He gave you leaders, but you didn’t listen to them and most of them were just as sinful as you. So now he himself has come in the person of His Son Christ and God Almighty, Yahweh in the flesh has become your salvation, even the Righteousness of God.” That’s the Gospel my friends! That is the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ. External laws and external leadership were not able to restore us to fellowship with God. So God did an internal work and left us an internal Spirit to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus is our righteousness and Jesus gives us his Spirit. On the night before he was crucified Jesus said:

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. (John 16:12-14. NKJV)

This is why Jesus is so much better than merely human shepherds. He will teach us and he will never die. All our favourite human teachers died. Martin Luther died. John Calvin died. John Owen died. Spurgeon died. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones died even Ray LeDrew died. They’re all dead, but Jesus Christ is alive!

²⁵Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25. NKJV)

The ministry of Jesus in your life is never interrupted by death! He ever lives to make intercession for you before the Father. Jesus is the Shepherd we need because his influence is eternal and it is also INTERNAL. Through Christ, I don't just hear the law, the law speaks to me from inside. The Spirit who wrote the Law tells me things in my heart that he received from Jesus FOR ME! I test those things as 1 John 4:1 tells me to so that I am not deceived, but praise God, I do believe and have experienced the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus speaking inside me saying "here is the path, walk ye in it". The ministry of the Good Shepherd is eternal, it is internal and it is DYNAMIC – it is powerful and able to fully curb, reverse and transform my sinful inclinations. The Apostle Paul said that in Romans 1:

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel [£]of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. (Romans 1:16. NKJV)

The Greek word that is used for "power" there is *dunamis*, meaning that the Gospel of Christ is powerful, it is alive, it is dynamic and it is able to make me live, not just eternally, but also abundantly in the here and now. Everyone needs the Good Shepherd. He is the only solution to what's wrong with the human heart. Say amen if you believe that this morning.

Very quickly I want to make two lesser applications. The first is specifically for pastors and elders; and it is this:

2. Pastors and elders need to trust the Word of God to do the work of God

A lot of the word count in Jeremiah 23 is given over to an extended rebuke by God to the useless and damaging ministry of the prophets and priests. While it is true that even had they done their jobs perfectly, the people would still have needed a Saviour, even still, God holds them accountable for rushing the people head long down the road to hell with their utterly barren and unhelpful ministries. There are three main problems with this group:

- i. They did not love the Word of God to seek it and to speak it

We see that in verse 18 where God asks:

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*? (Jeremiah 23:18. NKJV)

God says: “I am listening to these so called prophets preach in my name and I don’t seem to recall meeting with any of these guys. They didn’t seek my advice. They did not hunger after my words.”

I remember when I first started feeling a call to ministry I borrowed some tapes from my Senior Pastor. They were old; from the 60’s and the guy teaching was old in the 60’s he must be a thousand years old now and long dead. But this old man, whose name I cannot recall, from a generation of the church that has long past, said that in his wisdom, no less than half of a preacher’s daily week should be spent in prayer and study of God’s word in order to feed his people well on Sunday. That’s how they did it in our great grandparents’ day. Now, according to numerous studies, the average pastor spends less than 5 minutes a day in prayer. That’s a big shift. Sermon topics in Evangelical churches are not likely to have come out of the Word or the prayer closet. They are likely to come out of the blogosphere or the inner recesses of the preacher’s heart. He will give you “5 Tips for a Successful Marriage” or “5 Dangers of Social Media” but he will not likely be preaching on the text of the Bible, or at best he will use it as a sort of spring board to launch into conversations he finds more interesting. The prophets in Jeremiah’s day sped the people into ruin with thin, non-biblical, unprayed over sermons and we are seeing way too much of that in our day. If it was outrageous to God in Jeremiah’s day, how much more so must it be to him today when we have access and resources in Christ and the Holy Spirit that were only LONGED for in Jeremiah’s day?

But maybe you will say, now that we have the Holy Spirit and the finished work of Christ, maybe we don’t need human teachers and pastors to feed us the Bible? Then why did Jesus say to Peter:

“Feed My sheep. (John 21:17. NKJV)

Why did Peter then say to the young men he was raising up:

²Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers ... ⁴and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Peter 5:2-4. NKJV)

Pastors and elders, we work for the Good Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd and he expects us to feed his people from his word; not from the blogosphere, not from the internet and not from the book of the month. We feed them from God's Word and we write our sermons on our knees or we lose our right to serve.

ii. They gave far too much authority to subjective experience and revelation

We see that in verses 25-26:

²⁵“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ ²⁶How 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 23:25-26. NKJV)

These prophets spoke to the people out of the content of their subjective experiences. Now, let's be very clear, there are legitimate subjective experiences in Christianity, as indeed there were in Judaism. The prophet is not here condemning dreams or visions outright – think how many dreams and visions there are in the Bible? Joseph was a dreamer, Ezekiel had visions – the point is not that dreams and visions are bad it is that these men put authority in them rather than in God's Word. They did not do what we are all told to do in 1 John 4:1:

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1. NKJV)

They just assumed that because they had a dream it was from God and should be shared. Nonsense! Dreams are like e-mail and the devil knows your address and he signs all of his messages: “From Jesus”. We have to be discerning. Listen, I believe in dreams, I receive dreams personally, I journal them, I pray over them but I do not believe that dreams are authoritative and I do not believe that they should form the basis of our teaching. The church doesn't need prophesy conferences where people shake and vibrate and then share their visions and dreams. We need the plain, anointed teaching of God's Word.

iii. They offered false assurances that quickened the descent of the people toward judgement

We see that in verse 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.’” (Jeremiah 23:17. NKJV)

They say to people who are living in known sin: “Its ok friend, its all grace. God loves you just the way you are. Just believe in him and continue on the path you have chosen.” They say to those who are walking the path to hell: “There is no hell! Only peace awaits you, because in the end, love wins!” Pastors and elders and anyone who teaches others, be very careful what assurances you offer because God will not cash the bogus cheques that so many in our day are writing in his name.

The last thing I want to say by way of closing is to the sheep. To all of us. I am a sheep too; I am an under-shepherd, but I am a sheep first and foremost.

3. The sheep need to be discerning in their diet

At the end of the day the sheep need to understand that we are what we eat. If you choose to go to a tickly ear church then you have chosen a set of consequences associated with that. What you hear influences you, God says that in verse 16:

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you.
They make you worthless; (Jeremiah 23:16. NKJV)

You are responsible for what you listen to. You are responsible for what books you read and what radio preachers you listen to and what half-baked, ill conceived heretical blasphemies you suck up from the Miracle Network or the internet. You are responsible. You will live according to that which you decide to hear. Love the truth. Love the Word of God. Love the Gospel which is the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It is wonderful it is precious and it is enough. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.