

# Mister Bad News

June 28, 2026

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Matthew 10:40-42

Ah, Jeremiah. My favorite prophet. No, really. He is. Despite the fact that, as a college student, I had to take a break after reading the book of Jeremiah because it was so depressing (I told you that story last week), I took a course on this book during seminary that has stayed with me for over thirty-five years now.

In that course I learned about the prophet who might have been called “Magor missabib” in Hebrew, something like “terror on every side” in English. It was a pretty good description of Jeremiah’s message. The nation had failed to meet God’s expectations, Jeremiah said. They had erected shrines to other deities and worshiped them, and they had failed to protect the widows and the orphans, the most vulnerable of the population. Jeremiah had warned that this risked the end of God’s protection for the nation, which was a very small one between the two great empires of Egypt to the south and the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, to the north.

Jeremiah’s warning had come true. Judah’s King Jehoiakim had submitted to the Babylonians as a vassal, but he attempted to break that yoke when the Egyptians won a battle against them in 601. Jehoiakim’s rebellion resulted in a siege of the city and their surrender, during which Jehoiakim died. His son Jeconiah ascended to the throne, but the Babylonians replaced him with his uncle Zedekiah.

The nation had surrendered to the Babylonian Emperor, Nebuchadnezzar II. The king, many civic leaders, and many religious leaders had been removed to Babylon (Ezekiel was one of them). The new King Zedekiah was the choice of the Babylonians.

Into that, Jeremiah appeared wearing a yoke, symbolizing and saying in so many words that Babylon would continue to control Judah for some time as a result of their unfaithfulness. Other prophets, notably one named Hananiah son of Azur, disagreed. In contrast to Jeremiah, Hananiah promised that God would restore King Jeconiah and the other exiles and even return the sacred objects looted from the Temple.

I have to say that this would be entirely consistent with a dominant theology of the day. They fully believed that God’s promise that David’s line would continue forever meant that the nation would always be preserved as well. That theology had been confirmed one hundred and fifty years before, when the northern kingdom of Israel, which was not ruled by descendants of David, had fallen to the Assyrian Empire. Judah, in contrast, ruled by a king from the house of David, had endured.

Why shouldn't that happen again? Why shouldn't a nation blessed by God be preserved again?

As Tyler Mayfield writes at Working Preacher, "Prophecy is deeply contextual. The content of a particular prophecy is not eternal truth for all situations. What is an authentic, appropriate, and helpful prophecy in one moment and place can be false, inappropriate, and obstructive in another setting."

Hananiah spoke a word that promised the nation's restoration. It was a vision that Jeremiah wanted to see. "May the LORD do so," he said, "may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied." Who wouldn't want their nation freed from foreign domination? Who wouldn't want to see exiled people returned? Who wouldn't want to see their friends restored to their homes? Who wouldn't want to see the Temple once more filled with the objects they called sacred?

But Jeremiah didn't hear the word of God saying that. He invoked the voices of previous prophets who had warned about disasters and conflicts arising from the nation's unfaithfulness. Those were the prophets people remembered: prophets like Elijah and Elisha, like Hosea and Isaiah, like Micah and Nahum. They weren't much more cheerful than Jeremiah, and some of them a lot less so.

As Charles L. Aaron, Jr., writes at Working Preacher, "One prophet, Jeremiah, tells the people the truth. The other prophet, Hananiah, tells the people what they want to hear. One appears to us as the brave preacher who endures scorn for speaking the word the Lord gave him. The other appears to us as the soothing charlatan over whom everybody fawns because he offers near-term hope."

If you want to discern God's voice, said Jeremiah, take a look at who tends to get things right.

What he didn't say – what he didn't have to say, because I'm pretty sure that he left a pretty big echoing silence – was that he, Jeremiah, had declared God's judgment against Judah and look: they'd been invaded and surrendered to the Babylonians. He, not Hananiah, had been right.

Who should they trust for understanding God's will in the present?

To be honest, it didn't require the voice of God to predict Judah's likely future in 596. They were under the thumb of the Babylonians and they were going to stay there. It didn't need divine intervention to keep them vassals of that empire. If God did nothing at all, they would stay just as they were.

Hananiah misread the signs of the times just as much as he misread the signs of the Divine. Oh, by the way, he ended this conversation by breaking the symbolic yoke Jeremiah had been wearing, and the story ends with this sad line: "At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way."

I think it's fair to say that we, in the twenty-first century after Jesus, are surrounded by people who are happy to tell us what God's will is for us, for our church, for our communities, for our nation, and for all the nations of the earth. I also think it's fair to say that I'm one of those voices. If you'd like to know my opinion about God's will for us, I'm right here to tell you.

So how will you know whether I'm the one who's right, or among those who are right, or how right I or any of those preaching similar messages might be?

I'd like to say something similar to what Jeremiah did: Go look at the words of the prophets of the past. In theory, that's a good comparison. Go look for the ones who are Mister or Ms. Bad News. The judgmental ones are right.

In our day, though, we've got plenty of judgmental people (and I'd have to include myself among them), but we don't agree on what to be judgmental about.

Jeremiah found the presence of shrines to other gods in the nation of Judah profoundly troubling. Me, I don't. It's trite to say that some of my best friends are Buddhists, but it's also true that some of my best friends are Buddhists. I'm quite content to let them remain Buddhists as they continue to be kind and compassionate people.

Jeremiah found the abuse of the poor by the powerful to be profoundly troubling. As do I. The gap between rich and poor was probably greater in the sixth century before Jesus than it is now, but it's much too big now and it's getting bigger. I am not content to see this nation and this world torn apart by systems that reward a few and impoverish many.

There are plenty of modern-day religious leaders who berate us for living in a religiously pluralistic society. They tell us we should all be Christian. They tell us to remove the Buddhists, the Jews, the Muslims (especially the Muslims), the animists, the Wiccans, the Taoists, the anybody else. Jeremiah might have been there with them. I'm not.

Plenty of these same modern-day religious leaders praise the accomplishments of wealthy individuals. They'll tell you that wealth is the inevitable result of virtue, and therefore wealthy people are, by definition, virtuous. I think I've mentioned before that I think this is really poor theology. I'll actually call it heresy. Jeremiah would have agreed.

So who's right? How will we know?

For Christians, there's a complicating factor. We can't say that good prophecy comes exclusively from Mr. or Ms. Bad News because... Jesus. Jesus insisted on speaking Good News. I grant you that his good news could be hard on the wealthy, and it could be challenging for the powerful, but there it was: Good News.

I'm not doing well at telling you how to distinguish between the prophets and the charlatans, am I?

Debie Thomas has some wisdom at JourneyWithJesus.net: "As God's messengers in the world, we are not at liberty to soften the Gospel for the sake of our own likeability. Jesus has not commissioned us to say whatever is trendy or comfortable or easy or popular. He has commissioned us to say what is true. False hope is not God's hope. Easy peace is not God's peace. And convenient justice is not God's justice."

I think I can authoritatively say that if the message benefits a few and burdens many, it's not God's justice. If the message promises peace without the hard work of rebuilding broken relationships, it's not God's peace. If the hope is entirely disconnected from the reality of today, it's not God's hope. If the promise is built on lie after lie after lie, it's not God's truth.

Hananiah broke Jeremiah's symbolic yoke and the prophet went away. The leaders and the people of the nation had made their choice, and they continued to make their poor choices until King Zedekiah's rebelled about ten years later, resulting in the destruction of the nation and the burning of Solomon's Temple. Zedekiah's rule was built on injustice. It was built on violence. It was built on fantasy. It was built on lies. It resulted in disaster, as Jeremiah had foreseen.

May we choose better. May we choose truth.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*