

Chapter 41 Jeremiah 21-26

Bad Leadership

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

Sincere Christians would like to stay in the story without the passion of Jeremiah, but can we? His concerns are not dated. Religious evil is just as real today as it was then. Bad leadership under divine judgment and the perseverance of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry are the dominate themes of this next section and they are just as relevant today as they were then.

If we plot this section it becomes obvious that chronological order was not the author’s concern. Jeremiah focused on the subject of his message rather than a chronology of events. Although the book of Jeremiah was never intended to be a history lesson, it may be helpful to plot the history of this section to help the reader focus on the message. Jeremiah’s prime example of bad leadership begins with Zedekiah, Judah’s last king before the final deportation (597-587 BC), and works backwards, but not in any strict chronological order. At the time Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians, exactly as Jeremiah had prophesied (21:1-22:10). Jeremiah used Zedekiah to illustrate the kind of bad leadership that he was called of God to denounce. Jeremiah’s emphasis lies more on where he gave this message, at the palace of the king of Judah, than when he gave the message (22:1-10).

Next, with a brief comment, Jeremiah dismissed King Shallum, (another name for Jehoahaz), who reigned in Judah for only three months before he was exiled to Egypt where he died (609 BC) (22:11-12; see 2 Kings 23:33f.; 2 Ch. 36:4). He then turned to Jehoiakim, elder brother of Shallum, appointed king by Egyptian Pharaoh Neco (609-597 BC) (22:13-23; see 2 Kings 23:34-24:6). Jeremiah’s great temple sermon came at the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign (7:1-26; 26:1-6). His son, Jehoiachin became king in December, 598 BC and after a mere three months was deported to Babylon as a royal hostage. Jeremiah dismissed Jehoiachin as “a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants” (22:24-30; see 2 Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34). This description of Judah’s kings sets the stage for the good news, when 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 (23:1-8).

Next in view, are the prophets (23:9-40). They are scrutinized by Jeremiah and found to be wicked, deceptive, wilful, and delusional. Then back again to the description of the kings for round two and Jeremiah’s object lesson of the two baskets of figs (24:1-10). This took place after 597 BC when Jehoiachin was carried into Babylon and Zedekiah became king in Judah. Once again the editor works backwards. Jeremiah’s summary pronouncement of judgment against Israel’s shepherds occurred in 605 BC, during Jehoiakim’s reign (25:1-38). Jeremiah had been hard at work for 23 years, which fits with the timing of his call in 627-628 BC. Jeremiah’s temple sermon (26:1-24; see 7:1-8:3) is referred to again and dated during the reign of Jehoiakim (609 BC). This time the outraged reaction of the leadership against Jeremiah is emphasized. In

597 BC, Jeremiah dramatized Judah's need to submit to Babylonian rule under Nebuchadnezzar, by putting a yoke around his neck (27:1-22). His message contradicted the self-appointed prophets and popular priests who insisted on a message of false hope. This section concludes with Jeremiah once again turning his attention to the false prophets and to the prophet Hananiah in particular (28:1-17). The common theme running through this section focuses on bad leadership. Prophets, priests and kings conspired to wilfully and systematically oppose the word of the Lord.

Evil Kings

The timing of Zedekiah's request to Jeremiah underscores the illustrative nature of this section. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had laid siege to Jerusalem. Conquest and exile were imminent (587 BC). Jeremiah began this section with Judah's long-awaited political climax, the final occupation and deportation that the prophet had been predicting for many years. He did this to demonstrate the moral and spiritual character of the house of David,

King Zedekiah was fully aware of Jehoiachin's exile to Babylon ten years before (597 BC; 22:24-30). He had heard Jeremiah's "Good Figs, Bad Figs" message after the first exile, which stated categorically that God's blessing was for those who went into exile. The word of the Lord through Jeremiah could not have been clearer. It was as simple as rotten fruit and sweet tasting fruit. The truth was as stark as black and white, red and green—right and wrong.

"Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to the land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart."

"'But like the poor figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten,' says the Lord, 'so I will deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and byword, an object of ridicule and cursing, wherever I banish them. I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their fathers.'" (Jer 24:5-10).

Zedekiah knew that Jeremiah had been delivering this same message since the days of Josiah. Everyone knew that in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign in Babylon, when Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, ruled in Judah, Jeremiah had prophesied that there would be seventy years of captivity (25:1-38). This captivity was calculated to extend from the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign (605 BC) to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the return of the exiles ca. 536 BC (Zech 1:12; 2 Chr 36:20-23). Everyone knew that Jeremiah was nearly killed for delivering his momentous "temple sermon" during the early days of Jehoiakim's reign when he laid down the Lord's ultimatum (26:1-24; 7:1-8:3).

How could Zedekiah forget the public spectacle of Jeremiah walking around Jerusalem shouldering a heavy yoke? How could he forget the embarrassment of Jeremiah sending word to

the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon, through their ambassadors, that the Lord of Israel was handing over all their countries, together with Judah, “to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon” (27:6)? According to the prophet himself, he could not have delivered the word of the Lord more boldly and graphically: “I gave the same message to Zedekiah king of Judah. I said, ‘Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the Lord has threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, ‘You will never serve the king of Babylon,’ for they are prophesying lies to you’” (27:12-14).

One of those lying prophets was Hananiah, who publicly confronted Jeremiah in the temple and declared that the Lord had told him that in two years the yoke of Babylonian rule would be broken (594 BC; 28:1-4). Zedekiah must have heard the irony and sarcasm in Jeremiah’s response to Hananiah when Jeremiah said,

“Wonderful! Would that it were true—that God would validate your preaching by bringing the Temple furnishings and all the exiles back from Babylon. But listen to me, listen closely. Listen to what I tell both of you and all the people here today: The old prophets, the ones before our time, preached judgment against many countries and kingdoms, warning of war and disaster and plague. So any prophet who preaches that everything is just fine and there’s nothing to worry about stands out like sore thumb. We’ll wait and see. If it happens, it happens—and then we’ll know that God sent him” (28:6-9, *The Message*).

Hananiah should have quit, but he preceded to remove Jeremiah’s yoke and break it up in pieces as he repeated his prophesy that Babylon would be gone in two years. Jeremiah turned on his heels and left the scene, but a few days later he confronted Hananiah with the word of the Lord. Jeremiah’s message to Judah and the surrounding nations was unambiguous, “This is what the Lord says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron” (28:13). He was just as direct to Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore, this is what the Lord says: ‘I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord’” (28:15-16). Hananiah thought he was preaching a message of peace, but in fact, he was preaching rebellion from the Lord. Two months later he was dead (28:17).

King Zedekiah was without excuse. He knew where Jeremiah stood and he knew what the will of the Lord was. Zedekiah was well aware of the great temple sermon, and Jeremiah’s prophesy of the seventy year captivity was public knowledge. The vivid object lessons of figs and the yoke around Jeremiah’s neck made the word of the Lord clear. Nevertheless, Zedekiah had the audacity to send a delegation to Jeremiah, saying, “Inquire now of the Lord for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the Lord will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us” (21:2). Once again, Jeremiah was forced to repeat what the Lord had told him to say for so many years, “I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in anger and fury and great wrath” (21:5).

Jeremiah likened his message to a consuming fire and “a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces”

(23:29), and by now the reader may be forgiven for thinking that the fire had consumed everything and the rock must have been smashed into powder. The unrelenting nature of Jeremiah's message may cause some to say, "Enough, already. You have made your point!" But the issue was not that Jeremiah needed to *get over it*, it was that the people needed to *get it*. What they didn't get was that God was not some tribal deity that guaranteed their protection. What they didn't understand was that their verbal religiosity did not impress Yahweh who sought justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed. They failed to grasp that their selfish and materialistic aspirations contradicted God's plan for a just and righteous society.

Does the repetitive nature of Jeremiah's message pound away at our "propensity to marry religious and political sentiments" (Linder & Pierard, 18). In spite of everything Jeremiah stood for, Zedekiah persisted in asking Jeremiah for God's blessing and hoping for an eleventh hour miraculous rescue. Zedekiah seemed oblivious to his own spiritual rebellion and his insistence upon using God for his own political purposes. By blending God-and-country and mixing his religious sentiments with his nationalistic aspirations, Zedekiah proudly espoused a civil religion. But it was a religion that refused to pay attention to the word of the Lord (37:2). Even though he consistently chose religious pluralism, hedonism, and materialism, Zedekiah believed that God was on his side and success was assured. Undoubtedly Zedekiah had plenty of religious support for his point-of-view. The delegation he sent to Jeremiah included Pashhur son of Malkijah and a royal official, (not to be confused with the Pashhur (20:1) with whom Jeremiah clashed twenty years earlier) and Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, a priest, who was asked by Zedekiah on several occasions to seek Jeremiah's support (37:3). Zedekiah made the mistake common among egotistical leaders of transferring his own motives and modus operandi to Jeremiah and reasoning that Jeremiah could be wooed with pseudo respect and placated with artificial deference. But the prophet was neither impressed nor intimidated. They wanted Jeremiah's support and blessing, but they didn't want to listen to his preaching.

As we have said before, the leadership in Jerusalem staunchly supported the temple and used religion as a rallying cry. They were quick to say, "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (7:4). They repeated the phrase, "As surely as the Lord lives," and they pretended to turn to the Lord. But there was nothing righteous about their actions nor genuine about their motives (2:27; 5:2). They were all talk, leading Jeremiah to complain to God, "You are always on their lips but far from their hearts" (12:2).

Following his pronouncement of judgment, Jeremiah confronted Judah's royal line with a life or death choice (21:8-9), a clarion call for justice (21:11-14; 22:1-5), and a rebuke of their materialism (22:13-17).

Jeremiah was led by the Lord to deliver an either/or message that was reminiscent of the challenge Moses gave to the Israelites (Deut 30:15,19): "This is what the Lord says: 'See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death' (21:8). But the leadership felt no compulsion to choose. They wanted it both ways. They wanted to copy the ways of the world, condone pagan practices, conform to the spirit of the times but also maintain affiliation with their religious heritage. Jeremiah challenged their both/and thinking with simple dualisms, stark

alternatives, red and green logic, black and white choices. Obedience was a cut and dry decision. Faithfulness was an up or down vote. There was no in-between gray areas that allowed Judah's leaders to please Yahweh and also appease Baal, or exploit the poor and rescue the poor. They had to choose one or the other. They had simple options, either eat rotten figs or eat sweetly ripened figs. The choice was theirs.

Like the "shepherds" in Jeremiah's day there are religious leaders today who mock what they call the "simplistic bifurcation" that pits "us" against "them" in matters related to biblical faith and practice. I imagine that they would condemn Jeremiah for his "destructive binary oppositions" and his "troublesome polarization." They speak of "inclusivity" and "wholeness" and assure us that radically divergent theological perspectives belong together. They intentionally confuse racial and ethnic diversity with radical pluralism. Their watchword is "shalom" but they define peace "merely as the absence of turmoil and social conflict, and not as the triumph of divine righteousness among [people]" (R. K. Harrison, 123). They decry the "macro-dichotomy that threatens to split every major historic American denomination in two" (Butin, 18), but they refuse to draw a line between belief and unbelief, fidelity and idolatry, sexual purity and sexual immorality. They fail to distinguish between conforming to the spirit of the times and submitting to the word of the Lord.

There is a place for both/and thinking *within* a biblically rooted, Christ-centered world-view. Certain biblical truths ought to be held in tension. For example we believe in the total depravity of humankind *and* the evidence of God's image even in the vilest sinner. We accept God's unconditional, sovereign control and election of all people *and* affirm the freedom and responsibility of the person to respond to God. We believe in the salvation God provides through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross for all those who are elected *and* in the universal invitation of the gospel--that whosoever will may come. We believe in the irresistible grace of God *and* the human freedom of choice to reject as well as accept the gospel. We believe in the perseverance of the saints *and* we strive to remain faithful to the end. This biblical wholeness, which works to hold in tension truths affirmed in the Bible, rests on an exclusive commitment to Christ and his word.

No one emphasized the either/or alternative more than Jesus. We might prefer an indecisive "maybe," or a kind of middle-of-the-road, *whatever* belief system, but Jesus did not give us that option. What we get in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a series of either/or alternatives: two ways (broad and narrow), two teachers (false and true), two pleas (words and deeds) and finally two foundations (sand and rock). Jesus ends his message with a parable about two kinds of builders: one who builds on the rock and one who builds on the sand. Jesus established a clear line and a sharp contrast between wisdom and foolishness. Jeremiah was compelled by the Lord to do the same thing. Whether or not Jeremiah's call for justice fell on deaf ears, the prophet persisted in confronting Judah's kings with God's top priority for leadership. All talk and no action compelled Jeremiah to say to "the royal house of Judah, 'Hear the word of the Lord; O house of David, this is what the Lord says: 'Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the

oppressor the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it” (21:11-12).

Jeremiah was known not only for his temple sermon, but for his palace manifesto. The Lord said, “Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there: ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates.’” The word of the Lord was as necessary to politics as it was to spirituality. It belonged not only in the temple, but in society at large. Any compartmentalization of life that ruled out the word of the Lord would have been foreign to Jeremiah.

It is important to note that the recipients of this message range from the king to the officials to the people. Jeremiah gave this manifesto in a hierarchical society ruled by a king, yet he stressed its implications for all people. If this was true then, how much more is it true today. Democratization has made us think and act like kings. Society has substituted one myth for another, the myth of the divine right of kings for the myth of self rule. The rise of the imperial self is just as much a danger to biblical justice as any autocratic king. The sovereign self, with its blatant self-seeking individualism is no better for seeking justice than the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest. To be ruled by the competitive market place is definitely not the same as being ruled by the will of the Lord.

The straightforward character of Jeremiah’s plea for justice has a long tradition in God’s Salvation History story. And as the prophets before him stressed, the just and right thing to do is plain to those who seek to obey God’s will. Jeremiah spoke plainly, “This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place” (22:3). Yet human nature’s sinful tendency to confuse God’s simple justice was as readily apparent then as it is today. The “powers that be” from the ancient king to the modern existential self make justice out to be a mystery.

Jeremiah exposed one of the obvious sins that made justice more difficult when he confronted King Jehoiakim’s materialism:

“Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor. He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.’ So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him” (22:13-15).

Jeremiah contended with Jehoiakim that if he wanted to do justice, he only had to look to the example of his father, Josiah, who had “defended the cause of the poor and needy.” “But your eyes and your heart,” accused Jeremiah, “are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion” (22:16-17). The prophets insisted that doing what was just and right was not nearly as complicated and idealistic as people blinded by greed and selfish interests make it out to be.

One final theme that runs through Jeremiah's discussion of royal leadership is the question of legacy and how Judah's kings should be respected and remembered. Jeremiah was sensitive to the dignity and honor due to a king who fulfilled his leadership responsibilities. In his palace manifesto, he promised, "For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people" (22:4). This was not an appeal to the royal ego, but a picture of the respect afforded those who sought to serve the people according to God's will rather than their own selfish interests and the interests of a ruling elite. Sadly, Judah's kings chose a different legacy and Jeremiah vividly described their fate: Zedekiah's execution (21:7), Jehoahaz's (Shallum) captivity and death (22:11-12), Jehoiakim's burial fit for a donkey (22:19), and Jehoiachin's good riddance-exile (22:24-30).

False Prophets, Bad Priests

Judah's kings were bad, but her prophets and priests were worse and the nation's demise was attributed more to the failure of its spiritual leaders than the corruption of its political leaders. It is bad enough to wield power for selfish gain, but to purport to speak for God when the message is only human opinion and a wish dream is far worse. It is one thing to be useless, it is another thing to be deceptive. It is better to ignorantly say, "I don't know," than it is to arrogantly lead people astray. Judah's kings exploited the people, but Judah's prophets and priests deceived the people, because they exchanged the truth for a lie. They were the ones responsible for spreading "ungodliness" throughout the land (23:15). But if they had "stood in my council," said the Lord, "and proclaimed my words to my people," then "they would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds" (23:22).

Jeremiah was overwhelmed by God's verdict against the religious leaders. "My head is reeling," he complained, "my limbs are limp, I'm staggering like a drunk, seeing double from too much wine—And all because of his holy words" (23:9, *The Message*). "The land is full of adulterers," cried Jeremiah. "'Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness,' declares the Lord" (23:11). Jeremiah charged that the prophets of Jerusalem were even worse than the prophets of Samaria (Israel) who practiced Baal worship, because "they commit adultery and live a lie" (23:14). The implication is that they committed the full range of illicit sexual relations from lust and marital infidelity to homosexual practice (see Gen 19:4-5). "They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah," declared the Lord (Jer 23:14). For these leaders, spiritual idolatry and sexual infidelity went hand-in-hand. Their teaching and their life-style were as dangerous to the people as if they had poisoned Jerusalem's drinking water and polluted the land.

The religious rhetoric of these false prophets and bad priests remind us of some modern church leaders who advocate so-called sexual freedom or who preach a gospel of health and wealth or who use the gospel as leverage for their political cause. To quote Jeremiah, "They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord," declared the Lord. "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'" (23:16-17). This is an apt description of the modern church leader who commends various forms of sexual fulfillment

outside of a marriage commitment between a man and a woman. The order of the day appears to have been “feel-good” sermons based on popular sentiment coupled with an affirming attitude regardless of what the word of the Lord said. “They preach their ‘Everything Will Turn Out Fine’ sermon to congregations with no taste for God, their ‘Nothing Bad Will Ever Happen to You’ sermon to people who are set in their own ways” (23:17, *The Message*). Their refusal to stand in the council of the Lord is not only blatant but stupid. They act as if the Lord is oblivious to their disobedience and unaware of their indifference to his word. “‘Am I only a God nearby,’ declares the Lord, ‘and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so I cannot see him?’ declares the Lord. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the Lord” (23:23-24).

The false prophets of Jeremiah’s day were visionaries who fed the people a steady diet of excitement and hype. They preached enthusiastically, “I had a dream! I had a dream!” and then proceeded to offer “the delusions of their own minds” (23:25-26). They preached their seven steps to success and their five ways to a happy sex life. They presented their four keys to healthy self-esteem and revealed their ten best kept secrets for church growth. All the while the Lord assessed their wish-dream sermons as a ploy to keep from remembering what really counted. “‘They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their fathers forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?’ declares the Lord” (23:27-28). The comparison between straw and grain was an apt one. Straw makes fodder for animals, but it doesn’t make bread for humans. These delusional sermons were at best useless distractions and at worst major deceptions. In any case they did not feed the soul. In contrast to their people-pleasing sermons, the word of the Lord was like a consuming fire and a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces (23:29).

Another characteristic of these false prophets was that they plagiarized each other’s work. The ever-escalating pressure to come up with something new and exciting meant that they copied the *next thing* from one another and then claimed it came from the Lord. “‘Therefore,’ declares the Lord, ‘I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me’” (23:30). Perhaps this sober line should be remembered as a warning to pastors who run to expensive conferences hoping to stay abreast of the latest trends and bring back a message of excitement for their congregation.

Jeremiah’s final description of these false prophets details the Lord’s disgust with their frequent attempts to discuss his word yet their flagrant refusal to discern his will. Asaph’s lament fits Jeremiah’s picture of the false prophets, “Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (Ps 73:9). Or, as Jeremiah complained to God, “You are always on their lips but far from their hearts” (12:2). Like the false teachers described by the apostle Paul, they were “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). Their constant references to the *will* of the Lord or the *burden* of the Lord or the *vision* of the Lord, only served to hide the fact that they were reduced to sharing human opinion and speculation. Apparently they loved to debate the Scriptures, discuss religion, and talk about their spiritual feelings, but they refused to accept and obey the word of the Lord. So Jeremiah was led to call for a moratorium on preaching the word of the Lord, saying, “But you must not mention ‘the oracle

[burden] of the Lord' again, because everyone's own word becomes the oracle and so you distort the words of the living God, the Lord Almighty, our God" (23:36). Nevertheless, the false prophets persisted in claiming that their opinions were the word of the Lord in spite of being warned not to. It was those who pretended to know the will of God who would find out soon enough that judgment was the will of God for them. God's verdict was final, "I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace—everlasting shame that will not be forgotten" (23:40).

The Good Shepherd

For two important reasons Jeremiah's attack against Judah's bad leadership causes the reader to think of Jesus Christ. Once again we see that the heart of the matter comes at the center. In the middle of his description of evil kings and false prophets, Jeremiah issued a startling promise of hope, "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness'" (23:5-6). Like a good shepherd, this coming King "will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number" (23:3). From Jeremiah's perspective Israel's redemption from Egypt was to be eclipsed one day by Israel's redemption from exile in Babylon (23:7-8). Both the exodus and the exile were key stages on the road to redemption through the Cross of Jesus Christ.

From the prophet who bore the burden of such bad news came unexpected good news that, in spite of bad leadership, the Lord still rules over his people and he will save them. There is hope for the future because of Yahweh's determination to raise up a descendent of David, who will be called The Lord Our Righteousness. Unlike Zedekiah, who lived in opposition to the meaning of his name, "The Lord is Righteousness," the King who is coming will fulfill the meaning of his name, because he will reign wisely and do what is just and right. The messianic nature of this prophecy is emphasized in several ways. Jeremiah's phrase "the days are coming" points forward to God's climactic revelation. The reference to "a righteous Branch" recalls Isaiah's messianic promise, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isa 11:1). And the name, The Lord Our Righteousness, does not point away from the individual to God as we would expect, but to the individual as God. This title may have been in the apostle Paul's mind when he referred to Christ Jesus, "who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption," especially when his next thought quotes from Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:30-31; Jer 9:24).

It is not only Jeremiah's messianic prophecy that makes us think of Jesus, but Jeremiah's life that forms a striking parallel to Jesus life. Just as Jesus debated the scribes and Pharisees and used the strongest language to rebuke them, so did Jeremiah before him. Jeremiah serves as a parable of Jesus, because he makes us think of Jesus. The debate among the officials of Judah over whether Jeremiah should die after delivering his temple sermon is strikingly reminiscent of the debate that raged some 600 years later among the scribes and Pharisees over whether or not Jesus should die. When we read that "the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, 'You must die!' it is not difficult to think of Jesus when the crowd shouted, "Crucify him,

crucify him!” (Jer 26:8; Mt 27:22-23). 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). They determined that since Hezekiah didn’t kill Micah, Jeremiah should not be sentenced to death.

How did the book of Jeremiah help shape Jesus’ self-understanding? Did the ancient prophet’s experience of evil kings and false prophets help prepare Jesus for his encounter with the political and religious leaders that sought to kill him? When Jeremiah faced his accusers with calm resolve and firm conviction, he spoke in a manner that makes us think of Jesus before Pilate. “As for me,” Jeremiah said, “I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing” (26:14-15).

In God’s great salvation history story, Jeremiah as a parable of Jesus, along with his messianic prophecy leads us straight to the Gospel of John and the life of Christ. In a single descriptive line Jesus combined the prophecy and the parable. He identified himself as the descendent of David and the suffering servant, the coming King and the crucified Lord, when he said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). In the midst of so much bad news about the leadership and spiritual condition of his people, Jeremiah delivered his message of hope in anticipation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.