

Good morning, Bethel family—welcome to the gathered church, where we come together because of one glorious truth: **the gospel—Jesus in our place**. Today is a special day as all ages worship together. **The Word makes faith come alive for all ages**.

Today in Jeremiah, we will hear a hard but holy word: “**Woe**.” In Scripture, *woe* is more than a warning—it is a **cry of grief, urgency, and coming judgment**. Yet even in God’s warnings, we see His mercy. Because the Lord warns before He wounds, and He calls sinners to return before judgment falls.

As we open the Word, let us open our hearts, fix our eyes on Christ, and listen carefully to the voice of our Shepherd.

Whoa, Nellie! (Jeremiah 23:1-4)

Woe to the Shepherds (23:1-4) Jeremiah turns his prophetic fire toward the people at the top. God’s judgment is aimed first at the **shepherds**.

In the Ancient Near East, *shepherd* was a common metaphor for **kings, rulers, and leaders**. Here, these shepherds primarily refer to Judah’s kings and those entrusted with guiding God’s people (Jer. 10:21; 25:34–38; Ezek. 34; John 10:1–18). They were called to protect, guide, and feed the flock. Instead, they **neglected, scattered, and harmed** the sheep.

Take-Home: God holds leaders accountable for how they steward His people.

Leadership is never **neutral**. Authority is never merely positional. To lead others is to carry a sacred responsibility before God. James 3:1 echoes this warning: “*Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment.*” The greater the influence, the greater the accountability. And this reaches far beyond kings and prophets.

Before you dismiss this by saying, “*I’m not a leader,*” ask yourself: Are you a parent? A teacher? A coach? A supervisor? A ministry leader? A discipler? If so, God has entrusted someone to your care. Every platform—large or small—is stewardship. Influence is not accidental; it is an opportunity to reflect the heart and character of God.

Woe to the Sheep (28:1-17) stand up on **Lord**) But Jeremiah’s warnings do not stop with the shepherds.

It would be easy to hear Jeremiah 23 and think, “*I’m not a king. I’m not a prophet. I’m not a pastor. I’m not a leader. So this has little to do with me.*” But Jeremiah 28 widens the lens. God’s concern is not only with corrupt shepherds—it also exposes something about the **sheep**.

Because if you belong to Christ by faith, then the Lord is your Shepherd you shall not want.. Jesus says in John 10, “*My sheep hear My voice.*” If He is your Shepherd, then you are His sheep. So let me speak a **woe to the sheep**. And let’s call the sheep Nellie.

Jeremiah gives us a “**Woe Nellie**” real-world example through a public collision between truth and falsehood. This was not a private debate over theology—it was a public spiritual crisis. Two prophets stood in the same holy place. Both claimed to speak for God. Both used covenant language. But only one carried the true Word of the Lord.

And that should sober every one of us: **not every religious voice speaks for God**. Sheep who do not know the Shepherd’s voice can easily follow the wrong one.

Hananiah: The False Confidence of Religious Deception

Hananiah appears suddenly in Jeremiah 28, and this is the only place in the Old Testament where he is mentioned. Yet the text calls him “*Hananiah the prophet from Gibeon,*” suggesting he was likely known and respected in his day.

Gibeon was located in Benjamin—the same tribal territory as Jeremiah’s hometown (5 miles away), Anathoth. It was also a priestly city (Josh. 21:17), which may indicate that Hananiah had priestly connections or religious credibility.

In other words, Hananiah did not look like an obvious false prophet. He was local. He was religious. He sounded confident. He stood in the Temple. He spoke in God’s name. And yet he was dangerously wrong.

That is often how **deception** works. Falsehood rarely introduces itself as falsehood. It often wears the robes of sincerity, confidence, and spirituality. **Woe Nellie!**

Woe to the sheep who misspeak for the Lord (28:2) Hananiah boldly says, “*Thus says the LORD of hosts...*” That is the danger. He speaks with divine certainty, but without divine authority. He used God’s name to validate his own message.

This is not merely a prophet problem—it is a sheep problem when God’s people casually speak where God has not spoken. How often do we say:

“**God told me...**” “**God would never...**” “**The Lord must want this...**” When in reality, we may simply be baptizing our preferences, emotions, or assumptions. Woe to the sheep who put words in God’s mouth. To misrepresent God is no small sin.

Take-Home: We must speak **boldly** where Scripture speaks **clearly**—and remain **humble** where Scripture is **silent**.

Woe to the sheep who want to please the world (28:9) Hananiah’s prophecy was attractive because it told the people exactly what they wanted to hear. Peace. Relief. A broken yoke. Quick deliverance. An end to suffering. It was the sermon everyone would have applauded. The only problem: it was not true.

Jeremiah’s message was far harder. Repent. Submit. Endure the discipline of God. Trust Him even when obedience is costly. That is often the dividing line between false prophets and true prophets: false prophets preach **what is pleasing**; true prophets preach **what is faithful**.

Take-Home: Woe to the sheep who prefer applause over obedience.

Paul presses this same question in Galatians 1:10: “*Am I now trying to persuade people, or God?... If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*” That is the issue beneath Jeremiah 28.

Will we live for the approval of man or the pleasure of God? False religion bends truth to gain acceptance. But true faith bows to truth because Christ is King.

Take-Home: To follow Jesus is not to ask, “*What will people applaud?*” It is to ask, “*What honors my Savior?*”

Woe to the sheep who only listen to what they want to hear (28:5, 9) Jeremiah responds to Hananiah with surprising restraint. He says, “*Amen! May the LORD do so*” (v. 6). In other words, *I would love for that to be true*. Jeremiah was not emotionally attached to judgment or eager to deliver bad news. He longed for mercy. He wanted peace for the people. But Jeremiah also knew that **hope** must be grounded in truth, not wishful thinking but in the *truth of the Gospel*.

That same temptation still lives in the human heart. **We naturally drift toward voices that affirm us, excuse us, flatter us, and never confront us**. Paul later warns that people will gather teachers who tell them what their “**itching ears**” want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3)

Take-Home: Woe to the sheep who only listen to what they want to hear. Christ, the Good Shepherd, does not merely tell His sheep what they want to hear—He lovingly tells them what they need to hear, leading them in truth, repentance, and life.

Woe to the sheep who don’t know the Word (28:15) Jeremiah finally exposes Hananiah with sobering clarity: “*The LORD has not sent you.*” That raises an important question—how could the people have known the difference between a true prophet and a false one? By knowing the Word of God.

Hananiah's message directly contradicted what God had already spoken through Jeremiah, but the people lacked discernment. And discernment does not grow in shallow soil. It grows where Scripture dwells deeply.

Woe to the sheep who know social media better than Scripture. Woe to the sheep who can quote culture but not Christ. Woe to the sheep who consume endless opinions but neglect the Word of God.

Jesus said in John 10:27, "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*" The more deeply we know His Word, the more clearly, we recognize His voice. And sheep who know the Shepherd's voice are far less likely to follow the voice of strangers.

So What?

Jeremiah 28 ultimately shows us that sheep are often weak, impressionable, fearful, and prone to wander.

We chase comforting lies. We follow loud voices. We trust what feels right. We drift toward easy messages.

But this is why we need more than good instincts: We need a **Shepherd**. And praise God, we have One.

The call of Jeremiah 28 is simple: **Know His voice. Trust His Word. Follow your Shepherd.**

John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" *John 10:14* "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. I lay down my life for the sheep."

Exegetical Notes

Jer. 23:1 “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” This is the LORD’s declaration.

Woe

The accusation begins with a "woe"-cry (*i7, v 13); the linking of that interjection in v 13 with the same interjection in v 18 (there "alas!") suggests that the "woe"-cry originated in funeral lamentation;* that is to say, though "woe" suggests accusation here, it also implies the anticipation of the funeral of the one addressed. The participle is normal with this form (Holladay, 594).

Negligent Shepherds

This verbal stem can signify either "to perish" or "to be lost," and since it is the task of the shepherd to prevent any sheep in his flock from getting lost, the last meaning seems more likely. A shepherd who allows sheep to go astray is negligent. As elsewhere, the shepherds are the leaders of the people.

These verses are a woe oracle (see 22:13) upon the "shepherds" responsible for scattering and destroying the sheep of God's pasture. "Shepherd" was a word widely used of rulers in the ANE. The language is figurative, but the meaning is clear. The "shepherds" included the kings of Judah and other leaders (see 10:21; cf. 25:34-38; Ezek 34; John 10:1-18).

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.**

I will Gather

This language casts God as a shepherd, now stepping in to take up the task of the negligent shepherds who acted in such a vary through their misguided leadership that the

people were "scattered" into lands of exile. they shall be fruitful and multiply. This phraseology borrowed from the beginning of Genesis suggests that the return to Zion will be a kind of second creation (Alter, 936).

Jer. 28:1 In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur from Gibeon said to me in the temple of the LORD in the presence of the priests and all the people,

Same year

This confrontation between true and false prophet is staged for maximum exposure—in the Temple, when priests and a throng of people are assembled for worships (Alter, 953).

This time a prophet other than Jeremiah uses a symbolic action. Hananiah turns out to be a false prophet, but the difference is not immediately obvious, as he is also referred to as a prophet (TOTC, 214).

Hananiah

The name "Hananiah" was a common one (for reference to two others in Jer, see 36:12 and 37:13); the name "Azzur" is borne by two others in the OT (Ezek 11:1; Neh 10:18). The prophet Hananiah is not mentioned in the OT outside the present chapter, but the definite article ("the prophet from Gibeon") suggests someone well known at the time (compare the diction of 1 Kgs 13:11, "there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel").

Hananiah's name means "Yahweh has been gracious." It was an appropriate name for a prophet who believed strongly, if mistakenly, that Judah's fortunes would soon be restored. He is otherwise unknown (NICOT, 539).

Gibeon

His place of origin, Gibeon, was located, like that of Jrm (Anathoth), in Benjamin; indeed Gibeon (the present-day el-jib) is only five and a half kilometers northwest of Anathoth.

The Gibeonites had deceived the Israelites in Joshua's day (Josh. 9:1-15). It was the scene of a contest between Saul's men and David's men (2 Sam. 20: 12-17). Here Joab killed Amasa (2 Sam. 20:8-10). See NICOT, 539.

Gibeon was located in the territory of Benjamin, as was Jeremiah's hometown, Anathoth. It was one of the priests' cities (Josh 21:17), which suggests that Hananiah may himself have been a priest. If so, his credibility as a prophet would have been enhanced because of his priestly status. Gibeon had important historical associations in the memory of Israel (Josh 9:1-26; 10:1-14; 2 Sam 2:12-17; 20:8-13; 1 Kgs 3:4-15).

² **“This is what the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, says: ‘I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.**

Thus said the Lord of Armies. The false prophet uses the same messenger-formula as the true prophet, claiming to convey the words of God (Alter, 953).

Hananiah uses the proper messenger formula ("Thus says Yahweh"); he claims that what he says is said in the name of Yahweh and from him and he too uses symbolic actions. The only problem is that what he says will happen does not: none of the furnishings come back home to Jerusalem; none of the captives come back home; and the exile does not end within two years! Hananiah has a truth problem—a big one! This lack of truth casts major doubts on his alleged source (Kaiser, 324).

³ **Within two years I will restore to this place all the articles of the LORD’s temple that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took from here and transported to Babylon. ⁴ And I will restore to this place Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon’—this is the LORD’s declaration— ‘for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.’”**

Jer. 28:5 The prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the temple of the LORD.

The Prophet

Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet. The two are given the same epithet as they vie to demonstrate which of them is the authentic prophet (Alter, 953).

Here, tension revolves around the question of who is the true prophet? and 'what is the true prophecy and is emphasized by the fact that both Jeremiah and Hananiah are called the prophet. Jeremiah's words in verse 6 are expressed as a wish that it may indeed happen as Hananiah has predicted, but may also be regarded as irony (TOTC, 215).

⁶ The prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do that. May the LORD make the words you have prophesied come true and may he restore the articles of the LORD’s temple and all the exiles from Babylon to this place! ⁷ Only listen to this message I am speaking in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸ The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, disaster, and plague against many lands and great kingdoms. ⁹ As for the prophet who prophesies peace—only when the word of the prophet comes true will the prophet be recognized as one the LORD has truly sent.”

Amen

"May the Lord do so!" has been interpreted by many scholars as a sarcastic response, but Jeremiah was sincere. He did not defend himself or challenge Hananiah by saying, "You are lying," as might be expected. Because of his love for his people, he hoped that Hananiah was correct. However, Hananiah's prophecy must have caused Jeremiah to wonder if the Lord had bypassed him. He did not presumptuously assume that he was the only one who could speak for God (NAC, 248).

Prophets

Such messages were not popular. The people preferred to hear reassuring words and paid those prophets who spoke what they wanted to hear (cf. Mic 3:5). Jeremiah reminded Hananiah that one who preached peace would be vindicated as a prophet only if his predictions came true (NAC, 248).

In the New Testament, prophets appear in a series of ways (Goldingay, 125):

- In the Gospels, the people who are explicitly called prophets are Anna (Lk 2:36-38), John the Baptizer (Mt 11:9), and Jesus (e.g., Lk 13:33).
- First Testament prophets such as Jeremiah help the Gospel writers understand Jesus (e.g., Mt 2:17) and ought to have helped people in Jesus' own time to do so (e.g., Lk 24:44).
- Acts also speaks of the activity of prophets in the churches (Acts 11:27; 13:1; 21:10), as does Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 14:29).

Peace

Hananiah's encounter with Jeremiah contains some significant theological truths: (1) God's ways may not seem logical, but one had better follow them. Judah's deliverance would come through submission, not resistance. The NT speaks of achieving greatness through servanthood (Matt 23:11; Luke 22:26) and of being set free through submission to Christ (John 8:32-36). It speaks of death in order to live (Matt 16:25), of giving in order to receive (Luke 6:38), of forgiving as we are forgiven (Matt 6:14-15; Luke 6:37). See NAC, 251.

Jeremiah 27-28 is about the counterfeit gospel of prosperity theology. This counterfeit may look and feel like the real thing, but it conflates God's power with his will in falsely promising that faith in him will lead to prosperity. The appeal of such lies can be especially strong for believers who approach life with a robust sense of being chosen by God (on which cf. Response section on Jeremiah 24).

The siren song of prosperity theology beckons thus within the believer's heart: "God is all-powerful, so he can do anything He wants. God is all-loving, so he wants to give me what I want. Since what I want is security, health, and wealth, God is able and willing to give these things to me as long as I have faith."

In both Jeremiah's time and ours, the faulty "theo-logic" of Hananiah continues to appeal to the undiscerning. Those who feel that God is obligated to provide smooth sailing as a reward for faith in him will continue to be disappointed (ESV, 629).

Comes True

The passage also serves as a solemn reminder not to teach what is contrary to God's Word, even if sincere. We must not confuse our own beliefs and desires with the will of God. We are held accountable for every careless word spoken (Matt 12:36). See NAC, 251.

Jeremiah's argument is more complex than at first appears. He draws on two factors to be considered in distinguishing true prophecy from false (see Connections: On Distinguishing True Prophecy from False). First, he appeals to tradition, the history of prophecy. How does Hananiah's word fit with respect to this long history? The prophets who have spoken heretofore have prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many nations and great kingdoms, including Jeremiah himself (Fretheim, 393).

Second, Jeremiah states that if prophets do prophesy peace, as Hananiah has just done, then one will know that God has sent the prophet only if that word comes to pass (see Deut 18:22, which speaks of the fulfillment of all prophecies, not just those of peace). Readers, who are not told of any response from others present at this confrontation (v. 1), would be able to understand why Hananiah is not convinced by Jeremiah's arguments (v. 10-11). See Fretheim, 393).

Comparable issues regarding the truth of prophecy were anticipated by Jesus and experienced by the New Testament community. They included the development of various criteria, especially in view of the confession regarding Jesus and matters relating to the end times (see, e.g., Matt 7:15-16; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Acts 13:6; 1 Thess 5:3; 1 John 4:1; 2 Pet 2:1; see Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10; Luke 6:26).

So, it has been in every age since. There have always been those who have claimed to speak a word from God, and the faithful religious communities have had to struggle with issues of discernment ever anew. The various texts in Jeremiah can be a resource in this ongoing process (perhaps especially, beware of those who speak only words of comfort and peace). See Fretheim, 397.

Hananiah's word can only be tested through the passage of time. It is as though Jeremiah anticipates Gamaliel, who counseled: "If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38-39). That, however, does not help much in the present, for decisions must be made and policies must be enacted. This criterion for assessing Hananiah seems almost for the sake of the canon (Brueggemann, 253).

HANANIAH BREAKS JEREMIAH'S YOKE

Jer. 28:10 The prophet Hananiah then took the yoke bar from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it. ¹¹ In the presence of all the people Hananiah proclaimed, "This is what the LORD says: 'In this way, within two years I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.'" The prophet Jeremiah then went on his way.

Went his way

And Jeremiah the prophet went on his way. Jeremiah's silence and his withdrawal from the scene of confrontation are, at least for the moment, ambiguous. He may even think that Hananiah's theatrical gesture of breaking the yoke bar could prove to have predictive force. But then the word of the Lord comes to him again (verses 12-13), giving the lie to Hananiah's gesture and affirming that unbreakable yoke bars of iron are now to replace the wooden ones (Alter, 955).

THE LORD'S WORD AGAINST HANANIAH

Jer. 28:12 After the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke bar from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³ "Go say to Hananiah, 'This is what the LORD says: You broke a wooden yoke bar, but in its place you will make an iron yoke bar. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, says: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations that they might serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they will serve him. I have even put the wild animals under him.'"

Jer. 28:15 The prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD did not send you, but you have led these people to trust in a lie. ¹⁶ Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'I am about to send you off the face of

the earth. You will die this year because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.”¹⁷ And the prophet Hananiah died that year in the seventh month.

Die

Hananiah's punishment was swift. He had said two years would pass before deliverance for Judah, but he died only two months after his confrontation with Jeremiah (cf. 28:1 and 28:17). His sudden death for lying reminds of Pelatiah's death (Ezek 11:13) and the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). These are isolated incidents and are not the norm. They do, however, illustrate the seriousness of sin: one should never lie to or about God (NAC, 251).

Do not play around with God's word, for it is an act of rebellion that attempts to mess with God. Today we have religious authorities who make pronouncements that are directly counter to what God has taught about marriage, sexual morality, the distinction of the genders, and all other sorts of forms of rebellion against God and his word. Guess how some of that stuff will end (Kaiser, 327)!

Illustrations