False Prophets
Jeremiah 23:9-29

We're looking at the book of the prophet Jeremiah. And Jeremiah preached at a hugely challenging time in the society of his day. Now, if I were to ask you, 'who has the power to shape the culture of our own societies?' At one level you'd probably rightly answer, the government. The lawmakers. Because they're the ones with the power to determine what can or cannot happen legally, who decide where the money goes and what gets invested in. But on another level you'd have to say it's the celebrities, because they're the ones people really listen to. It's the talk show hosts, the film makers, the pop stars, the people with an extraordinary amount of soft power to influence the way we think and live.

And in Jeremiah's day things were no different. There were the kings, those with ruling, governmental power. And last week we saw Jeremiah speaking God's word against them. But there were also the prophets - the men with cultural power, the power to influence the way you thought and felt about something. The power to make you feel good or bad about something. And today we're going to watch as Jeremiah turns his attention to these prophets. And as we do, we're going to see what that has to say to our own day.

Reading: Jeremiah 23:9-29

We're going to look at three things: the problem of false prophets, the appeal of false prophets and the power of the one great prophet.

The Problem of False Prophets
After God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, he gave them the Ten Commandments, and what were the first two commandments about? They were about not having any gods other than God. Commandment no 1, Ex 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before me." Commandment no 2, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image… you shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." (Ex 20:4-5).

Now, in a wedding service, when a couple gets married, the minster turns to each of them in turn and asks 'will you take this woman, or this man, to be your wife, or your husband' and then he asks, 'and forsaking all others will you be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?' And when God gives these commandments against worshipping other gods he's saying, look, you are going to face the temptation to worship stuff other than me. To find your security, your self-worth, your reason for being in other things. But don't. I'm your husband, you're my bride - and I'm jealous for you.' It's a call to forsake everything and anything that could win your heart.

Which is why Jeremiah says what he says to these false prophets. Look at v10, 'For the land is full of adulterers.' Now, does he mean physical, sexual adulterers there? Well, maybe - because it wouldn't be surprising if sexual sin had become the new normal in Jeremiah's time. But look what he says in v13-14, "In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavoury thing: they prophesied by Baal [a pagan god] and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies.' In other words, just like had happened in Samaria, in northern Israel, years before, now in Jerusalem there are these people going about, these so-called prophets, encouraging the people to worship gods other than God.

Or, to use this picture of marriage that Jeremiah uses, they're encouraging them to get into bed with and run after other lovers, to seek pleasure, meaning, love, in the arms of another god, rather than their real husband - the one true God.

But did you notice that Jeremiah doesn't just say they were committing spiritual adultery, he says they also 'walk in lies.' And sexual unfaithfulness is almost always conducted in a web of lies and deceit. And spiritual adultery, worshipping stuff other than God, and making this the ultimate thing for you, is also covered in a web of lies, Jeremiah says. Because the people who promote it, or the thing itself, tell you, 'this will be great! This god - the god of wealth, or sex, or personal freedom, or free love, or career success will give you what you're looking for.'

And look at v27, where the Lord says that these false prophets, "Think to make my people forget my name… even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal." They're like the man who tells his lover, 'Forget about your husband. Don't think about him. Think about me. Your future's with me.' And the message of these false prophets is, 'you won't find what you're after in God, that'll never give you the life you want, forget him, pursue this.'

And yet, far from this ending as some wonderful love story, this drawing away from God comes with disastrous results. Look at v10: 'the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.' But hang on, Baal is the god of rain and agriculture. And if you worshipped Baal his prophets promised you'd have a bumper harvest. But Jeremiah tells the people, 'sure - we're in the middle of a drought.' And you can hear or read stuff, or just imbibe it from our culture, that if you pursue your career, and sacrifice other things for it; or if you try and earn as much as you can, or if you give yourself to your physical, sexual attractions, you'll have a bumper harvest in life. But you end up with a dried out, cracked and fissured soul.

Several years ago, Dan and Mia and Su and I took all our kids one night to the Christmas market at Freibourg in Germany. And once we'd done our shopping, we decided to go to this park area that has a viewing point above the city, and you have to take this switchback path to climb up to it. And going up was ok. I mean, the path was a bit icy, but there was a hand rail we could hold on to. But coming down was treacherous. Imagine trying to walk down an ice-rink at a 30 degree incline, in the dark, trying to hold on to your shopping bags… and your kids and buggies.

Well, look at v12, 'Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness.' And God is saying, 'listen people will tell you that if you listen to them, and you make money, or sex, or personal freedom the thing you pursue you're going to have solid ground to stand on, and a straight path to walk on. But in reality you end up on a slippery, sliding, path downwards. As God says in v32, 'they do not profit this people at all.'

It's why the Lord says in v16, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes." Now a mirage in the desert is a vain hope, isn't it? You're dying of thirst, and a mirage promises you, 'there's water here'. But it's just more sand and heat. And false prophets promise you a better future, the outcome in life you want - that you'll be more healthy, or more successful, or more popular. But it's like a mirage in the desert, God says.

And yet, their fundamental problem is not that they harm. It's that God isn't speaking through them.

Look at v11, “Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the Lord.” In other words, you can have someone who talks a lot about God, or about love, and what they say may sound deeply spiritual, but they’re *un*godly. It’s not God, in all his glory, and all his holiness, that they’re pointing you to, because it’s not him they’re speaking for. Verse 16, ‘They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.’

I don’t know if you remember, but back in 2013 at Nelson Mandela’s funeral, a man was employed as a sign-language interpreter. And world leaders stood on the platform making speeches and he stood alongside them translating them into sign-language. The only problem was, he was making it up as he went along. The politician was making a great speech, but the interpreter was winging it, making a totally random collection of meaningless hand movements.

And someone can make a living from talking about God or love or religion, but they are as helpful to you as that man was to deaf people. They are as much speaking for God as that faker was interpreting a president, because they’re speaking off their own authority. Effectively, they’re making it up as they go along. What they think is right or wrong, what they think matters or doesn’t matter, what they think is worthy or unworthy is what they’ve decided for themselves.

And in verses 18-22 Jeremiah talks about what God has planned for the future. But it’s sandwiched between two statements about false prophets and the council of God. Verse 18, ‘For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and hear his word?’ Verse 22, ‘But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people.’ You see, instead of being like a secretary of state in the cabinet meeting with the president, false prophets are like a third-rate journalist on the outside, in some dingy office somewhere, making up what they wish was being decided. They’ve been nowhere near the councils of God, Jeremiah says.

You see, if they had been, they would have told people what was really coming: v19, ‘Behold, the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked.’ So the false prophets have been saying, worship this and you can have your best life now, you can enjoy summer! When in reality winter is coming, a whirlwind, a tornado is approaching. And they should have warned people, not encouraged them. Verse 22, ‘they would have turned them from their evil way.’

So, why are false prophets so appealing - then and now? Well, Jeremiah tells us.

The Appeal Of False Prophets

Look at v14, ‘They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil.’ And v17, ‘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.’

Now, I reckon that all of us want to be told that we’re ok. We want people to look at us, and at the decisions we’ve made in life, and affirm us and say, ‘well done, you’re good.’ And Jeremiah says that false prophets offer us that kind of affirmation in bucket loads.

The problem is they affirm us in our self-centredness, and greed, and covetousness, and narcissism. As Jeremiah says, they strengthen people in their sin. They tell you, ‘God loves you! You’re fine just the way you are’.

And yet, what Jeremiah sees is that behind these desires that false prophets encourage are 1. a despising of God's word, and 2. a stubborn following of someone's own heart. That people think that what God's word says isn't for my greatest good, it's not for my personal flourishing; and so instead I should cut my own path in life, and decide for myself what's right or wrong. And so at their root is this unbelief that God really is abundantly, awesomely gracious and good - both when he says yes and when he says no. But like the serpent in the garden, these people say, 'you can be your own god' and that's appealing.

Now in the news this week was the case of a young woman who sued a cyclist who ran into her when she stepped out into the street. And you might think that's fair. Except, the reason she didn't see him was that she was engrossed in her phone. And Jeremiah is saying that a true prophet would grab her and tell her, watch out, take your nose out of your phone. But a false prophet does the opposite. They don't just do nothing when you spend your life absorbed in something that puts you at risk, they positively encourage you, 'you keep your eyes down there, you stay engrossed in money or career or image or your sexuality, because that's what life's about; whatever you do, don't look up.'

And, the problem is, it's way more appealing to be told you can carry on as you are, and that God or the gods of culture will give you even more of what you want, than that change is needed.

But, Jeremiah says there is something that can wake us up to reality.

Look at v9, 'My heart is broken within me… because of the Lord and because of his holy words.' And Jeremiah's heart breaks for the people. You see, to be holy means to be set apart, to be different. And God's words, like God himself, are holy. Which is the exact opposite of the message of the false prophets that you can live just like everyone else and God will bless you.

And in v29 the Lord says, 'Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces?'

And fire and a hammer are just about as far away from the affirming and encouraging message of the false prophets as it's possible to be. They tell you that if you look to money, or sex, or freedom, if you worship them, you can have your best life now. But God's word is like a fire that purifies. It's like a hammer that smashes our idols and shatters our self-confidence.

And there is no escaping that word, Jeremiah says. Verse 23, "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth?" Now, sometimes you'll hear people say that God really isn't interested in this or that area of your life; that there are far more important things for God to be worried about than who you're sleeping with. Or maybe you know what it is to live behind a mask, that you're one thing in public, but another in private. But Jeremiah reminds us of what the old prayer says, that God is the one before whom all hearts are open, and all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. That there are no masks, or walls, that we can hide behind. There are no areas of our lives over which he does not say, I'm king.

And yet, if all God's word does is burn up and break down, it'll leave us broken and burnt. But that isn't all it does, because ultimately, God's word isn't a thing, it's a person.

The Power of the One Great Prophet

You see, we need a much better word than people who tell us, you're great as you are, and you've got nothing to worry about. And we need something more than a word that only tells us our self-centredness, or covetousness, or greed is wrong, and condemns us. We need a word that gives us both the desire and the power to change. A word that says God loves you, but not just *'as* you are', but *despite* who you are, a word that gives you hope, wanting an able to become more like him.

And Moses was *the* definitive prophet. And listen to what he said in Deuteronomy 18:15, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you… it is to him you shall listen.' And the writer of Moses' obituary wrote in Deut 34:10 'There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.'

Until Jesus came. And in Acts 3 Peter stood in the temple and said that Jesus was the prophet Moses said would come, v26, 'to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.' And John opened his gospel by saying, not that Jesus *spoke* God's word like a Moses or a Jeremiah, but he was God's word. God's burning, breaking word. John 1:14: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' You see, Moses spoke with God face to face, and Jeremiah spoke as one who had heard the councils of God. But God the Son, came from the throne room of God himself. As we read together from Hebrews 1, 'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son… He is the radiance of the glory of God.'

But how does Jesus use the burning, breaking power of his word? Does he use it to destroy us? Well, remember how he began his preaching ministry, saying, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me *to proclaim good news to the poor*. He has sent me *to proclaim liberty* to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, *to set at liberty* those who are oppressed, *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*' (Luke 4:18-19). And when he says that he's quoting from another prophet, Isaiah. But when Isaiah first wrote those words he continued, 'and the day of vengeance of our God.' (Is 61:2). So why does Jesus miss off the bit that Isaiah the prophet was willing to say, and that Jeremiah the prophet spent his career saying - that the day of God's vengeance against sin is coming? Is Jesus just another false prophet, giving you the soft sell?

And the answer's 'no.' Because he didn't come just to talk about God's judgement on our sin, he came to take it. Remember last Saturday, how the sky grew dark over the lake during the storm - as one newspaper put it, 'as dark as night'. Well, Jeremiah talks here of God's judgment coming like a storm. And when Christ was crucified, as he hung on the cross, the gospels tell us the sky went dark and the sun was blotted out. Why? Because he was enduring the storm, the whirlwind of God's wrath for us. And he flung himself into that storm, so that you and I might find shelter in him. And he was hammered and smashed by the judgement we deserved.

Why? Because even though he knows what you're really like, behind all the masks, in every corner of your life, he loves you - not as you are, but *despite* what you are. Despite all the times we have turned from him and gone our own way, despite all the times we have been unfaithful, he loves us. And loves you enough to die for you. And he was broken that you might be made whole. He was smashed that you might be restored. That's the word of we all need to hear.

And when you hear Christ, the Word of God, speaking his words of love and forgiveness over you, it opens your eyes to reality and it lifts them up. Because you know that if he loves you like this he really is gracious and good. And by faith you'll choose him over all these other lovers and their false prophets. And you'll know the freedom and liberty and spiritual sight that only Christ can give you. The freedom that means you can use all the good things God gives you for His glory and others' good, rather than worship them.