

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

JER. 23:18 For who hath stood in the counsel of the LORD, and hath perceived and heard his word? who hath marked his word and heard *it*?

19 Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked.

20 The anger of the LORD shall not return until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: in the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly.

21 I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.

22 But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.

23 Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off?

24 Can any hide himself in secret places, that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD.

NOTES

In Heaven and Earth

Lesson Text: Jeremiah 23:18-24

Related Scriptures: Deuteronomy 31:24-29; Jeremiah 23:9-15;
Isaiah 57:15-21; Ezekiel 13:1-16; Acts 17:24-31

TIME: probably between 597 and 586 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 23:24).

Lesson Exposition

COUNTERFEIT CREDENTIALS— Jer. 23:18-20

The divine council (Jer. 23:18). There are generally four main components to ancient prophecies: the divine source, the prophets themselves, the divine message, and the human recipient of the message. The source of Jeremiah's conflict with the other prophets would seem primarily to be a conflict of message. After all, both he and the other prophets were speaking to the people of Judah. And both claimed to be speaking for God. Yet their messages were as different as night and day. Surely resolving the conflict was simply a matter of analyzing the message to see which one seemed truer.

That was not the path Jeremiah chose to take. Rather, he claimed that the reason there was a conflict between him and the other prophets was that they had not actually heard from God. That was a bold claim that, to our modern ears, seems impossible to defend. How can a person prove that someone did not hear from God?

However, Jeremiah's targeted attack made perfect sense in light of

the cultural understanding of a prophet's role. To hear directly from God as a prophet involved standing in the "counsel [or council] of the Lord" (vs. 18), which was an experience both unusual and verifiable. For us to fully appreciate the gravity of the false prophets' deception, we need to examine the image of the divine council and how the biblical role of a prophet fit into it.

The phrase may not be familiar for modern readers, but it is a concept present throughout the Bible. The idea of a god as part of a collective was common in many ancient cultures. Even today, we are familiar with the gods of Greek or Norse mythology, such as Thor, Athena, Loki, or Aphrodite. Such pantheons were likewise found in the mythologies of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and various Canaanite peoples. Every pantheon presented different gods who ruled over various aspects of the physical world, from the forces of nature to the inner workings of empires. Although the identities of those gods changed depending on the culture, the underlying principle remained the same:

the universe was run by a team of divine beings, usually overseen by one being who had proven himself to be more worthy than the others.

The biblical concept of the divine council bears some similarities but is fundamentally different. Whereas in all other religions the gods would frequently challenge one another for rank and supremacy, in the Bible there is no question who the King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of "gods" is (Deut. 10:17; cf. Rev. 19:16).

Although the identity of the supreme Ruler over the biblical divine council is clear, the roles and ranks of its other members are not as clear. The cherubim and seraphim are rarely depicted outside of the throne room (cf. Ezek. 10), meaning that their position on the flowchart of authority is probably high, much like the advisers in ancient human courts. Meanwhile, the angels carrying messages between God and His creation likely fill a lower position on the chart.

Even though our knowledge of such a flowchart is extremely limited, understanding its existence is important for seeing how the prophet relates to the divine council. When the role of messenger between God and His creation is given to a human, it is an elevation of status. A human welcomed into the throne room of God is transformed by the experience (cf. Isa. 6:1-7).

Only those humans who were chosen and changed were capable of truly seeing the spiritual realm coexisting around them (cf. 2 Kgs. 6:17). That transformation was necessary so the prophet could clearly communicate what he saw and heard. The prophet stood as a divinely appointed ambassador.

The incoming storm (Jer. 23:19-20). As a true prophet, Jeremiah could see what the false prophets could not. He had a clear view of the impending doom for God's people.

The visual description of God's wrath as a "whirlwind" (Jer. 23:19), likely best imagined here as a tornado, is a common prophetic symbol (cf. Ezek. 13:13; Amos 1:14). In the Psalms, storms are described as God's "chariot" (104:3), His weapon of choice (18:13-14), and the manifestation of His power (29:3-10).

The whirlwind took on an even deeper meaning in the prophetic message. As elaborated later in Jeremiah, the incoming storm was more than just a meteorological event. It was a metaphor for the impending invasion and conquest by the Babylonian Empire (cf. Jer. 25:15-32; Isa. 30:30).

PROFITLESS PROPHETS— Jer. 23:21-22

Absent authority (Jer. 23:21). The prophets came under a different level of scrutiny in verses 21-22. They no longer faced the criticisms of Jeremiah alone. God Himself raised His voice against them. By doing so, God was defending Himself in a sense. Because of the false prophets' messages, people might claim that He had not told them the truth about what was coming once the calamity arrived.

Disappointing discourse (Jer. 23:22). According to God, if these prophets, who claimed to have stood (like Jeremiah) in His inner council and heard His words, were telling the truth, their message would have generated action. The people would have responded by repenting and turning from sin—case closed.

But Jeremiah was a true prophet, stood in the council of God, and proclaimed God's words. Yet the people did not repent. So did God's argument actually prove anything?

God's evidence actually hearkened back to the prophetic criteria given in Deuteronomy 18:21-22. Prophets' messages were tested by comparing

what they claimed would happen (the content) against what actually did happen (the outcome). God told Jeremiah that his message would not be well received (cf. Jer. 1:8, 18-19). He warned Jeremiah that the people would refuse to listen to him (7:27). Therefore, their negative reaction to Jeremiah's message was, ironically, proof that his message was valid.

Meanwhile, other prophets claimed God would deliver the people from the day of destruction and give them peace (14:13; 28:1-17). That did not happen. God did not speak to these prophets, and that would be proven when their message of peace did not come to fruition.

RADICAL REALITY—Jer. 23:23-24

God's reach (Jer. 23:23). One reason people were confident that God would not send His people into exile was that the temple stood in Jerusalem. Why would He send them away from His temple, the place where His presence dwelled? Surely He wanted them close enough that He could keep an eye on them, speak to them, correct them, and bless them.

That line of thinking was common in the ancient world. Every community had their own local gods, which they thought held power over a certain limited area. But God reminded the people that He is not so confined. There is no place outside of His reach. He can and will interact with His people, no matter where they may be.

God's rule (Jer. 23:24a). God next asked whether there is a place anyone can hide from His view, presumably to do something in secret without God's knowledge or to somehow escape God's punishment. It was ridiculous for false prophets to claim they had experienced God's presence and received God's authority and message while they remained under God's eyes and within God's reach.

God's realm (Jer. 23:24b). Finally, God presented the truth that the false prophets had totally failed to grasp. He fills heaven and the earth. He is not confined to national or geographic boundaries. He is literally everywhere, across all of space and time. There is not a micrometer of reality outside of His presence.

Ultimately, the prophets' fatal flaw was that they had too small a view of God. They were afraid that exile from the Promised Land would mean exile from God Himself.

—Isaiah Campbell

QUESTIONS

1. What did Jeremiah say was wrong with the false prophets?
2. What was the divine council like according to the mythology of ancient nations outside of Israel?
3. How is the biblical idea of a divine council different?
4. What was the relationship between the divine council and Old Testament prophets?
5. What did Jeremiah understand about Israel's future that none of the false prophets did?
6. What was the "whirlwind" Jeremiah prophesied about (Jer. 23:19)?
7. What false claims about God might have been made if He did not defend Himself against the false prophets?
8. How did the people's lack of repentance serve as proof that Jeremiah was a true prophet and the others were not?
9. What misconception about His presence did God address in verse 23?
10. What was the false prophets' fatal flaw?

—Matthew Robinson

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. For a message from God to be authentic, the messenger must have a relationship with Him (Jer. 23:18).
2. The test of truth is time. Lies are always exposed eventually (vss. 19-20).
3. Ignoring the reality of God's justice misrepresents Him to the world (vss. 21-22).
4. People may sever their relationship with God through sin, but they are never unreachable by Him (vs. 23).
5. Nothing is done without God's knowledge. There is no secret hidden from Him (vs. 24).
6. There is no boundary capable of containing God. He is not confined to any nation, kingdom, planet, or galaxy.

—Isaiah Campbell

Golden Text

Illuminated

“Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:24).

In Jeremiah 23:24, the Lord asked two questions that reveal something profound about His omniscience and omnipresence.

Question 1: “Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?” God knows all because He sees all. The Lord weighs people's motives (cf. Prov. 16:2), and He knows the “secrets of the heart” (Ps. 44:21). This is a powerful incentive for authentic holiness. God is not content with mere external conformity to a code of ethics, but instead, the Lord looks at the heart (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7).

Question 2: “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” To “fill heaven and earth” does not mean God is like a physical substance or gas but that there is no place in the universe where He is not. He is present in every inch of His creation in the totality of His being.

This means that we are always standing on holy ground, because *God* is there. The doctrine of God's omnipresence reminds us that there is no such thing as a secular or private moment, for God sees all and knows all. And He does so not through second-hand reporting by an angelic being but rather by His own personal eyewitness knowledge. Knowing that God is always near and ready to intervene is a great incentive against sin. “In Him, we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

—Jerod A. Gilcher

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. If the Bible says the Lord is the “God of gods” (Deut. 10:17), does that mean other gods exist (cf. 1 Chr. 16:24-26)?
2. How did God prepare Israel for false prophets (cf. Deut. 18:18-22)?
3. How does God's act of punishing sin illustrate His faithfulness to His covenant (cf. 28:15-37)?
4. How can believers be sure that they are not deceived by false messages (cf. Col. 2:6-10)?
5. What are some ways that confronting people about deception can build up the church (cf. Eph. 4:13-16)?
6. Why might a person think God is “afar off” from him or her? How might you encourage that person from Scripture (cf. Rom. 8:35-39)?

—Isaiah Campbell