

The Battle of the Prophets

Jeremiah 25-29

Time Will Tell

We love trying to guess the future.

Whether it is gambling, anticipating geopolitical movements, predicting rises and falls in housing and stock markets, or picking the next technology trend, when we know what is coming, we can make the best decisions now. And our lives benefit.

And so when we come across someone who always seems to make the right calls, we listen up.

Famous successful investors like Warren Buffet have people watching their every move. At one point people were even eagerly watching the predictions of an Octopus called 'Paul' who managed amazing success in selecting the correct winner in all of Germany's world cup soccer matches in 2008. In fact over the course of his... career... he had a success rate of 12 from 14 – 85%

Of course in the end, whether we picked the right or wrong voice to bank on, only time will tell.

Of course the bit about the future that is most important is not what is going to happen to Bitcoin, but what is going to happen to you, and to me, when we stand before the judge of all the earth.

And more than any other thing, it is the answer to THAT question that must impact what we do in our lives now.

And so we want to make sure that in this greatest of eventualities, we are listening to the right voices and not the wrong ones.

Well back in Deuteronomy God set a fairly clear standard that marked out the true prophet from the false...

Deut. 18: ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a **prophet** like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the **prophet** speaks in my name. ²⁰ But a **prophet** who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a **prophet** who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death."

Deut. 18:21 You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" ²² If what a **prophet** proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That **prophet** has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.

To speak falsehoods in the name of God was a deadly presumption and God's people were not to put up with it.

Likewise, God promises to judge those that DON'T listen to his true prophets.

So making sure you discern the truth from the lie was seriously important.

Well for over thirty years Jeremiah has proclaimed warnings and judgments from God while others claiming to be prophets gave softer words, and were preaching 'peace' and 'safety'...

Well in today's passage who is false and who is true will become clear

Now before we dig in to the passage, it is important that we understand where we are chronologically.

As we have mentioned previously this series, the book of Jeremiah jumps around a bit in time.

Well, the three incidents we are looking at today come early during the reign of the last king of Judah, **Zedekiah**.

Zedekiah came into power after Jehoiakim rebelled.

Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, during which Jehoiakim died and his son, Jehoiachin became king, but after only a few months they surrendered and in 597 BC, Jehoiachin, his family, all the city's nobles and officials, soldiers, skilled workers, and artisans, 10,000 people in all, **were taken off into exile** in Babylon.

Judah was deliberately left weak and without its best leaders.

2 Kings tells us that only the poor of the land were left.

Nebuchadnezzar also plundered all the treasures of the palace and the temple.

He then installed Zedekiah as king to look after the place.

But Jeremiah *didn't* get taken to Babylon – he was still there.

Because it wasn't over. God had more to say and more to do.

The Vindication of Jeremiah

A Message for the Land: Accept the Yoke (Chapter 27)

And so early in Zedekiah's reign, God gets Jeremiah to do a bit of 'performance prophecy' A yoke is a beam that sits across the shoulders of a pair of oxen, and it has straps that go around their necks.

It's the thing people used to control the oxen and direct them where they want them to go.

Well, the Lord tells Jeremiah to make a wooden yoke and wear it on his own neck and walk around with it.

Jeremiah is to be a walking illustration of the message he is about to give...

But he begins this message in a surprising place.

He sends word first to all the kings of the surrounding nations through their envoys in Jerusalem.

A Message for the surrounding nations (27:1-11)

⁴ Give them a message for their masters and say,

'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Tell this to your masters: ⁵ With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please.

⁶ Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon;
I will make even the wild animals subject to him.
⁷ All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

Through Jeremiah, God reminds the rest of the nations that HE is the one in charge of this world.

And he has decided to give all their nations to Nebuchadnezzar.

The whole lot of them – even their animals.

It is not just his people who are under judgment, it is also those surrounding nations who have led Israel astray for hundreds of years.

Even Babylon itself will eventually suffer the same fate, but only *after* it has acted as God's sword.

So now comes the heart of Jeremiah's message from God.

As I have placed myself under this yoke at God's command, so should you.

It is a simple case of submit to Nebuchadnezzar and live, or refuse to and die and don't listen to anyone who tells you otherwise!

Jer. 27:8

“ “If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the LORD, until I destroy it by his hand.

⁹ *So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon.'*

¹⁰ *They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish.*

¹¹ *But if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there, declares the LORD.” ”*

The warning is REALLY clear isn't it?

God is behind this, so resistance is pointless.

It is the national equivalent of pleading guilty, accepting the lesser sentence, and get on with doing your time.

Because if you don't – it's the death penalty.

A Message for the King of Judah (27:12-15)

And what is true for those nations is just as true for Judah...

Jer. 27:12

I gave the same message to Zedekiah king of Judah. I said,

“Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. ¹³ Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the LORD has threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?”

Let the tragic poignancy of verse 13 settle on you.

Those left in Judah will now be just like 'any nation'. No longer being treated as the Lord's special possession – but just lumped in with the rest of the rebellious world.

And he too gets the same warning not to be deceived...

¹⁴ *Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon,' for they are prophesying lies to you. ¹⁵ 'I have not sent them,' declares the LORD. 'They are prophesying lies in my name. Therefore, I will banish you and you will perish, both you and the prophets who prophesy to you.'*”

A Message for the Priests and the People (7:16-23)

And then the yoked prophet goes to the people and their priests.

“This is what the LORD says: Do not listen to the prophets who say, 'Very soon now the articles from the LORD'S house will be brought back from Babylon.' They are prophesying lies to you.

¹⁷ *Do not listen to them.*

Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live.

Why should this city become a ruin?

Don't listen to the lies!

Those treasures from the temple aren't coming back.

They're goneski!

In fact, let me tell you, the plundering has only just begun.

In fact, priests and people, set these so-called prophets a test:

THEY say the items that are gone will come back.

Well, have them plead to the Lord that the stuff we *have left* will stay and see what happens.

Good news isn't good news when it is false.

Time will tell who was truly speaking God's word.

Because I am saying this: 'not only will the treasures not come back, but what is still here – the stuff needed for worship itself – that is going to go to Babylon too'

¹⁹ *For this is what the LORD Almighty says about the pillars, the bronze Sea, the movable stands and the other articles that are left in this city, ²⁰ which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away when he carried Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem— ²¹ yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says about the things that are left in the house of the LORD and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem:*

²² *'They will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day I come for them,' declares the LORD. **Then** I will bring them back and restore them to this place.'”*

It's a challenging message. You hear it don't you?

God is saying: I WILL restore things, but ONLY after the judgment is finished.

All those people being taken off into exile, as earth shaking as it would have been for Judah, is not the end of the story.

There is more judgment to come.
Don't listen to pleasant lies.
Accept the yoke, and submit to Babylon.

Battle of the Prophets: Will the Yoke be Broken? (Chapter 28)

But put yourself for a moment in the place of those in Jerusalem.
One lot of prophets says one thing, Jeremiah says the other.
How are they to know who is speaking from God, and who is not?

Well now we come to the incident we read earlier in chapter 28.
The battle of the prophets.

And this is one of the most important moments in the book of Jeremiah.
Indeed it is a turning point.

The moment when God proves before the people that Jeremiah IS truly his prophet, and that his message of judgment not the false hope of the false prophets is the message that the people need to listen to.

Let me remind you what happens.

The incident takes place the same year that Jeremiah sent his messages out.
And it is a face off between two men claiming to speak the word of God.

Like a boxing match in Madison Square Garden in New York, this pugilistic prophetic proclamation takes place publicly, right in front of the priests and people at the temple itself.

In the 'blue corner' let's say is Hananiah. The challenger.

In the 'red corner' and still wearing that wooden yoke that symbolises God's call to submit to Nebuchadnezzar as the Lord's agent of judgment is Jeremiah

Hananiah comes out swinging.

He begins with the classic prophetic formula: the same one Jeremiah often used...

² *"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:*

Hananiah claims to be speaking the Lord's words in the Lord's name.

And the message seems to be wonderful news.

'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'

And he boldly lays out a timetable for this.

The Lord, according to Hananiah, is going to bring everything taken from his temple and everyone taken off into exile, including Jehoiachin, back within two years.

He throws his left, he throws his right, and he returns to his left again, verse 4...

'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.' "

And then it is Jeremiah's turn to respond.

And initially he just takes the punch.

Again, can I say, you need to place yourself there and understand the moment.

Your nation has only recently been humiliated.

Most of your leadership has been taken away into exile.

Any treasure that was precious or glorious has been plundered by Babylon.
Who do you think the crowd favorite is going to be? Who do they WANT to be true?
The one wearing the yoke of your humiliation or the one proclaiming the Lord's liberation from that?

Well Jeremiah knows what he'd rather: he'd rather Hananiah was right as well!

Verse 6...

"Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD'S house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon."

But then comes the fend that signals to the people watching that this bout is not over.

Jeremiah says 'time will tell'

Up until now the previous prophets who spoke the Lord's judgment have been proven correct. So the burden of proof is on the peace preaching challenger, Hananiah.

Hananiah is happy to own that.

He throws his uppercut.

Once again, *in front of all the people*, he takes the yoke off Jeremiah and smashes it on the ground.

The symbolism unmistakable.

Verse 11: *"This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.'"*

So Jeremiah goes home. Game over right?

Not so fast.

This is not a battle of boxers, but of prophets.

And the strength of their punches are not measured by how artfully their words are delivered but on whether the mighty power of the Lord of Armies stands behind them.

Well Jeremiah goes on his way, but the Lord says, 'not just yet'

And he sends Jeremiah back to Hananiah, who is presumably still in the temple, and the combination of blows he sends is devastating.

First he doubles down on the message of judgment -

¹³ *"Go and tell Hananiah, 'This is what the LORD says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron. ¹⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him."*

But second there will be a killer blow for Hananiah himself.

In fulfilment of his words in Deuteronomy, God himself will vindicate his true prophet by destroying the false one.

"Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. ¹⁶ Therefore this is what the LORD says:

'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth.

This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD."

To preach 'peace' when there is no peace does not make you a hero, it makes you a liar. To encourage God's people to trust in lies is to entice rebellion and so the Lord proclaims his sentence.

'This very year you will die.'

And two months later in fulfilment of the word spoken through Jeremiah, Hananiah dies.

There should no longer be any doubt who is truly the Lord's prophet.

And so the next message Jeremiah brings should now have extra weight.

Chapter 29 strongly resembles the message of chapter 27, but this time it is not for those still in the Land, but to those already off in exile.

It contains many of the same themes as that earlier message - accept the reality of Babylonian rule, don't listen to false prophets - but like a door opening into a stifling room it is as if a flush of fresh air starts to sweep in.

For the exiles at least, there is a message of real hope...

A Message for the Exiles: Wait in Hope (Chapter 29)

This message from Jeremiah is sent to the exiles as a letter passed on by some emissaries from Judah.

'Settle in' (29:1-9)

It begins with a very clear instruction: 'settle in' You are going to be in Babylon for a while so you may as well make it your home.

⁵ *"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.*

⁶ *Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.*

Babylon is to be their home away from home.

In fact, he goes further. 'Don't live in resentment of Babylon, don't plot rebellion, do the opposite - see its interests as being tied to yours' Listen to this remarkable message to a people held in captivity...

⁷ *Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*

'Restoration will eventually come' (29:10-14)

And that is because despite Judah's rebellion, despite their wickedness, and despite the justice of God's judgment, behind all this is the Lord who still loves his people, and who will graciously keep his promises to them.

As certain as their judgment is, so will be their restoration when that judgment is over.

Just listen to the zeal and deep compassion in these verses...

Jer. 29:10

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

14 I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Now we are going to hear more about those plans of God next week. But you see it is not that there was no hope, it is not that there would be no peace.

It is that this hope, this future peace, would only come to pass AFTER they came to terms with and accepted the justice of God's judgment upon them. A 70 year humbling of his wayward people.

But we mustn't mistake this word of hope to the exiles as implying that they were the good ones deserving of mercy while those remaining in Jerusalem were bad.

The exiles much preferred to listen to the false prophets rather than the true.

So they also needed to be shown who to listen to, and whose message to reject.

'But I'm going to clean house in Judah and among the exiles' (29:15-23)

Those remaining in Jerusalem would serve as an example.

Destruction would fall upon them...

19 For they have not listened to my words," declares the LORD, "words that I sent to them again and again by my servants the prophets. And you exiles have not listened either," declares the LORD.

And so God promises he would do among them what he did to Hananiah back in Jerusalem.

He names and shames the false prophets among the exiles and testifies that they too, like Hananiah will die for their lies.

And when that happens, there should be no doubt, whom God has spoken through, and so whose word should be trusted.

Jeremiah's message to the exiles was that Babylon was that their exile was God's judgment and would last 70 years, so accept it, and live in light of it and return to the Lord. And when that time is over, and only after that, I will bring you home.

The Vindication of the Christ

Friends we live our lives now in light of what we understand the future will bring. If you know what is coming, wisdom acts accordingly.

There are voices, even in churches, that say that humanity is essentially good, that sin is not really a thing, apart from the sin of saying that it is.

...There is no judgment coming.

...You can believe whatever you want to believe and God doesn't mind – if there is really a God to mind at all.

Are those the voices we should listen to and trust?
Is that the future reality we should bet our lives on?

There are many whose itching ears are eager for such a convenient message but is it the truth?

Then there is the voice of Jesus

A voice that cried out 'the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news'
Yes there is good news of a loving God, but that good news testifies of a God who will judge all sin yet forgive all those who acknowledge the truth of their sin and turn back to him.

One voice demands nothing from us.

The other demands that we humble ourselves, admit our wrong doing and place our hope in him.

How do you know which is true? Who speaks for God?

Well time has told.

And God has made clear which voice we need to pay attention to.

Acts 17

³⁰ ...now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

And listen to what Paul says in **Romans 1** – the gospel we need to listen to is...

² the gospel [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, ⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus resurrection is God's resounding declaration that it is Jesus voice that should ring loudest...

And the risen Jesus himself challenges us too:

Rev. 22:12 "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Aliens and Strangers

Christ is risen! And that reality must drown out all those voices that challenge his gospel. Time has told, and so time will tell.

And wisdom lives in light of it.

Like the exiles, there is a glorious future that awaits.

A beautiful restoration far more magnificent than returning to the land.

Our God has promised, and our God will bring us to him.

But in the meantime, we wait.

You know the whole letter of 1 Peter is written to God's people as like exiles scattered throughout the nations, and his prophetic word to us as we wait patiently is this.

1Pet. 1:17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.