

Faithless People, Faithful Prophet

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- [0 : 0 0] So, could I ask you please to turn to the book of Jeremiah. This evening we are reading chapters 42 and 43. It's again quite a long reading, but it's a natural section of the book. It's on page 669. Jeremiah 42 and 43. In the previous chapter, the exile has happened, the city of Jerusalem has fallen. A temporary governor, Gedaliah, was appointed a good decent man who was then assassinated. And now there is chaos and confusion as people turn to Jeremiah asking what he has to say to them. So, chapter 42, verse 1. Then all the commanders of the forces, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and Jezaniah the son of Azbakh, and all the people from the least to the greatest came near and said to Jeremiah the prophet, Let our plea for mercy come before you and pray to the Lord your God for us, for all this remnant, because we are left with but a few as your eyes see us, that the Lord your God may show us the way we should go and the thing that we should do. Jeremiah the prophet said to him, Behold, I have heard you. Behold, I will pray to the Lord your God according to your request, and whatever the Lord answers you, I will tell you.
- [1 : 2 5] I will keep nothing back from you. Then they said to Jeremiah, May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the words which the Lord your God sends to us. Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the Lord our God. The end of ten days the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Then he summoned Jehonatan the son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces who were with him and all the people from the least to the greatest and said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him. If you will remain in this land, I will build you up and not pull you down. I will plant you and not pluck you up, for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land.
- [2 : 4 0] But if you say we will not remain in this land, disobeying the voice of the Lord your God and saying, No, we will go to the land of Egypt where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there. Then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, As my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt.

You shall become an execration, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. You shall see this place no more. The Lord has said to you, O remnant of Judah, Do not go to Egypt.

[3 : 56] Know this for a certainty that I have warned you this day that you have gone astray at the cost of your lives. For you sent me to the Lord your God, saying, Pray for us to the Lord our God, and whatever the Lord our God says, declare to us and we will do it.

And I have this day declared it to you. But you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that he has sent me to tell you. Now therefore, know for a certainty that you shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence in the place where you desire to go to live.

When Jeremiah had finished speaking to all the people all these words of the Lord their God, which the Lord their God had sent to them, Azariah the son of Eshai and Johanan the son of Kerea and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, You are telling a lie.

The Lord our God did not send you to say, Do not go to Egypt to live there. But Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon.

So Johanan the son of Kerea and all the commanders of the forces and all the people did not obey the voice of the Lord to remain in the land of Judah. But Johanan the son of Kerea and all the commanders of the forces took all the remnant of Judah, who had returned to live in the land of Judah from all the nations to which they had been driven, the men, the women, the children, the princes, and every person whom Nabuzerad and the captain of the guards had left with Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan, also Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch the son of Neriah.

[5 : 42] And they came into the land of Egypt, for they did not obey the voice of the Lord, and they arrived at Tach Panhas. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in Tach Panhas, Take in your hands large stones, and hide them in the mortar in the pavement that is at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace in Tach Panhas, in the sight of the men of Judah, and say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them.

He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence to captivity, those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword, those who are doomed to the sword.

I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. And he shall clean the land of Egypt, as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace.

He shall break the obelisk of Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt, and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us.

Now, could I ask you to turn once again to Jeremiah 42 and 43, on page 669, and we'll have a moment of prayer as we come to the word of God.

[7 : 23] Come then with prayer and contemplation. See how in Scripture Christ is known. Father, I pray that the word will be heard in the words, that you will take the human words, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living Christ, himself in whose name we pray.

Amen. One thing we can scarcely avoid in this Internet age is the proliferation of blogs.

I was almost going to say the spawning of blogs, like midges in summer, but that would probably have been too derogatory, a simile to have used. Everybody seems to have something to say, and everybody and those who blog seem to have something to say every day.

And one of the problems of blogs, of course, is like so much else on the Internet, you can waste ages simply looking at them. Now, obviously, blogs, like everything else, have good and bad about them.

The trouble about most, well, I haven't read most blogs, but the trouble about many blogs I've started to read is that in blog world, as in Facebook world, and the Internet world in general, nobody ever does anything badly.

[8 : 56] Nobody ever preaches a poor sermon. No church is ever other than flourishing. Nobody ever will admit that they are human.

That's why when you occasionally get a blog which actually admits to being human, admits to being fallible, it is a real blessing.

And there are one or two such blogs, and if you want to know some suggestions, I'll let you know afterwards. I'm not going to mention publicly any particular names. I often feel if Jeremiah had had to write a blog, how would it have gone down in today's evangelical celebrity culture?

I've spoken to those people for 40 years and more. I've preached the word of the Lord to them. I presented them with the great issues. And do you know what?

Nobody has listened. Nobody has paid attention. Indeed, most people have been defiant. And you can forgive poor Jeremiah this stage in his ministry for absolutely despairing.

[10 : 06] Once again, the same old problem. See, Jeremiah had begun his ministry some 40 years before in a time when there was the promise of better things.

The great reforming king, Josiah, had set in motion the greatest reformation of national life since the time of his great-grandfather, Hezekiah. It had been a tremendous effort, but it all ended in tears.

Jeremiah might have felt, well, after the exile, we've got another chance. Gedaliah, a good, decent man, as we saw last week, from a Bible-believing family, has been put in charge.

Things may get better. Three months or so later, Gedaliah is assassinated, and the place descends into chaos. You might well feel, I've been a total failure.

And that's, this is where he begins the final phase of his prophetic activity. And the interesting thing, as we'll see, is that God does not say, Jeremiah, that message I gave you didn't work.

[11 : 09] We better try something different. Let's try something a bit more popular. Let's try something a bit more, that's more likely to pull in the crowds, that's more likely to get people doing what you want them to do.

Jeremiah's ministry, from a superficial point of view, was a failure. And yet, two and a half thousand years later, we are still reading the words of Jeremiah, learning from the words of Jeremiah, and recognizing this is the voice of the living God.

And because it's the voice of the living God, although it may have been rejected, ignored, despised, nevertheless, it lasts, and it will last into eternity.

So that's really, that's really the way we need to look at this chapter. Jeremiah is preaching to those people, bringing them the word. You know so often the voice of the Lord your God, the word of the Lord your God, occurred in the chapter.

God is not going to allow his people to escape from it. Now the structure of the two chapters is largely dialogue. We have two speeches by the leaders and the people, followed by two replies from Jeremiah.

[12 : 22] And I think what I want us to do is to look at these both in turn. This will give us our two main points and our title, Faithless People and Faithful Prophets.

That seems to me is what's happening here. Faithless People and Faithful Prophet. So let's look first of all at the Faithless People in 42.1-6. Now commentators differ on how sincere the people are.

I want to suggest that they're being rather insincere right from the very beginning. You'll notice it's a mass delegation, well hardly a mass delegation, there's only a few of them left, but it's the least of the greatest as well as those leaders.

The remnant. Now there's apparent unanimity and apparent sincerity in verse 5. May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word which the Lord your God sends to us.

There's apparent unanimity, apparent sincerity, but there are warning bells. People don't suddenly swing from complete belief in God to total unbelief and rejection, which is what would have to be the case if the people were being sincere here.

[13 : 45] So let's look at the warning bells or let's listen to the warning bells. I think there's, once again, as so often, we've got to look at the little details and not just the overall thrust.

You know, one of the things about Bible study, we need to get the overall thrust, but we also need to look at the detail. And I think the first thing I want you to point out is the lack of personal faith on the part of the leaders.

Like so many, they can talk the language of piety. They can say the words they think Jeremiah wants to hear. Verses 2 and 3, the Lord your God may show us the way we should go and the thing we should do.

They thought, they probably thought, oh, Jeremiah will be impressed by this. After all, people have opposed him for so long. If he hears us sing, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God and go the way we should go, he'll be impressed.

There is one little word that gives the way, though. Look again at verse 2 and 3. Pray to the Lord your God for us.

[14 : 57] They say to the prophet, pray to the Lord your God. They don't say, pray to the Lord our God. There's an interplay between our and your, which we'll see as we go through.

Is he not their God as well? And Jeremiah recognizes this because when Jeremiah in verse 4 says, I will pray to the Lord your God, Jeremiah says, by the way, guys, he's your God as well.

He's not just my God, he is your God. So why come to me saying, hear the voice, pray to the Lord your God, reminding them that they are only paying lip service to the Lord when it suits their purposes.

It's this personal faith in the Lord which is at the heart of everything and needs to be seen here. So that's the first thing, the lack of personal faith. Pray to the Lord your God.

Then there's the extravagant protestation of obedience in verses 5 and 6. It's not nowadays would be called OTT.

[16 : 01] It's just so full of extravagant promises. Easily and glibly echoing words of scripture. Verse 5, It may the Lord, if we do not act according to all the word which the Lord your God sends, whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God.

Now that three times in earlier scripture, almost exactly these same words are used. In Exodus 24, these words are said to Moses, followed almost immediately by the idolatry of the golden calf.

They are said to Joshua in Joshua chapter 24, followed almost immediately by their going away after Canaanite idols. And they are said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 7, once again after going away to disobey.

In each case, extravagant protestations of obedience and loyalty are followed immediately by disobedience and idolatry. Again, the interplay of your and our.

This is sanctimonious language. This is language which is what they think the prophet will want to hear. By the way, brothers and sisters, let's be honest when we talk to each other.

[17 : 21] Let's not say what we think people will want to hear. Let's say what's in our heart. How easy it is to parrot the evangelical cliches.

How easy it is to talk the talk. Remember, ultimately, it's what people do that matters, not what they say they are doing. There's no obedience here.

There's plenty of talk about obedience. There's no actual obedience at all. And that leads us on to their second words to Jeremiah in 43, 1-7, where insincere protestations and extravagant protestations of obedience lead to arrogant disobedience.

This is the reputation, the words of the Lord their God all through the passage and verse 7. They came to the land of Egypt for they did not obey the voice of the Lord.

And again, in verse 4, in the middle of the section, all the people did not obey the voice of the Lord. And, in fact, they say to Jeremiah, you are telling a lie.

[18 : 32] Lie is one of the most common words in this book. Jeremiah has accused the false prophets of telling lies all the way through the book. They've now heard the voice of the true God and they're saying it's a lie.

And they make the ridiculous claim in verse 3, Baruch, the son of Neriah, has set you against us. Baruch was Jeremiah's secretary, almost certainly the person who put this book together at the end of Jeremiah's prophesying and life.

We'll meet him again later on. But, it's a ridiculous claim. There is absolutely no evidence of this at all. Baruch, clearly, from earlier passages, comes from an influential family and they probably feel the old prophet, because he is old now.

I mean, this is 40 odd years since he was called. They live in fantasy land. They believe what they want to believe. They go where they want to go.

Classic example of making up our minds and then asking the Lord to bless us. So often this happens, doesn't it? So often we make up our minds and then we try and wriggle and squirm until we can find some kind of proof that the Lord is blessing us.

[19 : 53] The arrogance of claiming their own private line to the Lord. The Lord has not spoken to you, Jeremiah, exactly what had happened to Moses centuries before, when Moses said he wished all the Lord's people would prophesy.

Neither Jeremiah nor Moses claim to be special people. What they do claim is they are the channels of the Word of God. And that's so important.

So there's no point in disobeying the Word of God and then expecting further revelation. If we do things that the Lord has forbidden, if we go against what the Lord has commanded, there's no point in any saying, oh Lord, will you help me?

Will you show me how to go? Because the answer is consistently, look, I have shown you how to go. It's there in the Word. So that's why I say faithless people, all the glib talk, all the language of piety.

In my experience over the years, those who are most devoted to following the Lord are not characteristically those who talk unctuously and sanctimoniously.

[21 : 01] They simply do what the Lord is saying and don't talk about it. But here, it's all talk. And no walk. Let's look then at the faithful prophet.

He's faced with this question, what are we going to do? Where are we going to go? And in his first reply, verses 7 to 22 of chapter 42, at the end of ten days, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

Now, there's nothing magic about ten days. days. That doesn't mean if we want guidance from the Lord, this message is telling us to wait for ten days.

That's not the point at all. The point is Jeremiah wanted to be certain that it was the true voice of the Lord and not simply the promptings of his own heart. He wanted to apply the word of the Lord to this new situation.

When I was studying theology, I was told that prophets were not foretellers, they were foretellers. In other words, they didn't foretell the future, but they simply talked to the conditions of the time.

[22 : 12] Now, surely the answer to that is they were both. And the reason they were able to talk to their time and to every other time is because they saw the whole of history from the perspective of the Lord of history.

They were foretellers and foretellers. They received the word of the Lord, the Lord of history, who knows the end from the beginning. If that were not the case, Jeremiah would just be a book of ancient history and ancient poetry, which you might be interested in if you were interested in ancient history and ancient poetry.

I suspect most of you here are not all that interested in either of these things. This happened long ago. The words were spoken long ago, but they are the living words of the living God for us today.

So, he waits, he opens his heart, listens to what the Lord has to say. And what the Lord has to say is very interesting. Verse 9, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, If you remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pluck you down.

I will plant you and not pluck you up. These were the words given to Jeremiah 40 years before when he was first called. If you read in chapter 1, God appoints Jeremiah to tear down, to build up, to plant and to uproot.

[23 : 36] You see, Jeremiah is saying to the Lord, and Jeremiah, sorry, the Lord is saying to Jeremiah, and Jeremiah is saying to the people, that word that's been spoken for all those decades is still the word to you.

The exile has happened, but you are still offered salvation. You're still offered restoration and renewal. The justice has fallen.

The city has fallen. The judgment has come, terrible judgment, but since judgment has fallen, justice is satisfied, and the repentant can live.

And that's the gospel. Till on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. In this ancient story, we see that judgment has happened, and therefore there can be mercy.

But these people are blind to that. They're not afraid of the Lord, they're afraid of the king of Babylon. And of course, Jeremiah is not unaware of this.

[24 : 44] Jeremiah doesn't poo-poo, he says, verse 11, do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord. Now, it's very easy to say, for I am with you to save you and to deliver you from his hand.

Not just don't fear the king of Babylon, put a brave face in it, don't fear the king of Babylon, because the king of Babylon is in the hand of the Lord, and he will rescue you, he will keep you. Going to Egypt is a one-way ticket to death and disaster.

By the way, there's nothing wrong intrinsically in going to Egypt. After all, the Holy Family were to go to Egypt, were they not, in Matthew chapter 2.

It's not a geographical point that's being made, it's the disobedience to the word of the Lord. Don't go to Egypt now. It's the wrong time to go to Egypt, and it's the wrong place to go.

And much of the later part of this book is how the word is going to pursue them wherever they are. They think that by going to Egypt, they will escape the anger of Nebuchadnezzar.

[25 : 56] They won't, of course, and Nebuchadnezzar reaches the stretch to Egypt, as we'll see later on. And they also think, I imagine, they can escape from the word of the Lord, but they don't.

They truculently take Jeremiah and Baruch with them, which means, of course, that very, very far from escaping from the word of the Lord, they've got the living embodiment of the word of the Lord with them.

God will speak to these people in Egypt, just as through Ezekiel and Daniel, he's speaking to the people in Babylon. Wherever people go, God's word will pursue them.

It's the same in our own personal lives as well. We are going to be singing shortly, Lord of our dawning, to Lord of our evening, the word which came to you when you were first converted.

That is the word that will sustain you throughout your journey. That is the word which will see you safely home. It's not a different word. Obviously, different circumstances require different applications of that living word.

[27 : 01] Nevertheless, it's our only safety. It was their only safety, and it's still our only safety. Verse 21, this is the key to it, chapter 42, verse 21.

You have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that he sent me to tell you. Now, that anything, once again, is another significant detail. Not just you're going down to Egypt, not just you're disobeying that specific thing, but you are disobeying totally the whole word of God.

You're setting aside the revealed word, the revealed will of God. You see, the Lord had revealed to Jeremiah during these ten days that the word would be rejected, but he still presented it.

What do we do when people persistently, deliberately reject the word? I think the Bible tells us we keep on telling that word as long as anyone will listen.

King Zedekiah had a choice. They have a choice as well, but they refused to take it. So, this is a reminder that Jeremiah is the true prophet. The words spoken so long ago, the words which appear to have so little effect, the words which he must have agonized, and we know he did in earlier passages where he protested to the Lord about the way things are going.

[28 : 23] He was human after all. Nevertheless, Jeremiah, you have spoken truly, and of course, if you're speaking the truth, you don't gain anything by then changing the message.

This is the only message. And then going on to the end of chapter 43, the second reply of Jeremiah, or rather not, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in Tachpanhes.

Tachpanhes was a frontier city on the delta, where presumably they settled until they decided where they were going to go. As I said, the word here is inescapable, and as has happened earlier in Jeremiah's ministry, as you see especially in Ezekiel's ministry, there is a sign as well as a word.

Entirely obvious what happened to the palace of the pharaoh in Tachpanhes, probably not his main palace, but a kind of palace on the frontier he would come, and the Lord is told to spread out stones for Nebuchadnezzar's throne to be set up on.

You see, Jeremiah so often is being told to perform an action which proves that he believes the word. It must have seemed absurd.

[29 : 43] Many of these things these prophets had to do must have seemed absolutely crazy. The book of Ezekiel, I always find it unfair when people say Ezekiel was a kind of loony because he did exactly what the Lord told him to do, not because he particularly enjoyed it.

I'm sure Jeremiah didn't enjoy it. It was a ridiculous mockery probably as he set up these stones, which would be Nebuchadnezzar's throne. But notice what's going to happen.

Verse 11, he that's Nebuchadnezzar shall come and strike the land of Egypt. You're not safe from him. You're foolish. I would have saved you if you had stayed in the land, but now you have taken a one-way ticket, as I say, to death and disaster.

It's impossible to evade the Lord's judgment. Psalm 139, where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to heaven, if I go down to Sheol, if I take the wings of the morning and go to the furthest parts of the ocean, even there you will find me. What's Nebuchadnezzar going to do when he arrives?

[30 : 51] He is going to humiliate not just Egypt, but the gods of Egypt. That's the important thing. Verse 12, I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt.

He shall burn them and carry them away captive. The God of heaven, the God of Jeremiah, the God of Judah, the God of Israel is alive and well, and he is going to defeat the Egyptian gods.

Now there's hope there because back in the Exodus story, in Exodus chapter 12, the Lord says, I will pass through Egypt tonight and against all the gods of Egypt, I will carry out judgment.

I am Yahweh, I am the Lord. That's what's going to happen again. And in the obelisk of Heliopolis, the city of the sun, the sacred pillars which were dedicated to Amun-Ra, the head of the Egyptian gods, they are going to be destroyed.

And all the time, Jeremiah is going to be an embodiment of that word, they had rejected. Now, it can't have been easy for Jeremiah.

[31 : 58] Jeremiah knew, we actually don't know what happened to Jeremiah. He disappears from our sight as he goes down to Egypt. He must have been devastated and desolated.

Not only have these people disobeyed me, they forced me to come down to Egypt. I'm pretty certain because of earlier passages talking about Jeremiah and Baruch, that the Lord protected him while he was there.

We don't know. But there he continues. We'll see next week, not me next week, we'll be going back to this in August and hopefully finishing the book and t-shirts will be issued.

We've made our way through Jeremiah. Anyway, Jeremiah is going to be there with them in Egypt and he's going to be prophesying in Egypt.

So as we finish then, two things. These chapters speak of the inescapable word, inescapable to those long dead and long gone remnant of Judah, but still speaking powerfully after two and a half thousand years, still part of our scripture, apparent short term failure, but the truth, while it may appear to be vanquished, never fails in the long run.

[33 : 18] The truth of God will flourish. And secondly, as Peter puts this wonderfully in his second letter, you have the word of the prophets, he says, like a light shining in a dark place, the word for dark there is murky, foggy kind of place where it's difficult to see and easy to stumble, and you have that until the day dawns and the day star arises, until the time when God will be God, and the world will know it.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for these great words of the ancient prophet, which are not just ancient words, but living words for us today.

And we pray that as we continue our pilgrimage, that we may indeed obey the voice of the Lord our God, turn away from delusions and from deceptions, and travel in the light of the prophets and the apostles until the day dawn, the Lord himself returns.

Amen.