

God's Word Is...

Jeremiah 23:23-29 (NIV)

²³ "Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away?" ²⁴ Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?" declares the LORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the LORD. ²⁵ "I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' ²⁶ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?" ²⁷ They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. ²⁸ Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. ²⁹ "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

Have you ever played the game "Tribond?" The basic premise is that you are given three words and you have to come up with one thing they all have in common or something that ties them all together. For example: what ties "picnic," "card," and "pool" all together? All three are types of tables – picnic table, card table, pool table. Let's try another. What is the link between "candy," "crab," and "caramel"? All three are types of apples. How about: what does a car, a tree, and an elephant all have? They all have trunks. Last one: how are grain, fire, and a hammer linked together? These three are all imagery that God uses to describe his Word.

What prompts God to do this, to liken his Word to grain and fire and a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces? In Jeremiah's time – around 600 B.C. – there were conflicting messages going out, both claiming to be from the LORD. Jeremiah was the one telling the Jews that God was about to punish the people for their turning away from him, for their continued disobedience against him. The LORD was going to destroy Jerusalem and whisk the people away from their homeland just as he had threatened years ago to do. But other so called prophets were saying that they had a dream, a vision from the LORD, that promised peace. They said that no harm would come to Jerusalem, that this Babylonian threat would blow over like the other threats that had come to Jerusalem. Which one is right? How do you know? Both say that their message is from the LORD. The people want the message of peace and safety, but is that the true message from God? This is something that the people had to wrestle with back then.

Is our day any different? Two preachers claim to speak for God and yet they have conflicting messages. One preacher tells you that God would never punish you for your sins, that he loves you too much to send anyone to a place of eternal torment. Then there is another preacher who says that God does punish people by sending them to a place called hell. Both seem sincere. Both seem learned. Who do you believe? What if you have two preachers say that God does condemn people to hell, but one preacher says that you can avoid this by doing all the good deeds you can possibly do or at the very least outweigh the bad with the good you do. The other preacher, though, says that you can never do enough and that someone has to do it for you. Both claim to speak for God. Who do you believe? Do you base your decision on what you want to hear or what you need to hear?

God knows what's going on. He fills heaven and earth. He is not a God who is far away. There is no place that people can claim to speak for him that he does not hear them. He knows we here on earth – both in the 6th century B.C. and in the 21st century A.D. – are struggling with whose message we should believe. So, God gives us a litmus test of sorts: "Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (verses 28-29) You will know who is speaking from the LORD by what they say.

The first test: is their word straw or grain? You cannot live on straw. Even with animals, straw is not substantive. It's used as bedding and as filler with other food like grain, but straw is not enough on its own. It's akin to a diet of nothing but junk food. There might be a little nutrition in there, but not enough to live a healthy life on. It doesn't fill you up. It doesn't satisfy. It ultimately leaves you empty and will be bad for your health. So we don't make our diets based entirely on junk food.

God says these prophets' dreams are straw. They're junk food. They preach peace and safety and that no harm will come to the Jews. While this message tastes good and it's what people want to hear, Jeremiah warns them that this is not a lasting and fulfilling message. He's warning them now before it's too late, before the army of Babylon is camping outside their walls, before they overtake Jerusalem, before harsh reality sets in and peace and safety becomes distant memories. Change your diet of whose words feed you before it's too late.

There's lots of straw being fed to people today, people saying that God would never be so cruel as to condemn people to an eternity of torment and suffering, that God would never send anyone to hell. Others say that if you do right by your conscience or if you try

really hard, God will notice the effort and be pleased by it. He'll accept you because you tried despite the fact that you fell short of the perfection he demanded. This message tastes good, but it is not nourishing. This message will leave you empty because God has clearly said that there is only one way to heaven and that every path that is not through him, not through Jesus Christ and his perfection, is not good enough. To tell people that God will not really send anyone to hell unless they are really, really bad (and the implication is that you aren't that bad), is to feed people junk food, a straw message. It gives a pleasant taste for a while, but in the end it will leave you unfulfilled and empty. It will leave you subject to God's wrath. We need something of a better substance, something that satisfies our hunger for salvation.

The Word of the LORD is grain because it fills you up, it satisfies your hunger and sustains you. Like grain, God's Word is good for you. Jeremiah's message of warning was good for the Jews to hear. It showed them their sins. It showed them their shortcomings. Even though this was not an appealing message, not the dessert of God's Word, it is what they needed. It showed them that they needed God to save them from themselves, to make them look to someone other than themselves to fix problems that they could not, to attain a perfection that they could not. Turn to God and be saved! Be filled with the fact that God has been perfect for you, that he sacrificed his life unto death – even death on a cross – so that you would be whole and complete right now by believing what he has done for you. Be filled with the fact that when Jesus said "It is finished," he was saying the God's justice was satisfied by his payment. There is nothing more you need to do. Your salvation, your peace, your eternal safety – it's already accomplished. God's Word fills you up completely when it comes to being eternally saved. Anything else is just straw, junk food.

The second picture of God's Word is fire. Fire burns and consumes. Will the message of these prophets of Jeremiah's day stand the test of time? Will their words, their dreams, their visions endure past that day? Nope. Their dreams were burned to ash the day they saw Jerusalem burning and left them in a smoking rubble heap. Their message was proved not to last. It was consumed by God and what he said would happen, the message he proclaimed through Jeremiah. What the LORD declared burned away the lies.

God's Word is still fire today; it still consumes the false words. People have tried to burn the Bible – literally and figuratively. They have tried to rid the world of his Word, yet it remains. And why shouldn't it? The LORD who declared those words promised that his Word would endure until the very end of the age. His Word has endured a world-wide flood. It has endured the destruction of its holy places. It has endured through the days when people murdered Christians. It has endured through atheistic regimes. God's Word stands in judgment over every other religion as it continues to endure. So, we stay away from that which is not in line with that Word of the LORD that has endured. If we attach our beliefs to messages go against what God has revealed, what goes against his time tested Word, we will find ourselves one day burned up with those lies, kindle for the judging fire of God's Word.

The last image of God's Word is "like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (verse 29) In Jeremiah's day, the words of these other prophets seemed so solid. They had seen Jerusalem threatened before, and they had seen the LORD come to their rescue time and time again. What did they really have to fear? Surely this must be the truth that we will have peace, that no harm will befall us. This is how it happened before. This is how it will happen again. God's Word through Jeremiah destroyed that false sense of peace. When the siege engines hammered into Jerusalem's stone walls again and again until they finally crumbled, so also the prophets' visions crumbled. They were broken into pieces. What seemed solid was now shattered.

The true Word of God breaks down any opposition to it. People can make what sound like solid arguments, sound theories, clever philosophies, but never has anyone been able to take down God's Word and break it to pieces. Instead, it stands century after century. Not only has it withstood these attacks, but it has broken down the human arguments and sound theories and clever philosophies over time like a sledgehammer breaking up concrete. God's Word even hammered on our hearts, breaking down our stony opposition to a message that said we cannot save ourselves, that we cannot contribute to our salvation. He broke down that pride and arrogance and unbelief in our hearts and instead founded our salvation upon the solid works of Jesus Christ, that our salvation is completely bought and paid for by God with no other repayment required or demanded. God's Word has shattered our ideas that our salvation rests on our efforts, but those ideas have been replaced with the solid facts that Christ has done it for us.

What does it matter that God's Word is grain, fire, and a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? Why do we need this message? As in Jeremiah's time, there will always be those who claim to have a dream, a revelation, a prophecy from God. Yet, God has given us his trustworthy Word to test their message, to keep us from being drug away by lying prophets who prophesy the delusions of their own minds. God's Word has stood the test of time and will continue to do so. This is the Word that has been preached to you. This is the Word that you have in your hands and on your lips. This is the Word that you proclaim to others. You can rest assured that God's Word will endure against all opposition. You can have the satisfaction of God's Word fully satisfying your desperate need for completion, for perfection. You can know that in the end God Word will win out against all other religions and philosophies because they are manmade. They cannot withstand the hammer that is God's Word. Therefore, let us speak faithfully God's Word. Amen.