

“Dueling Prophets”
Jeremiah 28:1-17
January 10, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We will be studying the book of Daniel this winter and spring. I have selected this part of Scripture because I think it speaks well to the situation we find ourselves in as Christians in America today. That situation is one of being exiles in a foreign land, just as Daniel and his countrymen experienced in Babylon. They were living in a land that was hostile to their beliefs, a hostility that at times rose to the level of threatening their very lives. While the hostility we face may not be as severe as theirs, I think it is clear to all that there is a growing hostility to classic and orthodox Christianity in our land. To espouse classic Christian teachings such as heterosexual marriage, sexual behavior limited to marriage, Jesus as the only way to heaven, or the Bible as the revealed word of God puts one well out of the mainstream of American culture.

We want to begin our study of Daniel with two chapters from Jeremiah. These chapters help us understand something of the times and historical circumstances of Daniel. Jeremiah 28 dates itself at the fourth year of Zedekiah, king of Judah. That would make it about the year 594-593 BC, during the twilight years of the existence of the nation of Judah, the southern kingdom, just prior to their Babylonian exile. Zedekiah was the youngest son of the great King Josiah, who had ruled in Judah for several decades and led the nation in a time of spiritual renewal. The big thing going on in the world at this time was the decline of the mighty Assyrian empire. Assyria had been the superpower for quite some time, but within a space of only thirty years it was weakened to the point that other nations attempted to seize the power that had formerly belonged to Assyria. Chief among those were Egypt and Babylon, the latter nation being led by King Nebuchadnezzar, who we will encounter repeatedly in the book of Daniel. Judah chose the wrong side and allied itself with Egypt against Babylon. That led to Babylon's first invasion of Judah, at which time several articles from the temple were taken back to Babylon, and Zedekiah was installed by Nebuchadnezzar as Judah's king. Zedekiah later rebelled against Babylon's rule, which led to the second invasion by Nebuchadnezzar. This one was far more serious than the first, resulting in the complete destruction of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, the slaying of Zedekiah's sons before his own eyes, followed by his blinding and then his exile to Babylon. A third invasion occurred when Gedaliah, the governor installed by Nebuchadnezzar, was assassinated. The events of our chapter happen between the first and second Babylonian invasions. It could all have been much better had Judah listened to its prophet, Jeremiah. God's word through Jeremiah was that Nebuchadnezzar was God's appointed means to bring God's discipline to wayward Judah. But once again Judah would not submit to God's word,

making things far worse for them. As we are going to see, they chose the wrong prophet and listened to Hananiah.

I. Hananiah's False Prophecy – v. 1-4

Hananiah prophesied a message far more positive than Jeremiah's, one that Jewish patriots would have found very appealing. Where Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years (25:11-12), Hananiah claimed that God's word to him was that it would only be two years in duration (28:3). Notice that Hananiah introduced his message with the common prophetic formula that Jeremiah also used. **“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.”** So Israel was confronted with two prophets, both claiming to speak for God but giving two messages that could not both be true.

Such a situation is not unique to Jeremiah's time. The same happens today, with different truth claims about God and his ways. Are there many paths to heaven, or is Jesus the only way? Was Jesus the Son of God or was he just an inspiring teacher? People claiming to speak for God will answer differently those questions and many others of great importance. How do we know what is true? Two answers commonly and erroneously given in our day to this question are that both are right and both are wrong. There are some who would say that everyone is right about any religious truth claim they make, even when they each say things that could not possibly both be true. They accomplish this seemingly impossible task by adding two simple words, the words “for you.” Something can be true “for you” while the opposite can be true for your neighbor and neither of you be wrong. The irrationality of that is staggering. You would never be able to build a building or treat sick people with such a view of truth. Yet in the far more significant area of eternal life we accept such irrationality.

The other response to conflicting truth claims is the more cynical conclusion that both are wrong. Because people claiming to be experts disagree on these matters, truth is beyond any of us. We just have to be agnostics about all truth claims.

We have far greater resources than did Jeremiah's hearers for deciding which of two competing truth claims is valid, because we have the completed word of God in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. But how do we know that these Scriptures are true? There is no ironclad argument I or anyone else can give you that will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Bible is in fact the inspired word of God. How then can this be known? It is the work of God's Spirit to confirm in our hearts that the Bible is true. So the best way to know that the Bible is true is the same way we know electricity is true—use it. So the application is simple. In our truth-challenged world, it is even more

essential that we make the regular study of the Bible a priority in our lives. We must do this regularly throughout the week and consistently throughout our years.

II. Jeremiah's Response – v. 5-11

We can see from Jeremiah's tepid response to Hananiah that it is primarily God's work to defend his word. After Hananiah prophesied that the Babylonian exile would last only two years, Jeremiah responded ironically, **"Amen! May the Lord do so!"** (v. 6). He loved his nation and would have liked their suffering to be limited to such a brief time. But he was a prophet, and he knew that his prophecies couldn't be held hostage to his desires. He knew that the most important thing wasn't what he wanted, but what God had said. He must be faithful to that no matter what. Hananiah had no such scruples about faithfulness to God's word. He liked to be liked, and his message was definitely the more popular one.

After his ironic response, Jeremiah simply repeats something from Deuteronomy to help Israel test the authenticity of prophets. One of those tests was simply whether or not the prophecy came true. So Jeremiah was saying, in effect, "We'll just have to wait two years and see which prophet is speaking truthfully." Jeremiah was secure enough to leave it with God to deal with this prophet in his time and in his way. God will defend his word. And as we'll see in our next point, he's not going to wait two years to do so.

Hananiah seems emboldened by Jeremiah's passive response. He walks over to Jeremiah and rips the yoke from his neck. A yoke is a wooden collar that goes around draft animals like oxen when they are pulling a wagon. It ties them together so they pull evenly. Sometimes you'll see an old wooden yoke hanging up in a restaurant as part of their interior decorations. Why was Jeremiah wearing a yoke in the first place? God had told him to do so. In the previous chapter we read, **"Thus the Lord said to me: 'Make yourself straps and yoke-bars, and put them on your neck'"** (27:2). Then he gave the reason for this a little later in that same chapter. **"If any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation"** (27:8). So it would seem that Jeremiah was walking around for a time with this yoke on his shoulders. It's like God is speaking to children when he speaks through Jeremiah. The words by themselves aren't enough, so they need pictures too.

Hananiah was bold enough and foolish enough to remove what God had told Jeremiah to wear. God will respond to defend his word, and we see him doing that next.

III. The Lord's Response – v. 12-17

The Lord's response to Hananiah came not directly to him, but through Jeremiah. That in itself is an answer. By bringing his word to Hananiah through Jeremiah God was saying in effect, "I have never spoken through you, Hananiah, and now in this word of judgment I speak not directly to you but through the one whose word you have challenged, my servant Jeremiah."

God's first word to Hananiah through Jeremiah was this: **"You have broken wooden bars, but you have made in their place bars of iron"** (v. 13). Jeremiah's yoke that Hananiah had broken was God's word of judgment, but it was also an act of mercy. Judah was being told to submit to God's judgment through Babylon. Had they done so, their lives would have been significantly better. But in the stubbornness of their hearts, they would not submit to God's judgment, with the result that the nation was brought to ruin. The same is true for us. We are to submit to the yoke God has assigned us to bear, and if we stubbornly refuse, things get much worse. Let me give three examples of that.

Children, God has placed upon you a yoke in the form of the authorities he has placed in your lives, the first of which is your parents. If you do not submit to their authority and accept the limitations of doing so, then there is a much more painful yoke you will have to wear. The wooden yoke will be replaced by an iron yoke, and it will lead to great pain and difficulty in your life.

A second example is to accept the limiting circumstances of your life. Let me mention just one of those—the body God has given to you. I suppose all of us have aspects of our bodies that we would not have chosen for ourselves. I would not have chosen to have male-pattern baldness if I had been given an option. You may think of yourself as too heavy, too thin, too dark, too light, too tall or too short. But God is the author of all these things, and we are to submit to him in faith. The failure to do so results in the iron bars of insecurity. I happened to listen this week to a TED talk by the supermodel Cameron Russell. Toward the end of her 2012 talk she said that people often ask her, "What is it like to be a model?" She goes on to talk not about the glamour we all imagine, but the deep insecurity she feels. "And I'm insecure because I have to think about what I look like every day. And if you ever are wondering, 'If I have thinner thighs and shinier hair, will I be happier?' you just need to meet a group of models, because they have the thinnest thighs, the shiniest hair and the coolest clothes, and they're the most physically insecure women probably on the planet."

Third, and just like the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day, we must accept the judgment of God for our sin. When we do so, we find that there is an answer to our sin through Jesus. He died to pay for it. If we fail to do so, we

will have to pay for it ourselves. Every sin must be paid for, either by the sinner who committed the sin or by Jesus. When we accept the wooden yoke of telling the truth about our sin, we find the joy of forgiveness through Jesus. When we refuse to do so, we make for ourselves an iron yoke that will require us to pay eternally for our sin.

God took very seriously Hananiah's presumption in speaking for God when God had not given a word to him. He said that Hananiah would die within the year. He would die before the two years he had said would see the overthrow of the Babylonian rule of Judah. His was such a serious sin because he had **"made this people trust in a lie,"** and when you trust in a lie, death can result. That's why in the laws of our nation, you can't make a claim about the ability of any medicine to help with an illness unless the FDA has approved that treatment. If someone claimed that their special vitamin could cure cancer, they would be causing people to trust in a lie, with potentially deadly results. If people believe that there is hope for eternal life outside of Jesus, they are trusting in a lie, with deadly results. If people believe that God's commands come from anything other than his loving desires for us, the results are deadly.

CONCLUSION:

So the first thing we learn about life in exile is the essential importance of truth, and that truth is found in God's revelation to us. Think of life as a giant maze where every path but one leads to some kind of death trap. It doesn't matter how quickly or efficiently you travel down a path if it's the wrong path. What matters is being on the right path. This is a very different metaphor, of course, than the one often spoken today, in which every path leads to a good end. People can just choose whatever path suits them, and things will be okay in the end. To believe that is to trust in a lie. All paths lead to death except one. But in our imaginary maze, you can't see over any of those walls, so you have no way of knowing where any path leads. Then imagine that every time a choice has to be made between two options, a cross marks the correct path. There are times when the path so marked may look too difficult and narrow, but if you trust the cross, you will be brought to your final destination.

Jesus is God's ultimate prophet, the one upon whom we can rely to bring us to eternal life. Our primary need is to listen to him. We listen not only to his words in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but also to the Old Testament because Jesus taught that it is the Word of God. And he also taught that he would lead his disciples into all truth after he left, so we also accept the writings of the rest of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit has led the Church to accept. Let me encourage and challenge you as a fellow exile to read carefully God's word and to follow it as your only source of truth.