

# The Righteous Branch

Jeremiah 23

90 minutes • Win, Build, Send inductive format

---

## SESSION OVERVIEW

---

**Discovery Aim.** Participants discover that in the middle of the book's darkest indictment, God makes His first great messianic promise: a righteous Branch for David, a King whose name is "The LORD is our righteousness." They uncover the wordplay hiding in the last king's name, take the imputed-versus-infused righteousness debate head-on, and meet God's word as fire and hammer, the same fire that burned in Jeremiah's bones.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man (CCC 1989, citing the Council of Trent). When God declares a thing, His word accomplishes it; the righteousness He gives really makes righteous.

---

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

---

- **The failed shepherds.** In the ancient Near East, "shepherd" was standard royal language: kings were shepherds of their people. Chapter 23 opens with a woe against Judah's shepherds, her kings, who have scattered and destroyed the flock (23:1-2). Chapter 22, just before, names them: Shallum, Jehoiakim, Coniah, a portrait gallery of royal failure. Against that gallery, God promises to shepherd the flock Himself and to raise up faithful shepherds (23:3-4).
- **The Branch.** "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch" (23:5). The Hebrew *tsemach* (branch, shoot, sprout) became a technical messianic term: the growth from David's felled tree (compare Isaiah 11:1; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12). The dynasty looks like a stump; God promises new, living growth from the royal line.
- **The name and the pun.** The Branch's name: *YHWH tsidqenu*, "The LORD is our righteousness" (23:6). Now the sting: the reigning king when Jerusalem falls is Zedekiah, *tsidqiyyahu*, a name built on the very same righteousness-root, "The LORD is righteousness." Many readers hear a pointed wordplay: the last king wears righteousness as a label and lives its opposite. The Branch will not merely bear the name; He will be what the name says. Let the group discover this contrast in Q4; it is one of the best moments of the night.
- **The false prophets.** The second half of the chapter (23:9-40) turns on the prophets who preach comfort without commission: "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran" (23:21). Their test failure: they never stood in God's council (23:18, 22) and they steal words from each other (23:30). Against their padded messages God sets His own word: "Is not my word like fire... and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" (23:29).
- **A word on fulfillment timing.** Judah's monarchy never recovered after the exile; no son of David sat on a throne in Jerusalem again. The promise of 23:5-6 therefore stood open for six centuries,

until the angel told a virgin betrothed to a man “of the house of David” that her Son would receive “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:27, 32). Christians do not read the Branch into Jeremiah; we read Jeremiah the way the apostles did, forward to its only claimant.

## OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

---

**Roots.** The promise rests on 2 Samuel 7, God’s covenant promise to David of an everlasting throne, a promise the psalms remember as sworn on oath (Psalm 89:3-4). Isaiah had already seen the shoot from Jesse’s stump (Isaiah 11:1). Ezekiel, Jeremiah’s contemporary in exile, hears the same shepherd oracle: God Himself will shepherd the flock, through “my servant David” (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23). Zechariah, after the exile, is still waiting: “Behold, I will bring my servant the Branch” (Zechariah 3:8).

**Fulfillment.** Jesus stands up in Ezekiel 34’s frame and claims it: “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), the owner-shepherd against the hirelings. Gabriel hands Him the Davidic throne (Luke 1:32-33). And the name of 23:6 unfolds across the epistles: God made Christ “our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30); “in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). How that becoming works is tonight’s steelman, and it is one of the two or three questions on which the Reformation turned.

## VOICES OF THE CHURCH

---

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. John Chrysostom** · *On the Priesthood*

St. John Chrysostom famously evaded ordination in his youth, and when he wrote *On the Priesthood* he explained the awe behind the flight: the shepherd answers to God for the sheep. Anyone who has read the prophets’ woes against shepherds who feed themselves can feel why. Anyone your group knows in ministry, priest, catechist, parent, carries a share of that accountability, and deserves a share of your prayers.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Bernard of Clairvaux** · *Advent Sermon 5, on the middle coming*

St. Bernard preached that the Lord comes three times: once in flesh at Bethlehem, once in glory at the end, and, hidden between them, an intermediate coming in grace to the soul that watches. “The days are coming,” said Jeremiah, and they came; and Bernard insists the hidden coming continues, to every heart that leaves the door open. Messianic hope is not only about the past tense.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Augustine** · *Letter 194, to Sixtus; cf. CCC 2006-2009*

St. Augustine resolved the anxiety about our standing before God in one line: when God crowns our merits, He crowns nothing other than His own gifts. Everything righteous in us is His gift first, which is why “The LORD is our righteousness” and “grace really transforms us” are not rivals. The

gift is real precisely because the Giver is generous enough to make it truly ours.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1989** · quoting the Council of Trent: justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man. Central to the steelman chain; keep it in the leader guide.
- **CCC 1995** · the Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life; justification entails the sanctification of the whole being. Steelman support; leader guide.
- **CCC 2009** · filial adoption makes us capable of true merit, which is itself God's gift; compare St. Augustine's teaching that in crowning our merits God crowns His own gifts (Letter 194).
- **CCC 754** · the Church is a sheepfold whose one necessary door is Christ, the Good Shepherd.
- **CCC 436** · Christ means anointed: Israel's kings, priests, and prophets were anointed, and Jesus fulfills all three in the messianic hope of Israel.

## THREAD WATCH

### THREAD WATCH · LEADER ONLY · NEVER APPEARS IN PARTICIPANT MATERIALS

**Thread 1 · Build and Plant.** Two developments tonight, both silent. First: "Behold, the days are coming" (23:5) is Jeremiah's signature formula for guaranteed future hope, and it introduces the Branch here. The identical formula opens the passage where the sealed guesses are answered. Second: the flock God gathers "shall be fruitful and multiply" (23:3), creation language, Eden language, planting language. The promise is germinating in plain sight. Say absolutely nothing; two sessions remain.

**Thread 2 · The Prophet Like Jeremiah.** Light touch: the Branch is a King who is also, by His name, the answer to everything the prophet has suffered for. The suffering messenger and the promised King are converging. Do not draw the lines yet.

**Thread 3 · The Watched Word.** Direct development: "Is not my word like fire... and like a hammer?" (23:29). Last session the fire was in the prophet's bones from the inside (20:9); tonight God claims it from His side. Same fire. The counterfeit prophets deal in stolen words and padded dreams; the true word burns and breaks. Session 10 will put the claim through a literal fire.

## SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can explain the shepherd-king convention and why chapter 23's woe is aimed at the throne.
2. Participants discover the Branch promise and the Zedekiah wordplay, and can state what the name "The LORD is our righteousness" promises.
3. Participants hear the imputed-righteousness case at full strength and can give the Catholic response: God's declaration accomplishes what it declares.

4. Participants can name the tests that expose false prophecy in 23:9-40, and apply them to voices in their own lives.

5. Participants leave praying for one shepherd by name, and submitting one comfortable message they consume to the fire-and-hammer test.

### TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

---

Opening prayer and Win: 15 minutes. Build: 55 minutes. Send and Live It This Week: 15 minutes. Closing prayer and memory verse: 5 minutes.

**If you are running long:** compress Question 8 (the marks of false prophecy) by reading its answer as a summary, and cut Question 10 (Ezekiel 34) to the single John 10 connection. Never cut the Zedekiah wordplay or the steelman chain; they are the discoveries this session exists for.

# The Righteous Branch

Jeremiah 23

---

## OPENING PRAYER

*"Father, You promised Your scattered flock a Shepherd and Your fallen dynasty a Branch. We confess how often we have trusted failed shepherds and comfortable voices. Tonight, gather us, feed us on Your true word, even where it burns and breaks, and write Your righteousness where our own has run out. Through Christ our Lord. Amen."* (Opening Prayer)

---

## WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

**W1.** Tell us about a leader, in any arena, who genuinely used their position for the people under them rather than for themselves. What did that cost them?

**W2.** When you hear the word "righteousness," what feeling comes first: comfort, pressure, guilt, boredom? Why do you think that is?

---

## BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY (55 MIN)

**READ JEREMIAH 23:1-4 ALOUD.**

**1.** In the ancient world, "shepherd" was royal language: kings were called shepherds of their people. So who is this woe actually aimed at, and what are the two charges in verses 1-2?

**ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

The kings of Judah. The charges: they destroy and scatter the sheep, and they have not attended to the flock (23:1-2). Note God's pointed wordplay in verse 2: you have not attended to them, so I will attend to you. The flock, meanwhile, God calls "the sheep of my pasture": the people never stopped being His. Leaders in God's house manage what they do not own, and the Owner audits.

**2.** In verses 3-4, who takes over the shepherding, and in what order? What is promised to the flock under the new arrangement?

**ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

God Himself first: "I will gather the remnant of my flock... I will bring them back" (23:3), and then He appoints shepherds under Him (23:4). The order matters: the answer to failed human leadership is not merely better humans but God taking the crook into His own hands, and then sharing it. And the restored flock "shall be fruitful and multiply" (23:3): the words of Eden. When God shepherds,

creation's original blessing starts working again.

**READ JEREMIAH 23:5-6 ALOUD, TWICE. THIS IS THE FIRST GREAT MESSIANIC PROMISE OF THE BOOK.**

**3.** Take the promise apart phrase by phrase: what is a “Branch,” why “for David,” and what will this King actually do?

**ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

A branch is new growth from a tree that looks dead: the Davidic dynasty is about to be cut down to a stump, and God promises a living shoot from the royal line (compare Isaiah 11:1). “For David” anchors it in the covenant promise of 2 Samuel 7, an everlasting throne, which the psalms remember as sworn on oath (Psalm 89:3-4). And the Branch’s job description is the exact inverse of the failed shepherds: he shall “reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (23:5). Not merely possess righteousness. Execute it. Righteousness in Jeremiah is something a king does to a land, not a label he wears.

**4.** The Branch gets a throne name in verse 6: “The LORD is our righteousness.” Now the discovery: the king on the throne when Jerusalem falls is named Zedekiah, a name built on the very same righteousness-root. Sit with that. What is this wordplay doing?

**ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

The last king of Judah wears the correct theology as a name tag and lives its opposite: Zedekiah is weak, faithless, and presides over the catastrophe. The Branch will not merely be called what Zedekiah is called; He will be what the name says. It is the difference between a label and a life. God’s promise, hiding inside a pun: the day is coming when “The LORD is our righteousness” stops being a slogan on a failing king and becomes a Person on an everlasting throne.

**5. Live discovery.** Six centuries later, an angel promises a young woman a Son and mentions this exact throne. It is in Luke 1, in the annunciation. Find the verses about David.

**ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Luke 1:32-33: “the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Joseph is “of the house of David” (1:27). No son of David had sat on a throne in Jerusalem for six hundred years; the promise of the Branch stood open the entire time, and Gabriel closes it by name. Every Sunday the Creed makes your group recite the fulfillment: “and his kingdom will have no end.” They have been quoting Luke 1:33 all their lives.

## **Steelman: Is Righteousness Imputed or Infused?**

**BUILD THE CASE AT FULL STRENGTH: PRESENT THIS AS PERSUASIVELY AS A THOUGHTFUL REFORMED FRIEND WOULD**

**The case:** “The name settles it: the LORD is our righteousness, not us, never us. ‘For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21): a great exchange, our sin credited to Him, His righteousness credited to us. Paul renounces ‘a righteousness of my own, based on law’ and claims instead ‘the righteousness from God that depends on faith’ (Philippians 3:9). Luther called the believer simul iustus et peccator: righteous and sinner at once, righteous by Christ’s imputed record, not by anything infused in us, because look at us. The Catholic idea that righteousness is infused into sinners puts salvation back on shaky human ground and robs Christ of His glory. Justification is God declaring us righteous in Christ, full stop.” Give this its full weight; it is the doctrinal heart of the Reformation, and it is motivated by a true instinct: all glory to grace.

**6.** Start with the common ground, because it is enormous. From tonight’s text and this study so far, what does the Catholic gladly grant our Reformed friend about where righteousness comes from?

**ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Everything about its source. The name is our confession too: the LORD is our righteousness, not self-made moral achievement. Grace is first; the preparation for grace is itself grace (CCC 2001, from Session 1); and when God crowns our merits He crowns His own gifts (St. Augustine, Letter 194; cf. CCC 2006-2009). No Catholic is permitted to believe in a righteousness of our own, based on law; the Church condemned that as Pelagianism before the Reformation was ever thought of. The dispute is not whether righteousness is God’s gift. It is what the gift does on arrival.

**7.** Now press on the text. When God declares something, what happens? Start at the beginning: “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). Then look at tonight’s chapter: what does God say His word is like (23:29)? So when God declares a sinner righteous, what kind of declaration is it?

**ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

God’s declarations create what they declare. “Let there be light,” and there was light. His word is “like fire... like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces” (23:29): it does things to what it touches. So the Catholic question to the imputation-only view is gentle but firm: is God’s verdict of righteousness the one word of God that leaves reality unchanged? Scripture says otherwise: “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified” (1 Corinthians 6:11); God’s love “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). The Council of Trent put it exactly: justification is “not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man” (CCC 1989). Imputation says God treats us as righteous; the Catholic faith says His word makes us so, truly if not yet totally, which is why the gift keeps growing and why the sacraments keep feeding it. The Branch does not merely wear the name over us. He executes righteousness in the land of the soul.

### DIG DEEPER • WHY THIS IS GOOD NEWS

Be fair to our friend first: classical Reformed theology warmly affirms real sanctification, the Spirit truly changing believers over a lifetime. The dispute is narrower and deeper: is that renewal intrinsic to justification itself, or a separate work alongside a purely forensic verdict? The Catholic claim is that God's justifying word does what it says, like "Let there be light": the verdict itself transforms, so sanctity is not a second project running beside our standing with God but the gift's own unfolding in us. The Catholic claim is ultimately the more grace-filled one: God's gift is generous enough to become truly ours.

### READ JEREMIAH 23:16-22 ALOUD.

**8.** (*Compress if short on time.*) God profiles the false prophets. Gather the marks from verses 16-22: what do they preach, to whom, and what is the credential they lack?

### ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They speak "visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD" (23:16); they say "It shall be well with you" to those who despise God's word, and "No evil shall come upon you" to the stubborn (23:17). The missing credential: they never "stood in the council of the LORD" (23:18, 22); "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran" (23:21). The profile of false prophecy in every age: comfort without commission, peace on demand, a message that never costs the audience anything. If a voice in your life only ever tells you what you want to hear, it fails Jeremiah's test.

**9.** Read 23:29 aloud. God gives two images for His true word: fire and hammer. We met fire last week. Where was it, and what does it mean that the same word is fire in the prophet and hammer on the rock?

### ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Last week the fire was shut up in Jeremiah's bones (20:9), burning from the inside when he tried to suppress it. Tonight God claims it from His side: my word is like fire. Same fire, both directions. The true word of God is never inert: it burns the one who carries it and breaks what is hardened in the one who hears it. Which gives your group a practical test for every sermon, podcast, and devotional they consume: does this word ever burn me or break anything in me, or does it only ever pad the walls?

**10. Live discovery.** (*Cut to the single connection if short on time.*) Someone eventually stood up and claimed the shepherd's office of 23:3-4 in the first person. It is in John 10. Find the claim, and find what this Shepherd does that hirelings will not.

### ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The hireling flees because the sheep are not his; the failed shepherds of Jeremiah 23 fed themselves.

Jesus is the owner-shepherd of 23:3, God gathering the flock in person, and the Branch-king of 23:5, in one figure. The proof of ownership He offers is not a title but a death: what He does for the flock that no hireling in history has ever done on purpose.

## SEND • CLOSING QUESTIONS (15 MIN)

---

**S1.** Where in your life have you been settling for the Zedekiah version: the right label, the right vocabulary, worn over an unchanged life?

**S2.** Which voices you listen to regularly would pass Jeremiah's test, words that sometimes burn and break you, and which only ever comfort you?

## LIVE IT THIS WEEK

---

- Pray daily, by name, for one shepherd: your pastor, your bishop, a catechist, a parent. The woe of 23:1 tells you what their office weighs; carry a corner of it this week.
- Apply the fire-and-hammer test once: after the next sermon, podcast, or spiritual book chapter you take in, ask on paper: did this burn or break anything in me, or only soothe me? Adjust your diet accordingly.
- Each morning this week, before your feet hit the floor, pray the throne name once over your own day: The LORD is our righteousness, and ask Him to execute it in you, not just declare it over you.

## CLOSING PRAYER

---

*"Lord Jesus, righteous Branch of David, You are what every failed shepherd was supposed to be, and Your name is the answer to our emptiness: The LORD is our righteousness. Reign in us. Let Your word fall on us as fire and hammer where we have hardened, and as pasture where we are scattered and hungry. Gather Your flock, and make us fruitful. Amen."* (Closing Prayer)

## SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

---

*"Behold, the days are coming, says 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."* (Jeremiah 23:5, RSV2CE)

## Every Passage in This Session

*Jeremiah 23*

---

### Primary Text

- Jeremiah 23:1-2 · woe to the shepherd-kings (Q1)
- Jeremiah 23:3-4 · God gathers; fruitful and multiply (Q2)
- Jeremiah 23:5-6 · the righteous Branch; the throne name (Q3-Q4, memory verse)
- Jeremiah 23:16-22 · the profile of false prophets (Q8, compressible)
- Jeremiah 23:29 · fire and hammer (Q9, steelman Q7)

### Old Testament Roots

- 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3-4 · the covenant promise to David, remembered as oath (leader background)
- Isaiah 11:1 · the shoot from the stump of Jesse
- Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23 · the parallel shepherd oracle (Q10 background)
- Zechariah 3:8; 6:12 · the Branch as messianic title
- Genesis 1:3, 1:28 · creating word; fruitful and multiply (steelman Q7, Q2)

### New Testament Fulfillment

- Luke 1:27, 32-33 · the throne of his father David (live discovery, Q5)
- John 10:11-15 · the Good Shepherd (live discovery, Q10)
- 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9 · the righteousness texts (steelman)
- 1 Corinthians 6:11; Romans 5:5 · washed, sanctified, justified; love poured in (steelman Q7)

### Catechism

- CCC 1989, 1995 · justification sanctifies and renews (steelman, leader only)
- CCC 2009 · merits are God's gifts crowned
- CCC 754 · the Church as sheepfold, Christ the door
- CCC 436 · Christ the anointed: king, priest, prophet