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Called to Speak for the Lord – the Book of Jeremiah

False Shepherds, Thieves, and
Robbers

March 14, 2021

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 23

Scripture Reading: John 10:1-21

The book of Jeremiah has good news in it. It contains the gospel as the Lord announced things such as:

- His preservation of the remnant, His true people
- His justice for and preservation of those who truly know Him
- A coming day (now accomplished in Christ) when He would make a New Covenant which would effect the salvation of His people

Most of the Old Testament prophets' message however was addressed to disobedient, rebellious, hard-hearted

people who “played church” and boasted about being God’s chosen, yet they were wicked. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophets were sent to announce God’s impending judgment upon the nations of Israel and Judah if they did not repent. We see in this the holiness of God, the holy wrath of God, and all of His holy attributes. But we also see the amazing patience and kindness and goodness of the Lord. He repeatedly promises these undeserving evil people that if they will repent, even at this late hour, He would restore His blessing to them. If they refuse, He would send the enemy from the north and wipe them out.

Now, in the midst of all of this, at the same time God’s true prophets were preaching His Word, the enemy was at work through the false words of the false prophets. False shepherds whose only purpose was to use the sheep for their own gain. And chapter 23 is one of the central portions of Scripture in which we have the Lord exposing these wolves. That is the chapter we want to look at this morning, but first let’s make

a few comments regarding chapters 21-22.

God's Answer to Zedekiah

Jeremiah 21:1-10 NASB The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur the son of Malchijah, and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseiah, saying, (2) **"Please inquire of the LORD on our behalf, for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is warring against us; perhaps the LORD will deal with us according to all His wonderful acts, so that the enemy will withdraw from us."**

(3) Then Jeremiah said to them, "You shall say to Zedekiah as follows: (4) 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel, "Behold, I am about to turn back the weapons of war which are in your hands, with which you are warring against the king of Babylon and the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the wall; and I will gather them into the center of this city.

(5) **"I Myself will war against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm, even in anger and wrath and great indignation.** (6) "I will also strike down the inhabitants of this city,

both man and beast; they will die of a great pestilence. (7) "Then afterwards," declares the LORD, "I will give over Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people, even those who survive in this city from the pestilence, the sword and the famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and into the hand of their foes and into the hand of those who seek their lives; and he will strike them down with the edge of the sword. He will not spare them nor have pity nor compassion."

(8) "You shall also say to this people, 'Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. (9) "He who dwells in this city will die by the sword and by famine and by pestilence; **but he who goes out and falls away to the Chaldeans who are besieging you will live,** and he will have his own life as booty. (10) "For I have set My face against this city for harm and not for good," declares the LORD. "It will be given into the hand of the king of Babylon and he will burn it with fire."

This section is worthy of serious thought. We see in it:

- These people KNEW Jeremiah was a true prophet who spoke God's Word
- The wicked insist that God bless them when they are in trouble. How could the people of Judah even dare expect God to rescue them!
- The wicked have Almighty God Himself as their enemy. When the Babylonians invade, it is God who is leading them!
- In those times, the righteous thing to do was to acknowledge that God is the one bringing the judgment and to accept it by surrendering to the invaders. God promised that such people would survive.

Now, here is an incredible thing:

Jeremiah 21:11-14 NASB "Then say to the household of the king of Judah, 'Hear the word of the LORD, (12) O house of David, thus says the LORD: **"Administer justice every morning; And deliver the person who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor, That My wrath may not go forth like fire And burn with none to extinguish it,** Because of the evil of their deeds. (13) "Behold, I am against

you, O valley dweller, O rocky plain," declares the LORD, "You men who say, 'Who will come down against us? Or who will enter into our habitations?' (14) "But I will punish you according to the results of your deeds," declares the LORD, "And I will kindle a fire in its forest That it may devour all its environs."""

Even at his very late hour, God provides them a way out. *All they needed to do was to repent of their sin, stop oppressing the poor and the victim, and administer true justice to them.* God's wrath would not go forth like fire among them.

But they refused. Even then! Even at such a time when they could see Nebuchadnezzar's armies coming!

One time years ago I was asked by some people who were in our church then to go visit a friend of theirs who was dying of cancer. I did and I took my Bible along as I always do in such cases. The moment I walked into his house, he looked at me and said "Don't read that to me!!" Here he was, literally at death's door, but he would not listen to the Lord. He would not repent. He was just like these people of Judah.

Another Opportunity to Repent

Still the Lord warns them and calls them to repent:

Jeremiah 22:1-10 NASB Thus says the LORD, "Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and there speak this word (2) and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, who sits on David's throne, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates.

(3) 'Thus says the LORD, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

(4) "For if you men will indeed perform this thing, then kings will enter the gates of this house, sitting in David's place on his throne, riding in chariots and on horses, even the king himself and his servants and his people.

(5) "But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself," declares the LORD, "that this house will become a desolation.'" (6) For thus says the LORD concerning the house of the king

of Judah: "You are like Gilead to Me, Like the summit of Lebanon; Yet most assuredly I will make you like a wilderness, Like cities which are not inhabited. (7) "For I will set apart destroyers against you, Each with his weapons; And they will cut down your choicest cedars And throw them on the fire.

(8) "Many nations will pass by this city; and they will say to one another, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this great city?' (9) "Then they will answer, **'Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD their God and bowed down to other gods and served them.'**" (10) Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him, But weep continually for the one who goes away; For he will never return Or see his native land.

No one will ever stand before God and be able to say, "you didn't give me enough time. You didn't warn me of this. You didn't...".

John 16:7-11 NASB "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. (8) "And He, when He comes, will convict the world

concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; (9) concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; (10) and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; (11) and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

Judgment Against Corrupt Rulers

Do you ever find yourself frustrated because there are so many corrupt officials holding office in our nation? Or in other nations? It seems the norm anymore that these kind of evil people grow wealthier and wealthier and get away with all kinds of corruption, bribery, and even murder. That is what was going on in Judah. And here is what the Lord tells this wicked king who was the son of one of the most godly kings Judah ever saw (Josiah) -

Jeremiah 22:11-17 NASB For thus says the LORD in regard to Shallum [Jehoahaz] the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who became king in the place of Josiah his father, who went forth from this place, "He will never return there; (12) but in the place where they led him captive, there he will die and not see this land again.

NOTE: Jeremiah now speaks for the Lord to the next king, Jehoiakim (see verse 18). Jehoahaz only reigned 3 months and then Pharaoh removed him and put Jehoiakim in his place:

(13) "Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness And his upper rooms without justice, Who uses his neighbor's services without pay And does not give him his wages, (14) Who says, 'I will build myself a roomy house With spacious upper rooms, And cut out its windows, Paneling it with cedar and painting it bright red.'

(15) "Do you become a king because you are competing in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. (16) "He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; Then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" Declares the LORD.

(17) "But your eyes and your heart Are intent only upon your own dishonest gain, And on shedding innocent blood And on practicing oppression and extortion."

Verse 17 really sums it up! It perfectly describes tyrants and corrupt rulers in our day and in every age. Many, many

– if not most, it would seem – crave position and power, they energetically campaign – all to obtain power. And when they get it, they have no intention of serving the people who elected them, they serve themselves. This is always done at the expense of others. They use the people who they are supposed to be working to help and protect. We read and hear about it every single day, don't we?

What specifically had Jehoiakim done along these lines? Well, apparently he set out to build himself a luxurious palace. And he did it by ripping off his own people. He didn't pay them – much like Solomon did when he used forced labor for his lavish building projects.

Recently I was watching a youtube video channel that features boats in the Miami area. It shows them going out into the ocean over really rough water, and another shows boats cruising through downtown Miami in the Miami river. As you watch these, you see the HUGE multi-million dollar yachts. It is a real picture of hedonism – including every desire. These things are more than anyone conceivably even needs or can use! And as you watch, you wonder – *where did the money come from to buy these things and to maintain them?* I am

sure that most of it came exactly as the funds for Jehoiakim's palace did. A few may have been honestly earned, but very few. Most came through corruption, greed, injustice, ripping people off, crime and criminal organizations, bribery and the list goes on. How many people were oppressed so that this kind can have it all?

Listen to Matthew Henry here:

Those therefore that are enlarging their houses, and making them more sumptuous, have need to look well to the frame of their own spirits in the doing of it, and carefully to watch against all the workings of vain-glory.

But that which was particularly amiss in Jehoiakim's case was that **he did this when he could not but perceive, both by the word of God and by his providence, that divine judgments were breaking in upon him.** He reigned his first three years by the permission and allowance of the king of Egypt, and all the rest by the permission and allowance of the king of Babylon; and yet he that was no better than a viceroy will covet to vie with the greatest monarchs in building and furniture.

He was the rich fool Jesus told about, at least in spirit. Storm clouds of invasion and destruction were all around him, yet he parties on building himself a palatial house! That is the insanity of the sinful heart. And how many people in our day are of the same spirit as he? Warnings and threatenings from the Lord are given, death is a reality that we see every day to remind us that we are not going to live forever here, and yet people build their mansions. As Matthew Henry soberly reminds us – when we “enlarge our houses,” we need to examine our own hearts and motives very carefully. And of course, we must deal justly with people.

Here is what the Lord says is going to happen to these wicked rulers on the Day when Christ comes again:

Jeremiah 22:18-19 NASB Therefore thus says the LORD in regard to Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, "They will not lament for him: 'Alas, my brother!' or, 'Alas, sister!' They will not lament for him: 'Alas for the master!' or, 'Alas for his splendor!' (19) "He will be buried with a donkey's burial, Dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

This happened to Jehoiakim and it is a picture of the hell which awaits all his kind.

One more comment on this from Matthew Henry for us to seriously consider:

It is the common folly of those that are sinking in their estates to covet to make a fair show. Many have unhumbed hearts under humbling providences, and look most haughty when God is bringing them down. This is striving with our Maker.

(2.) Carnal security and confidence in his wealth, depending upon the continuance of his prosperity, as if his mountain now stood so strong that it could never be moved. He thought he must reign without any disturbance or interruption because he had *enclosed himself in cedar* ([Jer 22:15](#)), as if that were too fine to be assaulted and too strong to be broken through, and as if God himself could not, for pity, give up such a stately house as that to be burned.

Thus when Christ spoke of the destruction of the temple his disciples came to him, to show him what a

magnificent structure it was,
[Mat 23:38](#); [Mat 24:1](#).

Those wretchedly deceive themselves who think their present prosperity is a lasting security, and dream of reigning because they are *enclosed in cedar*. It is but in his own conceit that *the rich man's wealth is his strong city*.

False Prophets – A Plague to Jeremiah, and to us

We now arrive at this 23rd chapter, one of my favorite portions of the Bible. We can only introduce it and plan then to look closely at it next time. Here is how it begins:

Jeremiah 23:1-8 NASB "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. (2) Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: "You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds," declares the LORD.

(3) "Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. (4) "I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

(5) "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. (6) "In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, 'The LORD our righteousness.'

(7) "Therefore behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when they will no longer say, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,' (8) but, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.' Then they will live on their own soil."

In every era of church history, really from the beginning of creation, Satan has sent his false prophets, false shepherds, false teachers, into the visible church – into the flock of the Lord’s sheep. Their purpose is to use, to destroy, to scatter, all the while parading as the Lord’s pastors.

Think about how often Jesus, for instance, had to confront this thing. Not so much in the world (such as among the Romans), but among the people who were supposed to be His. Pharisees, Sadducees, false priests and prophets, a polluted Temple and perversion of the sacrifices offered there.

It is, therefore a great error on our part to carelessly read of these things in the Bible, and then go on our way assuming that such things are not going to happen today. That is to say, *if we naively assume that all is well, that there is no way a false shepherd could be active in our own Christian world and experience, that certainly there might be some such operating today but not very commonly, then we simply are willfully blind to what God tells us plainly in His Word.*

1 John 4:1 NASB Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Often I sense that many people who I speak with or who hear my sermons and Bible studies think that I am being just too critical. That things surely are not as bad as all of that. This is why I really appreciate the people who have been victims of evil, usually in their local church – because they know I am not overstating the case. And I hope that all of you understand this too.

You know, one day when we are all with the Lord and in the new creation, there is going to be preaching. Maybe all of us will be preachers! And at that time, do you know what the subject of our sermons is going to be? Entirely. Completely. It will be Christ and it will be about who He is and about what He has done for us. It will be about God, about His being and attributes – which we will understand far more clearly than we do now. There will never again be a need for sermons like Jeremiah and Isaiah preached, or like Paul preached, in which wickedness was exposed and evil rebuked.

But now – for now, in this fallen world, in this time of battle against an enemy that never sleeps – failing to be wise about evil and the enemy’s constant tactics is disastrous, and even disobedient to the Lord.

Jeremiah 23:11 NASB "For both prophet and priest are polluted; Even in My house I have found their wickedness," declares the LORD.