

Jeremiah Chapter 23 John Karmelich

1. In the last lesson, the focus was on the Israelite political leaders shortly before the famous biblical event of the Babylonians destroying Israel. This chapter "steps down a level" to address all Israel's political and spiritual leaders including "bad dudes" (false prophets). My point is God has things to say to any of us called to such roles. This chapter also includes an important message about the Messiah still coming (i.e., Jesus). It's here because with Israel being a "goner" soon, it is important to state how God's still going to keep His unconditional promises to that nation. The chapter then focuses on false prophets. This isn't about a weird guy who's walking about in a sandwich board! It's to realize God calls people (spiritual leaders and prophesy teachers) to explain what He wants us to know about Jesus and His plan for humanity. Since this chapter teaches about the coming of a true ruler (Jesus) and dealing with false ones, it teaches us what God expects of leaders.
 - a) I can just hear some of you thinking, "But I am not a pastor, civil leader or teach prophesy (biblical predictions), why should I care about any of this stuff?" Glad you asked! What I would answer is first of all, God wants us to discern between good leaders and bad ones. God wants us to spot the "real deal" versus false ones. Yes I'm going to discuss ways that we can tell the difference in this lesson. For those of us called to one of these roles, this is a lesson on what God expects of us in one of those roles, so please pay attention.
 - b) The other thing to keep in mind is Christianity is never meant to be "A billion solo acts for Jesus". God wants unity among believers in terms of working with other ones to together we can make a difference for Him. Therefore someone has to lead and this chapter is one of many places in the bible that give us lessons in how leaders should and shouldn't act as to make a difference for Him. Therefore, it's not just "for them", it's lessons for us what He expects of us as leaders or how we judge leaders. Yes a lot of this concept is taught in the New Testament as well. So why is it here? Keep in mind God spreads out key principals all through the bible therefore if somebody rips out a chapter, key themes are still there!
2. Before I get into the other specifics of this chapter, lets focus for a moment the good news of Jesus coming preached in this chapter. Why? Because at the end of the last chapter God put a big curse on the current Israel king that none of his sons would rule. Therefore, a lot of Israelites would be wondering, "What about God's unconditional promise that one of David's descendants would be the promised eternal king (i.e., the Messiah) to rule forever? It's necessary for Jeremiah to explain that here and now, and he does. As I explained in my last lesson, the virgin birth isn't just a cute miracle. It was a necessary step to get around that curse. The legal "adoption" process also made Joseph the legal father of Jesus as again, based on Numbers 27 (as I explained in the last lesson.)
 - a) Anyway, Jeremiah talks about the "branch". It's got nothing to do with tree branches. It's a word picture of a broken branch being planted to form a new tree. It's the idea that just as Israel was wiped out by the Babylonians, God preserved "a branch" that was used as to bring the Messiah into the world through Mary. I know this is old news for many of you. I just wanted everyone to grasp that as we read about the "branch", its prophecy that ties to Jesus coming in the world.
3. Speaking of prophecy, John you do a lot of that. How do we know you're a prophet? First, let me explain what a New Testament "prophet" is and isn't. It doesn't mean one is bible worthy. It just means God can use anyone to teach people about Jesus and explain bible prophecy. I've also met people who have a special gift to know things before they happen. It doesn't mean they can go to a hospital and say, "you'll live another 30 years and you're a goner tomorrow". It only means that at any time God can give people intuitions about future things. However, to be a biblical prophet means one has to be 100% right all the time. I don't want to try to beat those odds! To teach bible predictions accurately requires good study and homework and I try my best to teach the bible as accurately as I can and in context as much as possible. The best way to judge prophesy is simply to watch the results. Jeremiah himself will preach that in this lesson. Speaking of Jeremiah:

4. It's time for me to break down and actually summarize the chapter. That's why we're here:
 - a) The first four verses appear to pick up where Jeremiah left off in the last chapter. Giving a condemnation speech to Israel's leaders. In the bible "shepherds" is a common idiom for the leaders of a people. The word "pastor" literally means "feeder". The idea is God calls on a lot of us to "feed" people His word. Many have public pulpits and many teach God's word many other ways such as classroom teachers. There is a famous Christian motto that goes, "If you can do anything else, do it" (Charles Spurgeon). The point is simply that teaching is a calling and teachers "teach" because we can't stand not doing it.
 - i) That leads back to these verses. One of the main topics of this chapter is about the false teachers in Israel. It can refer to civil leaders that lead people astray or teach what's wrong (or ignore the problems at hand) as well as the spiritual leaders that teach false doctrines.
 - ii) So what would motivate false teachers? Sometimes false teachers do it based on a dream or series of dreams they've had and are convinced it's from God. The way to tell if something is "true or false" from God is first is it biblical, and two, tell it to the church as God gives some people the gift of spiritual discernment as well as a gift of preaching prophesy. Obviously some do it for fame or money. However, I would also add some people really believe the "dreams" they have. Personally I'm not one who trusts dreams. I match them up against His word for accuracy.
 - iii) Anyway, the first four verses are bad news as God promises He'll scatter away the bad leaders. To state the obvious, God holds spiritual leaders to a higher standard as God cares what we teach about Him. It's His reputation at stake! With that said we move from the bad news to the good news.
 - b) From Verses 5 to 8 focuses on the events around Jesus Second Coming. Why here, now?
 - i) The main reason is for the Israelites to realize despite all their problems, "this isn't it" for their existence as a nation. Let me broaden that question to ask, "Why does the bible spend so much space describing the Messiah (i.e., Jesus) ruling over the whole world?" Why is that such an important concept? So when we're down or when we're suffering, we can realize it won't be a permanent thing. God still has a wonderful plan for the future. So after all these thousands of years, why hasn't the coming of Jesus happen yet? First God's timing is God's timing, not ours. Second, the bible is full of predictions that have come true to validate it as God's word. The fact that Israel is an independent country again after 2,500 years of being under the rule of others gives me hope that God's still in charge and the Messiah is coming!
 - ii) Anyway, these verses lay out some hope in the middle of a lot of bad news.
 - c) Speaking of bad news, I present the rest of the chapter. It's both a history lesson as well as a current state of affairs from Jeremiah's time perspective. The focus is on false teachers as they lead many people away from God. The key point here is God's aware of what they're doing and yes they're going to be punished badly for turning people away from Him. I'd say that describes the chapter pretty well.
5. Instead of getting into those details now, I'd like to get back to the idea of false prophets. Let's be honest, they don't wear a button saying, "I'm a false teacher, come follow me!" I'd bet most of the false teachers through history have been great speakers and have great presentations. The way to discern the truth from the false is by comparing it to God's word and by letting them speak to say a roomful of Christians where some in that group have the ability to discern His truth. Yes, they are motivated by the usual things of fame, power and money. Sometimes they actually have had dreams where they believe God spoke to them. Again discernment and comparison to His word is the keys to interpretation, no matter what else they say.
6. OK, so what do you call this chapter, "Discerning between the true and the false" with a focus on how we're to look at our spiritual leaders. That's the essence of these forty verses. Yes, there are a lot more details, which is why I write a long lesson. Therefore, time to get started.

7. Chapter 23, Verse 1: "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. ² Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.
- a) Let's start by remembering where we left off. The last chapter focused on three of the last four kings in the land of Israel. That chapter was probably written before the last one was in power. A common nickname for leaders is "shepherds". In fact the word pastor means "feeder", so you can see the connection. The general idea is God calls the spiritual leaders to feed His word to the people. The obvious idea is God expects us to be His witnesses to the world around us. In order to be His witness, we need to understand what we're to be to the world around us. The pastor' role to teach God's truths and remind us of them.
 - b) Whenever somebody asks me about joining a certain church, I ask, "Do they regularly and systematically teaches His word"? After that is it a church where we can use their spiritual gifts to make a difference for Him? I mention this as that's where good teachers hang out!
 - c) So much for what they should be doing. Most of the text here focus on what they failed to do, which is "scattering the sheep". To state another obvious point, this is not discussing a literal flock of sheep. It's a word picture of those called to spiritual leadership and the rest of us. So how is it they were driving them away? I'm sure they wanted people to come to weekly synagogue service (for the tithes), so it's not that simple. Consider all the religious leaders just under the Christian banner who give sermons on being a good person and do the right thing, but never discuss His word or take it seriously. I remember talking to my neighbor many years ago how she liked her church because she was in and out of there in half an hour! I also met a man who told me many years ago, that he wasn't religious, but goes every weekend as it's good for business. My point is if you don't want to hear what it is God expects of us, there are lots of options out there to satisfy our other needs.
 - d) Coming back to Jeremiah, I suspect most people still went to a weekly service out of habit, but I also suspect the people also did Baal worship "to cover their bases", or just did what they felt like doing as if God didn't matter. If that's true then and now, how is it God held the leaders accountable? Could be for not teaching His word. Could be they didn't make any efforts to condemn sinful actions. Could be that they joined in the "cover their bases" practices. Could be that they engaged in blatant sins and had no interest in repenting. All I'm saying is corruption was rampant in the "church", then and now.
 - e) Bottom line, God holds the leaders accountable for how they/we teach His word and that fact alone keeps me in His word to teach it correctly let alone try to live like He desires.
 - f) What about the civil leaders? The obvious thing is they should lead in ways that also will be pleasing to God and not be bad examples to the people.
8. Verse 3: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.
- a) Now that we described the problem and the punishment in the first two verses, we'll now switch to God's solution. Keep in mind, "God's dilemma": How does He punish Israelites for their sins and still keep His unconditional promise that the Messiah will rule the world from Israel? That's why the Israelites had to return there. The first time's for Jesus to come into the world and die for our sins among many other reasons. The second time is for Him to rule over the world. So how do we know Israel won't be conquered and reappear some day in the future? Isaiah 11:11 describes God gathering them not just from Babylon but in a sense from all over the world. Sometimes I get asked is the United States in the bible? I like to answer Isaiah 11:11. It says, among the places Israelites will come from to return to Israel is "the coastlands of the sea". I believe that's part of modern Israel being gathered.

- b) Something to keep in mind when one is reading bible prophecy is that it's often written in patterns. That just means there is a short-term fulfillment to validate the writer as being a "genuine bible prophet" and a long-term fulfillment as well. In the case of these verses, I'd be willing to bet it refers to both the gathering seventy years after the captivity as well as a second gathering from "all over the place" that started in 1948. Ok, it's been seventy years since Israel became a nation why hasn't Jesus come yet? God's timing is God's timing. We can't speed up the dial! What about the fact that modern Israel is mostly secular? Again it is God's problem. I just figure if the world starts uniting against Israel like Revelation tells us they'll get religious very fast! Enough of that, back to the text.
 - c) Again, the text says God will bring them back "from all the countries" He's driven them. It says when God brings them back they will be fruitful and increase in number. Israel grew mightily in population shortly before Jesus first coming and a significant issue there now's a lack of real estate as their population continues to grow. So when Jeremiah wrote they'll be fruitful and multiply, it has come true.
 - d) That leads to the Verse 4: "(God) place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing". Has there been a time in the history of Israel were they haven't been afraid or none missing? I'd argue this verse has to be "post-Jesus coming" to fulfill that role. On one had, a short-term fulfillment came when the Israelites returned as part of the Medo-Persian Empire. The bible has several prophets from that time period. While things were far from perfect, the land of Israel remained part of that empire and lived without a significant threat until Alexander the Great showed up to change the course of Middle East History again.
 - e) That leads me back to the idea of a double fulfillment of prophesy. I'd also argue that this is "millennial" when the Israelites will live at peace and they will have faithful teachers. I also argue that what we do as saved believers in the millennium is work as priests to lead people closer to God. Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 speak of us as "priests". So if you don't like the idea of being a priest or pastor, "deal with it" as that'll be our job in the millennium. I'd rather do that then have a desk job for eternity, so hopefully I'll get a nice priestly role say in Hawaii! Anyway, I see a double fulfillment as the verse discusses no more fear, etc.
9. Verse 5: "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.
- a) For those of you who thought Verses 3-4 only refers to life there after the famous 70 year time period of the Babylonian captivity, I present Verses 5-6. This is definitely returning to the Messiah as a descendant of David ruling over Israel and "everyone will live in safety".
 - i) So how do Jewish people argue how they recognize the Messiah since those family records no longer exist? They argue that the Messiah will lead them to rebuild the temple. I'll just say that's the Antichrist to keep it simple. Then a "lot of bad stuff happens" until Jesus rules as the Messiah and Verses 5 and 6 take place.
 - b) Let me ask the question: John let's assume you're right and these verses do discuss when the Messiah rules over Israel. Why is there no mention of the First Coming here? Because the topic at hand is "bad shepherds versus the ultimate good shepherd". Every single part of what Jesus did in His First and Second Coming is either hinted at or stated within these pages of the Old Testament. In other words, it's not Jeremiah's main topic here, but it still is a big topic all over the bible, to put it mildly!
 - c) If you still have any doubt this is referring to the Messiah, notice the last phrase of Verse 6 that translated here, "The LORD Our Righteousness". The idea of the final word has to do with "doing what's right" (i.e., living as God desires). The good news is if we're saved, I'd argue we don't sin in the Millennium. For those who survive and repopulate the world at that time, they better get used to living as God desires, as that's how it'll work then!

- d) One final thing: Notice the reference to "Judah and Israel". For those who don't know, it's a reference to the Southern and Northern Israel kingdom. Even though the "North" died a long time before Jeremiah's time, God's reassuring the Israelites that descendants from the two kingdoms would return to live under the Messiah's rule. So does that mean everyone who's an Israelite will be saved? Hardly. It's simply the idea that when Jesus, the Messiah returns to rule over Israel, there will be descendants there that came from both kingdoms.
10. Verse 7: "So then, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when people will no longer say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,'⁸ but they will say, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' Then they will live in their own land."
- a) Here's the last two verses of "long term good news" before we get a lot verses on "the bad news" of why the captivity is going to occur. So are these verses discussing Babylon or is it another long-term reference? The key is the "where". If you look at a map, and if you're aware where Babylon is/was, it's pretty much due east of Israel. Verse 8 says the Israelites will return from "the north" and all the countries where God had banished them. If you're aware of modern Israel migration pattern, the largest number of Jewish people came there from Russia, which is north of Israel. Other than New York city, the largest migration was from Russia, which is what I suspect Verse 8 refers to. So why hasn't there been the same large migration from the United States there? The answer is life is fairly safe here and it is not a major factor to migrate (as opposed to visit) when life is comfortable here. Will there be more Jewish Americans migrating there? Don't know. I just know when Jesus returns to rule from there, there has to be an Israel to rule from. The point is the last century mark the "beginning of the end" in my opinion. Can it still be many years before "the big show" begins? Of course. I just know we're close to that occurring based on watching history of the last century unfold before our eyes.
- b) OK enough good news. Time for the bad news!
11. Verse 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.
- a) This is Jeremiah realizing the horrible things that are coming down in Israel and it makes him "stagger" when he considers how horrible its going to be. The analogy here is he feels like he's "staggering drunk" to contemplate this. Imagine if God gave you the insight via a vision of the destruction of everything you knew around you. Let's say you tried to warn people around you but no one took you seriously. That's how I picture Jeremiah here!
- b) So you know, he's just getting "warmed up" on the bad news here!
12. Verse 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.
- a) To discuss these verses remember that in the bible, adultery and idolatry are often used as interchangeable words. That's because adultery is cheating on one's spouse and idolatry's cheating on our relationship with God. Is it possible that adultery has run rampant? What I suspect is it's no worse than it is today! However, Israel at that time was full of spiritual leaders who lead people away from God and onto stuff. It'd be as if the "Sunday Sermon" focused on whatever book the pastor read that week instead of the bible itself. In this case the Israelite religious leaders secretly went after other gods as much as the people did.
- b) A little history might help here. In the book of Ezekiel (Chapter 8) he is shown a vision of how the religious leaders were secretly worshipping other gods within God's temple! I've got to admit I pondered that motivation. Best I figure, they probably felt God had let them down so they were secretly going after alternatives to "cover their bases". Anyway here in Verse 11 there is a reference to "wickedness in the temple". I suspect it's the same thought as both were written about the same time in history.

- c) The bigger picture idea is God's "ticked off" at the religious leaders of Israel for making an effort to lead the people away from God. As I've said on a handful of occasions, in Jewish thought, one of the worst sins is "Doing evil in God's name", because you're leading others away from Him. If you think Jesus was any lighter, He used what I call "the mafia verse". He stated that if anyone causes one of "these little ones" to stumble (lead them away from God) that it'd be better if a millstone (a large carved stone used in wheat preparation) was hung around the guilty party's neck and cast into the sea. (See Matthew 18:6 or Luke 17:2.)
 - d) Bottom line is God expects bible teachers and prophecy teachers to do so accurately with a goal of leading people closer to God then further away from Him. So whether a pastor or a bible teacher starts focusing on things other than the bible themselves or leads a life with a blatant emphasis on sin, either way not only are they being a bad witness for God, we're leading people away from Him, and to put it bluntly, it's a really bad thing!
 - e) As I've stated many times one thing that drives me to prepare hard for these studies is the realization that I'll be judged by a stricter standard than non-bible teachers. That concept motivates me more than any other bible verse (James 3:1). OK enough of me, time to get back to Jeremiah:
13. Verse 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.
- a) The bible doesn't tell us a lot what hell is like (or heaven for that matter) but it mostly tells us how to live "here and now". Every now and then we get a clue about the afterlife. Here is a verse that says those who lead others away from God are "banished to darkness". Yes, I believe it's a description of hell, but who knows, maybe it's just saying the "bad guys" are going to suffer greatly in the near future. Either way I don't want to be in their shoes.
 - b) Stop and consider the one's doing the teaching may believe that Jesus is God. What I like to ask people who say that is, "Prove it?" The "proof's in the pudding" so to speak. If they are leading people away from God people can claim whatever they want and even have a sincere heart about it. But if they're not "putting their money where their mouth is" they're heading to the place of "darkness".
 - c) While I'm in the neighborhood, let me talk a few seconds about hell. Lots of theories about eternal fires and eternal darkness. I've heard comedians joke that "after a few days won't a person get used to it and accept it?" I've stated for years that hell's for people who have no desire to live as God desires for all of eternity. It's been described as utter darkness where one lives forever with no light and no contact with others. Could be. That theory does tie to this verse and some of Jesus' comments about eternal suffering. All I know is I deserve to be there and so do you. None of us are perfect. If we're to spend eternity with a perfect being we'd have to be perfect ourselves or be perfectly forgiven. That's Christianity from a perspective of understanding what hell is and isn't. Hope that helps.
 - d) Coming back to the verse, the essential idea is whether or not those false prophets believe in God or not, the point is they didn't act on their belief which is proof they "aren't putting their money where their mouth is" so to speak.
 - e) If that didn't make the point about how bad things are, the next two verses are stronger!
14. Verse 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."
- a) Jeremiah now uses a "history lesson" to explain how bad things are about to be. As all my regulars know by now, Israel split into two kingdoms after King Solomon. The capital of the North one was called "Samaria". It's also a nickname for that kingdom. It died a little over 100 years before Jeremiah wrote this. The main reason the "North" died was they're given over to Baal worship and they got to a point where God couldn't change them.

- b) That leads to the Southern Kingdom called Judah where Jerusalem was and was the only one standing when Jeremiah preached. The underlying point is the "South" is worse, since they had the "North" as an example. When Jeremiah says "they committed adultery and a lie", that refers to the fact they "claim" they were worshiping God but as I've said over and over again now, "They didn't put their money where their mouth is" and they worshipped Baal and other deities while claiming to worship God and God alone.
 - c) If all of this isn't bad enough, Jeremiah then used an ancient history example from Genesis as he said in effect both the South and North are like Sodom and Gomorrah in the sense of both kingdoms being so wicked, God's got no choice but to wipe it all out.
 - d) OK John, this is all interesting ancient history. You're way overdue for one of your why is it we should care lectures? Hit us! Let me quote Billy Graham here who famously stated, "If God doesn't judge the United States, He owes Sodom and Gomorrah a big apology!" It means for us Christians that like those Israelites He expects us His witnesses to the world around us or we too could get wiped out like them!
 - e) But John, other than the Babylonian invasion and maybe the Roman one, no one has tried to destroy the United States like they did to Israel. No, but on the other hand there were a number of famous pastors who's churches died because the top guy became a bad witness for Jesus. I'm sure a lot of us have also seen less known Christians fall as they failed to live as a witness for Him. The issue isn't salvation it's being a witness for Jesus!
 - f) OK enough guilt for these verses. Let's try the next one.
15. Verse 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.
- a) Now we're getting into the specifics of the punishments to false prophets. They'll eat bitter food (poisonous I assume) and drink poisoned water. Whether Jeremiah is being literal or not, we can logically assume it wasn't a "career maker" when the Babylonians showed up and confronted those who argued, "Peace is coming" and "everything is going to be okay". So if these false prophets are so wrong, why the horrid punishment? The worst thing that they did was lead others away from God. That's the "millstone mafia punishment" that I'd mentioned earlier.
 - b) Let's remember their motivation. Sometimes it's plain old, fame and fortune. Sometimes it's a case where they had a dream and they thought, "I need to tell everyone the dream I had as it affects the future". As I said in the introduction, some do get "intuitive" feelings. It doesn't mean they can go to a hospital and say, "you'll live another 30 and you will die tomorrow". It just means some people do have gifts that something is up. In the area of speaking for God, I trust nothing but His word. As Paul said in Galatians 1:8, if an angel preached another gospel...in effect, don't believe it". Interpretation is always a challenge as we must interpret the bible with the bible and do our best to study passages in context. I don't claim to be perfect, but I study, pray and do my homework before writing.
 - c) All of that leads back to the false prophets. They were giving false hope to the Israelites as they gave their "dreams" of everything's going to be ok.
 - d) So if Jeremiah was saying "x" and the false prophets were saying "y" and let's say what the person is predicting hasn't happened yet, how do we know who's right? Time. Again we match things up with scripture and test it with the "body of Christ". One spiritual gift is a gift of "discernment". It's a spiritual way of spotting the true from the false. If there's still the issue of doubt, then let time see what's going to happen.
 - e) As I've joked for years, when someone says they got a message for me, my first reaction is, "What did God lose my phone number?" Then I simply think about what someone says in comparison to God's word. Beyond that, time will see what comes true.

16. Verse 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?
- a) So what would motivate someone to say, "You will have peace" especially if they claim to be a prophet? Money? False visions? Fame? Giving people what they want to hear? I'm suspecting it's some or all of those things. I'm guessing some of them simply had dreams of peace and for financial gain preached it even though God didn't approve.
 - b) So how does one become a prophet? Bottom line is one has to be "picked for it". There was at least one true prophet in the book of Acts "post Jesus" (Named Agabus, Acts 11:28) All I am saying is in the bible when someone is called to be a prophet God does the calling and I'd argue the receiver is "stuck" with that gift. Whether or not other people do have it after the bible was canonized is a debated topic. I consider a modern true prophet anyone who studies God's word and accurately teaches bible prophecy. It's not some magical gift as to see the future. It's simply understanding what the bible teaches, praying for guidance and accurately explaining it to others. Can one ask God for that gift? I suppose we can. I just figure that if you're doing it correctly and people are interested in how you preach it, that is an indication one has that gift.
 - c) So what about people who have intuition or "premonition" about things? I've seen people who have that gift. It's not something they can turn on or off. They just get them at times. What about "fortune tellers" and all that. The vast majority is fake. Once in awhile they'll be a person who has access to demonic powers whether they realize it or not. Personally I avoid that stuff as much as possible and pray when I encounter such a person. Enough of that, let's get back to Jeremiah.
 - d) Jeremiah's bottom line is all the fake prophets have never really sought God to find out in any way what is His desire. So how could people know they were fake? Easy. They gave messages that were not biblical. As Baal worship was common they said, "All is well". It's like telling people today who ignore God, "Go enjoy your life, everything is ok, as if there will be no accountability to God.
17. Verse 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.
- a) Speaking of God's judgment coming down, I present Verses 19-20. Keep in mind we have got a "double judgment" in mind. First it's the fact that the Israelites had gotten to a point where there was nothing God could do but bring that kingdom to an end, as they're not a witness for Him anymore! We've had many chapters and a few more coming up telling of the ways the Israelites will die at the hands of the Babylonians, so it's not good news. I'm speculating that eternal judgment is hinted at here. It's the idea of "You don't want to live by God's rules, then you'll live that way for eternity". If you know you're bible well, you'd also know that Babylon (think "tower of Babel") was the first place ever to organize a type of rebellion against God. (He said, "fill the earth and multiply" yet they stayed together!)
 - b) For the sake of those who haven't read all my Jeremiah lessons to date, let me explain why this generation got hit harder than say, those living today. Short version is God wanted to make an example out of them to tell us there's a horrid price our society pays when we no longer live as a witness for Jesus. Obviously there's a lot more too it, including the reason why God picked Babylon for this judgment. That city was the home of lots of idols. This is God saying to His people, "You want to worship things other than Me, this place will be full of such things. See how much they help you when I'm not around!"
 - c) Anyway the tone of these verses is that despite the false prophets saying, "All is well", we have Jeremiah here telling the truth that God's anger will not stop (in the sense that from our perspective it seems like God's angry) until the land of Israel is destroyed.

18. Verse 21: I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied.
- We've got more "they're in big trouble" verses here. Once more God's proclaiming these false prophets are in effect doing nothing but damage.
 - So why go on and on about this? Since it's too late for that generation anyway, I suspect a lot of this is for the readers to discern good from bad prophets. So how do we tell? As my father taught me (who was a banker), you have the tellers spend a lot of time counting all the money. The more time they spend with the real thing, the easier it is to spot the fake. I would argue it's the same with false teachers. The more time one spends with what's the real thing (The bible) the easier it is to spot what's fake. Jesus said we'd recognize people "by their fruits" (See Matthew 7:15-20).
 - Let's try a little tougher one. Suppose someone from a cult came knocking on your door. How do we tell if they're the real deal inviting us to church or a cult? Listen to what they have to say. If we know our bible, they're words will eventually give them away. There's a lot of material out there of things to say to Jehovah Witnesses or Mormon's, but even the smaller groups that we're not sure about is where we must "inspect their fruit".
19. Verse 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.
- Here we get an "only if" verse. It implies that if the false teachers really wanted to be the type of messenger from God that He wants us to be, all they have to do is seek Him.
 - So does that mean if they did, there would have been a lot more Jeremiah's around at that time? Who knows? The implication is we're called to be a witness for God. We're asked to draw close to Him and learn of Him. Remember that Jeremiah's addressing those who've been called to be Israel's spiritual leaders. This is God saying, "You want that job, great, I would say it's time for you to draw close to Me, learn my Word and learn how it is I want My people to behave. That's the essential point of Verse 22.
 - Speaking of drawing close to God, let's look at Verse 23:
20. Verse 23: "Am I only a God nearby,"⁰ 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.
- This is God saying, "Who do you think you're messing with anyway?" I know all things, and I judge all things. At the least all of you should know you're Israelites so you were called to be a witness for Me to the world around you. If you needed to learn more about Me, all you had to do was "ask" so to speak. Yes that message is for you and I as well!
21. Verse 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.
- Here we get a bunch of verses all dealing with false prophets who are "at it" because they had a dream. I don't know the number of false teachers there were around Jerusalem at that time, but it must have been enough to really get God "ticked off" and give us many a verse dealing with this.
 - So let me answer the question, "Why does God through Jeremiah go on and on about this? You'd think we get the point by now. I think part of it was for future generations who are studying the bible to realize that God's not to be messed with and just because we had the weirdest dream of our life, does not necessarily mean it's a message from God. Realize for Jeremiah's generation, it was too late. I suspect he goes on and on about this as to pound it in their heads that God's not to be trifled with. Just because you had a dream about what's in the future, it has to be tested against God's word, period!

- c) God's other concern is that who He calls He loves. Therefore anyone making the effort to drive people away from Him is again, in really bad eternal trouble! That's why Jeremiah's pounding the table so hard with this point. Verse 27 says "Their father drew people away through Baal worship, so the false prophets are drawing them away as well". Yes, that is my paraphrase of these verses. Baal was a local deity popular in that culture at that time. Baal worship was supposed to bring prosperity to one's life. Plus prostitution was used to entice Baal. The point was, the worship system around Baal became popular. Since we've got such a high emphasis on false teaching here, I get the impression it was a widespread, bad problem. OK enough of that, let's keep going.
22. Verse 29: "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"
- a) This is God saying through Jeremiah, "Hey you want powerful stuff? Check out my word as it blows away anything you can dream of saying. No preaching God's truth won't win anyone a popularity contest, but God's words come with power. When we call upon His spirit to guide us, that spirit goes out with the Word and does lead people to God and yes closer to Him. That's the motivation and it works! It's powerful and kills every argument a person can make against God's existence or His plans for mankind.
- b) Stop and consider why most religions are so popular. Because "works" are emphasized. It is the appeal that if we work hard enough we can be appealing to God or be a better male or female. Christianity in a sense teaches to "give up". You can't please a perfect God. All we should do is trust in His power to work through us and then and only then can He use us to make a difference for Him. That's living the Christian life "in a nutshell".
23. Verse 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.
- a) Wow, Jeremiah really gets on a roll here. He's claiming that the false prophets claim that the words they get are from God, but of course are just dreams.
- b) That leads to the question, "Can God speak to us through dreams?" If God is God, then I'd say He could do what He wants when He wants. I'm simply leery of dreams, and I would want to test them by the bible and then by time. If we had a dream say, a horrible thing is going to happen to a friend, I may tell them of that dream and that's that. As I said earlier, if God wants to tell me something, "He hasn't lost my phone number". Even if say I had a vision about a big destruction coming to my town, the only thing I know for sure is I still preach God's word because that's the only hope to survive we have. As I learned a long time ago, none of us are guaranteed a long life. How long we live is His business. All we can control is what we do with the time we've got!
- c) Again a reason Jeremiah is going on and on about this, is people believe false prophets as there is no evidence to contradict it. Someone could be a great speaker and proclaim God gave him a vision of the future. How can we tell if it's a true or false vision? As I said we match it up against His word or just think about what they're peddling in comparison to living as God desires we live.
- d) So if these guys are such bad news, why didn't God just strike them dead? Why allow the message to spread to those who don't know better? I suspect is it's because that message's what people want to hear. We want to be reassured by "holy men" that were ok just as we are. It appeals to the ego to here we doing life right when really we're not. Therefore God allowed them to continue "for a season" because that's what people wanted to hear. Yes it lead to destruction but God gives us free choice despite the consequences. Unfortunately, people are only concerned with "short term" consequences versus long term.

24. Verse 33: "When these people, or a prophet or a priest, ask you, 'What is the oracle of the LORD?' say to them, 'What oracle? I will forsake you, declares the LORD.'³⁴ If a prophet or a priest or anyone else claims, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' I will punish that man and his household.³⁵ This is what each of you keeps on saying to his friend or relative: 'What is the LORD's answer?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?'³⁶ But you must not mention 'the oracle of the LORD' again, because every man's own word becomes his oracle and so you distort the words of the living God, the LORD Almighty, our God.
- a) The good news is the rest of the chapter (hang in there, we're down to eight more verses), focus heavily on the phrase "The Oracle of the Lord". Let's just say it's used over and over again in the last part of this chapter. That term is someone asking, "What's God got to say about the matter?"
 - b) Let me put it this way, at this point in Jeremiah's life, Babylon had already made two trips through Israel and done a lot of damage. The third and final "wipe out" hasn't occurred as of yet. The point is many Israelites did see the "handwriting on the wall" so to speak as it's becoming obvious that destruction is near. Therefore some Israelites could ask Jeremiah in either a serious or sarcastic tone, depending upon the person, "What's God got to say?" It's my translation of "oracle of the Lord". Let's face it, many people don't really care about the issue of what God's got to say until of course, "it's obvious we're in really big trouble". So now is when people are bugging Jeremiah with the question, "What should be do? Yes we are desperate and now we're willing to listen.
 - c) By the way when the word LORD is in all capitals, it's the most holy name of God. It's just another way of saying to not mess with what God's got to say here.
 - d) Anyway, Jeremiah's answer to the question is in effect, "Oracle of the Lord", too bad, He's left the building so to speak". After claiming in a sense it's too late to turn back, Jeremiah's now focusing back on false prophets. They were using that phrase to describe for their own dreams assuming they were God inspired.
 - e) As I've stated a bunch of times in this lesson, there is always a "too late" with God. No we don't know when "too late" is, but it can occur. Again, the issue isn't salvation, it's about a life that can be used for God as a witness for Him. If we reach "too late" that's when He'll say to us in effect, "You want to worship things other than Me? Assuming you survive all of the bad stuff coming down, even the survivors will get their fill of "time wasters"!
25. Verse 37: This is what you keep saying to a prophet: 'What is the LORD's answer to you?' or 'What has the LORD spoken?'³⁸ Although you claim, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' this is what the LORD says: You used the words, 'This is the oracle of the LORD,' even though I told you that you must not claim, 'This is the oracle of the LORD.'³⁹ Therefore, I will surely forget you and cast you out of my presence along with the city I gave to you and your fathers.⁴⁰ I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace--everlasting shame that will not be forgotten."
- a) This chapter effectively ends with the fact that "doom's coming and all of you must accept it." No it is not the ultimate end of Israel as that's Jeremiah's topic of the next two chapters (my hint to read the next lesson!) but he is stating the fact that for any of us, when we fail to use our lives to make a difference for Jesus, there is a too late. For these Israelites, they in effect didn't care about God and the evidence was idolatry all over that land. I've stated a bunch of times that the one good thing that came out of the Babylonian captivity is it did cure the Israelites of idolatry, so in that sense as horrible as this was, God knew what He's doing as this did the trick.
 - b) The big question for you and me is what will it take to draw us close to God? Even for all of us veteran Christians, it's so easily to be sidetracked by life and get away from drawing close to God with our lives. I suspect most of us veterans have had our own "Babylonian Captivity" experiences to draw us back to God. For my younger readers, the question that you need to ponder is what is keeping you from using your lives to make a difference for Him? That's always the question to consider as that's why He made us in the first place!

c) Anyway, for those Israelites who lived about 2,500 years ago, the lesson here is "too late" is upon them. Most of them suffered horrible deaths. The "lucky ones" then lived as slaves in the Babylonian Empire. The point of all of this is God takes His desire seriously to have a close and personal relationship with each of us. Remember why we were created in the first place, to glorify God with our lives. That's why we were saved and that's what God's desire for our lives. Let's be honest, life is full of "false prophets" who want to draw us in any way away from God's desire for our lives. They don't wear badges saying "Hey I'm a false prophet follow me!" That's why we can only judge people based on what they say as they either try to draw us closer to God or further away from Him. One reason why we're to pray for the Spirit to guide us, is so that He'll help us distinguish between the things or people that will lead us closer to Him or further away from Him. Which is a good reason to end this lesson in prayer. Thanks as always for reading and I hope all of this helps each of us draw closer to Him.

26. Heavenly Father, As always, we thank You for giving our lives purpose and meaning. Thank You for separating from non-believers so we can use our lives to make a difference for You. We ask that the Spirit guide us so that we have the power to do Your will as well as to help us discern what is true and what is false and to use our lives for Your glory. Guide us so that we can glorify You with our lives. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen