

Lecture 28
The Fall of Judah
2 Kings 23:31 – 25:30; 2 Chronicles 35:2-23

When my kids and grandkids were young, we used to play a game called Kerplunk. Remember that? It's a game with a plastic cylinder full of holes in it through which you poke Pickup Stix at various angles forming a maze. Then you fill it with marbles and one by one you withdraw the supporting Stix until all the marbles fall down – Kerplunk! It's a version of "the last straw" or "a house of cards" . . . the foundation just gives way and everything comes tumbling down.

Throughout this study of Kings and Chronicles we have been viewing Israel's history with parallel interests – the throne and the temple – kingship and priesthood together forming the core of the life of God's people. But the closing chapters of these books seem to almost gush a breathless sequence of the rise and fall of the last four kings. We watch the dismantling of a monarchy as son by son the family of Josiah is toppled from the throne, and wagonload by wagonload the spoils of the temple disappear from Jerusalem.

The time for war was at hand, but it's not the end of Judah and Israel. One day God would anoint a King of Peace who lives forever to represent God to man, and a High Priest for all generations who would represent man to God. In one person, Jesus Christ, would be everything needed for God and His people to be in harmony. Until then, man's poor performance wouldn't change God's plan.

Even godly people do foolish things. Josiah made the foolish blunder of attacking Pharaoh Neco of Egypt as he was on the way to assist Assyria in their fight against Babylon; little realizing that it was Babylon, not Assyria that would be Judah's greatest enemy. As a result, he was wounded and died.

Josiah has four sons according to 1 Chronicles 3:15: Johanan (about whom we know nothing – perhaps he died in childhood), Jehoiakim (also known as Eliakim), Zedekiah (also known as Mattaniah), and Shallum (also known as Jehoahaz). When Josiah died in 609 B.C. the people put Jehoahaz on the throne at age 23. He'd barely settled into his three month reign when Pharaoh Neco returned from the campaign in the north and came back through Jerusalem. He deposed Jehoahaz, who was

probably pro-Babylonian following in the footsteps of his father Josiah, and took him back to Egypt where he would die in captivity. Neco's choice was the older brother, Jehoakim, age 25, undoubtedly pro-Egypt in his politics.

Jehoakim's sorry story can be pieced together from the prophet Jeremiah, who could do nothing with this wicked young man. He was looked upon as a puppet of Egypt, a collector of taxes for the alien monarch (a reputation he might have countered by a demonstration of care for his impoverished people). Instead, he was a self-indulgent and self-opinionated man, flaunting affluence amid the land's misery.

In chapter 36 of Jeremiah, the Lord said, "Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. Perhaps when the people hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin." (36:2-3) Je-hu-d-i was selected to read the scroll to King Jehoakim. Jeremiah writes (vs. 23-24), "Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the

scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. The king and all his attendants who heard these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes."

Unlike his father, Josiah, he had no respect for the Lord or His Word.

In Jehoakim's fourth year, 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon tore Judah out of Egypt's hands and Jehoakim had to acknowledge Babylon's dominion. It was in this first deportation of 605 that the prophet Daniel was taken to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar returned back to Babylon. Out of range for three whole years, Jehoakim gained enough confidence to rebel against him even though Jeremiah continued to try without success to dissuade him.

Here we have a picture of Judah . . . seesawing between two imperial powers – Egypt to the south / Babylon to the north – and a fool on the throne who chose to oppress his subjects and parade his wealth. One commentator termed Jehoakim a "Jewish Nero – squandering money on himself while his people languished in poverty."

We haven't studied Jeremiah as a part of this series, but what Kings and Chronicles gives a brief account of, Jeremiah details as God attempted warnings that cover a period of eleven years. You know, the book of Jeremiah would be worthwhile reading this summer while this series is fresh in your mind. (pause)

Events are moving so rapidly, names are changing, it's easy to get confused. Someone once told me KIM had a CHIN. I still use that as a memory tool. Well, Nebuchadnezzar overran Judah – had Jehoakim killed and his body flung outside the wall – and set his 18 year old son, Jehoachin on the throne. (Jeremiah calls him Co-ni-ah or Jeconiah.)

Apparently, after a brief 100 days, Nebuchadnezzar changed his mind and in a second deportation took Jehoachin, his household and a large portion of Judah into exile, along with the gold and treasures from the temple. Josephus says that the prophet Ezekiel was among this group taken in 597 B.C. All this was but a foretaste of the terrible events that would occur when Nebuchadnezzar would return in 588 B.C. and again lay siege to Jerusalem.

Departing Jerusalem with over ten thousand people headed for Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar made 21 year old Zedekiah (also known as Mattaniah) king. He had very little left to rule over, but he still had the prophet Jeremiah – not that he listened to him. In fact, he eventually had Jeremiah imprisoned.

Zedekiah was a weakling. He permitted idols back into the temple and listened to the advice of false prophets. Seduced by the surrounding nations of Edom, Ammon, and Moab and provoked by Egypt, he took up the hopeless goal of standing up against Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar returned, first defeated Egypt, and then besieged Jerusalem. The siege began on January 15, 588 B.C. and continued until July 18, 586, when the famine was so severe the people were cooking and eating their own children as Jeremiah writes in Lamentations, chapter 4:10 “With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed.”

We read about Zedekiah’s attempt to run when the walls were breeched. He was caught, made to witness with his eyes his sons being killed and then his eyes were gouged out. He was taken in chains to Babylon to die

there. All captive Judah could see as they trudged off to Babylon was a plundered temple behind them burning with the rest of the city and destroyed walls as Nebuzaradan, commander of the Imperial Guard, led them into exile. The end had come and none of their idol gods could not save them.

Jeremiah lamented, "You have made us scum and refuse among the nations. All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us. We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction. Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed."

(Lamentations 3:45-48)

Now, with only the poor left in the land, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedeliah to be governor. He was gentle and righteous in disposition according to Josephus and urged the people to cultivate the ground, pay the tribute and live as best they could under the circumstances. Jeremiah declined to go to Babylon at the invitation of Nebuchadnezzar, but elected to stay in the land with the people.

Ishmael, who was of royal blood, had fled to Ammon during the struggle. Now he saw an opportunity to promote himself and, as we read, he and his men

assassinated Gedeliah. In fear, the remnant decided to flee to Egypt against the godly counsel of Jeremiah.

They had lost their independence.

They had lost their land.

They had lost their wealth and leading people.

They had lost their city and their temple.

Jeremiah had given the people hope by promising that God was with them and would see to it that they were protected and returned to their land. But the leaders abandoned all hope when they fled to Egypt, for there they died and were buried.

Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled. 2 Chronicles 36:21 "The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah."

Well, so much for the recap of Judah's last days. What the Exodus had accomplished by bringing the people into the land – was now undone by sin and idolatry. They had chosen death instead of life. The horrible curses of Deuteronomy 28 had fallen on nation and kings.

We get a glimpse of one last episode. After 37 years as a prisoner, Nebuchadnezzar died and his successor Evil-Merodach (me-RHO-dak) came to the throne of Babylon. As a part of his succession amnesty, he granted release to Jehochin and “spoke kindly to him.” He was given new garments and a permanent invitation to the royal table. What a picture of what Christ does for us; release from the prison of sin, clothed with garments of righteousness and invited to dine intimately with the King of Kings. I hope you enjoyed that privilege you shared with your small group today/tonight.

It’s easy to view the events of the last 28 lessons we’ve studied together as a drama we’ve attended. It’s important to remember that this has been a procession of flesh-and-blood men and women, kings, priests and prophets. All were real, responsible human beings not just a company of actors or puppets. Like us, they had problems; they had conflicts; they made poor decisions. Every one of them lived a life that revealed themselves in their attitude and relationship to God. Our lives too are “on stage” revealing our attitude and relationship to God.

God had a plan for their future, however, a hope for the remnant. Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I

have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” In the study of the Restored Kingdom we’ll discover what happened after the 70 year period of captivity. If you just can’t wait, it’s found in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther and the last three prophets of the Old Testament – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

Before we end this study, however, I want to go back and recount some of the important lessons and applications we’ve learned along the way.

A common perception of the Old Testament is that it is all about war, killing and a vengeful God – one very opposite of the God of Love perceived in the New Testament. I hope this study has given you have a new perspective . . . there was no punitive punishment without warnings and plenty of them. God was incredibly patient and long-suffering because grace has always been God’s style. The prophets tried to communicate through their speech, their written words and their symbolic actions. They had a heart for God and a message of hope for the repentant – but it fell on hard hearts and deaf generations.

“I did it my way” was certainly the theme song for all the kings of Israel and most of the kings of Judah. Only eight in Judah could say, “I did it His way.” Hopefully, we haven’t been so self-righteous as we studied the sins of these people, that we haven’t applied the consequences of sin to our own lives. I reminded you in an early study that we need to stop tampering with the labels we put on sin – in essence rationalizing.

We lie and call it a “fib.” We steal little things and call it “borrowing.” We use the term “pre-marital sex” because it sounds nicer than adultery or fornication.

Cancer is still cancer even if you call it indigestion. Blatant sin like their idolatry is easy to identify and condemn, but what has subtly crept into our lives unnoticed and tolerated?

Remember the story of the scholar who had a noisy carpenter living on one side and a blacksmith on the other? To get rid of the noise he paid both of them to move, but the next day the noise was back just as loud... they had simply traded houses. The moral being – the scholar took pains to see what who was moving out, but paid no attention to who was moving in.

I read that sin is like putting on weight – we don't worry about it until it starts making us look bad.

God had His chosen men. This God of love tried repeatedly to warn His people of the consequences of their actions. Remember Elijah? We learned through the difficulties of his life that problems intensify for us when we think of the acrostic H-A-L-T . . . when you're hungry, anxious, lonely or tired. So we need to S-T-O-P . . . sleep, trust God, obey and pray. The school of faith teaches us to trust God to solve our problems. And then for a graduate course, it teaches us to trust God when He chooses NOT to solve our problems.

Why is it that most people will pay attention to warnings against physical dangers and yet remain deaf concerning their spiritual or eternal peril? The prophet's words were challenging – remember I told you “people will forget what you said, or they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Often your influence is more than just in words . . . it's in your lifestyle. We all say and do things we regret, but overall – are we encouraging those around us to seek the things of God; to pursue the good and godly; to enjoy the freedom and joys of being a Christian?

Samuel Wilberforce said that Christianity condensed was – admit, submit, commit and transmit.

Edward Everett Hale wrote, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do that something that I can do.” In other words, it’s better to do everything you can than just sit on the can.

Our Christian character is not a single quality but a 3-dimensional achievement built on the foundation of decision, direction and dedication.

Remember the lepers who cried, “this is good news and we’re keeping it to ourselves.” Have we learned in this study we have a responsibility to share the good news about an approachable, loving, forgiving God whose tolerance was demonstrated over and over again with His people?

This has been a sad study as we’ve seen blessings forfeited. Remember, Jeroboam was offered all of David’s kingdom, but turned to idolatry. The prophets were persecuted and ignored, the destruction of a nation came as a result of disobedience. All very sad. Yet what high points!

Elijah caught up to heaven (a type of rapture of the church) . . . the healing of Naaman ravaged with leprosy because he would humble himself in obedience . . . the miracle of Jonah and the repentance of a whole city at his preaching . . . Elisha's miracles (feeding a hundred with twenty loaves of bread, the floating axhead) . . . Isaiah's vision of Almighty God on His throne . . . Micah's prophecy of the Messiah coming from Bethlehem . . . Hosea's picture of God's grace through his marriage to Gomer . . . Habakkuk's personal faith journey . . . Hezekiah and Josiah, godly kings who dared to stand alone for God . . . and the promise of restoration and return to the land after 70 years.

From the time God allowed His people to have earthly kings beginning with Saul, David, and Solomon and through those we've studied this year, and by His warning them they would regret that course of action in the long-term, He has always kept a remnant for Himself. That remnant of faithful people throughout the ages has kept faith in the one true God alive, trusting He would fulfill all His promises.

God was not finished with Judah then and He is not finished with Israel today. When Jesus came and the

Church Age was established, Israel was set aside while the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 9:25 – I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full numbers of the Gentiles has come in.

Verse 26: And so all Israel will be saved. . . .

Verse 29: for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

There is always hope. It was there for fallen Judah, it's there for the remnant of God's faithful Jews today, and it's there for us now because our Savior, the Messiah, Jesus Christ purchased our salvation on the cross with His precious blood.

I truly hope this study has drawn you closer to a loving Lord. That you stand awed and amazed at His provisional care, His majesty and His justice. We invite you back in the fall for a New Testament study called Building Foundational Faith – a study of Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians and Galatians.

Let's pray.

Lord, these things we've studied this year were written that we might learn from examples of the good and the evil; that we might learn to listen to those whom you've sent to warn and instruct us; that we might learn more of your compassionate and just nature. Just as we strive to be People of the Word, let us truly be people of God who are devoted to knowing You through the Living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. It's in His name we pray. Have a wonderful summer!