



Lesson 12 May 16th, 2020

Practice Justice

Study Scripture – Jeremiah 21:8-14

Background Scripture – Jeremiah 21

Key Verse:

“O house of David, thus saith the Lord; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor.”

Jeremiah 21:12

INTRODUCTION

Our Lesson Study raises some very important issues such as:

1. Why doesn't God answer our prayers
2. Why God is not some kind of genie ready when you rub the lamp of prayer to appear and say, Yes, master, what do you want me to do?
3. The consequences of worshiping other gods
4. The consequences of the defaulting on your promises whether to pagan rulers and governments or to God
5. Every choice we make is either for life or for death
6. Why our land mourns

As we face the consequences of sin we can either die by hiding behind denial and other defensive walls such as:

- minimizing what we have done saying it's not that bad,
- shifting the blame saying if it wasn't for such and such a thing I wouldn't have done it,
- making an excuse that that was not the real me,
- saying to God. Look at all the good that I have done
- or saying if you think I'm bad, just look at him or her beside me.

But remember that this simply delays and compounds the consequences and we die.

The other choice is we can surrender and face the music through repentance and restitution which is of course the path to peace and life.

So we can remind ourselves that every choice we make is either for life or for death.

The example we have before us today is that of the nation of Judah. We should therefore look carefully at what their leaders did and how they behaved and how the people, the general population, behaved even though they knew they were in a Covenant with God.

Can we learn from history?

What do we look for in a godly leader or leaders?

Or, do we really want a godly leader or leaders?

A TEACHING LESSON FROM HISTORY

The golden era of the nation of Israel that began in the reign of David and peaked during the reign of his son Solomon was relatively short-lived. The cracks began to appear even before the death of Solomon, as he turned away from God in his latter years, under the influence of his pagan wives.

The affairs of state took a decided turn for the worse on the death of Solomon, as soon thereafter, the country was split in two, to form the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel. It is important that we remind ourselves of this fact and the existence of separate kingdoms.

Judah and Israel were small states in a world dominated by several large states namely, Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt. Sometimes one or other of these dominated but sometimes none dominated. It is interesting to note that Assyria was located in the northern part of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, modern day Northern Iraq and its principal city was Nineveh. In 745-727 it achieved clear dominance. It defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people into exile in 722 B.C. and that nation ended permanently. (1 Kings 17: 3-6; 18: 9-10).

In 612 B.C. Chaldeans from southern Babylonia located in the northern part of the Tigris Euphrates valley, modern day Northern Iraq, succeeded in capturing Nineveh and bringing an end to Assyrian dominance.

In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar II defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish and so gained control of Syria and Palestine. In 597 B.C. he besieged and conquered Jerusalem but did not destroy the city. In 589 B.C. he noticed Zedekiah's alliance with Egypt (which we know Jeremiah had warned Judah against) and again Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem but this time in 587 B.C. he destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, burned down the walls of Jerusalem, decimated the royal family and leaders, killed many of its people and took the remaining people into exile in Babylonia bringing an end to the Southern kingdom of Judah and the dynasty of David.

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Note that there is a biblical context. The elders of Israel had long before the time period of this Lesson requested to the prophet Samuel

“Behold, you are old, and your sons don't walk in your ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5).

The prophet Samuel was no fool and he knew that the request was a rejection of himself but more importantly a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh. So he was displeased. But God told him the true state of affairs and the heart of the nation:



“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they tell you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not be king over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day, in all that they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they also do you. Now therefore listen to their voice: however you shall protest solemnly to them, and shall show them the way of the king who shall reign over them”. 1 Samuel 8:7-9.

The litany of rebellion against God continued in both Israel and Judah, with Israel being the more incorrigible. After a succession of evil kings and wanton idolatry, God in judgment sent Israel into exile. Judah fared a little better but only for a time.

When we look at a succession of kings, Solomon, David, Rehoboam, and the list of others we realize that they were more bad than good. They were on many occasions really only minor regents for the great powers of Assyria, Egypt, Babylonia and other lesser but still more powerful nations. Instead of trusting God to protect them they were always tempted to look for security in great power alliances.

Does that sound like us and how we live?

Occasionally the sequence of evil kings in Judah was broken by a righteous king, but that the nation was following fast in the footsteps of Israel in behaviour and destiny was evident. Still, in all the rebellion and apostasy of Israel and Judah, God sent a steady stream of prophets to both call the nation back to Himself and to warn them of their impending judgment, if there was no repentance. In fact, on the rare occasions when the kings and the people were faithful to their covenant, the nation prospered and had peace. Clearly, God did not execute the threatened judgment immediately, but it was clearly coming for God said because of Manasseh's leadership and the willingness of the people of Judah to accept his leadership:

“I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will cast off the remnant of my inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies. They will become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; because they have done that which is evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even to this day”. 2 Kings 13-15.

The prophet Jeremiah's ministry (626 to 575 BC) began during the reign of Josiah and spanned the reigns of the final four kings of Judah and ended with one of the darkest events in that nation's history; the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the exile of survivors to Babylon. His task and purpose were to warn the people of Judah about the catastrophe that was awaiting them. They had sinned greatly, and he called them to repentance so that they would avoid this catastrophe and be saved.

Jeremiah lived in days of spiritual darkness and political instability. Two strong nations greatly influenced life in Judah when Jeremiah began his ministry: Egypt on the southwest, and Assyria on the northeast. Judah was the "jelly" in this "sandwich" and found herself pressed on both sides. Instead of looking to God for their security, the people looked either to Egypt or to



Assyria. All this time there was the constant voice of the prophets warning kings and people to only trust in God.

As Jeremiah lamented in chapter 8:22

“Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?

Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?”

One writer comments on this interesting statement which has relevance for us and our way of living:

“The biblical prophet Jeremiah was bemoaning the spiritual sickness of the people of the kingdom of Judah in the sixth century B.C.

He alluded to the fabled balm of Gilead, a balsamic medicinal ointment prize in the ancient world. Balm was a metaphor for spiritual healing. Jeremiah is not here lambasting the balm distribution system, the drug supply chain. Balm had long been trafficked between the Levant and Egypt...

No-there was in fact plenty of balm in Gilead. That's the whole point, actually. Stockpiles perhaps, awaiting camel caravan people. Balm is this leafy thing you need to process to market as a pharmaceutical. It takes time, it's not that easy. Somebody has to do the work. But supply was not a problem for Jeremiah. He was treating spiritual matters.

A regime in Jerusalem (*“the house of the king of Judah,”* Jeremiah 21:11-23:8) had been charged by God (Yahweh) to *“execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed”* (Jeremiah 21: 12-14). But it was failing”.

The spiritual condition of Judah was at rock bottom after fifty-two years of rule by the apostate King Manasseh. He and King Ammon, who ruled after him for two years, set up pagan altars all over Judah. These kings encouraged idolatry of every sort, even in the Jerusalem temple. The slide to destruction was now inevitable despite the desperate efforts at reform by King Josiah who succeeded Ammon and was the last godly king of Judah.

Josiah tried to turn the people back to the Lord, but his reforms were more external than internal. There was reformation, but not revival. Unfortunately, Josiah died prematurely and his reforms died with him.

The four kings who followed Josiah, the last four in Judah's history, were all weak men who lacked spiritual conviction. They just played politics and tried to win Judah's security through political intrigue and alliances. Three of these sad rulers were sons of Josiah: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. The fourth was Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim. The last of these kings was Zedekiah, the most spineless of them all. He was a chameleon, a double-minded man who was unstable in all his ways (James 1:8). He was only interested in actually accumulating houses and wealth for himself. God simply called him evil.

One area of concern for God was the matter of justice and particularly as it impacted the underprivileged, poor, widows, orphans, aliens... in the land. The Law was explicit with regard to the treatment of these groups and these kings failed abysmally in this regard and themselves



exploited the weak and vulnerable; something that did not go un-noticed by God. This was one of the specific charges the prophets brought against the royal house and a reason for the nation's defeat and exile.

These last four kings were essentially puppets of Babylon or Assyria and Judah a vassal state. This sad condition was actually divine discipline in accordance with their covenant with Jehovah but worse was on the horizon. The feckless Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon against the advice of the prophet; apparently thinking that he would be aided by the Egyptians if he rebelled against the Babylonians (2 Kings 18:21). Now the Babylonian army was advancing on Jerusalem.

It is to be clearly noted that Nebuchadnezzar had besieged Jerusalem three times because they would not remain as vassals to Babylon. On all of these occasions the king of Judah repented and Nebuchadnezzar went away. On one occasion he came back besieged Jerusalem and took away treasures as well as the royal household including Daniel.

But there was a third siege when Nebuchadnezzar had had enough of the rebellions of the king of Judah. He intended to overcome the city and remove the house of David from being king. This happened when Zedekiah was king. Zedekiah had revolted against Nebuchadnezzar who actually had installed him on the throne and he foolishly, despite a warning by the prophet Jeremiah thought he was home free when Nebuchadnezzar was forced to lift the siege temporarily to meet a threat from Egypt. This had given the people of Jerusalem false hope that they would be saved despite what God said to them.

After disposing of the Egyptians army Nebuchadnezzar again besieged Jerusalem in 588 B.C. to get rid of the foolish Zedekiah who had really no intention of obeying the commands of God. So we know from history that in 587 B.C. the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the city, killed pretty well all the residents that he considered of value, and took the rest into exile in Babylonia.

As we come to our Text, the desperate king sends messengers to the man of God hoping for some good news in this the penultimate hour of the nation. The emissaries intended to enlist Jeremiah's help in order to ensure God's aid against the invaders. He was hoping for some miraculous intervention by God, (2 Kings 19:35, 36). Clearly this man was oblivious to the terms of the covenant, having disregarded the word of God for his entire reign. There was no repentance from the king, just a presumption on God's mercy.

Note how politics is played in real life especially by so-called people of God. The messengers sent to Jeremiah was Pashur the son of Melchiah and Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest. Some believe this is not the same Pashur as in Chapter 20. But one writer tells us: Now Pashur was the priest that when Jeremiah was prophesying put him in stocks and all. And of course it brought great discouragement for Jeremiah, for he decided to quit his prophetic ministry until God's word like a fire burned in him, and he could not hold back from speaking forth God's truth. And this time this same Pashur now is sent by King Zedekiah to find out



what's going to happen because Babylon is marching. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar are there. What's going to happen to us? And so they are sending to Jeremiah now to find the word of the Lord concerning their present dilemma. *"Inquire, I pray thee, to the LORD for us"*.

This kind of behaviour is absolutely incredible. But it is the way of the world and the way of cynical time servers which we find in positions of authority everywhere. What a shame when it is found among the covenant people of God.

Jeremiah's response shows, the request demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of Judah's standing with God. The prophet's response gave the stark and chilling details of what was about to unfold on Judah. The Babylonian army was in fact God's tool of discipline on the king and the people; the die was cast and only those who left the city and voluntarily surrendered to the invaders would spare their own lives.

Jeremiah's response came in three parts. First came words against King Zedekiah himself (Jeremiah 21:3-7). The prophet was blunt: Jerusalem's weapons will become a liability as the Lord himself fights against the city. Today's text opens with the second section of Jeremiah's response.

THE TEXT

Verses 1 – 2. Desperate times call for drastic action. King Zedekiah and these emissaries have been the active enemies of the prophet but here concede that he was in effect the true prophet of God.

Somewhat belatedly they seem to recall God's last-minute rescue of His people in very similar circumstances such as what Jehoshaphat experienced from the Moabites, Ammonites, and the Syrians.

(2 Chron. 20). Hezekiah had also experienced supernatural deliverance when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem (2 Kings 19; Isa. 37). The major difference here is that these were godly kings who sought God's deliverance in repentance.

... Enquire, I pray thee, of the Lord for us... Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord whether He would give Judah deliverance from Nebuchadnezzar as He had delivered His people in the past.

Here again we see the true colors of the king; his concern is to get rid of their trouble, not to make peace with God and be reconciled to Him (Exod. 10:17).

They try to bend the prophet to their advantage.

Will the LORD turn back Nebuchadnezzar according to God's marvelous works? Jeremiah did not have a good word from the LORD.

Verses 3-6. All that the king did not want to hear! To this point the Judahites were fighting the invaders in the outlying areas but the news from Yahweh was they would retreat inside the



walls of Jerusalem, as it were to assemble for slaughter by the Babylonians. The reality was that God, Himself would be fighting against Judah!

This was not the answer from Yahweh that Zedekiah was praying for. He wanted Covenant mercy and promises without Covenant faith and faithfulness!

The Lord spelled out in graphic terms the "*wonderful works*" He will do to faithless Judah and Jerusalem.

This is what the Covenant people could not comprehend; their God, fighting against them and His own Temple! They had missed the key ingredients of Faith and Faithfulness. The wonderful Covenant with Abraham had conditions (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 27-28) and consequences!

Verse 7. ... *I will deliver Zedekiah king of Judah, and his servants, and the people, and such as are left in this city from the pestilence, from the sword, and from the famine, ...* These are the typical description of the results of invasion and siege warfare (14:12). All of the surrounding villages gathered to the walled cities; food, water and sanitation became compromised and pestilence.

Verse 8. ... *I set before you the way of life, and the way of death...* the prophet turns his attention from the king (without excluding him) to the *people* in general. God sets before them a stark choice between *life* and *death*. Similar expressions are common throughout the Scriptures, but this one seems to especially recall the words of Moses: "*See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil*" (Deuteronomy 30:15).

The prophet also received another message from the Lord for Pashhur and Zephaniah to deliver to King Zedekiah. Yahweh was going to give the people the choice of living or dying (Deut. 30:15, 19; Matt. 7:13-14).

Jeremiah's words of judgment and doom should be seen in the context of God's Covenant with the people. The Lord still requires obedience and loyalty. The people's oft-repeated refusals to render to Him their exclusive worship have brought them to this point of no return.

The choice presented to God's people in the days of Jeremiah is also presented to us, collectively and individually, today. Jesus speaks of the choice between life and death as a choice between a wide gate and a strait way (Matthew 7:13, 14). Each of us is called to choose the path we take. Though choosing life seems a no-brainer, many still choose death by trusting in their own wisdom (Proverbs 3:5-7). Only following Jesus leads to life (John 14:6, 7).

Verse 9. *He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword ...* If the residents of Jerusalem stayed in the city and resisted the enemy, they would die. But if they surrendered to the Babylonians, they would live.

The choice that Jeremiah has just presented abstractly in the previous verse he now paints in real-life terms: to stay in Jerusalem and try to hold out against *the Chaldeans* will mean certain



death. The three vehicles of death—*by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence* are all typical of the results of a long siege (Ezekiel 5:12). Leaving the confines of the city and surrendering to the Chaldeans is the only path to continued life (Jeremiah 14:12; 38:17; 40:9).

This is not the advice the people hoped for in this situation. They want to stay *in this city* and be delivered by God. However, the ways of life and death that Jeremiah presents are the only options. God has decided to punish His people; there will be no deliverance from the Chaldeans (Jer. 27:11, 12).

The phrase *his life shall be unto him for a prey* is a military figure of speech (Jeremiah 38:2; 39:18; 45:5). A victorious army brings home booty like a predator brings home prey. A defeated army's best possible outcome is the life of its soldiers. In this situation, if they surrender to the Chaldeans, the people will at least escape with their lives (Jer. 45:5).

Verse 10. *For I have set my face against this city ... and he shall burn it with fire.* This is a summary statement that captures God's attitude, decision and results of the former two.

Jeremiah's address to the people closes with a sobering restatement of the truth as God has determined. The Hebrew phrase *set my face* is an idiom for single-minded determination (Jer. 44:11; Luke 9:51).

Doubtless the idea that God will work *evil* against His own people is a shock (Jeremiah 44:26, 27; Amos 9:4). Evil here should not be understood as morally detestable or in some way satanic. The concept is closely related to cursing, especially in contrast to doing *good* as a blessing. God's harm is not intended only as retribution; it is intended also to correct His wayward children (Jeremiah 5:3; Hebrews 12:4–11).

This waywardness shows itself in how they do Justice. In this refusal to perform acts of justice they had failed. They had even corrupted the process of Justice. In this corruption they refused to even listen to the cries of the poor.

Again, God's actions are to be seen in light of His covenant with the people. Still, this is not a strict line by line enforcement of covenant stipulations. God is truly disappointed and betrayed by the people.

Furthermore, we should understand that sometimes multiple layers are the nature of God's wrath. Sometimes it's purely retributive in nature. In those cases, God's wrath has no redemptive element at all; it's punishment simply because the one who receives the punishment deserves it (Romans 2:5; 6:23; Colossians 3:5, 6). The nation of Judah, represented by its capital *city* of Jerusalem, certainly deserves God's wrath in a retributive sense; if the pagan nations deserve punishment for their idolatry, how much more Judah!



The Judeans' preference to believe that God will punish only their enemies and thereby always deliver Judah, shows how badly they misunderstood what it means for God to be faithful. His wrathful judgment results from the actions of a people and their rulers who have been blessed with God's word as no other nation, (Deut. 4:6-7). They are without excuse in their repeated rejections of Him. What is happening to Judah now is the promised result of those actions (Deuteronomy 4:25–28). Even so, God's wrath in this instance is also corrective in nature (4:29–31).

The Lord's purpose for the city was firm: He would turn it over to the Babylonian army to destroy it by fire. This was something the people could not change by their actions or their prayers.

All of this is a reminder of the absolute sovereignty of God. Zedekiah, in seeking to inquire of God (Jeremiah 21:2), seems to assume that the Lord is on call to perform miracles whenever the people desire. But God cannot be manipulated. The destruction of Jerusalem at *the hand of the king of Babylon* will happen because God has determined that it should (20:4; 32:28). Nebuchadnezzar will indeed burn the city (2 Kings 25:8, 9).

Verse 11. *And touching the house of the king of Judah....* the focus of Jeremiah's message shifts again as he begins the third of his three sections of address. This group of three prophecies progress from admonition (vv. 11-12), to accusation (v. 13), to judgment (v. 14)

... *the house of the king of Judah*, the reference seems to be to all members of the royal court, those who live in the palace and assist in carrying out the affairs of state. They are not exempt from the indictment against king and commoner (Jeremiah 13:18).

Verse 12. *O house of David...* Jeremiah here tells the royal "household" (the king of Judah and his administrators) to be careful to dispense justice every day, particularly with the poor and powerless. If they did not, the Lord's wrath would burn against them as an inextinguishable fire (41:4, 27; 21:12, 14; 49:27).

The administration of justice was one of the main duties of kings even in pagan nations. The king was the guardian of justice (2 Sam. 15:4; 1 Kings 3:9, 16-28; 8:32).

... *execute judgment* ... in two words Jeremiah sets forth God's vision for kingship and for the responsibilities of the ruling elites toward the people. Those two words are *execute judgment*. This is to be the foundational role of the king and his administrators toward the people. Jeremiah was to tell the royal "household" (the king of Judah and his administrators) to be careful to dispense justice every day, particularly with the poor and powerless. If they did not, the Lord's wrath would burn against them as an inextinguishable fire (4:4; 17:4, 27; 21:12, 14; 43:12; 49:27).

The judgment (justice) spoken of here can be understood in a legal sense. That includes adhering to the Law of Moses with regard to how people are to be treated, especially those who are most vulnerable (Exodus 22:22; Leviticus 25:17; etc.).



The phrase *in the morning* is a Hebrew idiom that implies “daily” or “regularly” (Psalms 5:3; 59:16). It is customary for cases to be adjudicated at the city gates in the morning to avoid the heat of the day (2 Sam. 4:5). Starting each day with right judgments will help ensure that the people act in ways pleasing to the Lord.

All this certainly includes the royals and officials of the *house of David*. Such people seek to take what is not theirs. If human judges refuse to end this injustice, God’s *fury* will be *like fire*, and will *burn* as a result. Fire is not typically literal in contexts such as this (Psalms 79:5; 89:46), but sometimes it is (2 Kings 1:10; Job 1:16). The latter will be the case here when Nebuchadnezzar, as an instrument of God’s wrath, burns Jerusalem.

Verse 13. ... *inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain* ... the Lord addresses Jerusalem by way of its geographical characteristics. Both *the valley* and *the plain* make the inhabitants feel secure in the face of military advances. Jerusalem is bounded on three sides by deep valleys. Thus the city itself sits above its potential enemies on a defensive stronghold, (Jeremiah 49:4). These verses (13-14) could also address those Judeans who lived in the hills and remote valleys of Judah. They thought they would be safe, but not so!

Behold, I am against thee... the people of the city are overconfident their situation (2 Samuel 5:6, 7).

Who shall come down against us? indicates just how little they understood about their vulnerability. This attitude is especially astounding given that it’s not a foreign army that’s the primary threat, but the Lord God himself. Can there be any worse words to hear from the Lord than *I am against thee*?

Verse 14. *But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the Lord: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.*

A reading of Joshua 5:13–6:27 should convince everyone that their walls offer no security against the Lord’s wrath! When the Lord desires to pass judgment according to *the fruit of [their] doings*, He cannot be thwarted (Proverbs 1:31; Isaiah 3:10, 11).

Commentators disagree on what is being referred to as *the forest*, since there are no forests in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. One possibility is a figurative reference to the royal palace as being “the house of the forest of Lebanon” in 1 Kings 7:2. It was referred to in this manner because of the quantities of cedar that went into its construction. Other homes were also constructed of wood, thus perhaps creating a kind of urban “forest” (2 Kings 19:23).



CONCLUSION

We must at this stage never forget that the covenant God made with Israel when they came out of Egypt at Sinai included the 10 Commandments and the statutes and judgment that explained how to keep the Ten Commandments. We call these Commandments the Torah.

But it would be wrong to think that some parts of the 10 Commandments are less important than other parts. All the 10 Commandments are important. So when you look at Jeremiah 34: 15 we see his emphasis as instructed by God and his recounting when Israel disobeyed the covenant and the few occasions they did obey. He stated:

“Then you recently turned and did what was right in My sight-- every man proclaiming liberty to his neighbor; and you made a covenant before Me in the house which is called by My name”.

This chapter explicitly focuses on the covenant relationship which involves the practice of justice. It makes very interesting reading and reminds us of what God requires from us.

Today’s lesson brings us to one of the most somber moments in the history of God’s dealings with His covenant people. Jerusalem was beyond the point of repentance. The people’s self-delusion and trust in their own wisdom meant death.

Whether or not we are immunized against such a mind-set depends on whether we are willing to learn from history. And we realize that the grace of God may come to us in the mere fact that we avoided the worst possible outcome of a bad decision or a bad pattern of living. *“Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God”* (Romans 11:22).

Remember that Psalm 1 lays out the position of the righteous and the position of the wicked. It gives us great advice. Jesus made the same demands and you must decide one way or the other and you cannot remain neutral. See Matthew 7:13-29.

The only sensible and safe way is to submit to God and His law. It makes no sense to disobey God.

It is not good enough to say the right words with our mouth but do the opposite in our daily lives.

May we, unlike the people of Jeremiah’s day, repent while there is time.

