

Jeremiah's Way

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The Path of a Christian Is Influenced by God's Word

Ephesians 1:17 records Paul's prayer that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him. That prayer opens onto a simple but weighty subject: the path of a Christian ought to be influenced by God's word.

The world changes rapidly. Men are confident that it changes faster now than it ever has before — from hunter-gatherers to subsistence farmers to factory workers to something that shifts every six months. Against all of that change, what remains constant is the word of God. And the person who roots their life in that word will find it speaking with precision and relevance to whatever moment they find themselves in. That is what we seek to demonstrate from a passage in Jeremiah that is remarkably apt for a time of national upheaval and political noise.

The Time: Kings, Captivity, and Upheaval

To understand Jeremiah 28, we need to know the moment it was written into. Second Chronicles 36:5 tells us that Jehoiakim began to reign at twenty-five years old, did evil in the sight of the Lord, and was taken by Nebuchadnezzar and carried to Babylon. The vessels of the house of the Lord went with him.

Jeremiah had a word from God about Jehoiakim: he shall be buried with the burial of an ass, dragged along and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem. And about his successor Jeconiah — also called Joiachin or Coniah — God said through Jeremiah: though Coniah were a signet upon my right hand, yet will I

pluck thee thence. He would be given into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. He and his mother would be cast out into another country, and there they would die.

So: one king buried like a dead donkey, his body thrown outside the city. The next king taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Then Zedekiah came to the throne — a weak man, afraid of his own courtiers, afraid of the Jews who had fled to the Chaldeans, a king who said of himself, the king is not he that can do anything against you. It was a time of upheaval, of one king after another, of the great power of Babylon increasingly dominant over the land Israel had once ruled.

Hananiah's Prophecy — Make Israel Great Again

Into this moment stepped Hananiah the son of Azur, a prophet from Gibeon, speaking in the house of the Lord before the priests and all the people. His message, recorded in Jeremiah 28, had two main points.

First, God was going to bring back all the vessels of the Lord's house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon. Within two full years. The temple vessels — the gold and silver articles that were the visible markers of Israel's unique standing before God — would be restored. Second, Jeconiah the king would be brought back from Babylon and restored to his position. The exiles would return. The yoke of Nebuchadnezzar would be broken.

Abbreviated plainly, Hananiah's message was: God will make Israel great again. Everything that had been lost — the temple treasures, the rightful king, the national dignity — would be returned. Within two years. God had said so.

Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying, I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years will I bring again into this place all the vessels of the Lord's house. — Jeremiah 28:2–3

The internal contradiction in his prophecy is worth noting: in verse 2 he says I have broken the yoke — past tense — and in verse 4 he says I will break the yoke — future tense. Both cannot be true at once. But the people were not listening for logical consistency. They were listening for what they wanted to hear. And Hananiah gave it to them.

What Actually Makes a People Great

To appreciate how hollow Hananiah's prophecy was, it helps to go back further and ask: what actually made Israel great in the first place? The answer is given by Moses himself in Exodus 33, in the aftermath of the golden calf, when he interceded for the people and God proposed to send them to Canaan without His presence.

Moses would not accept that. He said: wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? Is it not in that thou goest with us? So shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people upon the face of the earth. What made Israel distinct from every other nation on earth was not their military strength, or the beauty of their land, or the wisdom of their rulers. It was the presence of God with them.

And what came with that presence? Exodus 34 fills in the answer. The Lord passed by Moses and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. Grace, mercy, goodness, truth. Then followed commandments — a covenant, a structure of life in relationship with God. And Moses came down from the mountain with his face shining, because he had been in the presence of the Lord. And finally there was the tabernacle — the place for God to dwell in the midst of His people.

These are the things that made Israel great: God's presence; His grace and mercy; goodness and truth; the covenant with its commandments; the face that shone from being with God; the place of His dwelling. Hananiah's prophecy contained

none of them. There was no mention of God's presence. No grace or mercy. No goodness and truth. No face shining. No tabernacle. Only the return of the vessels and the reinstatement of the king. An outward restoration with nothing inward behind it.

Jeremiah Went His Way

Jeremiah's initial response to Hananiah is remarkable. He said, Amen. The Lord do so. He did not immediately denounce the prophecy. He expressed a genuine wish that it might be true — that God would bring the captives back, restore the temple vessels, break the yoke of Babylon. There was no trace of professional jealousy, no instinct to protect his own prophetic territory.

But then he added the decisive word. The prophets before me and before thee of old prophesied of war and evil and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. The prophet that prophesieth of peace — when his word comes to pass, then shall that prophet be known that the Lord hath truly sent him. He was not denouncing Hananiah directly; he was applying the standard. We will see.

Hananiah then broke the wooden yoke that Jeremiah had been wearing as a prophetic symbol, declaring that God would likewise break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from the neck of all nations within two years. He had the last public word. And Jeremiah went his way.

Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way. — Jeremiah 28:11

That sentence deserves to stand on its own. Hananiah had performed a dramatic gesture, had spoken in God's name, had the crowd's attention, had given the people exactly what they wanted to hear. And Jeremiah went his way. He did not argue. He did not demand a public retraction. He did not stay to correct every error. He went his way.

The Servant of the Lord Must Not Strive

Second Timothy 2:24 illuminates what Jeremiah's way looked like: the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. That is Jeremiah's way. He was a servant of Jehovah. He knew what his responsibilities were and what they were not. His responsibility was not to win every public argument, not to demolish every false prophecy in real time, not to ensure that Hananiah's errors were corrected before the assembled crowd.

There is a temperament, common in times of upheaval, that feels compelled to respond to every voice that says the wrong thing. If someone prophesies smooth things, the temptation is to mount an immediate refutation. But the servant of the Lord is not called to strive. He is called to go his way — to do what God has given him to do, to speak what God has given him to speak, and to leave the rest with the Lord.

People looked at Jeremiah and saw a man who was losing the argument. A prophet who had no answer to the dramatic scene of the broken yoke. A man out of step with the times, lacking the energy and vision of someone like Hananiah who understood the moment and knew what the people needed to hear. Jeremiah went his way. And the Lord was with him.

The Word That Came Afterward

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah after Hananiah had broken the yoke. The message was pointed: thou hast broken the yokes of wood, but thou hast made in their place yokes of iron. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him.

The yoke of Babylon would not be broken in two years. It would become heavier. Then came the personal word to Hananiah: Jehovah hath not sent thee,

and thou makest this people to trust in a lie. Therefore this year thou shalt die, for thou hast spoken revolt against Jehovah. In the seventh month of the same year in which he had prophesied — two months after he had spoken — Hananiah died.

The prophet who spoke what the people wanted to hear died within the year. The prophet who went his way continued. The book of Jeremiah has many chapters after chapter 28. God had much more for Jeremiah to do and to say, because Jeremiah was where God had put him, doing what God had given him to do.

A Word for the Turn of the Year

We stand at the close of 2023 and the opening of 2024, living in a country in profound upheaval and distress. Voices on all sides are explaining what has happened, what is happening, what must happen. Some of those voices tell people what they want to hear. Some promise restoration, returned greatness, the reversal of what has been lost. The analysis can be sophisticated. The passion can be genuine. But if the word is not connected to God's word — if it has nothing of His presence, His grace, His mercy, His goodness, His truth — it is Hananiah's prophecy.

What the passage from Exodus 33 and 34 lays out as the source of a people's true greatness has not changed. It is not the return of the vessels — the visible emblems of former status. It is the presence of God. It is the face that shines from being with Him. It is grace and mercy, goodness and truth. It is the commandments of a covenant relationship. It is the place where God dwells in the midst of His people. None of that is a political program. All of it is given to us in Christ.

For those of us who know the Lord, the lesson is the simple and ancient one: go thy way. The way of the Christian is the way that is influenced by God's word, not by the noise of the times. We are not called to strive. We are called to be gentle, patient, apt to teach, meek — and to trust that the God who is over all

governments, who sets up over men the basest of men when He will, who has not changed in His character or His purposes since He proclaimed Himself to Moses on the mountain, is still sovereign over all that is happening now. Dear brethren, let us commend to our attention the good example of the prophet Jeremiah.

And the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. — 2 Timothy 2:24–25

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