

BIBLE STUDY HELPS

TITLE: Rules

TEXT: Jeremiah 23:1-12

TARGET: SESSION IN A SENTENCE

God promises to give His people a trustworthy, righteous Ruler.

LOOK UP: FOCUSING THE GROUP

Display in Advance: “Character or Results?”

Introduce: Which does our society value the most today from a leader: Character or Results? Does society overlook someone’s character if they get the results they desire? In what ways might a church value results over character?

Most people would agree that leaders should possess good character. It still ranks as one of the highest qualities admired in leaders.

Yet, when leaders fail morally, ethically, or legally, their followers sometimes rationalize or justify why that person is still a worthy leader to follow. Sadly, they are saying as much about their own decisions as they are of the choices of that leader. They can also rationalize that, “since that leader was able to continue in their poor choices, I can do the same thing and continue to lead.” Most leaders who don’t accept responsibilities for their failures and sins aren’t as concerned with those whom they lead but for the power that they will lose if they repent or admit their failures.

This was true in Jeremiah’s day as well. Judah’s King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray for God’s deliverance in Jeremiah 21:1-2. Jeremiah lays out the fact that deliverance was not going to take place, but judgment was coming. In the remainder of Jeremiah 21 and Jeremiah 22, he warns Judah’s officials to rule justly lest God sweep them away. He encouraged Judah’s royal house to follow God’s ways. He preached that obedience would bring blessing, but disobedience would bring ruin.

None of the leaders desired to repent. Finally, in Jeremiah 23, Jeremiah begins to lay out a plan to give His people a trustworthy and righteous Ruler. Before introducing us to that new leader, God instructs Jeremiah to reveal that there will be new shepherds who will replace those who have abused the sheep of His pasture.

LOOK IN: UNPACKING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Shepherds with a New Purpose—Jeremiah 23:1-4

¹ “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” This is the Lord’s declaration.

² “Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who tend my people: You have scattered my flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I am about to attend to you because of your evil acts”—this is the Lord’s declaration. ³ “I will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands where I have banished them, and I will return them to their grazing land. They will become fruitful and numerous.” ⁴ “I will raise up shepherds over them who will tend them. They will no longer be afraid or discouraged, nor will any be missing.” This is the Lord’s declaration.

Identify: How did the old shepherds treat God’s people (the sheep of God’s pasture)?

Shepherds were responsible for the flocks they oversaw. This referred to all the current leaders responsible for the people of God during Jeremiah’s time. God had seen the practices of the evil leaders and spelled it out in His threefold indictment. They had *scattered* the people, *banished them*, and had *not attended to them*. The Lord affirmed that He would deal with the evil shepherd-leaders.

Discuss: In what ways might Christian leaders commit the same evils? What would cause Christian leaders to act in this manner?

After dealing with the evil shepherd-leaders, God said He would work to restore the people. This was great news and demonstrated God’s love for His sheep.

Identify: Underline every first-person action God said He would take to restore the people. What does this indicate about God’s activity in bringing about restoration?

God affirmed that He Himself would participate in His people's restoration.

1. He promised to *gather the remnant of my flock*. *Remnant* literally means "remainder," and it often denotes a faithful group of God's people. This group would receive the Lord's personal attention.
2. God said He would gather His people *from all the lands*. The leaders failed to shepherd well, leading Judah astray. As a result, they bore significant blame for God's judgment. Ultimately, however, God had *banished* His people because they had failed to follow His commands. God now promised that He would bring them back to *their grazing land*.
3. God promised that in this restoration the Jews would *become fruitful and numerous*. In a sense, God was starting over with His people.
4. When He brought them home, He would *raise up shepherds over them who will tend them*. He would provide good leaders who would serve faithfully. God affirmed that His people wouldn't be *afraid or discouraged* under these good shepherds.

Leaders are accountable to God for their actions. When leaders fail to lead well and, instead, steer their people toward evil, God holds them accountable. On the other hand, leaders who serve faithfully will be a blessing to their people and also enjoy God's blessing.

But the Lord also declared He would raise a *Righteous Branch for David*.

A New King with a New Purpose—Jeremiah 23:5-8

⁵ "Look, the days are coming"—this is the Lord's declaration—"when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land."⁶ "In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness."⁷ "Look, the days are coming"—the Lord's declaration "when it will no longer be said, 'As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites from the land of Egypt,'⁸ but, 'As the Lord lives, who brought and led the descendants of the house of Israel from the land of the north and from all the other countries where I had banished them.' They will dwell once more in their own land."

Identify: What would be the characteristics of this new King? How would His reign be characterized?

Jeremiah anticipated a day when God's people would not only have good shepherds, but a new King would be leading them—"A Righteous Branch for David."

1. Jeremiah affirmed this Branch *will reign wisely*. The original wording has the sense of unusual insight and abundance. Kings needed wisdom to rule well, and this King would do just that.
2. He would *administer justice and righteousness*. He would make just decisions and enact godly laws that would guide people toward righteous lives. He would reflect God's will because God loves these qualities as well (Jer. 9:24).
3. Jeremiah affirmed that *Judah will be saved*, while *Israel will dwell securely* under the Branch's leadership. During the days of the divided kingdom, the Northern Kingdom of *Israel* and the Southern Kingdom of *Judah* remained separate, but God was planning to reunite them. Israel was relatively small, and hostile forces surrounded it. Nevertheless, in the day of the Branch, God's people would know everlasting security.

Jeremiah announced that the Branch's name would be *The Lord Is Our Righteousness*. The Branch's *name* pointed the people toward the God who is identified by righteous judgments and actions. *Righteousness* flows from God's character, and the Branch would demonstrate that to everyone.

We know that Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We can trust Jesus as our righteous King. Many kings reigned throughout Israel's history. The writer of 1,2 Kings tells us that all nineteen leaders of the Northern Kingdom were evil, whereas only eight of Judah's twenty kings sought to follow God. Jesus' reign will surpass them all.

Even the best of Israel's kings, and even David, falls short of the righteousness of the Messiah. God's people will live well under the reign of Jesus, the Righteous Branch.

Discuss: Is it easier for you to trust in the rulers of our land or in King Jesus? How would life perspectives be different for us if we completely trusted Jesus to be the absolute and perfect Ruler of this world?

In verses 1-8, he had denounced the evil shepherds and assured God's people that He would provide new, righteous leaders—particularly the Branch (Jesus). In verse 9, Jeremiah returned to his present context (which wasn't encouraging) and pronounced judgment against *prophets* who misused their power and led the nation toward ruin.

Jeremiah's Current Reality Broke His Heart but He Continued to Trust God—Jeremiah 23:9-12

⁹ Concerning the prophets: My heart is broken within me, and all my bones tremble. I have become like a drunkard, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord, because of his holy words. ¹⁰ For the land is full of adulterers; the land mourns because of the curse, and the grazing lands in the wilderness have dried up. Their way of life has become evil, and their power is not rightly used ¹¹ because both prophet and priest are ungodly, even in my house I have found their evil. This is the Lord's declaration. ¹² Therefore, their way will seem like slippery paths in the gloom. They will be driven away and fall down there, for I will bring disaster on them, the year of their punishment. This is the Lord's declaration.

Jeremiah knew God had appointed him to preach the truth. Tragically, false prophets contradicted Jeremiah and convinced the people that peace was coming. This broke Jeremiah's heart. This leads Jeremiah to recall what "The Lord" declared regarding their future: *"their way will seem like slippery paths in the gloom. They will be driven away and fall down there, for I will bring disaster on them, the year of their punishment. This is the Lord's declaration."*

Respond: How can what we know about the return of Christ and our redemption through a personal relationship with Him, help strengthen us when we observe all the evil taking place in the world?

LOOK OUT: LIVING OUT THE TARGET

Illustrate: A 2022 Lifeway Research blog post headline stated, "Americans increasingly don't trust the church or pastors, as confidence and trust levels have eroded to historic lows for both." It went on to reveal these statistics:

- Only 31% of Americans say they have quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the church or organized religion, a record low in Gallup's tracking poll.
- 36% of Americans say they rate the honesty and ethical standards of clergy or pastors high or very high—down three points and a new record low in Gallup's annual survey.

Source: <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/07/12/pastors-and-churches-face-historic-lack-of-trust/>

Discuss: How should we respond to this based on what Jeremiah was observing in his cultural context? How can Jeremiah's prophecy regarding the future help us avoid discouragement and remain faithful and hopeful?

As we strive to live faithfully in a sin-broken world, we should be careful regarding the character traits we embrace in our leaders, especially those who profess to be followers of Christ. We should also be careful how we lead others. We should be good shepherds who search for, care for, and tend to God's sheep. We should be good shepherds who point people to the Perfect and Righteous King—Jesus Christ, the Messiah!