

# Check Your Source

Jeremiah 23:23-29 | Psalm 82 | Hebrews 11:29–12:2 | Luke 12:49-56

## JEREMIAH 23:23-29

*<sup>23</sup> Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? <sup>24</sup> Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. <sup>25</sup> I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' <sup>26</sup> How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? <sup>27</sup> They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. <sup>28</sup> Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. <sup>29</sup> Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*

## INTRODUCTION

To whom do you listen? Who speaks into your life? From where do you take your direction? To whom do you listen? When it comes to the news? For example, just last October, the Chancellor of Austria stepped down, ultimately resigning, amid accusations that he had paid news outlets to report propaganda, including polls with skewed data that made him look more popular.<sup>1</sup> Depending on which news you consume, the facts were quite different. The very nature of truth was now a question. Reality could be manipulated. A Gallup poll from the same month already indicated that people already no longer trusted Austrian news media to report in a neutral way. This is not new information for most of us. We have known for years that people choose their news to suit their ideology, especially online from alternative news sources and social media, creating ideological echo chambers. Facts are now flexible and reality is shaped, no longer by truth, but by desire—and a healthy dose of sales potential. So, to whom do you listen?

A trustworthy source matters more than ever. And in fact, this is the very point being made in our Old Testament lesson from the Prophet Jeremiah. Here, the prophet notes that who we listen to, matters very much. Who we listen to, is not just the difference between the truth and lies, but it is the very difference between life and death. So, check your source. Let's take a look at what the prophet says.

## 1. THE GOD WHO SEES

The text in front of us is a poetic oracle, a speech given to the prophet Jeremiah to speak against the people of Israel. It is spoken in the voice of God himself, a message directly relayed from God, to his people, through this prophet. And in the first few lines, God asks a series of rhetorical questions to demonstrate his trustworthiness. *"Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off?"*<sup>2</sup> The presumed answer is 'yes.' God is with his people, always among them, never having abandoned them. God's love of his people means that he cares for them, up close. This is perfectly demonstrated, in fact, in how he eventually sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be with his people—incarnated, able to sympathize with us—taking the name, Immanuel, which means

<sup>1</sup> Klaus Knittenfelder, "News from a different league: the rise of the digital party press in Austria," *Reuters Institute*, January 24, 2022. See [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-different-league-rise-digital-party-press-austria](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news-different-league-rise-digital-party-press-austria).

<sup>2</sup> Jer 23:23.

'God with us.'<sup>3</sup> But God continues the questions: "*Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?*"<sup>4</sup> Here, the presumed answer is 'no.' And third question: "*Do I not fill heaven and earth?*"<sup>5</sup> The presumed answer here is 'yes.' Together, these final two questions paint a clear picture. Nobody can hide from God. His omniscience—that is his ability to know all—and his omnipresence—his ability to be in all places—extends to the ends of the earth. This means his knowledge of and care for his people is irrespective of their location. But it also means his knowledge of the secrets of our hearts and his judgment, his righteous wrath, also extends through all of existence. He sees all, knows all, and is everywhere capable of doing something about it. Because God sees and knows all, he is a trustworthy source.

## 2. THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

This is in direct contrast with some of the prophets who were speaking in his name. In fact, the rest of the passage outlines the extent of the problem as well as the consequences.

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal.<sup>6</sup>

It is a reference to a story that will be told just a few chapters later. In chapter 28, we find the prophet Hananiah competing with the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been proclaiming the oracles of God that God's people, for their sins, would be carried into exile by the Babylonians. Because they had acted unjustly, oppressing people and taking advantage of the poor, rebelling against God in wickedness and evil, Israel would be held in captivity and separated from their country, their Temple, and most importantly, God, for seventy years.<sup>7</sup> But Hananiah, put off by Jeremiah's prophecy of judgment, and in order to satisfy the desires of the people, said it would only be two years.<sup>8</sup> This preacher preached what the people wanted to hear. But he was wrong. Jerusalem was burned to the ground by Babylon and Israel was, in fact, sent into exile for 70 years. The fake news turned out to be fake, unsurprisingly.

But more than the lies of the false prophet, it is the consequences that are striking here. God draws a direct line from listening to the wrong prophets, the ones who do not speak for God, to idolatry, to worshipping Baal. Once they started listening to prophets of their own desires, it took no time at all to follow the gods of their own desires. Bad sources lead to bad choices.

And what's God's conclusion to this? Let the prophets speak. The false prophet will be wrong. But the one who speaks the Lord's Word should speak faithfully. It will be like straw and wheat. It will be like fire that burns and a hammer that breaks rock. The one who speaks the Word of the Lord, those words will stand. The lies of the of the false prophets will crumble and fall away.

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<sup>3</sup> See John 1:1-14, Heb 4:15, and Matt 1:22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Jer 23:24.

<sup>5</sup> Jer 23:24.

<sup>6</sup> Jer 23:25-27.

<sup>7</sup> Jer 25:1-38, especially verse 11.

<sup>8</sup> Jer 28:1-16.

### 3. THE GOD WHO SAVES

It is not a terribly complex lesson for all of us. To whom do you listen? Because, make no mistake, there are plenty of false prophets out there in the world. There are plenty of people who will tell us what we want to hear, tell us the easy message, tell us the things that will please us. We have them in the domain of political news. We have them in the realm of therapy and life coaching. And we even have them in the Christian faith. Now to be clear, I do not mind where you get your news or motivational thoughts of the day, but I care very much who you listen to in the Christian faith.

God, in these verses from Jeremiah, gives us the only test we need. Does the person we are listening to about faith, about religion, about the things of Christianity, speak God's Word? Or are they shaping the message, the theology, the sermon, the church around what satisfies the itching ears of the people? Because we have God's Word, written right here in the Bible. That is the historic Christian faith, in fact. This is why the reader in every church service, having read the lesson from Bible, says: "This is the Word of the Lord." And we respond: "Thanks be to God."<sup>9</sup> We really believe that these Words, the biblical words, are God's very message to us. How fortunate we are to have a record of God's Word! God has given us all we need to discern to whom we should listen. It may not be popular. It may not conform to our societal values. It may not be what we want to hear because it makes us feel guilty, it convicts us of our sin.

But it is God's Word. And so, as you read about the faith, listen to preachers in person and online, choose where you might go to church when you someday leave Vienna, pay attention. Measure what is said against God's Word. Ask yourself: 'Is this person attempting to say what God has said? Or am I being led down an easy and inviting path toward what I want to hear?' Because that path ends in something less than the true faith. It ends in idolatry. It ends in further rebellion against God and, ultimately, his judgment.

### CONCLUSION

Interestingly, the author of Hebrews comments on this very thing, though not the passage we heard read already, but much earlier in the letter. From chapter 4:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.<sup>10</sup>

The Word of the Lord is powerful enough to divide soul and spirit. Just like in Jeremiah, the author of Hebrews shows how the Word of the Lord is the Word of Truth, and all will give account to the Lord according to his Word. His Word is the only trustworthy source. But notice also, the author of Hebrews adds a further dimension. We also have Christ Jesus, a high priest

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<sup>9</sup> The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Heb 4:12-15.

and mediator of that Word who identifies with us, who through his incarnation, sympathizes with us. And yet he was without sin. He did not fall to the temptations and evil that all of us fall to, the lies into which we buy. This made him not only a trustworthy source, but a trustworthy saviour. And so, what does the author of Hebrews conclude? *“Let us hold fast to our confession.”*<sup>11</sup> Let us hold fast to that trustworthy Word of the Lord, that Word of salvation—the salvation won for us on the cross of Jesus Christ. Because who we listen to, is not just the difference between the truth and lies, but it is the very difference between life and death. Who we listen to matters. Check your source.

Let us pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us your Word. May we hold fast to it, so that we may receive your mercy and grace. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>11</sup> Heb 4:14.