

Jeremiah 23 — Woe to False Shepherds, Hope in the Righteous King, and the Fire of God's Word

1) Woe to the Shepherds Who Scatter (Jeremiah 23:1–4)

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord. “Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: ‘You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,’ says the Lord. ‘But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,’ says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:1–4)

God calls His people “My sheep.” Leaders exist to feed, protect, and care for them—not to use, fleece, or scatter them. The Lord promises accountability for unfaithful shepherds and a future in which His flock is tended well and made secure. God’s heart has not changed: He desires pastors who open His Word, guard the vulnerable, and lead with integrity.

2) The Promise of the Righteous Branch (Jeremiah 23:5–8)

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” (Jeremiah 23:5–6)

God’s answer to failed shepherds is a faithful King—the Righteous Branch from David’s line—who rules with justice and secures His people. This title, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” reveals a profound truth: our standing with God does not rest on our performance but on God Himself as our righteousness.

Followers of Christ confess that this promise finds its true fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who shed His blood on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and rose from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord (Romans 4:25; First Corinthians 15:3–4). Whatever one’s view of future history, the center is not a timetable but the King who gives His people righteousness, peace, and safety.

3) The Grief of a Holy God and the Corruption of Leaders (Jeremiah 23:9–15)

“For the land is full of adulterers; ... both prophet and priest are profane; yes, in My house I have found their wickedness,” says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:10–11)

Jeremiah trembles because sin has become public, normal, and even religiously endorsed. When leaders indulge deceit and immorality, they strengthen the hands of evildoers (Jeremiah 23:14). God warns that such paths are like “slippery ways in the darkness” (Jeremiah 23:12). Holiness must begin in God’s house, especially among those who speak in His name.

4) False Assurance vs. God's Council (Jeremiah 23:16–22)

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord. ... They say to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, ‘No evil shall come upon you.’” (Jeremiah 23:16–17)

Counterfeit preaching promises peace without repentance. But had these prophets truly stood in God's council, they would have turned the people from their evil ways (Jeremiah 23:22). Real preaching does not flatter; it calls to repentance, exposes idols, and points to God's mercy.

5) God's Nearness and Omniscience (Jeremiah 23:23–27)

“Am I a God near at hand,” says the Lord, “and not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?” (Jeremiah 23:23–24)

God is not distant. He sees through facades, titles, and platforms. Nothing is secret before Him. That truth should comfort the sincere and trouble the deceitful. He knows our motives and our messages.

6) Wheat vs. Chaff; Fire and Hammer (Jeremiah 23:28–32)

“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?” says the Lord. “Is not My word like a fire?” says the Lord, “and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:28–29)

Dreams and impressions, even when sincere, are chaff if they are detached from Scripture. God's Word is wheat—nourishing, substantial, and life-giving. It is fire to purify and a hammer to shatter hardness of heart. Any word that lightly treats sin or loosely handles Scripture does not build God's people.

7) Beware Religious Slogans; Ask What God Has Actually Said (Jeremiah 23:33–40)

“Thus you shall say to one another: ‘What has the Lord answered?’ and, ‘What has the Lord spoken?’ ... For you have perverted the words of the living God.” (Jeremiah 23:35–36)

In Jeremiah's day, people tossed around the phrase “the burden of the Lord” as spiritual jargon while ignoring God's actual message. God rejects hollow catchphrases. The right question is simpler and weightier: “What has the Lord spoken?” Let us put away slogans and return to hearing and obeying the plain Word of God.

Practical Application

1. Measure ministry by Scripture, not spectacle. Ask of every sermon, strategy, or song: *Does this turn people from sin to God and form Christlike character?* (Jeremiah 23:22; Second Timothy 3:16–17)
2. Pursue integrity in leadership. Shepherds are called to feed, not fleece. Pay those who labor fairly, protect the vulnerable, and tell the truth even when it costs (Ezekiel 34:2–4; First Peter 5:1–4).

3. Let the Word be your diet. Build your life on wheat (Scripture), not chaff (spiritual trends). Read, hear, meditate on, and obey the Bible (Psalm 1:1–3; James 1:22).
4. Live openly before a near God. Since nothing is hidden from Him (Jeremiah 23:24), confess sin quickly and walk in the light (First John 1:7–9).

A Challenge for Believers

Will you submit to the fire and hammer of God's Word? Let it burn away compromise and break stubborn places. Refuse flattering messages that promise comfort without repentance. Ask God to make you a truth-teller with compassion—one who loves people enough to warn, and loves God enough to obey. Seek Christ's heart for His flock: feed the sheep, protect the weak, and model holiness.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

God is not far from you. He sees you, knows you, and loves you. Sin separates us from God, but Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross to pay your debt, and He rose from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord. He offers you forgiveness, new life, and peace with God today.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31)

“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Pray from your heart:

“Lord Jesus, I believe You died for my sins and rose again. Forgive me, cleanse me, and make me new. I turn from my sin and trust You as my Savior and Lord. Teach me to follow You. Amen.”

If you have called on Him, begin to read the Bible (begin with the Gospel of John), pray daily, and gather with a Bible-teaching study group that will feed you with the Word and walk with you in the way of Christ.

Summary: Jeremiah 23 exposes false shepherds, promises the Righteous Branch who gives us God as our righteousness, and summons us back to the living Word that is fire and hammer. Come under the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who saved us by His blood and whose resurrection declares Him God, Savior, and Lord.