

Derek Kidner summarized Jeremiah 23 by saying

“Without justice, a nation suffers, but without truth it sickens.” (91)

And chapter 24 reminds us that without a heart to know God,
a nation is a very bad fig.

Have you ever been eating pistachios – or dates – or some other fruit or nut –
enjoying a tasty snack –

and then you come across one that is spoiled,
and the foul, rotten flavor just explodes in your mouth?!

What do you do?

Well, you look carefully at the next 4 or 5 in order to get the *good flavor* back!

But the remnant of Jerusalem are like bad figs – so bad that they could not be eaten.

That’s right.

The remnant.

The exiles – those people who were driven out of Jerusalem for their sins –
they are like the good figs – the first-ripe fig that my soul desires!

But the remnant are spoiled figs that no one can eat.

But God has a habit of turning the world upside-down.

This is why (as I look at our topsy-turvy world)

I begin to wonder what God might have up his sleeve!

1. Without Justice, a Nation Suffers (23:1-8)

a. Behold, I Will Replace the Shepherds Who Scatter the Sheep (v1-4)

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD.

² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. ³ Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

In verses 1-8, there are three calls to “behold.”

Notice how God says to the shepherds:

“You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.”

But then he says:

“Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds....

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock

out of all the countries where *I* have driven them.”

The house of David was called to shepherd the flock of God.
But the sons of David did not care for the flock.
They scattered the flock and drove them away.
And yet God says that *he* drove them away.

David had been called to succeed where Israel had failed.
If you go back to the days of the Judges,
the prophet Samuel watched the demise of Israel –
when the ark of God was taken captive by the Philistines,
and the priests were slaughtered, and Shiloh left vacant.

Israel had failed to do justice – to do the truth.
Israel did not have a heart to know the LORD.

And so God called David and his sons to succeed where Israel had failed.
Indeed, the people of Judah had grown proud and short-sighted.
They thought that God’s promise meant that Jerusalem would never fall –
God’s promises to David would never fail –
and therefore they had eternal security.

Eternal security is the doctrine of ‘once-saved-always-saved.’
It is one of those doctrines that is *true* in one sense, but *false* in another!

It is true in that those who are elect will never finally fall away.
It is false in the sense that there are *many* who are outwardly “saved”
who *do* fall away.

I have heard some people say, “My son prayed the prayer when he was seven,
so I know he’s okay.”
That mentality is *exactly* the same as Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day.
We prayed the prayer, so we’re in!
God promised, so we’re good!

Eternal security is only true when it is paired with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.
You are only secure if you persevere.

This, in fact, is the fundamental problem for Israel.
We don’t persevere.
Oh, I don’t doubt that there were some faithful Israelites –
and it would appear that a couple of kings may have persevered to the end.
But just look at Israel’s history!
The people of God never persevere for more than a generation or so.
If our eternal security depends on our perseverance,

then we're in trouble.
And seriously, that hasn't changed much.
Just look at the history of the church!

The security of Israel – the security of the church –
does depend on perseverance:

and first and foremost, it depends on the perseverance of Jesus! (read v5-6)

b. Behold, I Will Raise Up a Righteous Branch for David Who Will Execute Justice and Righteousness (v5-6)

⁵ *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”* ⁶ *In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely.*

Here is our second “behold.”

When there is a Son of David who executes justice and righteousness in the land,
then Israel will dwell securely.

But so long as the sons of David keep dying, then the “security” is only temporary.
Temporary security – temporary salvation – is hardly worth calling salvation at all!
We need a Son of David who will never die.

And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

There is an irony in this name.

The last king of Judah was Zedekiah.
Zedekiah’s name means “the LORD my righteousness”

We need a Zedekiah.

But this guy ain’t it!
We need a king whose name is lived out in his life.

And the third “behold” focuses on the result of what will happen when we have such a king:

c. Behold, a Day Greater Than the Exodus Is Coming (v7-8)

⁷ *“Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’⁸ but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he^[a] had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.”*

The exodus was the great redemptive act of God.

All of Israel’s history was oriented around the Exodus.
The book of Genesis is important –
but in the five books of Moses,
the book of Genesis functions as a historical preamble to the Mosaic covenant,
explaining the background to the Exodus!

But when the LORD our righteousness comes –
when the righteous branch, the great Son of David, comes –
then even the Exodus will pale in comparison with that greater deliverance.

Until then – without justice – a nation suffers.

Jeremiah then turns to the prophets –
pointing out that without truth, a nation sickens.

2. Without Truth, a Nation Sickens (23:9-40)

a. The Prophets of Jerusalem Strengthen the Evildoers (v9-15)

[read Verse 9]

⁹ *Concerning the prophets:
My heart is broken within me;
all my bones shake;
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the LORD
and because of his holy words.*

When Jeremiah hears the holy words of the LORD,
he becomes like a drunken man –
he staggers and reels because of how potent God’s words are.

¹⁰ *For the land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land mourns,
and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.
Their course is evil,
and their might is not right.*

¹¹ *“Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
even in my house I have found their evil,
declares the LORD.*

¹² *Therefore their way shall be to them
like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven and fall,
for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment,
declares the LORD.*

¹³ *In the prophets of Samaria
I saw an unsavory thing:
they prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.*

¹⁴ *But in the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a horrible thing:*

*they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from his evil;
all of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.”*
¹⁵ *Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:
“Behold, I will feed them with bitter food
and give them poisoned water to drink,
for from the prophets of Jerusalem
ungodliness has gone out into all the land.”*

Verses 9-15 lay out the basic charge:
the prophets of Jerusalem strengthen the hands of evildoers.

Two hundred years before – in the days of Elijah –
the prophets of Samaria had led Israel astray.

But now it is worse.

The prophets of Jerusalem are encouraging people to remain mired in their sin.

“All of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.” (v14)

You think that Sodom and Gomorrah were bad?
Jerusalem is worse!

Why?

This is the central point of the passage in verses 16-32:

b. Do Not Listen to Prosperity Preachers (v16-32)

i) They Speak Visions of Their Own Minds (v16-17)

¹⁶ *Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”*

I want you to pay attention to this.

What is the problem with the “prosperity preachers” in Jeremiah’s day?

They are saying to the people of God, “It shall be well with you.” *Shalom!*

They are preaching “if God be for us, who can be against us!”

What can separate us from the love of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?!

Jeremiah says that they “speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.”

But how do you know?

False prophets do not wear nametags saying, “Don’t listen to me, I’m a false prophet!”

They are simply known as *prophets*.

And in Jeremiah's day they appear to have been a very orthodox bunch of preachers.
When Jeremiah says, "they commit adultery and walk in lies" (v14)
that could be referring to their *spiritual* adultery.

But the LORD warns us *not* to listen to the words of the prosperity preachers.
And in verses 18-22 he gives us a clue for how to identify them:

**ii) One Who Has Stood in the Council of the LORD Will Warn of His
Coming Wrath (v18-22)**

¹⁸ *For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD
to see and to hear his word,*

or who has paid attention to his word and listened?

¹⁹ *Behold, the storm of the LORD!*

Wrath has gone forth,

a whirling tempest;

it will burst upon the head of the wicked.

²⁰ *The anger of the LORD will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his heart.*

In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

A genuine prophet – who has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word –
will preach the wrath of the LORD – the *anger* of the LORD that *must be executed*.

²¹ *"I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;*

*I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.*

²² *But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their deeds.*

A true prophet will warn my people.

A true prophet will *turn* my people from their evil way.

Preachers who never rebuke people – but allow them to wallow in their sin –
are *not* sent by God.

Verse 23 may sound a little odd:

iii) "I Am Against the Prophets" Declares the LORD (v23-32)

²³ *"Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away?"*

We are so used to hearing the opposite!

God often emphasizes how he is *not* distant – but near!

But there is a danger in over-emphasizing the nearness of God!

The prosperity preachers keep saying that God is near –

God will bless –
God's on your side – he'll make it all work out!

And so the LORD himself points out:

“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and *not* a God far away?”
Don't think of me as your “pet deity”!

This is a serious danger today.

If your primary notion of God is that of a close personal friend –
a buddy who's got your back –
then verse 23 is what you need to hear!

“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and *not* a God far away?”

(read v24)

²⁴ Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

Yes, God is a God who is near – but he is also far away!

He dwells in a high and holy place – but is near to the contrite in heart!

Notice that God is near to the *humble* –
to those who recognize that they are small and insignificant.

As soon as we think that we are somebody –
and that God's chief end is to make me happy –
then we are just creating a god in our own image.

²⁵ I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? ²⁸ Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. ²⁹ Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? ³⁰ Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. ³¹ Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.' ³² Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.

And so God says that he is against the prophets.

These prosperity preachers refuse to warn the people of God –
and so they “lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness.”

Walter Brueggemann summarizes this beautifully:

“Behind the dispute concerning true and false prophets

is a dispute about the character of God.
The ideological prophets of the establishment celebrated and affirmed God's nearness
and God's abiding commitment to and presence
within the Jerusalem establishment.
God had become a part of that social arrangement.
In sharp contrast, Jeremiah bears witness to a God who is 'afar off' –
free, sovereign, and not a mere appendage to the established religion...
Until Judah is clear about the character of Yahweh, it will never be clear about...
what the message will be." (214-215)

If you are listening to teachers who are saying that God is there to make you happy,
then run away!

c. So Stop Asking for a Message (v33-40)

³³ *"When one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you, 'What is the burden of the LORD?' you shall say to them, 'You are the burden,^[b] and I will cast you off, declares the LORD.'*

The word translated "burden" in verses 33-40 has a double meaning.
It can mean a "burden" – something you carry.
Or it can mean an oracle or message.

So when someone comes asking "what is the burden – or message of the LORD"
Jeremiah is supposed to answer: "you are the burden – or message of the LORD,
and I will cast you off, declares the LORD."

The point of verses 34-40 is that the people, the prophets, and the priests
have all become an intolerable weight that God will no longer bear –
precisely because they have emphasized their *own* message (burden)
and rejected *his*.

³⁴ *And as for the prophet, priest, or one of the people who says, 'The burden of the LORD,' I will punish that man and his household. ³⁵ Thus shall you say, every one to his neighbor and every one to his brother, 'What has the LORD answered?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?' ³⁶ But 'the burden of the LORD' you shall mention no more, for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God. ³⁷ Thus you shall say to the prophet, 'What has the LORD answered you?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?' ³⁸ But if you say, 'The burden of the LORD,' thus says the LORD, 'Because you have said these words, "The burden of the LORD," when I sent to you, saying, "You shall not say, 'The burden of the LORD,'"*

And the result (v39-40) is that:

³⁹ *therefore, behold, I will surely lift you up and cast you away from my presence, you and the city that I gave to you and your fathers. ⁴⁰ And I will bring upon you everlasting reproach and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.'*

Jerusalem itself will be cast away from the presence of God.

And this sets up the final point.

It is not just that the *people* have been cast out of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem itself is under God's wrath.

3. Without a Heart to Know the LORD, a Nation Is a Very Bad Fig (24:1-10)

Without justice, a nation suffers.

Without truth, a nation sickens.

But without a heart to know the LORD, a nation is a very bad fig!

Chapter 24 comes from the time in between Nebuchadnezzar's first and second siege.

In 597 he took Jeconiah captive – along with Ezekiel and many leaders of Jerusalem.

Many undoubtedly thought that the captives were the “bad figs” –

after all, they had been the leaders in Jerusalem.

But Jeremiah sees a vision in verses 1-3.

a. The Vision of Two Baskets of Figs (v1-3)

24 After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, the LORD showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. ² One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³ And the LORD said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I said, “Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.”

There are two baskets of figs – “placed before the temple of the LORD.”

Which is which?

Well, think about it.

Jeremiah has been preaching for years – decades –

that God's judgment would come upon Jerusalem,

and that the king and the people would be taken into captivity.

So is this the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophesy?

Undoubtedly some thought that this *was* all that Jeremiah had prophesied.

Soon it would all be over.

The king would return – the temple would be restored –

and the glory of the kingdom would resume.

But then in verses 4-7, the LORD overturns the expectations of Israel:

b. The Exiles Are the Good Figs – I Will Give Them a Heart to Know Me (v4-7)

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁵ “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place

to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶ I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. ⁷ I will give them a heart to know 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.

The exiles are the good figs.

This is unexpected.

These people were run out of Jerusalem *by God* because of their infidelity to God – and yet God says that he will do *good* to them.

All the language of blessing from Jeremiah 1 comes out in God's promise to the exiles. Notice that the LORD does *not* say that the exiles are particularly holy.

Rather, the emphasis is on what the LORD *will do*:

“I will regard as good... I will set my eyes on them for good,
and I will bring them back to this land.

I will build them up, and not tear them down.

I will plant them, and not pluck them up.

[and above all]

I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD.

And in the words of the great covenant promise,

“and they shall be my people and will be their God,
for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

How can people return to the LORD?

Jeremiah has made it clear that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked.

How can we return to the LORD?

When God gives us a heart to *know the LORD* we then return to him.

This is an act of grace – sovereign and free –

well worth overtaking the Exodus as the greatest event in redemptive history!

In contrast:

c. The Remnant Are the Bad Figs – I Will Make Them a Horror (v8-10)

⁸ “But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. ⁹ I will make them a horror^[c] to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.

¹⁰ And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.”

In other words, *no*, the remnant is not favored by God!

Those who remain in Jerusalem will perish.

“I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them,
until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.

It is simply a matter of God’s free election and grace.

As Paul says in Romans 9:18,

“So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills.”

[read and comment on Romans 9:18-29 –

especially “We would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah”]

God makes “the future with those whom the world judges to be *without* a future.”

(Brueggemann, 220