

In the 1950s, there was a game show called To Tell the Truth. The subjects would all claim to be Mr. Smith, and the game was that the audience would listen to them answering questions, and figure out who was genuine. At the end, the famous question was asked, “Will the real Mr. Smith please stand up?” Here chapter 28 reminds us of such a scene. Two prophets both claim to be speaking for the LORD.

How could the people be expected to sort out which one was the true prophet? Hananiah seemed more reputable, a respectable figure in the established group of prophets, with the support of influential people. Meanwhile Jeremiah had always been an outsider, and eccentric, and lately Jeremiah was also surprisingly dressed with a yoke from a farm.

Lying clergy threaten to mislead us toward a yoke of damaging soul swagger, but Christ’s yoke enables us to truly reckon with our sin, be humbled, and receive life.

1. The audacity to speak for God, though not sent by God. (v.1-4)

In verse 1, after Jeremiah had previously spoken, this prophet Hananiah stepped forward to disagree. Hananiah was introduced like any other prophet, with a time stamp of his ministry, his father and family line, his city of origin, the audience to whom he spoke, and the location of the verbal delivery.

In verse 2, Hananiah even said, “*Thus says the LORD...*”, which means that he claimed to be speaking for the LORD God. If called by God and sent by God, then so be it. But if not it is audacious, which means it was recklessly brave.

We have a confrontation. Prophet vs. rival prophet. It is a deliberate showdown in the house of the LORD.

The issue was the yoke that Jeremiah was wearing and the meaning and message that Jeremiah had attached– submit to the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Hananiah said the opposite. No need to submit, because God will BREAK the yoke of the king of Babylon off of us. What was at stake is whether or not God requires consequences for sins. Would God require that His sinning people go into exile for 70 years, and then get restored?

Verse 3, Hananiah had a very different message. Not 70 years, but 2 years. God would soon bring back all of the temple furnishings that were taken away.

Verse 4, furthermore, God would bring back the king of Judah, and we all live happily ever after. No mention of the sin of the people, the covenant of God, the call for repentance, the wrath of God. Just happiness, and happiness 68 years earlier than gloomy Jeremiah was predicting. Which church would we attend?

2. When swagger is hatched. (v.5-11)

After the opening statements, verse 5 is the time for debate. In verse 6, Jeremiah responded 3 ways to the challenges made by Hananiah. First, Jeremiah responded with a prophetic sigh. A wish. It reminds us of when the Prophet Moses in Numbers 11:29 said, *“Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His spirit on [all of His people.]”* That was Moses’ heart desire and wish. This was Moses’ prophetic sigh. And it came true! God later at Pentecost did give His spirit to all of His people, and we all became prophets and priests and kings as Christians. Here Jeremiah was expressing a wish. Oh, Yes, if only there did not need to be a 70 year exile, as he said in verse 6, *“May the LORD do so, may the LORD make the words that you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.”*

Second, Jeremiah responded by announcing in verse 7, that Jeremiah himself would now counter the substance and veracity of what Hananiah said. In verse 8, Jeremiah did so by appealing to the long line of former prophets, and the typical characterization of what most of those prophets have revealed as messages from God. Verse 8, *“The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.”* This second reply that Jeremiah was making was that historically, the true prophets - the real prophets – have spoken mainly about the covenant of God, and of the requirements of that covenant, and the ominous things that need to happen when people disobey that covenant. This point did not yet prove that Hananiah’s message was false, but it does serve to put everyone on notice that Hananiah’s message was outside of the mainstream message of the long and storied history of prophetic announcements!

Third, Jeremiah next responded in verse 9 to the false prophet by reminding him of the true test of a prophet - his prediction must come true. Since Hananiah was prophesying return from exile within 2 years, that must actually come to pass. Only then, would it be known that the LORD has sent Hananiah to speak for God. This important test Jeremiah referenced is from God’s Word through the previous faithful prophet Moses, in Deuteronomy 18:22, *“when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken...”*

If you were there, which preacher would you rather hear? Jeremiah with a persistent call to repentance and a disconcerting message of doom and gloom for the next 70 years, or a very upbeat Hananiah, with a message that all will be well before you know it.

In verse 10, Hananiah was still quite confident, with a flair for the dramatic. Hananiah took Jeremiah’s famous yoke right off of Jeremiah’s neck, and Hananiah broke it right there in the Temple, in front of everyone! The yoke was a command

from God as God's object lesson, and now Hananiah was changing the message that attached to that yoke. He interpreted his own dramatic action in verse 11, by saying that THE LORD HIMSELF promised that He would break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar within 2 years.

What was Jeremiah to say now? The debate is over. There was no more to say in the face of such brash but incorrect teaching. Flashy and flamboyant, but misguided and wrong. Jeremiah did not say anything more. Jeremiah simply left. End of verse 11, we read very matter-of-factly, "*but Jeremiah the prophet went His way.*"

Why was there was no immediate answer to Hananiah's bold antics? The smashing of the yoke in the temple was left lingering and unrefuted.

What is one to do when spiritual swagger shows up? What is the response to the foolishness of soul swagger, when it is hatched? What should we do when the people in our day reject the hard truths of God's Word that judgment must precede life?

There comes a point when wisdom says nothing. Jeremiah had already been very clear and accurate about the character and intentions of God. First wrath and judgment flows from God, then life and restoration flows from God. Jeremiah was wise to leave it in the hands of God.

3. God's verdict shows two yokes: judgment or life. (v.12-17)

Verse 12, "*sometime after...*" We fast forward to later, a while after Hananiah's stunt. Verse 13, God sent Jeremiah back with a message to go and tell Hananiah, "*thus says The LORD, you have broken wooden bars, but you have made in their place bars of iron.*" Verse 14, God was still going through with God's plan of placing everyone under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, even the beasts of the field will be under that beast Nebuchadnezzar. The symbolic yoke had been easy for Hananiah to break, but the breaking of the symbolic yoke had no corresponding reality in the unfolding of events in the real world under God's control. The reality of the broken wooden yoke was now verbally turned into the symbol of an iron yoke. An invisible iron yoke, yet tied to reality. God's tough verdict, previously announced by the true prophet Jeremiah, was an unbreakable yoke in actuality.

Hananiah had mistakenly thought that God was obligated to fight for His temple, fight for His people, fight for His temple furnishings, and for His King. But the truth is that God had explained in the covenant that God can turn against His own people, resulting from their sins! As we know in the New Covenant, God the Father would even turn against His own well-beloved Son, when Jesus bore like a yoke the sins of God's people! The Father did not lift the iron yoke until Jesus died and was buried, fulfilling the requirement of death for sins.

What was at stake in this debate in the temple that day was the very verdict of God, which flows out of God's own character. What sort of God is our God? Answer: Our God is a God of just dealings followed by mercy. And whoever won't obey God, there must be just consequences.

The just consequences were that God was putting everyone under a new Adam, and his name was Nebuchadnezzar! He would have his way with the whole world! The verdict of God could not be more widespread. The whole world deserved to feel the just punishment of God under a vicious world leader, like a dress rehearsal for God's future lake of fire.

In verse 15, God had another verdict to give out. What about the person of Hananiah? What about the office of prophet? What about the matter of truth? Verse 15 was a lawsuit brought by God Himself, pressing charges against Hananiah, who broke the covenant of God. God indicted Hananiah, who had not been authorized and dispatched to speak for God about 2 year release from exile, but rather Hananiah had made it all up on his own. In court in verse 15, the prophecy was called by its real name – "a lie." The subsequent damage was that the people had trusted in that lie, damaging their minds and spirits. Verse 16 reads like a courtroom verdict... "*Therefore... behold...*" God's verdict? This prophet was a false prophet. Verse 16 contains the handed-down sentence, "...*you shall die...*" There is a similarity in the language of the crime and the language of the sentence. The crime was "I did not send you as a prophet" and the sentence was "I will send you away from the face of the earth." The punishment fit the crime! Our God is a God who is heavy-handed with those who speak to His people with distorted, misleading, wrongly soothing, and falsely reassuring messages!

Verse 17, the narrator added the final fact. Sure enough, in that same year, and to be exact "*in the seventh month*" which shows that God keeps track of everything, the so-called prophet Hananiah died. The verdict came to fulfillment in the same year as God pronounced his sentence. This fact discredited Hananiah. No one should ever again believe his false report that the exile would end in the next two years. This fact also proved the legitimacy of Jeremiah's words calling for repentance. This fact also upheld the important office of prophet within God's kingdom. This fact removed the false hope of their immediate deliverance from evil Babylon, while upholding the distant hope of their future deliverance. The golden temple furnishings over in Babylon were not coming home anytime soon. The remaining golden temple objects built right into the Temple, were not safe from Babylon's next attack. All of their false hopes evaporated as soon as God eliminated the false messenger. All of these points were powerfully communicated and resolution was brought to the debate and the flamboyant yoke smashing gimmick, without verse 17 adding any other theological statement whatsoever. If we read verse 17 carefully, we notice, for example, that it does not have any

statement such as this, ‘The LORD God of Israel destroyed Hananiah because of his wickedness.’ No. Those words are not in verse 17, because they were not needed. Every reader understands. The final fact is true, and it represents all the consequences flowing from truth. The issue of truth versus falsehood that rides through this whole chapter, was settled by the reporting of one final fact at the end. The will of God took place in real time. Behind the power of Babylon was the power of God, orchestrating their every move. Think of the positive consequences. What are we warranted to conclude about the future of Jerusalem, the future of the temple furnishings, the future of the exiles? We remember what God promised at the end of chapter 27, “*I will bring them back and restore them to this place.*” Is there anyone left who wishes to stand and dispute the truth of the statement of God?

“*I am God and there is no other.*” God said in Isaiah 45:5.

Later, God even spoke Himself directly, out loud verbally, not using a prophet’s voice as a spokesperson. Do you remember that?

Yes, God the Father said this when Jesus was baptized, in Matthew 3:17, we read, “*and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’*”

About who else did God the Father say that He was well pleased? No one else!

And what must happen to perfect Jesus, the King of Kings, in order for us to be saved from death for our covenant breaking? It was required by God’s just judgment that our sins be placed upon Jesus, and then be sent away to the exile of death, because of our covenant breaking.

God’s verdict shows two yokes: judgment or life.

The verdict of judgment was on Hananiah unto his death, for his own sins.

The verdict of judgment was on Jesus unto His death for our sins.

But there is another verdict, another yoke. When Jesus rose again, the verdict was that He was “*declared to be the son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead.*” Romans 1:4. By Jesus becoming the new King of Kings, in place of fallen Adam and in place of evil Nebuchadnezzar and every other representative, Jesus won a new yoke for us. Jesus said, “*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me...* (Mt. 11:28-30)

That is the verdict of life, the very yoke of life, taken by faith.

The yoke of life is only found on the pathway of judgment first, followed by life. The Lord Jesus was sent to be the one to receive the iron yoke of the judgment of God, in order that afterwards, we all might receive the easy yoke of life.

Conclude: two applications.

Application #1. Discerning truth from falsehood, because it is vital for the health of your soul. If you were there that day for the debate, listening to Hananiah and Jeremiah, would you be able to tell which one is the truth prophet?

In the masterpiece book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who should Christian listen to? Mr. Worldly Wiseman, or Evangelist? The two messages given to Pilgrim (and given to you the Christian) are two messages that are diametrically opposed to one another. On his journey, Christian must discern who is speaking the truth!

Our Savior said in Matthew 24:24, "...*false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs, and wonders, so as to lead astray...*"

Listen for how they speak of sin and how they speak of the judgment for sin at the cross of Jesus. Hananiah wanted to announce a restoration, without the acknowledgement of the necessity of an exile, because of the severity of the sins of the people.

At the core of Christianity stands a cross, that is necessitated by the sin of the people. God required exile prior to restoration. God's salvation plan required Christ's cross, prior to His resurrection. The Bible teaches a real heaven and a real hell, because our God is holy, and people are sinners. Sin must be dealt with, and our God has dealt with it at the cross, saving us fully.

Soul swagger is when people wander from this gospel truth. Soul swagger is pride, in which we tell ourselves that our sins are not that bad. Soul swagger is when we go so far as to use God's name, God's Word, and God's office of preacher/teacher, and God's network of His people in the church to spread man's message, instead of God's message. Soul swagger seems fun, flamboyant, confident and upbeat, while the same old truth seems boring. But soul swagger is as deadly as the false prophecies and lies that induce it.

The Book of Hebrews tells us that the best way for us not to wander away, is to dig deeper, and to develop our skills of being able to distinguish what is truth and what is just a little off from the truth. Listen to Hebrews 5:13-14, "*You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*" The issue with false clergy is not an issue of sincerity, but rather of accuracy. False teachers can be nice people and even sincere. So, what is wrong, exactly? What is wrong is their teaching. They deny the judgment of God. They do not speak of the possibility of people being permanently cast away from God.

Application #2. Ask your pastor to give truth that prevents your prideful soul swagger.

Christian pastors must preach what Christ preached. Matthew 16:21, "...*Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer*

many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Christ needed to suffer for our sins, and then enter His glory.

The job of the pastors and teachers is not to offer something new and novel, just because the crowds seem to like it. Faithful pastors speak the same historic truth that was preached 100 years ago. Be hungry for repetition. Ask your preacher – “Tell me the old, old story...of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and his love. Tell me the old, old story, if you would really be, in any time of trouble, a comforter to me.” Pastor, don’t go soft on sin and the dangers of sin. Preacher, please tell us that there is hope for us at the cross of Christ, and only there. True teacher, remind us without fail of the judgment of God that precedes life. People from all around the world came to the preacher named Philip in John 12:21, and they said, “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” Tell your pastor, Preach Christ to me. My wandering soul is counting on you doing this, and the wandering souls of my family members. Pastor, please remember that we live in dark times, and you bring God’s light. The founder of our denomination, the Rev. Dr. Machen, wrote, “is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus’ name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, than that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.” Pastor, we are counting on you to contrast the lies of the world, to keep us from our own soul swagger by giving us the historic Christian message in our church, to humble and revive our weary souls.