

Lessons on True and False Prophets

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Lessons on True and False Prophets (Jeremiah 28)

Jeremiah the prophet encountered many trials during his ministry. Trials came from false prophets and priests, and from evil kings and the common people. Jeremiah 28 is one example. This trial relates to a false prophet named Hananiah who declared a message contrary to Jeremiah's. Jeremiah's message *was* from the Lord; Hananiah *claimed* that his message was from the Lord. After examining the passage, we will draw some lessons on true and false prophets. The full chapter (28:1–17) follows here, according to the NASB.

¹Now it came about in the same year, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year, in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, ²“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³Within two years I am going to bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. ⁴I am also going to bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles of Judah who went to Babylon,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.’”

⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and in the presence of all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord, ⁶and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord confirm your words which you have prophesied to bring back the vessels of the Lord’s house and all the exiles, from Babylon to this place. ⁷Yet hear now this word which I am about to speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people! ⁸The prophets who were before me and before you from ancient times prophesied against many lands and against great kingdoms, of war and of calamity and of pestilence. ⁹The prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet comes to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent.”

¹⁰Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke it. ¹¹Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Even so will I break within two full years the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.’” Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

¹²And the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, ¹³“Go and speak to Hananiah, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord, “You have broken the yokes of

wood, but you have made instead of them yokes of iron.”¹⁴For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they will serve him. And I have also given him the beasts of the field.””

¹⁵Then Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet, “Listen now, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie.

¹⁶Therefore thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This year you are going to die, because you have counseled rebellion against the Lord.’”

¹⁷So Hananiah the prophet died in the same year in the seventh month.

Jeremiah lived in a very difficult time, about 600 BC. He began his ministry in 627 BC. The Assyrians were controlling this region of the world, yet the Babylonians were ascending. By 605 BC the Babylonians had already taken captive Daniel the prophet and also deposed Jehoiakim the king. And then a few years later in 598 the king of Judah, Jehoiachin, and the prophet Ezekiel, along with 10,000 captives, were sent away into the Babylonian empire (2 Kings 24–25; Ezek 1:1–3; Dan 1:1–7). The threat now in Jeremiah 28 has to do with King Zedekiah and the prophet Jeremiah. This is taking place about 597 BC, about eleven years before the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the scattering of the people even more so throughout the Babylonian kingdom.

King Manasseh preceded the kings just named. He was so sinful that the Lord decided that Judah should fall (2 Kings 24:1–5). Indeed, the Lord deigned that the nation Judah would fall because the evil king Manasseh caused the people to sin. As a result, Jeremiah had been saying it will be seventy years of captivity; seventy years. Jeremiah proclaimed that it was God’s will and in order to minimize what happens, in order to have their own life as booty, they should concede to the Babylonians. However, the kings and the prophets were saying, to summarize, “No, let’s not do this. Let’s find another way. Jeremiah is actually a traitor! He does not really speak the truth.” They were denying it. In chapters twenty-seven to twenty-nine, we have the prophet Jeremiah combating the words of false prophets.

In Jeremiah 28 then we pick up with this expression in verse one, “Now it came about in the same year.” The same year is the year mentioned in 27:1 when Zedekiah first became king. At the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign Jeremiah had warned the people to listen to him because he was speaking the Word of the Lord. Nevertheless, five months later, in the fifth month of Zedekiah’s reign, this word, or this incident, happened that we have in our passage. So, a few months have transpired between chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Hananiah knew what Jeremiah’s message was.

Hananiah hails from Gibeon, verse one says. Gibeon was the place assigned to the priests in Joshua 21. It was a Levitical city, one of the forty-eight Levitical cities. The city was not far from Jerusalem; about seven miles northwest of it. It was considered the great high place where the tabernacle and the altar of burnt offering were kept (1 Kings 3:4; 1 Chron 16:39–40; 21:29). King Solomon went there in order to consult God, and he received the revelation of God’s promise of wisdom to him (1 Kings 3:3–15).

Gibeon was prominent in terms of the priesthood and tabernacle. Hananiah was likely a priest and now he is declaring himself to be a prophet. He is contradicting, or about to contradict, the words of Jeremiah the priest and prophet (Jer 1:1–3; 25:1–3). And he is going to do this in

the house of the Lord, in the temple of Jerusalem that would be destroyed about 10 years later. The false prophet does so in the presence of the priests and all the people. He exposes himself to all the people by the position that he is claiming and the words he is announcing.

Then in verses two to four Hananiah speaks in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. He is taking the name of the Lord and we will see, as we have read, he is actually making a false prophecy. Indeed, he uses the name of the Lord for his false prophecy. To call the Lord, “the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel” means he claims that the God of armies is with Hananiah and his message to protect Israel. He introduces the oracle just like Jeremiah did. And what is his oracle? He says in verse three, “within two full years I am going to bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon.”

Consider the magnitude of this prophecy. Under Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin the Babylonians came and destroyed cities; they also took away some captives and vessels from the house of the Lord. But Hananiah is saying that within two years the yoke of Babylon will be broken, the captives and vessels will be restored, and the king reinstated. In the original Hebrew in verses three and eleven, he is being precise. It is as though he declared, “In terms of days, I am not speaking in round figures; I am saying precisely within two years it is going to happen.” Hananiah contradicts what Jeremiah had been saying in 25:11–12 and 29:10. Jeremiah tells us that it is going to be seventy years. Not two years, but seventy years. But Hananiah says all this is going to take place within two years.

In addition, Hananiah predicts that the vessels are going to be returned from Babylon to the temple of Jerusalem, but Jeremiah and Ezekiel had already predicted the destruction of the temple because of the people’s sin (Jer 7:1–15; Ezek 10:4, 18; 11:23). Even Solomon was told that this would happen (1 Kings 9:1–9).

Also in verse four we read, “I am also going to bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim.” Jeconiah is another name for Jehoiachin (the ending of his name is “chin”); the latter is used in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and Ezekiel’s prophecies are based on the exile of Jehoiachin’s reign, because Ezekiel was exiled at the same time. This king was exiled, but the false prophet promises restoration to the throne within two years.

Last, Hananiah promises the return of the exiles of Judah in two years. In 2 Kings 24:13–15 there were 10,000 of them taken away into captivity. In other words, family, friends, and countrymen will return. This sort of prophecy would have brought tremendous hope to a dejected people. Why? Because Hananiah says, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.” Yet, it would be false hope based on false prophecy.

In verses five to nine, we have Jeremiah’s initial response. His initial response was before the Lord gave him the clarifying revelation of verses twelve to fourteen. On the surface, it may seem like Jeremiah is being deceived, but we will see that it is actually not the case. The Scripture says, “Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and in the presence of all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord, and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord confirm your words which you have prophesied to bring back the vessels of the Lord’s house and all the exiles, from Babylon to this place.”

Jeremiah gives an initial answer in front of the priests and all the people in the Lord’s house when the incident first occurred, because he wants to be hopeful. He does not want someone who comes and claims to speak in the name of the Lord to initially be rejected.

Jeremiah wants to be very careful and test him. So he says, “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord confirm your words.” In essence, “May that happen, if the Lord wants it.”

Jeremiah’s suspicion continues in verses seven to nine. “Yet hear now this word which I am about to speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people! The prophets who were before me and before you from ancient times prophesied against many lands and against great kingdoms, of war and of calamity (or evil) and of pestilence.” “Yet,” in the original language is the word “*akh*,” which alerts us to the fact that there is something contrastive happening here. Also, the verb, “hear,” has an emphasizing particle with it, “*na*,” translated “now.” Jeremiah has something antithetical and emphatic to convey.

The prophets who preceded them were ones like Moses, David, Isaiah, and Amos. They said a whole lot about temporal and eternal destruction on people who refuse to repent. Because the Lord had true love for them He sent prophets to warn them to repent of their sins and believe in the Lord (Neh 9). A few examples are in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28, Psalm 18, Isaiah 5, and practically the whole book of Amos, except the last few verses. All over their prophecies, one reads of a God of love who warns the people of impending disaster. So to Jeremiah, something seemed strange. Why does Hananiah only have good news, only related to prosperity and blessing? The other part of the equation is omitted. If he does not have the rest of the equation, Jeremiah knows it does not equal to anything substantial. It is *not* the truth. Jeremiah has already been speaking against false prophets who prophesy only of peace and who never call the people to choose between repentance and punishment (Jer 6, 8, 14, 23, and 27). They never confront sin. They never alert the people to the fact that they are transgressing and rebelling against the King of heaven and the God of Israel. Jeremiah will do so again in the next chapter.

In verse nine Jeremiah proceeds, “the prophet who prophesies of peace,” notice it is only peace, “when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom the Lord has truly sent.” If he only speaks of peace, well, let us wait and see if peace actually occurs. If peace actually occurs then we can say that the Lord has truly, notice, “truly,” sent him. But if peace does not come about, then we will know. Jeremiah knew what Moses said about this in Deuteronomy 18:15–22. Jeremiah was waiting to see what happens; if the Lord intervenes, we will know more clearly.

Hananiah’s second oracle is recorded in verses ten and eleven. It occurred after he heard Jeremiah’s answer in front of the priests and the people. Now Hananiah has a second public opportunity. Will he repent? No. “Then Hananiah the prophet,” verse ten, “took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke it.” In the previous chapter the yoke on Jeremiah was an object lesson for the people. So he took that yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and broke it. And, “Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord,’” he still takes the name of the Lord in vain, “‘Even so will I break within two full years the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.’” Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way.” So Hananiah contradicted Jeremiah again and refused to repent. Jeremiah heard Hananiah’s initial oracle and he brought caution to it. Hananiah persisted. He broke the yoke of Jeremiah and he used the Lord’s name in vain a second time in the presence of Jeremiah and all the people. Then, the prophet Jeremiah goes away.

Verses twelve to seventeen contain the second response of Jeremiah. The impetus for his second response is an actual revelation from the Lord. “The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying.” In other words, after the second opportunity of Hananiah to repent in this chapter, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. “Go and speak to Hananiah, saying.” The form of the verb

“go” is not the usual imperative; it is the infinitive absolute. Sometimes when the infinitive absolute is used in place of the imperative it stresses an emotional, urgent matter. We can tell by the outcome of Hananiah’s life that the Lord is angry.

He says, “Go and speak to Hananiah, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord.’” Now the Lord is really speaking. “‘You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made instead of them yokes of iron. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him. And I have also given him the beasts of the field.’”” God has given to Nebuchadnezzar the dominion over these nations and the wild animals. What God desires comes to pass.

In verses fifteen to seventeen, Jeremiah is now going to report Lord’s true words to Hananiah the prophet. “Then Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet, ‘Listen now, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This year you are going to die, because you have counseled rebellion against the Lord.’ So Hananiah the prophet died in the same year in the seventh month.”

He died two months after his oracle of two years. Within two months he perished. Notice what the Lord says in verse fifteen. God did not send Hananiah and Hananiah was culpable of making people trust in a lie. When he spoke false words, some people believed him. He was held accountable for what the people heard and their response to it. He influenced their sin. His sin influenced their sin.

This expression ‘to make people trust in a lie’ or ‘to make someone sin’ is also descriptive of Jeroboam the first king of the northern kingdom, and Ahab, one of the most notorious kings of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 14:16; 15:26, 30, 34; 16:13, 26; 21:22; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 6; 13:11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 21:16 [Manasseh]; 23:15). By their example, or wrong example, they made people sin against the Lord. God had warned through Moses that the penalty for false prophesy would be death, and thus it happened to this false prophet (Deut 13).

Now what lessons can we draw? This passage was chosen to highlight the need to distinguish between true and false prophets, or true and false teachers. However, much of the Bible was written to instruct us about it. Consider the letters of the New Testament that were written to combat false teaching and practice. Indeed, the Bible gives a lot of attention to what is true and what is false, and exhorts us to be able to discern the difference.

Some lessons: **Believe Scripture**. Since the Lord has spoken through his prophets and apostles, in this canon, we ought to believe it. Remember what Jesus said, “‘O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?’ And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:25–27). “Foolish men and slow of heart to believe.” “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:46–47). “When you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). “And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb 11:6). “And whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). We must believe Scripture, and never entertain any so-called revelation contrary to it.

Know Scripture. “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you” (Col 3:16). “The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). Apollos, “was mighty in the Scriptures . . . for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:24–28). “Ezra set his heart to study the law the Lord, and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who do not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Hebrews tells us, “Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for some one to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For every one who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb 5:11–14). How can you and I discern good and evil if we do not know what is in Scripture? The only standard of true knowledge is Scripture. Otherwise, we have no measuring tool. It is not what I say or write, or what anyone else says or writes.

Be a Berean. Although, Paul and Silas, men of God, preached to them, the Bereans double-checked them, examined everything, and were complimented. “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, *to see* whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). If Paul and Silas could be double-checked, then certainly I or anyone else can be double-checked. Examine everything. “Examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good” (1Thess 5:21). “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). “Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” (2 Cor 13:5). Test everything according to the word of righteousness. If it is in accordance with the word, then accept it. Or else, reject it.

Pray for courage and fear God, not man. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Ps 27:1). “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). And Paul requested prayer, “that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel . . . that in *proclaiming* it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph 6:19–20). “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted” (Prov 29:25). “Do not fear those who are able to kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

Preach against sin. “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). You ought to “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). “I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:1–4). Preach against sin.

Beware of and know the characteristics of false teachers. “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by

their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes*, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the rotten tree bears bad fruit” (Matt 7:15–17). “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom 16:17–18). “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4). In addition, the letters of Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter, Jude, and First and Second John have much to say on this. Beware of false teachers.

Remember the example of the Lord Jesus Himself. Any faithful follower of Christ will have His mind on everything. A careful reading of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John amply demonstrates how Jesus handled these matters.

Lastly, this topic deserves our vigilance because the Day of Judgment is coming. Every sin has a consequence. Paul said that, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one many be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor 5:10). That is we believers will experience a judgment of rewards on all we have done, including whether we have persuaded men to repent and believe. The Day of Judgment also relates to teachers. “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching, persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Tim 4:16). “Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:26–27).

I pray that we will be more discerning between what is true and what is false. And, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says” (Matt 11:15; Rev 2:7). Amen.

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