

# Jeremiah 23 • Carrying the Wrong Burden

## Introduction

One sad situation is when Christians begin to unquestioningly follow false teachers; an even sadder situation is when they recognize the false, leave, and refuse to join another flock because of the possibility of encountering another fraud. The only cure for false teaching is right teaching, true teachers for false. It's never acceptable to go completely without. If you do, the false have also won because their objective is to get you to carry the burden other than the one of a crucified life to Christ. The objective of false teachers at every level, local or public, is to get you to make a substitution even to the most minor degree. Satan knows that God's truth cannot co-exist alongside error, and it's our job to know and apply the difference.

<sup>1</sup>“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>“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. <sup>4</sup>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.

### [Read v.1-4]

#### **Q: What exactly does the biblical metaphor of “shepherd” represent?**

A: “Shepherd” is the most common description of a spiritual leader, what the New Testament will come to call a pastor, and their sheep or flock corresponds to the people or congregation.

#### **Q: Who do shepherds work for?**

A: In this case, they do not own the flocks given into their care but tend them on behalf of God, their actual owner.

**Observation:** *This is the exact condition of Israel as described at Christ's First Coming, an example of living under false shepherds:*

*Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.*

*Matthew 9:36*

#### **Q: Someone that doesn't do their job is referred to as a “false shepherd”. What is the defining characteristic of a false shepherd?**

A: “You...have not attended to them.” (v.2) They neither ensure proper care and feeding of the flock nor protection from outside attacks, both of which are biblical metaphors for not preaching the true Word of God nor protecting against infiltration of wrong doctrine/teaching.

#### **Q: What is the double meaning of the word “attend” in v.2?**

A: The false prophets' duties went unattended and the flock suffered the consequences; therefore God's attendance of **them** will constitute His judgment for their actions.

#### **Q: Thus far there is application for both literal Israel and spiritual Israel (the church). But how do v.3-4 make it clear that there is a final, literal fulfillment of these words to come for the literal Israel alone?**

- “the remnant of My flock out of all the countries” – It describes the complete and total return of all Jews to Israel, not just the partial returns that have historically occurred to date.
- “they will not be afraid any longer” – It describes a time when the situation on earth has changed completely (e.g., the Millennial Reign). Even during the best of times, anti-Semitism has followed the Jews everywhere, even to this day.

[Continued on the next page.]

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For thus says the LORD God, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.

Ezekiel 34:11-12

**Q: God's resolution is not limited to just restoring the flock. What is the other crucial action He will take?**

A: "I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them". God re-establishes His Word through faithful pastors.

**Q: How do we know for sure that there is a greater teaching concerning the flock which applies to BOTH Israel and the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles?**

"I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.

John 10:16

and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.

John 10:28

**Point:** The cure for a bad pastor or leader is not to go out on one's own, but to seek out a good pastor or leader instead.

**[Read v.5-8]**

**Observation:** Isaiah's prophecies concerning the Messiah focus largely on His offices as Prophet and Priest, whereas Jeremiah and other prophets focus more on His office of King, here related to the earthly throne of David.

**Q: What are some of the meanings of the title "Branch" which is given here and several other places in Scripture for the Messiah?**

- It's an indication the Messiah will come in physical form as represented by His "family tree", coming through David.
- It's an indication that His path is different from all the rest, leading to a different result if chosen.
- It's an indication of all the alternate paths which may claim a common heritage with the Messiah but are actually leading nowhere – false religions, if you will
- Others?

**Q: Why do you suppose that in the context of what is here given through Jeremiah, that the messianic trait most emphasized is righteousness?**

A: Their unrighteousness – choosing to live according to their own way instead of according to God's Word – is the core problem not just of the false shepherds but the misled and scattered flock.

**Observation:** There is application for the church, but then specific application to Israel alone is provided. One of the biggest signs of the Last Days is not merely returning to the land of Israel; that is a precursor to the even bigger sign of a massive spiritual revival in which the Jews finally accept Christ as their Messiah.

**Application:** When you pray for revival, what is the main thing you hope will happen? If God's priority is righteousness – a return to obedience to His Word and will – shouldn't that be our priority when it comes to spiritual revival of the church?

<sup>5</sup>"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.

<sup>6</sup>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.'

<sup>7</sup>"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,' <sup>8</sup>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."

<sup>9</sup>As for the prophets:

My heart is broken within me,  
All my bones tremble;  
I have become like a drunken man,  
Even like a man overcome with wine,  
Because of the LORD  
And because of His holy words.  
<sup>10</sup>For the land is full of adulterers;  
For the land mourns because of the curse.  
The pastures of the wilderness have dried  
up.  
Their course also is evil And their might  
is not right.  
<sup>11</sup>For both prophet and priest are polluted;  
Even in My house I have found their  
wickedness,” declares the Lord.  
<sup>12</sup>Therefore their way will be like slippery  
paths to them,  
They will be driven away into the gloom  
and fall down in it;  
For I will bring calamity upon them,  
The year of their punishment,” declares  
the LORD.

### **[Read v.9-12]**

**Q: Whereas the previous verses focused on the corrupted nature of the office of pastor, what is now added to the discussion?**

A: False prophets.

**Q: What is the source of the cause of making them “like a drunken man...overcome with wine”?**

A: “His holy words”. God’s Word is a dual-edged sword that cuts both ways whether for the building up of followers through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (symbolized by just “wine”), or for the destruction of judgment by being filled with something false in its place (symbolized by “drunkenness”.) By definition, God’s Word as “holy” means that it prepares everything for His presence, whether cleansing the righteous or removing the unrighteous.

**Q: What is the result of the false prophets which Jeremiah mourns in v.10?**

A: They have produced unfaithfulness.

**Q: What is significant about the use of the term “polluted” as used to describe both the false prophet and the false priest?**

A: This is the common Old Testament term describing a heart devoted to sin. The whole point of Old Testament Law and the associated purification rituals was to cleanse the pollution so as to make one acceptable again to God spiritually. A “polluted” person cannot stand when confronted with God’s “holy words”, which demand cleansing or removal.

**Q: How will Jesus describe the resulting spiritual condition of spiritually blind followers of spiritually blind leaders as given by Jeremiah in v.12?**

*“Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”  
Matthew 15:14*

**Q: Is there anything significant about the phrase “the year of their punishment”?**

A: Sometimes this phrase is translated in other places as “time of visitation”. It’s the biblical way of stating that an exact date and time has been set by God which, when reached, there is no escape from. Part of their spiritual delusion is in thinking that since nothing has happened “yet”, nothing will happen at all.

<sup>13</sup>“Moreover, among the prophets of Samaria I saw an offensive thing: They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray.  
<sup>14</sup>Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; And they strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one has turned back from his wickedness. All of them have become to Me like Sodom, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.  
<sup>15</sup>Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets, ‘Behold, I am going to feed them wormwood And make them drink poisonous water, For from the prophets of Jerusalem Pollution has gone forth into all the land.’”

<sup>16</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the LORD.  
<sup>17</sup>They keep saying to those who despise Me, ‘The LORD has said, “You will have peace”’; And as for everyone who walks in the stubbornness of his own heart, They say, ‘Calamity will not come upon you.’  
<sup>18</sup>But who has stood in the council of the LORD, That he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened?  
<sup>19</sup>Behold, the storm of the LORD has gone forth in wrath,

### [Read v.13-15]

**Q: What is the difference between “Samaria” and “Jerusalem” as used here?**

A: “Samaria” refers to the northern kingdom of Israel which never repented from its false worship and was carried away into captivity for their sin first; “Jerusalem” refers to the southern kingdom of Judah still remaining who is about to suffer the same fate.

**Q: On the whole, what is the spiritual condition being discussed here?**

A: Unfaithfulness.

**Q: Why would a teaching on unfaithfulness be particularly powerful to the people of Jeremiah’s time by referring to Samaria’s problem with Baal?**

A: Although Baal was a false god and false religion, this is a Hebrew word also meaning “husband”. The essence of Baal worship is false worship on the surface level, but has a much deeper meaning of spiritual unfaithfulness, of Satan’s desire to take away God’s bride (His people) to make them his own bride. This ties in with their being likened to Sodom and Gomorrah as well, exchanging the natural for the unnatural.

**Point:** *Then as today, as it has been throughout all of history, there is a direct connection between physical unfaithfulness and spiritual unfaithfulness. As the western church today has ever-increasingly allowed sexual promiscuity, divorce, homosexuality, etc. into the mainstream, so has there been a corresponding spiritual decline. No spiritual revival today would be successful without being accompanied by a moral return and repentance.*

**Q: What is the sad irony of the result of allowing one’s self to become spiritually polluted as described in v.15?**

A: It’s a variation of “you reap what you sow”. As one embraces spiritual pollution, that’s what they’ll get in return. If they turned from their ways, they would be fed and watered spiritually for healing, but since they will not, they consume the poison that is consuming them.

### [Read v.16-22]

**Q: What is the chief, deceptive message of false prophets?**

A: “You will have peace” and “Calamity will not come upon you” (v.17). In other words, it’s a message that you don’t have to repent and return to the Lord but can continue in your own ways.

**Q: What does this deception hide as expounded on in v.18-20?**

A: It hides the fact that God has already set in motion final judgment for their false teachings and false beliefs. Although it will be clearly revealed in “the last days” (v.20), the implication is that by that time it may be too late for the unfaithful of today.

**Q: What is one of the chief, visible proofs of a false prophet?**

A: Their “ministry” does not turn anyone back to God. There is no sincere return to spiritual faithfulness.

**Point:** *This is one of the surest signs that something is more akin to a “cult of personality”. Everything is built up around this one person who is promoted more than Christ, who is quoted by their followers more than the Bible, who ultimately never experience the revival they keep waiting to happen. Just in the past 50 years alone there have been too many real-life examples of this to list here.*

Even a whirling tempest;  
It will swirl down on the head of the  
wicked.  
<sup>20</sup>The anger of the LORD will not turn  
back  
Until He has performed and carried out  
the purposes of His heart;  
In the last days you will clearly  
understand it.  
<sup>21</sup>I did not send these prophets,  
But they ran.  
I did not speak to them,  
But they prophesied.  
<sup>22</sup>But if they had stood in My council,  
Then they would have announced My  
words to My people,  
And would have turned them back from  
their evil way  
And from the evil of their deeds.

<sup>23</sup>“Am I a God who is near,” declares the  
LORD,  
“And not a God far off?  
<sup>24</sup>Can a man hide himself in hiding places  
So I do not see him?” declares the LORD.  
“Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?”  
declares the LORD.

<sup>25</sup>“I have heard what the prophets have  
said who prophesy falsely in My name,  
saying, ‘I had a dream, I had a dream!’  
<sup>26</sup>How long? Is there anything in the  
hearts of the prophets who prophesy  
falsehood, even these prophets of the  
deception of their own heart,  
<sup>27</sup>who intend  
to make My people forget My name by  
their dreams which they relate to one  
another, just as their fathers forgot My  
name because of Baal?  
<sup>28</sup>The prophet  
who has a dream may relate his dream,  
but let him who has My word speak My  
word in truth. What does straw have in  
common with grain?” declares the LORD.  
<sup>29</sup>“Is not My word like fire?” declares the  
Lord, “and like a hammer which shatters  
a rock?

<sup>30</sup>“Therefore behold, I am against the  
prophets,” declares the LORD, “who steal  
My words from each other.

<sup>31</sup>“Behold, I am against the prophets,”  
declares the LORD, “who use their  
tongues and declare, ‘The LORD  
declares.’”

<sup>32</sup>“Behold, I am against those who have  
prophesied false dreams,” declares the  
LORD, “and related them and led My  
people astray by their falsehoods and  
reckless boasting; yet I did not send them  
or command them, nor do they furnish

**Application:** Can you see the value of having a pastor who is most concerned about your righteousness, the quality of your obedience and walk with Christ? Can you see how those who aren't so concerned are not actually properly expressing biblical love?

### [Read v.23-24]

**Point:** One of the differences between false and true leaders is that true leaders live and act and teach as if every second of life is being personally observed by God because it is; false ones are deceived into thinking He either doesn't see or doesn't actually care.

### [Read v.25-32]

**Q: According to v.27, what is the false prophet's goal?**

A: “...to make My people forget My name...just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal”. In others words, to produce spiritual unfaithfulness, to become wed to another husband.

**Q: Why is God stating that we should be willing to listen to the false prophets' dreams?**

A: Because we're supposed to be able to test it against God's Word and discern when it is clearly false. This is the meaning of knowing the difference between straw and grain – no informed person could be fooled to mistake one for the other. (“Straw” is also another form of “chaff”.)

**Q: Within the context of the discussion so far, what is the significance of the demand to “speak My word in truth”?**

A: The false leader falsely preaches peace and whatever is pleasing to the listeners' ears so as not to challenge them. The implication here is that the **WHOLE** message has to be communicated clearly and completely for the whole truth, pleasant or not.

**Q: What are some of the meanings of comparing God's Word to fire or a hammer?**

A: Fire is associated with holiness, something that completely cleanses (like what happened at Pentecost), and the hammer forces a change one way or the other.

*“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*

Matthew 3:12

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this people the slightest benefit,” declares the LORD.

*“And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”  
Matthew 21:44*

**Q: What are the chief methods of false prophets God specifically identifies in v.30-32?**

- *“I am against the prophets...who steal My words from each other”*. They mix in what might actually be truth spoken by another so as to disguise their message’s lack of authenticity.
- *“I am against the prophets...who use their tongues and declares, ‘The LORD declares’”*. They use God’s name to give their falsehoods the air of authenticity.
- *“I am against those who prophesied false dreams”*. They claim a supernatural experience that is not by itself provable so as to be immune from accusations that it’s not authentic

**Q: What is the actual, tangible end result of false prophets’ efforts?**

A: *“...nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit”*.

**Point:** Ever notice how everything about false teachers always centers around **THEM** and **THEIR** needs? Is it a coincidence that the only one that profits is a false prophet? We are supposed to be able to tell the difference between the false and the true based on the Word of God and their lack of effectiveness to produce sincere repentance.

**[Read v.33-40]**

**Observation:** To fully understand this final section, it’s important to understand that the Hebrew word here translated “oracle” also means “burden”. Re-Read and try replacing “oracle” with “burden” to begin to get the sense of what is actually being communicated here.

**Q: So what is ironic about their inquiry of the “burden of the Lord”?**

A: They have refused to bear the burden, so to speak, of obedience to any of God’s Word to date, written or otherwise, so their inquiry has to be considered to be completely insincere. They’re not interested in actually carrying the burden of obedience to His Word, old or new.

**Q: According to v.36, how is the “burden” switched?**

A: Since they won’t carry the burden of God’s Word, they will have to bear the burden they themselves created which will lead to destruction. This process is said to *“have perverted the words of the living God”*.

*“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”*

*Matthew 11:28-30*

**Point:** The ultimate deception perpetrated by false teachers and false prophets is replacing the “burden” of a Christ-committed life with something that appears easier in this life, but in reality is not, eventually leading to death. The issue of knowing God’s Word well enough to discern and choose between true and false leaders is, in reality, a life and death issue.

<sup>33</sup>“Now when this people or the prophet or a priest asks you saying, ‘What is the oracle of the LORD?’ then you shall say to them, ‘What oracle?’ The LORD declares, ‘I will abandon you.’ <sup>34</sup>Then as for the prophet or the priest or the people who say, ‘The oracle of the LORD,’ I will bring punishment upon that man and his household.

<sup>35</sup>“Thus will each of you say to his neighbor and to his brother, ‘What has the LORD answered?’ or, ‘What has the LORD spoken?’ <sup>36</sup>For you will no longer remember the oracle of the LORD, because every man’s own word will become the oracle, and you have perverted the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God.

<sup>37</sup>“Thus you will say to that prophet, ‘What has the LORD answered you?’ and, ‘What has the LORD spoken?’ <sup>38</sup>For if you say, ‘The oracle of the LORD!’ surely thus says the LORD, ‘Because you said this word, “The oracle of the LORD!” I have also sent to you, saying, “You shall not say, ‘The oracle of the LORD!’”’

<sup>39</sup>“Therefore behold, I will surely forget you and cast you away from My presence, along with the city which I gave you and your fathers. <sup>40</sup>I will put an everlasting reproach on you and an everlasting humiliation which will not be

forgotten.”

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