

Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Jeremiah 23 is one of the most theologically dense chapters in the entire book, comprising four distinct but interlocking movements. The chapter opens with a searing indictment of the shepherds of Israel (vv. 1–4) — the kings and priests who have scattered and destroyed the flock rather than gathering and tending it. This is not pastoral neglect but active devastation, and the LORD holds these leaders directly accountable. The indictment pivots immediately into promise: God Himself will gather the remnant, appoint faithful shepherds, and ensure the flock is no longer afraid or lacking (vv. 3–4). This promissory turn leads directly into the messianic promise of the Branch (vv. 5–8) — a Davidic king who will reign with wisdom and justice, execute righteousness in the land, and bear the name “The LORD Our Righteousness” (*YHWH Tsidkenu*). This is one of the most explicit and concentrated messianic passages in the Old Testament prophetic corpus.

The chapter’s second half shifts from false shepherds to false prophets (vv. 9–40). Jeremiah describes his own devastation at what he has witnessed — prophets who commit adultery, walk in lies, strengthen evildoers, and declare peace where there is none (vv. 9–15). The false prophets speak visions from their own hearts, not from the mouth of the LORD (vv. 16–22). They claim to bear the LORD’s word but have not stood in His council, have not heard His voice, and their messages actively lead the people away from repentance (vv. 18, 22). The LORD’s response is a theology of divine presence and divine word: He is near and far simultaneously; He fills heaven and earth; no one can hide from Him (vv. 23–24). He knows the prophets’ dreams and distinguishes His own word — which is like fire, like a hammer shattering rock — from the straw of human invention (vv. 25–29). The chapter concludes with a formal pronouncement against those who steal the LORD’s words from one another, who use the phrase “the burden of the LORD” as a kind of verbal commodity, profaning it (vv. 30–40). The consequence is total rejection — the LORD will “forget” and “cast away” those who have treated His word as their own possession.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish three interlocked effects through this passage. First, He is confronting both leaders and people with the full weight of unfaithful spiritual authority — the catastrophic consequences of those who hold the shepherd’s office and the prophet’s mantle while serving themselves rather than God and His flock. Second, and crucially, He is foregrounding the coming True Shepherd and Righteous King against the backdrop of every failed human alternative — the more devastating the indictment of false shepherds and false prophets, the more luminous the Branch appears. Third, He is pressing upon the

reader a theology of authentic divine speech: there is a real word from the LORD, it is not like human words, it cannot be fabricated, and the one who handles it must handle it with fear — for the God who fills heaven and earth is the same God whose word is fire.

Subject Sentence: The LORD indicts false shepherds and prophets while promising the true and righteous Branch.

Primary Claim: Every false shepherd exposes what only the LORD Himself can provide — a King who is genuinely righteous, a word that is genuinely true, and a God who cannot be deceived or escaped; and God will deliver exactly that through the coming Branch.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Messianic Branch (vv. 5–8)

The messianic interpretation of the “Branch” (*tsemach*) passage is shared broadly across Christian traditions, though the precise theological freight carried by *YHWH Tsidkenu* — “The LORD Our Righteousness” — is interpreted differently. The Reformed and Lutheran traditions both read this name as pointing to imputed righteousness: the coming Davidic King is not merely a righteous king in His own conduct but is Himself the source and ground of His people’s righteousness before God. This reading is supported by Paul’s explicit application of this theology to Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21) and by the broader prophetic context, where Israel’s chronic inability to produce righteousness from within herself is precisely the problem being addressed.

Arminian and Wesleyan readings tend to emphasize the Branch’s righteous *reign* — He will execute justice in the land — and apply *YHWH Tsidkenu* primarily to God’s character being vindicated in history rather than to the imputation of righteousness to believers. This reading *partially holds*: the text does describe a reign of justice and wisdom, and God’s character vindication is genuinely in view. But this reading does not account for the name being applied to both the king and later to the city of Jerusalem (Jer. 33:16), which is a person bearing that name in a way that suggests transfer or imputation rather than mere association. The Reformed reading, which sees both dimensions — the king’s righteous character and the righteousness He bestows — better accounts for the full textual and canonical range.

Dispensational readings tend to refer this passage exclusively to a future literal millennial reign, keeping the fulfillment strictly future and national (ethnic Israel, geographic Jerusalem). This framework acknowledges the passage’s genuine future orientation but creates an unnecessary disjunction between the Branch’s identity (Christologically fulfilled in Jesus’s first coming) and His reign (pushed entirely to the millennium). The New

Testament — particularly Hebrews, Revelation, and the Pauline letters — treats the Branch’s office as inaugurated in Christ’s first advent even while awaiting consummation. A canonical reading holds the tension of already/not-yet without severing the person of the Branch from His present mediatorial work.

False Prophets and the Word of the LORD (vv. 9–40)

The interpretive question in the second half of the chapter is whether the diagnosis of false prophecy is primarily an *ethical* problem (the prophets are immoral people) or an *epistemological* problem (they are not speaking from the LORD’s council). The text insists it is both, but the *epistemological* problem is primary — the ethical failure flows from the deeper failure of not having stood in the council of the LORD. Some moralistic readings focus so heavily on the prophets’ adultery and lying that they miss the theological argument being made: the false prophet’s problem is not simply bad behavior but false ontology — he claims to be a mouthpiece of the living God while speaking from his own heart. The question “Did you stand in the council of the LORD?” (v. 18) is the diagnostic center, not “Are you living rightly?”

Pentecostal and charismatic readings of this passage sometimes become reflexively defensive, treating the passage as a warning about excess rather than a *positive* theology of authentic divine speech. The text is not merely saying “be careful with prophetic claims” — it is saying there is a real word from the real God that is distinguishably powerful, and all human imitation is exposed by contrast. The Reformed reading here captures the full weight: the passage affirms the reality and authority of divine speech precisely by condemning its counterfeits. The appropriate response is not caution about prophecy per se but reverence before the genuine word of God — which, in the canonical context of the completed Scripture, is now the written Word.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 11:1–5** — The Branch from Jesse who judges with righteousness, whose word is like a rod that strikes the earth; the direct parallel to the *tsemach* figure and His righteousness, providing the Isaianic grounding for Jeremiah’s promise.
- **Jeremiah 33:14–16** — The second occurrence of the Branch promise, where the name *YHWH Tsidkenu* is now applied to the city (Jerusalem), suggesting the righteousness of the Branch is extended to and shared with His people — the canonical confirmation of imputed righteousness.
- **Ezekiel 34** — The extended shepherd passage where the LORD Himself indicts the false shepherds of Israel in nearly identical terms to Jeremiah 23:1–4, then promises to shepherd His flock Himself through a new David — confirming this is not an isolated metaphor but a sustained covenant indictment.

- **John 10:1–18** — Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep explicitly contrasts Himself with the hireling shepherds; this is the New Testament fulfillment of Jeremiah 23:1–4’s promise, where the True Shepherd arrives and gathers the scattered flock.
- **1 Corinthians 1:30** — Christ has become for us “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” — Paul’s direct appropriation of the *YHWH Tsidkenu* reality, confirming the Reformed reading that the Branch is the source of His people’s righteousness before God, not merely a model of it.

Aim: To bring the reader face to face with both the devastating inadequacy of every human substitute for God’s true leadership and word, and the relief and sufficiency of the Branch — the LORD Our Righteousness — who alone can accomplish what every failed shepherd and false prophet could not.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The LORD pronounces woe on the shepherds who scatter and destroy His flock; they are held accountable for the sheep’s condition	“Shepherds” = political and priestly leaders; “scatter” connects to exile
3–4	The LORD promises to gather the remnant Himself from all the lands of exile; He will appoint faithful shepherds; the flock will no longer fear or be lacking	Promissory reversal: what the shepherds failed to do, the LORD will do
5–6	Promise of the Branch — a righteous Davidic king who will reign wisely, execute justice and righteousness; His name: <i>YHWH Tsidkenu</i> — “The LORD Our Righteousness”	<i>Tsemach</i> = Branch; one of the most concentrated messianic texts in the OT
7–8	A new exodus — the day is coming when people will no longer swear by the LORD who brought Israel out of	The new gathering will eclipse even the Exodus in redemptive-historical

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Egypt but by the LORD who restored them from the north	magnitude
9–12	Jeremiah’s personal grief at the state of the land and its prophets; they commit adultery, walk in lies, strengthen evildoers; the land mourns; judgment is coming	“My heart is broken within me” — prophetic lament; the prophet identifies with the word’s pain
13–15	The prophets of Samaria prophesied by Baal; the prophets of Jerusalem are worse — they commit adultery and walk in lies, making the people like Sodom and Gomorrah	Jerusalem’s false prophets exceed Samaria’s — greater light, greater culpability
16–17	The LORD commands: do not listen to these prophets; they speak visions of their own minds; they say “no disaster will come” to those who despise God	The diagnostic: their message flatters rather than confronts; peace where there is no peace
18	The rhetorical question: “Who has stood in the council of the LORD to see and hear His word?”	The epistemological center of the entire passage — the false prophet’s fundamental disqualification
19–20	The storm of the LORD’s wrath is going forth; it will burst on the heads of the wicked; in latter days they will understand it clearly	The word the false prophets suppress is a word of coming judgment
21–22	The LORD did not send these prophets; if they had stood in His council, they would have turned the people from evil	The test of authentic prophecy: does it call people to repentance?
23–24	The LORD is near and far; He fills heaven and earth; no one can hide from Him	Foundational theology of divine omnipresence — the false prophets cannot deceive an omniscient God

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
25–27	The LORD knows the prophets' dreams; they tell dreams and call them divine word; they cause the people to forget the LORD's name through their dreams	The prophets' "revelations" are human fabrications that displace God's actual name and word
28–29	Let the one who has a dream tell it as a dream; what has straw to do with grain? The LORD's word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks rock in pieces	The qualitative difference between divine word and human speech — one shatters, one does not
30–32	Woe against those who steal the LORD's words from each other, who wag their tongues and claim "He declares," who lead the people astray with reckless lies	Three formal woe pronouncements against specific categories of false prophecy
33–40	The section on the "burden of the LORD" (<i>massa</i>): those who use "What is the LORD's burden?" as a catch-phrase are told they themselves will become the burden the LORD casts off; the word is to be treated with reverence, not as a verbal commodity	Wordplay on <i>massa</i> (burden/oracle); profaning the LORD's word inverts the burden — God casts them off

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Indictment and the Promise: False Shepherds and the LORD's Gathering
2	5–8	The Branch and the New Exodus: The LORD Our Righteousness
3	9–22	The False Prophets:

Division	Verses	Label
		Adultery, Lies, and the Missing Council
4	23–29	The God Who Cannot Be Hidden From: Divine Presence and Divine Word
5	30–40	The Profaned Word: Woes, the Burden of the LORD, and Final Rejection

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD indicts false shepherds and prophets while promising the true and righteous Branch.

Primary Claim: Every false shepherd exposes what only the LORD Himself can provide — a King who is genuinely righteous, a word that is genuinely true, and a God who cannot be deceived or escaped; and God will deliver exactly that through the coming Branch.

Applications (Five)

1. The inadequacy of every human shepherd is not an accident — it is a pointer. (Mind/Belief)

Every generation discovers that its leaders — political, ecclesial, spiritual — are capable of catastrophic failure. Jeremiah 23 insists this is not an interruption of God’s plan but a demonstration of its necessity. False shepherds do not merely fail the people; they expose, by contrast, what the flock actually needs — a shepherd who is the LORD Himself. The congregation should be taught to read leadership failure not with cynicism (“all leaders are corrupt”) nor with naïve re-investment in the next human candidate, but with theological clarity: every failed shepherd is a handmade arrow pointing toward the Branch. The application is a reorientation of expectation — stop looking to human leadership for what only Christ can provide, and start reading its failures as God’s persistent advertisement for His Son.

2. “The LORD Our Righteousness” is not a title to admire but a status to receive. (Affections/Worship)

YHWH Tsidkenu is one of the most profound names in Scripture, and it is easy to treat it as a piece of theological furniture — impressive, duly noted, filed. But this name is the answer to the deepest problem in Jeremiah 23: the people have no righteousness of their own, their leaders have corrupted rather than generated it, and even their prophets have produced counterfeit peace. The Branch comes bearing the very righteousness of God and

giving it as a name — not describing His own character but transferring His status. The application is not intellectual appreciation but worshipful reception: can you say, “My righteousness is not my record, my reputation, or my religious performance — it is the LORD”? This is the move from theology to worship, from knowing about the Branch to resting in Him.

3. Examine whether the word you are receiving produces repentance or only comfort. (Will/Behavior)

Jeremiah 23:22 provides a diagnostic: “If they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way.” The test of authentic divine word is not how confident the speaker sounds, not how supernatural the claim feels, not even how much it resonates emotionally — it is whether it calls the hearer to genuine repentance and change. The application is concrete: evaluate the teaching, preaching, books, and podcasts you regularly consume. Does the word you habitually receive confront your sin, challenge your idols, and call you to costly obedience — or does it primarily affirm your existing posture and promise peace? A steady diet of the latter is not spiritually neutral; according to this text, it is actively dangerous.

4. God’s word is not straw — treat it as what it actually is. (Affections/Worship)

Verse 29: “Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” This is one of the most startling verses in the prophetic corpus. The false prophets’ problem is not merely that they are lying — it is that they have substituted something soft and yielding for something that shatters rock. Many congregations, and many preachers, handle Scripture with a comfort and casualness that treats it implicitly as straw — useful background material, a collection of helpful thoughts, a warm cultural inheritance. The application is to cultivate genuine fear and reverence before Scripture — not as a religious performance but as a functional acknowledgment of what the text actually claims for itself. What would change in your daily reading if you genuinely believed you were handling fire?

5. You cannot hide your heart from the God who fills heaven and earth. (Mind/Belief)

Verses 23–24: “Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth?” The false prophets operated on the implicit assumption that the God whose word they were counterfeiting could somehow be managed, outmaneuvered, or deceived. This is a version of practical atheism — professing the LORD while functionally treating Him as absent or inattentive. The application presses directly on the private architecture of the reader’s life: the theology you actually hold about God’s presence is demonstrated not by your confessional statements but by what you do, say, and think when you believe no one is watching. Jeremiah 23 insists the omnipresent God is precisely the one who knows the prophets’ dreams (v. 25) — the most interior, hidden content of a person’s inner life is not hidden from Him. This is both a warning and — for the believer who has nothing to hide because they are robed in the Branch’s righteousness — a profound comfort.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Jeremiah 23 makes a series of foundational theological claims that bear far beyond its historical moment. First, it establishes that God holds those in positions of spiritual authority to an accounting for the condition of those in their care — the shepherd’s failure is not merely professional negligence but covenant treachery, because the flock belongs to God. Second, it presents the LORD Himself as the solution to failed human leadership: He will gather, appoint, and ultimately provide through the Branch what every human shepherd could not. Third, the name *YHWH Tsidkenu* — “The LORD Our Righteousness” — makes an explicit claim that the coming Davidic king will be the ground and source of His people’s right standing before God, not merely a model of personal virtue. Fourth, the chapter presents a robust theology of divine speech: the LORD’s word is qualitatively different from human speech, it proceeds from His council, it accomplishes what it is sent to do, and it cannot be fabricated, commodified, or escaped. These are not tangential claims — they are foundational to the entire prophetic and redemptive-historical project.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is a masterclass in the Reformed insistence that the gospel always runs from God to man, never from man to God. The false shepherds and false prophets of Jeremiah 23 represent the widest possible variety of human attempts to generate righteousness, divine speech, and covenant peace from within the human project — and every one of them fails, catastrophically and culpably. The Branch is the Father’s direct response: where Israel could not produce a righteous king, God provides *YHWH Tsidkenu*; where the false prophets could not produce a true word, God provides the word that is fire. The Reformed doctrine of imputed righteousness finds one of its most concentrated Old Testament expressions here — the Branch does not merely model righteousness for us to imitate but is named as the righteousness of His people, bearing that name as a gift transferred to those who are united to Him. Calvin, commenting on this passage, recognized it as the beating heart of Old Testament soteriology: the covenant people’s hope is not their faithfulness but the LORD’s own character provided for them in the person of His appointed King.

Main Takeaway

Every system humans construct to generate righteousness, produce true spiritual leadership, and speak for God eventually collapses under the weight of its own corruption — and this is precisely God’s design, because the collapse creates the vacancy only the Branch can fill. Jesus of Nazareth is *YHWH Tsidkenu* — He is not a righteousness you

achieve, improve toward, or supplement; He is the righteousness you receive. And the word He has given — which is like fire and like a hammer — cannot be counterfeited, commodified, or escaped. Stop building on straw. Rest on the Branch.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the “false shepherds” section to a critique of contemporary church leadership.** It is tempting to weaponize Jeremiah 23:1–4 as a commentary on specific pastors, denominations, or institutions known to the congregation. While the passage does speak directly to those who hold spiritual authority, its primary movement is toward the promise — the indictment of false shepherds is not the destination but the launching pad for the messianic promise. A sermon that spends most of its time cataloguing leadership failure and little time on the Branch has inverted the passage’s own logic and may leave the congregation with cynicism rather than hope.
- **Treating the Branch passage as an isolated prophecy rather than the chapter’s theological center.** Verses 5–8 are often extracted and preached as a self-contained messianic text, which is exegetically defensible, but when the passage is read in its chapter context, the Branch’s significance is dramatically heightened — He is the answer to everything the false shepherds and false prophets could not provide. Preaching the Branch only in abstraction from the chapter’s indictment loses the relief and specificity of the promise.
- **Applying “The LORD Our Righteousness” in a merely motivational direction.** *YHWH Tsidkenu* is sometimes preached as “God wants you to walk righteously” or “God is calling you to be a righteous person.” This misses the theological force of the name entirely. The name does not describe what God calls His people to be — it describes what God *is for them* in the person of the Branch. The application is not moral aspiration but gospel reception: the righteousness is His, and it is given, not achieved.
- **Missing the epistemological argument in the false prophets section.** The section on false prophets (vv. 9–40) is often preached primarily as a warning about moral corruption — these prophets are sexually immoral and deceitful. But the text’s own argument centers on a more fundamental failure: they did not stand in the council of the LORD (v. 18). The ethical corruption is the fruit of the epistemological failure, not the reverse. A sermon that focuses only on the prophets’ immorality as the problem will produce a moralistic application (“be more ethical in ministry”) when the text is calling for a theological application (“submit to the actual word of the living God, recognizing that no human being can manufacture it”).
- **Domesticating verse 29 (“like fire, like a hammer”).** This verse is one of the most arresting in the prophetic corpus, yet it is frequently quoted in passing as a piece of

inspiring rhetoric about the power of Scripture. The passage demands more — it should produce in the reader a reckoning with the qualitative difference between divine speech and all human substitutes for it, including well-intentioned Christian content, inspirational teaching, and therapeutic counsel. The preacher should press the congregation: do you functionally treat Scripture as fire, or as background music?

- **Failing to address the “burden of the LORD” section (vv. 33–40) as genuinely load-bearing theology.** This section is one of the most linguistically complex in Jeremiah and is often either skipped or summarized hastily. But its theology is essential to the chapter: it insists that the word of God is not a verbal commodity to be traded, repeated, or used as a credential. The profaning of the word — using “the burden of the LORD” as a catchphrase while not actually bearing the LORD’s word — is presented as grounds for total rejection. In an age of commodified Christian content, this section has acute applicability.