

Message: *“Whom Can We Trust?”*

We’ve spent a lot of time wondering who we can trust over the past year. Can we trust the health officials? Can we trust the news coming out of China about the virus, how it spreads, and how they contained it? Can we trust the reports about the riots over the summer? Can we trust the police when they claim to be acting without racial bias and only using appropriate force? Can we trust the reporter who raised her hands and said she was press as she was arrested for participating in the riots in Des Moines? Can we trust the election officials who say there wasn’t any fraud in the election, or should we trust those who are calling for a recount, a new election, or even a refusal to peaceably transfer power?

If anything, we’ve learned we can’t trust many of those sources. Health officials first said that masks don’t work to stop the spread of the virus, but later admitted they said that only to keep supplies going to medical personnel. China claimed to have the virus contained, but their state censorship makes it hard to trust any official news from their government. Police body camera videos show some of the arrests are more violent than the police officers involved reported. Videos purporting to show voter fraud are denounced by Republican election officials. A whole new news ecosystem has developed, as even Fox News isn’t always conservative enough for some. Fact checkers try to help us through this mess, but who checks the fact checkers?

Jeremiah and those around him wonder who they can trust. In times of upheaval and change, those questions come up. They wonder if they should trust the prophets who are saying that God will save his people again, or if they should trust Jeremiah, who says that God is letting the Chaldean army come and carry off those who live in Jerusalem. They wonder if they should trust in the kings who are leading them, or not.

Jeremiah reminds the people to trust in God, not in men. He cries out to God, as he laments about how others have reacted to his preaching, how they don’t trust in his message.

Jeremiah 17:14-17: Jeremiah’s Cry:

P: Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for You are my praise. Behold, they say to me, "Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!" I have not run away from being Your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips; it was before Your face. Be not a terror to me; You are my refuge in the day of disaster.

Earlier in Jeremiah 17, Jeremiah employs the metaphor of a withered shrub and a watered tree to talk about trust. In the wilderness around Jerusalem, they would have known the difference. The shrubs are those who trust in their own human strength and ingenuity or in other “mere mortals” to deliver them from adverse situations. The green trees are those who trust in God, whose roots are deep in the living water of God.

Jeremiah knows he is a green tree, with deep roots in the water of God. Yet he still struggles, and doubts, and calls out to God. He has spoken the words God gave him to speak, even when those around him didn't want to hear it. He has not run away from his calling. He trusts that God will come, and will not be a terror to him. Yet he waits for the time of judgment.

Jeremiah Thrown in Prison and a Cistern: Jeremiah 37:11-16, 38:1-6:

P: Now when the Chaldean army had withdrawn from Jerusalem at the approach of Pharaoh's army, Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin to receive his portion there among the people. When he was at the Benjamin Gate, a sentry there named Irijah the son of Shelemiah, son of Hananiah, seized Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "You are deserting to the Chaldeans." And Jeremiah said, "It is a lie; I am not deserting to the Chaldeans." But Irijah would not listen to him, and seized Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. And the officials were enraged at Jeremiah, and they beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, for it had been made a prison. Jeremiah came to the dungeon cells and remained there many days.

Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people, "Thus says the LORD: He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, but he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war, and live. Thus says the LORD: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken." Then the officials said to the king, "Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you." So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

The people of Judah had put their trust in men and chariots. They first hoped that an alliance with Babylon would result in the valuables that had been looted from the temple would be returned and restored. Now, they hoped that an alliance with Egypt would protect them from the Babylonians. And it seemed like it had worked. The Babylonians, the Chaldeans, had withdrawn from Jerusalem because Pharaoh's army was coming. Trusting in Egypt had resulted in being saved!

Now, though, Jeremiah is in trouble. He'd warned the people not to trust in Egypt's armies. He knew this was only a temporary reprieve. But now he wanted to get out of Jerusalem and take care of some family business. But his preaching of doom and gloom, of telling the people that they should prepare for lives in Babylon instead of defending Jerusalem, led a guard to think he was deserting to the Chaldeans, and the officials to lock him up.

Worse than that, he ends up in a cistern. A pit. He's as down as he can be. Those who put him there hoped he'd be forgotten down there, starving to death as Jerusalem was under siege. But God sent help through an Ethiopian eunuch, and Jeremiah was released. There was a faithful remnant—there always is. Even though we can't always see who our friends and allies are, they're out there, because God never leaves his people all alone.

Jeremiah trusted in God, and told others to do the same, but they didn't listen. They refused to trust in God, and so Jerusalem fell and the people were taken off into exile.

But God didn't leave the people without hope. Whenever doom and destruction was prophesized, God promised to spare a remnant.

Jeremiah 23:3-8 The Righteous Branch

P: Then I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which He will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’ “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where He had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.”

The people of Jerusalem should have remembered they could trust God because of what he did for them in the Exodus. But now, God is asking them to trust Him to do something even more; to get them out of exile and bring them back to the promised land.

Some were able to remain after the Babylonian army left, and others were able to return over seventy years later when the Babylonians had themselves been conquered by the Persians. Even as they didn't remain faithful to God, God remained faithful to them. God was with them even in exile, and worked to restore them.

While Jeremiah and those who heard him may have been hoping for a king who was truly righteous, unlike the last kings of Jerusalem, we know that Jesus is the king. He is the righteous branch. In Him we can trust, and never be dismayed. Through Jesus, we are saved and can dwell securely. Through Jesus, God does a greater miracle than leading the Israelites on the Exodus or bringing them back from exile. Through Jesus, the exile caused by sin has been ended. God brings all people back to himself. That's a promise we can trust.