

A Crisis in Leadership

Pentecost +10

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Jeremiah 23:23-29, Psalm 82, Hebrews 12:1–14, Luke 12:49-56

There's a crisis in leadership. Have you ever had to sit under an unjust judge? Maybe in the business world or maybe in the courtroom or even in our political state.

When I was in graduate school, I worked as a writer for a company. One of the vice presidents hired me, and he liked me. I had favor with him. But another vice president gave me a hard time because he didn't like the first vice president. I came in some days, my desk would be gone. And given it to somebody, all my equipment, my computer, everything been given to another employee. And all my stuff would be packed in a box over in the corner.

He's regularly tormenting me, which I have to say, it was kind of funny to me. Now, most people don't have a boss like that, but many people have had to deal with difficulty in leadership in the business world. Unjust managers, managers who don't manage don't know how to lead. There's a TED talk about this came out a few years ago, narcissism and leadership in the business world, how it's just everywhere. And so the business leaders think, primarily of themselves and their potential bonuses, and less of developing the employees below them. It's a real serious problem.

Then we might consider the political arena. At any given moment, one group will consider the person in the White House as a threat to the future of the nation. There are bad leaders in politics and there are those who try to lead well. Nonetheless, from a distance our leaders in Washington often seem to waste time and money.

Recently, we heard the Southern Baptists come face to face with their own negligence in leadership. The trust of the people has been violated over the years. This is not simply limited to the Southern Baptists. It is. It is endemic across the society, all forms of leadership within the church, the business world, in the political world, and even within the family.

What do we do when we have bad leaders?

Our readings today are about faulty leaders.

There is a crisis in leadership. The powers that be are failing. Society is on the verge of collapse. Jeremiah is raised up by God to announce the coming judgment on the nation and to confront the powers that be: the kings, the priests, and the prophets.

Jeremiah prophecies against the ruling class: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. ² Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.” ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Je 23:1–2.

One ongoing pattern we see throughout the history of the people is the kings participating in idolatry. Even among many of the righteous kings, we are told that they did not remove the high places: that is the places where the people carried out Baal worship. Manasseh sunk so low that he practiced child sacrifice. The kings were notorious for making treaties with surrounding nations instead of trusting in the faithfulness of God. These treaties often became a doorway for idolatry in the land.

Idolatry is often compared with adultery because the people flirt with other gods while claiming allegiance to YHWH. It is also compared to adultery because sexual immorality was often part of the rituals in these pagan religions. The kings were leading the people astray. They were unfaithful shepherds.

The priests and prophets are also guilty. Jeremiah laments,
My heart is broken within me;
all my bones shake;
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of the Lord
and because of his holy words.

¹⁰ For the land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land mourns,
and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.
Their course is evil,
and their might is not right.

¹¹ “Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
even in my house I have found their evil,
declares the Lord.

¹² Therefore their way shall be to them
like slippery paths in the darkness,
into which they shall be driven and fall,
for I will bring disaster upon them
in the year of their punishment,
declares the Lord.

¹³ In the prophets of Samaria
I saw an unsavory thing:
they prophesied by Baal
and led my people Israel astray.

¹⁴ But in the prophets of Jerusalem
I have seen a horrible thing:
they commit adultery and walk in lies;
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
so that no one turns from his evil;

all of them have become like Sodom to me,
and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.”²

In today’s reading, Jeremiah confronts the false prophets who announce all is well even as Israel is facing complete destruction. He cries out,

How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart,²⁷ who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?³

These prophets are rehearsing their dreams that all is well with Israel. But all is not well. The poor are oppressed. The orphan and the widow are not cared for but suffer under the oppression of the wealthy. Immorality abounds.

Jeremiah suffers at the hands of these so-called prophets. They want to shut him up. He is telling the people: Judgment is at the door. The best thing you can do at this point is submit to enemy: the Babylonian invaders. The false prophets may sound like the true prophets because they say, “Trust the Lord. He will be faithful to His people and defeat the enemies.” While this sounds good, it is not a word from God.

The Lord is judging the nation for corrupt rulers and immoral lifestyles. From oppressing the weak to sexual immorality, the leaders and the people have been unfaithful. Judgment Day is at hand.

What should the people of God do when the leaders are unfaithful?

Psalm 82 gives us a picture. Cry out to God the just judge. The Lord takes His stand among the divine council. While this council almost sounds like angelic powers, it is more likely referring to rulers of the nations. The psalmist is questioning these rulers,

² “How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
³ Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”⁴

But these rulers do not heed the cry.
They have neither knowledge nor understanding,

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Je 23:9–14.

³ Anglican Church in North America, *Anglican Church in North America Sunday and Red-Letter Day Lectionary* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

⁴ Anglican Church in North America, *Anglican Church in North America Sunday and Red-Letter Day Lectionary* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

they walk about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken. ⁵

No matter how powerful these rulers seem, they will die. They will all face the Lord, the truly just judge.

Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations! ⁶

In the story of Jeremiah, Babylon does invade. The nation is defeated. The unfaithful leaders suffer. In light of Psalm 82, there is another judgment coming.

The great and terrible day of the Lord comes, and the people do not see it. All they see is Jesus. His coming marks the coming of the Lord in a way the people could not recognize. Jesus also faces unfaithful rulers: King Herod is a usurper who crushes the weak under his feet. While the story of Zechariah reminds us that some priests are still faithful, we also know that the priests and pharisees will collude to have Jesus destroyed.

What they fail to realize is that their collusion in leading Jesus to the cross, is the very judgment Jesus has been prophesying. He exclaims, “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”⁷

In the cross, Jesus enters into this baptism. The leaders have been judged and found wanting. Their days in power are numbered. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, His kingdom is established and the power of their kingdom has come to an end. This will be realized literally a few years later when Rome destroys Jerusalem.

Jesus says that He has come to bring division. In the cross, time is forever divided: from then on we will speak of “Before Christ” and “In the Year of Our Lord.” Fred Craddock speaks of Jesus life, death and resurrection as a crisis. He says, “Jesus is the crisis of the world (John 12:31). Crisis does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life.”

Allegiances will be challenged in light of Christ. The disciples must face their own inner divisions and ultimately step forward in following Christ and leaving behind their old identities. Families will be divided as followers of Christ become a new family: the church. The pagans who follow Christ will renounce their memberships in secret societies as they pass through the baptismal waters and are joined to the body of Christ.

⁵ Anglican Church in North America, *Anglican Church in North America Sunday and Red-Letter Day Lectionary* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

⁶ Anglican Church in North America, *Anglican Church in North America Sunday and Red-Letter Day Lectionary* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

⁷ Anglican Church in North America, *Anglican Church in North America Sunday and Red-Letter Day Lectionary* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016).

These divisions continue this day as we take up our cross and follow Christ. We turn away from worldly power systems, worldly goals, and toward Christ.

We still face a leadership crisis in the culture. Our political world is alienated and ridden with strife. In the church, we have seen leaders violate the trust of their people again and again. Many families have suffered from false leaders who oppress and abuse the family. Our businesses have also suffered under the hand of leaders who live for themselves and fail to serve the people they lead.

How are we to respond? When we have opportunity to influence through voting or confrontation, we may act. Many times we may have no influence or voice in the lives of leaders who are unwise and even oppressive. Psalm 82 teaches us to take our complaint to the Lord and trust Him. Ultimately, we bring all our complaints of injustice to the cross of Christ. We look to our Savior, the author and finisher of our faith.

We bring all this to the cross of Christ, trusting that our just judge cares for us and will ultimately make all things right.