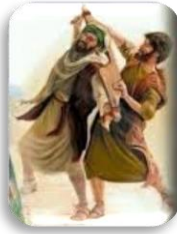


# False Prophets Judged (Jeremiah 23:9 - 24:10)



## A. Overview

1. **Background:** Jeremiah came from a small village where everybody knew everybody. He relocated to Jerusalem because of his relatives' plot to kill him. To his shock, he found hypocrisy everywhere in the religious city. The young prophet saw rampant dishonesty in the commercial transactions in the city, and that dishonesty ran so much deeper, all the way to the ruling classes, including the politicians and the priests (Jer 5:1). After suffering physical violence from the priests in Jerusalem, Jeremiah had to overcome deep depression. But he faithfully delivered God's word to the nation of Judah, even to Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (21:11-23:8).

Jeremiah's greatest shock was yet to come, not from the people or the ruling class of the city, not even from the persecution of the priests or kings, but from the group of prophets in Jerusalem to whom he hoped to belong.

2. **Time:** In 597BC Jeconiah was taken away and Zedekiah was installed as king over Judah. Now Jeremiah's message focuses on the false prophets. Jeremiah expected to find honesty and integrity in the prophets, and hoped for their friendship and support. But Jeremiah was shattered by what he saw in them, *'My heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake. I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine has overcome...'* (23:9) Most of them were 'professional prophets' given to lying dreams and false prophecies. The deeply troubling thing about these 'prophets' was not what they said, but how they lived. Jeremiah speaks about their life – the man, message, ministry, motive, and method – i.e. *What makes a false prophet?*
3. **Samaritan Prophets vs Jerusalem Prophets (23:13-15)** – The Samaritan prophets prophesied by Baal and caused the people of Israel to go astray. It was *folly* (v13). But in the Jerusalem prophets, Jeremiah saw a *'horrible thing'* (v14). These prophets called as the mouthpiece of God were living the life of adultery, lie and compromise, strengthening the hands of evil people, so no one ever turned from wickedness. While these false prophets flourished, the people under their ministry became like Sodom and Gomorrah before God. Their 'prophetic ministry' polluted the land with 'profaneness'.

## B. Marks of the False Prophets

1. **Man** – Jeremiah was first shocked by their immorality, in particular rampant adultery. They were running around with other men's wives without even feeling shame or guilt. There was no real consequence for their sins. And soon the whole land was filled with adultery (23:10, 14). How could they live in such sin while prophesying? (Was it even really God's word on their lips?)  
  
(a) Some people say, 'What's wrong with it if two people love each other?' When God says He loves you, God is committed to you and will stay loyal to you to the end. That's what *'hesed'* means – covenantal faithfulness. That's why when we marry, we do not make our vows on feelings, but on commitment and loyalty – 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part'. How could the prophets of God speak of God's love when they were disloyal in their personal lives and to their own wives?  
  
(b) Some say, 'our giftedness means God's approval. 'Our might is our right', i.e. We are 'successful, so it must mean we must be 'right.' This became the attitude in the nation. But God's verdict was, 'their might is not right' (23:10). Giftedness doesn't automatically translate into character. These prophets have corrupted society to become *wicked*. The only 'might' that God ultimately allows to continue is what is 'right'. *God's curse is on those who put 'might' ahead of 'right', thus the 'poisoned waters' and the great drought in the land.* True word from the Lord must include both the mercy and the judgment of God.
2. **Message** - Jeremiah was shocked by their message.  
  
(a) There are three sources of revelation: (i) demonic source (23:13 – Baal); (ii) human imagination (23:16 – prophet's own heart); (iii) inspiration of divine source (23:18 – counsel of the LORD). The Jerusalem prophets' messages originated from *'their own imaginations'* as they desperately looked for the brighter

side of everything. It is human nature to clutch on the straws of vain hope than to face the hard truth. So a professional preacher can be driven by popularity than God's voice because their bread and water depend on people's support. Their two-fold message was, *'You shall have peace...No evil shall come upon you.'* (23:17) *without any call to return to God.* God calls their message *'a lie and recklessness'* (23:32) to be judged. It was irresponsible to prophesy 'peace and prosperity' and wreck the life of God's people.

**(b)** They had an unbalanced theology, *'Am I a God near at hand, and not a God afar off?'* (23:23) They emphasised the imminence of God at the cost of the transcendence of God, the kindness of God at the cost of the holiness of God. God almost became their Genie, a carefree friend and they lost sight of God as the awesome King and holy Judge. Intimacy and closeness with God can degenerate into familiarity and casualness with God. A close walk with God means knowing Him who sees every hidden secret, and at the same time filling the heaven and earth (23:24).

**(c)** Jeremiah's Revelation - *'For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD and has perceived and heard His word? ... Behold the whirlwind of the LORD has gone forth in fury...'* (23:18-20; 30:23-24 c.f. Rev 4-5; 7:1). If these prophets had stood in the counsel of the LORD, they would have turned His people from their evil ways back to God. The core of the true prophets' burden through the Scriptures is to turn the heart of the people back to the Lord, rather than foretelling some future outcome.

### 3. **Ministry**

**(a)** Their ministry was self-commissioned. *'I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.'* (23:21) They have no legitimate prophetic ministry before the Lord, and there was no substance in their message.

**(b)** Their message was like 'empty husks', i.e. placebo and not the real medicine. Feeding on their dreams, vision and revelations, were like chewing and swallowing empty chaff. It won't feed them or fill them. Listening to the self-commissioned prophets would not profit to hearers at all (23:32).

**(c)** How then can we know the true word of God? The true word of God 'burns' and 'breaks.' *'Is not My word like a fire?'* says the LORD, *and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?'* (23:29). The true word of God brands our soul in fire and breaks up our hardened hearts. We get consumed and broken by the fire and the hammer of God's word. The true word of God is His 'holy' (23:9). It is not essentially a 'feel good' placebo message, but bitter medicine that brings true healing and restoration. (C.f. Heb 4:11-12)

### 4. **Methods** (23:25-40) - Jeremiah now digs at their misleading methods of delivering false revelations.

**(a)** *'I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies?'* (23:25-26) They deliberately dramatized their revelation to impress people. Jeremiah says, if you had a dream, just tell it like it is without dressing it up with dramatic effects to make you look super-spiritual. *'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!'* Sadly, what began in the soulish realm to bolster their spiritual pride actually led them into the demonic and pagan realm, eventually forgetting God's name (character) for Baal's name.

**(b)** These false prophets became so brazen and hardened, and they stole 'dreams' and 'prophecies' from each other as their own to impress people. *'Therefore, I am against the prophets,' says the LORD, 'who steal My words everyone from his neighbour.'* Behold, *I am against the prophets, says the LORD, 'who use their tongues and say, 'He says.'* Behold *I am against the prophets who prophesy false dreams.'* (23:30-32). God calls their ministry a 'reckless lie'.

**(c)** Jeremiah points to the cliché everyone was using in the prophetic ministry - 'the oracle (burden) of the Lord'. Whenever they said, *'the oracle of the LORD,'* their words suddenly took on an extra aura of authority. *'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.'* (23:33) Jeremiah didn't use this term himself. But the false prophets have so misused the term to give authenticity to their own soulish burden without actually having the LORD's burden, so the LORD forbade its use.

Next time they say, 'the burden of the Lord', Jeremiah was to tell them, *'You are the LORD's heavy burden (not your message), so He will get you off His back - by exile!'* (There is a wordplay here – 'burden' is 'massa' and 'cast out' is 'nasa' in Hebrew.)

## C. Jeremiah the True Prophet

Jeremiah 24 is written around 597BC. By now King Jeconiah and most of Judah's leaders were taken into exile, and so the cream of the nation was in Babylon (c.f. 2 Kgs 24:10-17). Those remaining in Jerusalem became filled with optimism for the future. The new king Zedekiah even conspired with the surrounding peoples to rebel against Babylon (Jer 27), and the false prophets were prophesying of a quick return of the exiles (Jer 28). Jeremiah saw that indeed there will be a new day for Judah. But the future lay with the exiles in Babylon, not with Zedekiah and his supporters in Jerusalem.

1. Jeremiah's Open Vision Offerings to God were presented in the temple courtyard. The two baskets represent two offerings. The first basket of sweet figs was beautiful. But the rotten figs in the second basket were so bad that it could not be eaten. Both baskets were laid at the temple to be offered to God. Surprisingly, God saw the early deportees taken to Babylon as the offering of sweet figs, i.e. Jeconiah and other exiles (Jer. 29:4-7; 2 King 25:27-30). *'I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. Then I will give them a heart to know Me that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.'* (24:6-7)

Contrary to the natural assumption of the people, Zedekiah, his administrators and the pro-Egyptian party in Jerusalem were the 'rotten figs' to be gathered up and destroyed. Zedekiah and those who escaped the deportation presumed that Jeconiah and the exiles were the rejected lot, and they who remained in Jerusalem were the remnant. But in God's eyes, the opposite was the truth!

2. The Difference? 'Upper class' vs 'Lower class'? No, the early exiles were those 'consumed' and 'broken' by God's word. They were the ones chastised, disciplined and refined by God in exile, and God could work with them. Those who escaped the exile thought they dodged the judgment altogether, but they were the bad figs who never repented.

The true word of God doesn't always offer immediate comfort, but it offers real hope. The true word of God may be shattering at first, but in time it brings real healing. It does not offer superficial healing, but it offers an escape from God's judgment. Those who are refined by God's word are the sweet figs offered to Him. God chastens every son He receives. Those who don't know the chastening of the Lord are 'illegitimate sons' (Heb 12:5-11).

3. In the last days there will be earthquakes, wars, rumours of wars, famine and pestilence, etc, and the human race will be divided into two baskets. One will be the basket of sweet figs because they are dealt with by the Word. Some may even suffer for their faith. Those who are at ease and does not suffer trouble, are the rotten figs that resist the discipline of God's word. But they will be ultimately be gathered up for God's judgment.

4. True and False Prophets

	True Prophets	False Prophets
Intimacy	Life of deep communion with God. Standing in the counsel of the Lord.	Showmanship and use of dramatic effects to impress people. No deep personal encounter with God.
Character	Fear of God more than fear of man. Aim at turning people's hearts to the Lord rather than gaining popularity with men.	Self-appointed and driven to please men rather than God. Steal words from one another. Deceive with false visions and dreams.
Power	Burn away the impurity and break up the hard hearts in people.	No conviction, and no repentance in hearers. Promise false hope and false victory. Produce 'worthless hearers.'