

In Preparation for Sunday, April 6 *Evil Kings and False Prophets*

““Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! declares the Lord.” Jeremiah 23:1

Read: Jeremiah 21:1-28:17

Bad leadership under divine judgment and the perseverance of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry are the dominant themes of this next section. If we plot this section it becomes obvious that chronological order was not the editor's concern. The book of Jeremiah was never intended to be a history lesson.

21:1-22:10: Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonians. Zedekiah is king (597-587 BC).

22:11-12: Shallum is another name for Jehoahaz, who reigned for three months and was taken by the Egyptians into exile where he died (609 BC) (see 2 Kings 23:33f.; 2 Ch. 36:4).

22:13-23: Jehoiakim, elder brother of Shallum, appointed king by Egyptian Pharaoh Neco (609-597 BC) (see 2 Kings 23:34-24:6).

22:24-30: Jehoiachin became king in December, 598 BC and after three months was deported to Babylon as a royal hostage (see 2 Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34).

23:1-8: In contrast to these evil kings, God will raise up a successor to King David who is a true shepherd and he will be called, The Lord Our Righteousness.

23:9-40: Next in view, are the prophets. They are scrutinized and found to be wicked, deceptive, willful, and delusional.

24:1-10: Now back to the description of the kings and Jeremiah's object lesson of the two baskets of figs. This took place after 597 BC when Jehoiachin was carried into Babylon and Zedekiah became king in Judah. Once again the editor works backwards.

25:1-38: Jeremiah's summary pronouncement of judgment against Israel's shepherds occurred in 605 BC, during Jehoiakim's reign. Jeremiah had been hard at work for 23 years, which fits with the timing of his call in 627-628 BC.

26:1-24: Jeremiah's temple sermon (7:1-8:3) is referred to again as taking place during the reign of Jehoiakim (609 BC). This time the outraged reaction of the leadership is emphasized.

27:1-22: In 597 BC, Jeremiah dramatized Judah's need to submit to Babylonian rule under Nebuchadnezzar, by putting a yoke around his neck. His message contradicted the prophets and priests who insisted on a message of false hope.

28:1-17: Once again, Jeremiah turned his attention to the false prophets and to the prophet Hananiah in particular.

The common theme running through this section is bad leadership. Prophets, priests and kings conspired to oppose the word of the Lord that Jeremiah declared.

Bad leadership under divine judgment and the perseverance of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry are the dominant themes of this next section.

1. If you put yourself in King Zedekiah's place what would you have thought of Jeremiah's message about Babylon (21:1-10)? Judging from Jeremiah's message (21:11-14), what was lacking in Zedekiah's administration? How might God's Word to us today contradict mainstream thinking, official positions, and popular perspectives?

2. How did Jeremiah's vision of success (22:3-4) differ from Jehoiakim's vision of success (22:13-17)? What did Jeremiah prophesy would be a sign of Jehoiakim's failure (22:18-19; see 2 Kings 24:6)?

3. Jeremiah pronounced the Lord's judgment against Judah's kings, "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" But he also announced a new day coming (23:1-7). How does this prophecy point forward to the coming of Jesus Christ (John 10:1-18)?

4. How does Jeremiah describe the prophets (23:9-40)? What was the source for their visions and dreams? How can we distinguish between the word of the Lord and human visions of success?

5. Jeremiah was a "big picture" prophet, who paradoxically saw submission and exile as the path of blessing (good figs) and resistance as the path to destruction (bad figs). Those who accepted the word of the Lord would have to live by faith, believing that the Lord would break the chains of slavery and judge the nations. What did Jeremiah say would happen to the false shepherds (25:34-38)? Does this pronouncement of judgment against false leaders apply to us today?

6. The debate among the officials of Judah over whether Jeremiah should die is strikingly reminiscent of the debate that raged some 600 years later among the scribes and Pharisees over whether or not Jesus should die. Just as Pilate testified to Jesus' innocence (Jn 19:4), some of the officials declared "to the priests and the prophets" that Jeremiah should not be sentenced to death, because "he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God" (26:16). Citing the prophet Micah during the reign of Hezekiah (716-687 BC) as a precedent, officials actually quoted what Micah had said about Jerusalem (Micah 1:1; 3:12). Since Hezekiah didn't kill Micah, Jeremiah should not be sentenced to death.

Parenthetically, another prophet by the name of Uriah, who also prophesied in the name of the Lord, met a very different fate (26:20-23). What was different between Jeremiah and Uriah? How does this relate to what the Lord told Jeremiah in the beginning (1:17-19)? Do you have the courage to stand for the Lord when people oppose you?

7. With his bow-your-neck-under-Babylonian rule message, Jeremiah must have seemed like a defeatist. What were the false prophets saying (27:14-18)? Who must have sounded more spiritual?

8. Later that same year (594 BC), Jeremiah was confronted in the temple by the prophet Hananiah, who claimed that the Lord would break the yoke of the king of Babylon and the temple articles would be returned in two years (28:1-17). How did Jeremiah respond to Hananiah? Why did Jeremiah let Hananiah take the yoke off his neck and then just walk away? What can we learn from Jeremiah's response to Hananiah?