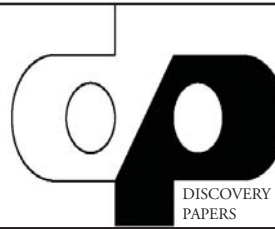


WHO DO WE LISTEN TO?



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SERIES: *WEEPING IN WORSHIP*

Have you ever had a question about something but didn't know who to ask? Do you ever need advice and wish you knew an expert who could help you out? Well, this week, I discovered the solution to this problem: LivePerson.com, where 30,000 experts are "ready to chat" with you about topics ranging from gardening to real estate to parenting to romantic relationships. All you have to do is search through the profiles of the various experts, look at what they charge—usually \$1 to \$3 per minute—and then choose your expert.

We live in a confusing world, and we have questions. We want to know what is true, where to turn, and what to do. But so many voices clamor for our attention: parents, teachers, pastors, friends, even internet blogs, websites, and advice columns. How do we know who to listen to? Thanks to the internet, everyone now has a voice, but not every voice is worth listening to.

We're in the middle of a series studying the book of Jeremiah. Last week we talked about the mess that we find our world in and asked, "Who is going to help us out of this mess?" We saw the failures of the leaders God had sent His people, but we saw God responding with a new leader who would finally fix this world. And we realized that we need to wait for this king. But the problem is that while we wait, life goes on. And life is full of questions and people willing to answer those questions, some for only \$2 per minute. We want God to guide us, and we want to follow Him. But how do we know who speaks for Him? Who do we listen to?

Well, Jeremiah was a prophet in Jerusalem in the late 7th century and early 6th century BC. His career as a prophet lasted right up to the point where Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of God were sent into exile. Jeremiah brought a message to the king that this was about to happen, that God's plan was for Jerusalem to fall. But his wasn't the only voice talking to the king. There were lots of other prophets who were supposed to be speaking for God as well. And most of them had a very different message than Jeremiah's. Most of them assured the king that Jerusalem would be fine. Most of them said that the attacking armies would fail—that God wouldn't let His people suffer defeat and that the king's victory was close at hand.

So this king has to decide who to listen to, and, as usual, he picks the wrong voices. Today we're going to look at Jeremiah 23:9-33. This section comes immediately after the passage we looked at last week. In this passage, God addresses this issue of different voices. He criticizes those prophets who claim to speak for Him, but who really

don't. In the previous passage, he pointed out the failures of Israel's political leaders; in today's passage we will see him pointing out the failure of her spiritual leaders. And as we look at this passage, we can learn a few things about false prophets. We can learn what tends to characterize them and how we might be able to distinguish them. But most of all we'll see how God breaks into the confusing mix of voices and makes Himself known. We'll see that God's voice cannot ultimately be drowned out.

False Prophets Are Polluted

Our passage starts out by talking about these false prophets (verses 9-22) and then moves on to how God responds to them (verses 23-32). Let's look first at verses 9-22:

⁹ Concerning the prophets: My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD and his holy words. ¹⁰ The land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land lies parched and the pastures in the desert are withered. The prophets follow an evil course and use their power unjustly. ¹¹ "Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness," declares the LORD. ¹² "Therefore their path will become slippery; they will be banished to darkness and there they will fall. I will bring disaster on them in the year they are punished," declares the LORD.

¹³ "Among the prophets of Samaria I saw this repulsive thing: They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. ¹⁴ And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness. They are all like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah." ¹⁵ Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty says concerning the prophets: "I will make them eat bitter food and drink poisoned water, because from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land."

¹⁶ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ 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.’¹⁸ But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?¹⁹ See, the storm of the LORD will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked.²⁰ The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart. In days to come you will understand it clearly.²¹ I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied.²² But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.

Jeremiah has much to say against these prophets. His entire career has been pitted against these guys. They are ones that have tried to kill him. They have tried to put him in prison. They have been his opponents in ministry. But here his response isn't anger; it's sadness and despair that those who are supposed to speak for God aren't. He says his heart is broken because of them. And there's essentially three things that he points out about these prophets.

The first issue is that these prophets are polluted. In verse 10, the prophets are called adulterers. Now, adultery is used figuratively throughout the Old Testament to refer to people who have turned away from God. But the term is also used literally to refer to inappropriate sexual activity. And I think it's being used in both senses here. These prophets are turned away from God, but they're also engaged in sinful sexual activity. Verse 11 says that the prophets and priests are godless and that their godless activities are even occurring inside the temple. Now, in ancient Near Eastern culture, sex and religion were closely interlinked. This is still the case in many cultures today. People realize that sex has a spiritual aspect, but they misinterpret what that spiritual aspect means. So you have things like temple prostitutes and religious sexual rituals. And I think that is what is going on here—these prophets and priests are actually endorsing sexual activity inside the temple in a similar way that the cultures around them would conceive of religious activity. These prophets were having sex in the temple and calling it religion. That's pollution.

It should be shocking and unimaginable that the prophets of God would do this. But the sad thing is that as we read this it barely causes us to yawn. This is no surprise. We've heard all about pastors who have had affairs with people in their congregation, evangelists who visit prostitutes, or religious cults where sex is a major feature of their activity. Many of us have been involved with churches or have friends in churches that have been shattered by some sexual scandal. Or if not sexual, then financial or having to do with illegal drugs. The very fact that it comes as no surprise to us that the people who are supposed to speak for God frequently end up being polluted by sin should be surprising. At least be surprised that you're not surprised.

So this should be the first clue to King Zedekiah and the people of Israel about the quality of these prophets.

The fact that their lives are lived in direct contradiction to God's covenant with them should tip people off that these aren't the best people to listen to. Their lives demonstrated that they weren't actually trying to be faithful to the God they were trying to speak for. As we've been studying Jesus in the gospel of Mark and learning about the way of the Lord, we've learned that His way is to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others. That's always been the way of the LORD. But these prophets are doing the opposite. They are sacrificing others for the sake of themselves. That's pollution. And that marks them out as false prophets.

False Prophets are Pretending

But there is something about these prophets that is especially twisted. In verses 13 and 14, Jeremiah says that these prophets are pretending. Remember that Jeremiah is talking to the prophets of the southern tribes of Israel, who are in Jerusalem. That's who he's addressing in verse 14. But in verse 13, he refers to the prophets of the northern tribes of Israel, the ones who were headquartered in Samaria.

So we have two sets of prophets. The ones in the north turned away from YHWH completely. They turned to Baal. And Jeremiah says this is terrible: prophets who are supposed to speak for God speaking for Baal instead. But in verse 14 he says that what the southern prophets have done is worse. The translation in the NIV doesn't bring it out very well, but the Hebrew grammar is setting up a contrast. Now these prophets think of themselves as better than the ones in the north because they at least tried to stay true to YHWH. But Jeremiah says they're actually worse. The idea is something like this: "It's really bad that the Northern prophets prophesied by Baal and led people away from me. But it's much, much worse that the prophets of Jerusalem claim to speak for me, but don't." If you're not going to speak my words, don't claim to. Don't pretend to be what you're not. If you're to claim to speak for me, you better be actually speaking for me and not trying to further your own agenda.

If you think about our culture and talk to people today who have a hard time believing in Christ, many of them will say that the thing that makes it hard for them to believe is all the selfish, worldly, charlatans that pose as religious leaders in our culture. Money hungry, power hungry, and sex hungry religious leaders have done more to damage the name of Christ than any atheist that has ever lived. Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ." Given the choice between a really articulate college professor talking about why Christianity can't be true and a pastor who sexually exploits a member of his congregation, I'd choose the atheist professor any day.

There's a movie that came out a few years ago called *Jesus Camp*. It's a documentary about a Christian youth camp where elementary aged kids are trained to be militant evangelistic leaders in a Christian revival. The way it's all portrayed in the movie, this camp is creepy. It sounds

like brainwashing. The children aren't allowed to think for themselves. There's no relationship with God. It's not about following Jesus. It's about becoming a cog in the machine of some religious/political movement. And it's clear that the leaders of this movement are using people to further their own agenda. They are claiming to speak for God, claiming to represent His interests, but they are really pursuing their own personal agenda.

Movies like this cause huge crises of faith for people because a lot of the language is the same. They talk about God and Jesus and the Spirit. They talk about taking up your cross, they talk about trusting God. But it's all a bit twisted. So you watch this movie and you hear people using God to further their own agenda. And then you go to church and hear similar words from your pastor. And it gets confusing. Does anyone really speak for God? Is everyone just using religion for their own purposes? We'll answer that question in a moment, but for now, there's one more thing we notice about these false prophets.

False Prophets Promise False Hope

The third criticism of these prophets has to do with their message. Jeremiah says that their message promises false hope. In verse 17, we see them talking about shalom about peace. They say that no harm will come to the people that listen to them. You see, Jeremiah was predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Jeremiah's message was not a very positive one, at least in the short term. But theirs was an easy message. They said that Jerusalem would be OK, that the city would have peace, that nobody was going to be hurt. Now, if you were the king of Jerusalem, wouldn't you listen to the prophets who told you everything was going to be fine rather than the one prophet who promised disaster?

But one of the things that we've seen continually as we've been in the book of Jeremiah is that God's work in the world takes his people *through* suffering, not around it. God's plan for Jerusalem involved what was unthinkable to them, but it ended with hope and redemption. In fact, if there is one word that characterizes the whole Christian message, it is redemption. But redemption implies a process. It speaks of something beautiful that rises out of something painful. Redemption is good that springs forth from evil. And this is how God works in the world. Faith in Christ is life through death, not life through ease.

Do you know that feeling after you've been really sick and then you start to feel better? I came down with a throat infection earlier this week that put me in a lot of pain. But once I started feeling better, it was the most amazing thing. I had forgotten how good it feels to be healthy. That first day you feel good after feeling sick for a while is so amazing. You feel like you could move mountains. And that's what God is doing. He often takes us through difficult circumstances to bring us out the other side.

But this is always a hard message for us to understand. We want to pass over the sickness and get right to the new

appreciation of health. A few weeks ago we looked at the passage in Mark where Jesus told his disciples that his path would lead to suffering and death and then to resurrection. How did Peter respond? He rebuked Jesus! He took Him aside and told Him that He was talking nonsense. Peter couldn't imagine that following God meant going through that. But that's exactly what God's plan was. So instead of Jesus being rebuked, the story ends with Jesus firmly rebuking Peter, saying "get behind me Satan." Peter had let his own agenda for a successful political revolution blind him to the path that God has chosen. In particular, he couldn't imagine the pain that path would involve. And most of us are like that too. We know following Christ is about redemption, but we're always surprised by the depth of pain that we are taken through in the process of being redeemed.

So the false prophets preached false hope. They told the king that everyone would be fine. And this is a really attractive message. We'd like it to be true. We see this kind of message everywhere in our world. The most popular religious falsehood in our culture is that everything is going to be OK. We have false prophets who preach shalom to everyone. They say that because God is love, everyone is OK, sin isn't a factor, and everything will be just fine.

One of the examples of this kind of false religious hope is a particularly popular bumper sticker. I have seen one pretty much every day. It spells the word "COEXIST" out of different religious symbols. And inherent in its message is that idea that all religions are equally true and that everyone will be fine. It is essentially the same message as that given by these false prophets in Jerusalem. Can't we all just get along? If we could all just realize that we're all OK, then we can just get along and everything will be fine. It is amazing to me that, in such an educated and culturally literate society, we could be incredibly culturally naïve about how the world works and how human nature functions.

Sometimes I wonder how many people with "COEXIST" bumper stickers are divorced or aren't talking with their parents or have broken relationships with their children or hate their bosses. If they can't even get along with one other person, how do they propose that Muslims and Hindus who have spent centuries killing each other in India get along with each other? How do you get past the vengeance and the violence? All we need to do is put a friendly bumper sticker on our car and then it will all be fine? The prophets in Jerusalem promised God's peace apart from God Himself. These prophets do the same. They promise peaceful coexistence without the necessary steps of brokenness, repentance, and ultimately forgiveness that is only possible through the death and resurrection of Christ. Both sets of prophets offer naïve greeting card promises that simply aren't true to this world or its Creator. But our God is bigger than that. And that's where we're going next.

God can't be used

And so these are the false prophets that we encounter. They are polluted. They pretend to speak for God. And they promise false hope. So how does Jeremiah challenge them? It's interesting to realize that Jeremiah is the real prophet. He is the real deal. But this passage isn't a defense of his prophetic truth. The antidote to false prophets in this passage isn't a true prophet. The antidote is God Himself. And isn't this consistent with what we've seen all throughout Jeremiah? Whether it's bad shepherds, leaders, religion, or our own sin or hope for the future, the answer is always God Himself. That's what we see in the second half of this passage. The answer to the false prophets is nothing short of God Himself. Verses 23-32:

23 "Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away?" **24** "Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" declares the LORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the LORD. **25** "I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!'" **26** "How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?" **27** "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." **28** "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. **29** "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" **30** "Therefore," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me." **31** "Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.'" **32** "Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," declares the LORD. "They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least," declares the LORD.

Two main ideas are contained in this last section of the passage. The first has to do with who God is Himself, and the second has to do with His Word. The first part about who God is can actually be a bit confusing at first. He talks about not being a God who is close, but a God who is far away. The NIV translation tries to be helpful by adding the word "only", indicating that God isn't claiming that He isn't close, He's just not only close. This isn't in the Hebrew text and I'm not sure it's an accurate addition. You see, we like to think of God as being close to us. We talk about being intimate with God, about having a personal relationship with God, about being close with Him. And all of that is true and faithful to the way God seems to relate to His people in Scripture. So it sounds weird to hear God say that He isn't a God that is close.

But you have you realize that in the ancient Near East, most of the gods were regional or family gods. And these

gods were responsible for making sure that the interests of their region or family or people group were met. That's why you had gods that fought each other; each one represented a certain interest group. And that's how the prophets of Jerusalem were thinking. They saw YHWH as a God who protected their interests. He was on their side. So they thought that He could be used to further their agenda, to protect their power, to enhance their careers. But the God of Israel says, "I am not a regional, local deity that can be co-opted by your agenda. I am a God who is far off, a God of everything. I am free. I will do what I want, not what you want me to do. I cannot be used." These prophets want to use God for their own purposes, but YHWH says, "No." God can't be used.

And for most of us, most of the time, this is good news, because when we are thinking big picture, we all agree that we want a God whose will cannot be thwarted. We want a God who won't let people stand in His way of making sure that His plan that takes into account all things and all peoples comes to pass. We don't want a god that can be enlisted in some local political power play. We want a God that transcends that.

Until it's our local political power play that we want God to support. Until it's our vision for the world or our lives or our church that we want God to enforce. Until we are the ones who try to thwart God's plan because we really do need things to turn out a certain way or else we just won't be able to take it. That's when we want a god that is close, that can be controlled, that can be made to fit our vision for our lives.

And the truth is that it's really tricky to know when you're trying to use God to further your own agenda. The history of Christianity in America is ripe with God being used to further someone's political agenda. And everyone tries to do it: right, left, center. Everyone claims that God is on their side. That's one of the reasons we tend to be pretty hesitant at PBC about taking specific political stances. It's so easy to feel passionately about something and use God to further your goals. We prefer to preach Christ and His gospel and allow the Spirit to work individually in our lives to bring us to political convictions. But what this passage tells us is that even though people try to use God, it doesn't work. Ultimately, God can't be used. In the end, His will will be done regardless of who tried to use Him and for what ends.

God's Word can't be beaten

That brings us to the second thing that God says to correct these false prophets. God says that He can't be used. And then He says that His Word can't be beaten. His Word can't be distorted by some people who misrepresent Him. In verse 28, God gets a little sarcastic. He tells those prophets, "If you have a dream, go ahead, tell it. I don't care. Your little self-serving dreams are nothing compared to my Word." In the next verse He describes His Word as a fire. It will overcome. It will burn brightly, and it will consume anything that isn't in line with its message. He

says that His Word is a hammer. It shatters the lying words of false prophets. Nothing can stand against the Word of God. And the passage concludes with God's pronouncement of judgment against those false prophets. Three times in a row God says that He is against them. God is bigger than their agenda. His Word is a fire and a hammer. And now they have gotten on His bad side. If you've read much of the Bible at all, you'll know that it is a frightful thing to have the God of the Universe against you.

These words, as strong as they are and as harsh as they are, are words of comfort for us. So many people claim to speak for God, and this can create in us a paralyzing sense of fear. What if we listen to the wrong one? What if we choose to believe the voice that doesn't speak authoritatively for God? Well, this passage says that God is bigger than someone who would misrepresent Him. And God's Word is bigger than any false message. We can know that even amidst all the false prophets, even amidst religious professionals who use God for their own personal gain, even amidst my own mixed motives and dark broken heart, God will have His way. His will *will* be done.

The tricky thing about this way of thinking is that things take longer than we want. Most of us who ask the question "Who do I listen to?" have a decision before us. Often it is a really important decision—or at least it seems important to us. And we want a quick answer. But the process of God's Word being vindicated sometimes takes a while. The people of Jerusalem spent a long time in exile before they learned that Jeremiah's promise of a future restoration really was God's Word. But that's not what we want. When we ask, "Who do we listen to?" we want answers *now*.

What this means for us is that we have an incredible freedom to make mistakes as we try to follow Christ. God can't be used. His Word can't be beaten. So as we're trying to figure out who we are and make decisions in our lives, the fact that God is sovereign really takes the pressure off. We're not going to mess things up. We're not going to thwart His will. Who do we listen to? Well, we try to listen to God. And then we try to make the best decision we can. Be with Him—talk to Him and try to listen to Him. Honestly. And then make the best decision you can. You aren't going to ruin His plan. You aren't going to overcome His will or invalidate His Word. It's OK. Be with God and make the best decision you can. And eventually we'll understand everything in the end.

When I was a kid and my parents would be talking about something I didn't understand, I'd ask them to explain it and they'd often say, "You'll get it when you're 64." That was kind of the running joke in my family, "You'll get it when you're 64." I hated that answer. But it does make me excited to be 64 someday. Imagine all the things I'll

suddenly understand...

OK, maybe not, but verse 20 of this passage tells me that, in the days to come, I will understand. Whatever isn't clear now will eventually be made clear. And that is a great promise. So as we're sorting through voices and trying our best to follow God's voice amidst all the confusion, we can know that eventually we'll see it all clearly. And that will be incredible.

Conclusion

There are many voices in our world, many competing ideas. Some of them come from outside the church and tell us naively that everything is going to be OK, that Jesus is one option among many and that God has promised shalom to everyone. Others come from within the church, and they try to use God's name to further their own agenda, whether its right-wing political agenda, left-wing political agenda, corporate professional agenda, or personal agenda. But God says, "I won't be used, and My Word won't be beaten."

What this means to us is that we can know that our God will have His way, even when people who are supposed to represent Him have sex in the temple, even when people who are supposed to speak for Him fake it, even when they promise a fake hope. Even in the midst of all these things, our God is real. He is bigger than all that. Those false prophets, as heart-breaking as they are, don't threaten our God. He is still King of the Universe. He is still in charge. And this book is still the perfect revelation of who He is.

That gives us freedom. It gives us freedom to turn to God, to try our best to listen to Him and then make a decision. We can have the confidence that nothing we do will ultimately thwart God or His Word. What a relief to know that eventually, all the false voices will fall away and there will be one voice remaining! May we be familiar with His voice when that day comes.