

When the Prophet Speaks a Hard Truth

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

I have a good friend that I would never seek advice from... and it has nothing to do with how intelligent he is, or his level of success in life, or even his level of education... but the reason why I never ask him for advice is because I know that *no matter what I am struggling with* (that he isn't going to challenge me) but he's going to tell me exactly what I want to hear...

Ever meet someone like that?...

If so, then you might better understand the confrontation between the two prophets (Hananiah and Jeremiah) who are mentioned in our first reading this morning (from the 28th chapter of Jeremiah) ...

And just to give you a little background information – let me simply mention that for at least 100 years before this book was written God kept sending other prophets into the Holy land (namely Micah and Isaiah) telling the people to repent of their sins... warning God's faithless and rebellious people (to turn away from idol worship) and to not ignore the social injustice that was taken place in their land...

And yet, the people did just that – they not only ignored the plight of the poor as they built great palaces for themselves while many went hungry (but they also ignored the call of the prophets to turn back to God and instead they continued worshiping idols)...

And then in the year 586 BCE (the southern Kingdom of modern day Israel – known as Judah at the time – where the city of Jerusalem is and the Temple was located) was attacked by the Babylonian empire... in fact, to this day Jews remember that time period as being one of the most painful in their history (as it destroyed not only the entire city but it also brought down the Temple)... and not only that – but large portions of the population of Jews were sent into the world as exiles and as slaves... it was a time of national tragedy and mourning...

Needless to say, the people were crushed... their dreams had been dashed... their hopes were taken away... and like it would be for us today (the people tried to make sense of what to do and how to respond)...

and so they turned their attention to two prophets – one named Hananiah (and another named Jeremiah) in hopes that they might get a word of hope...

Now what's interesting about their prophecies (and about these two men) is that both men preached very different messages...

And the way that the story is told - Hananiah told the people what they wanted to hear (and he did give them hope – and he painted a very rosy picture of the future)... in fact, he told the people not to worry (that in two years everything would return to normal – that the exiles would come home – and that the Temple would be rebuilt)... and life would return to normal....

and it was a wonderful message (exactly what people wanted to hear)... the only problem was (it wasn't true) and it certainly wasn't a message from God... it was nothing more than a false hope (coming from a false prophet)...

But what ended up being the true message from God came from the lips of Jeremiah (who told the people a very difficult *but honest message* that no one wanted to hear) – that the national tragedy that they were encountering was God's judgement for the way they had been living... in fact, he tells us in verse 8 (of our first reading) – “*that from ancient times the prophets warned the people that God sends wars, and famines, and plagues against many kingdoms and nations (who rebel against God)*”... and both Jesus and John the Baptist said the same thing – “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*”...

And what made the message sting a little more was that he also said that God was now using the Babylonian Empire as an instrument for their punishment... as a rod to discipline... and what made the message of prophecy even more difficult to hear (was that Jeremiah told the people not to resist the Babylonians - but to submit to them)... that to resist the situation (was fruitless)...

And as you can imagine – the people hated Jeremiah and his message (and like they wanted to do with Jesus) the people were always looking for ways to kill him or shut him up... **because never once did Jeremiah tell the people what they wanted to hear... instead, (even though it was unpopular) Jeremiah told the people what they needed to hear – that the only real way their peace would return (was not by returning home – or returning to the life they once knew) but by repenting and turning back to God – with all their heart, mind, and soul...**

You know, this week as I was thinking about how the people who heard Jeremiah's message responded – I couldn't help but think about our own world today... and how we can so easily tune out any message that doesn't sit well with us...

In fact, if you don't like the president (all you have to do is turn on CNN)... and if you don't like what the Democrats are saying (just turn on Fox News)... if you don't like the doomsday reports related to the Virus (you can always find another way to interpret facts and statistics)... and, of course, if we don't like the message of God – we can tune out of that too... all with the click of a button....

But that was exactly what led the people in Jeremiah's day into further trouble... they didn't want to look at themselves (and see how their sinful behaviors were destructive)... how they were deceitful, and lustful, and perverted, and far from the Word of God...

And the Bible tells us that because of their rebellion towards God that tragedy fell upon all the people... one that turned the life they once knew upside down (and into turmoil)... and still – the people refused to take a good look at themselves and change... and still they ignored the prophets...

Now what I can't do is explain to you why we have so many terrible things happening to us today... why we have this plague – or the worst social unrest in a generation – an economy in great turmoil – millions of people out of work – businesses failing - fear among the people – death tolls climbing – the potential for a civil war (or war with another nation)... and I have no idea why all of these things are happening quickly and seem to only get worse day by day...

But what I do know from God's Word – and from studying the Book of Jeremiah (is that in the middle of any disaster or national tragedy that we face) we are to repent.... We are to take a look at our own lives (and the warning signs that the end is near) and repent... that now is the day to turn back to God...

In fact, do you remember the story in Luke 13... it tells the story of a tower in Siloam falling upon 18 people and they all die – and the people wondered to themselves (*“were they worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem?... is that why they died?”* They wondered)... And do you remember what Jesus said?... he said, *“No, but unless you all repent you will all perish”*... and Jesus recognizes that during national tragedy we are to repent (to recognize our sinfulness and turn back to God)...

And that's why we are to listen to the Word of God (and the signs around us) – and not do what the people in Jeremiah's day did (and ignore it)... instead, the Bible tells us that we are to repent, turn back to God, and ignore any false prophet who tells us differently...

But let me add – that in the midst of all of this rebellion and the prophet’s warnings to turn back to God (Jeremiah also had a word of hope)... he didn’t just preach a message of doom and gloom (but that in 70 years they would come back to the land)... and in fact, God tells Jeremiah to buy land and put the deed in a jar (to remind the people – as a symbol - that eventually they will come back)... and in Jeremiah 31 we hear the Lord’s promise to those willing to return to the Lord,

“I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people... “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

And as you know, future days would come – and God would indeed give them a new heart (a new covenant) – and that would be because Jesus would enter into the disaster of our sin (by being arrested, flogged, crucified – and take on the disaster of our sin (to be our remedy))... and to be the hope of salvation for the world...

And as difficult as these days are right now - He is still our hope today and always – (that nothing in the world is going to save us from true death – especially not a vaccine) – apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ... and in the midst of all that we’re going through right now (the message of God is simple - turn back to the Lord) and put your hope in Jesus... and you will be saved... and through his love you will find peace for your souls...

May the peace of our Lord and Savior be made known to you on this day... May His healing hand be upon our lives and upon our world... and may the Love of God live in our hearts – now and forever...

In Jesus’ name we pray... **Amen!**