

May 17 Lesson 12 (NIV)

PRACTICE JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 86:1–13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 21

JEREMIAH 21:8–14

⁸ “Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. ⁹ Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives. ¹⁰ I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.’

¹¹ “Moreover, say to the royal house of Judah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD. ¹² This is what the LORD says to you, house of David:

“ ‘Administer justice every morning;
rescue from the hand of the oppressor
the one who has been robbed,
or my wrath will break out and burn like fire
because of the evil you have done—
burn with no one to quench it.

¹³ I am against you, Jerusalem,
you who live above this valley
on the rocky plateau, declares the LORD—
you who say, “Who can come against us?
Who can enter our refuge?”

¹⁴ I will punish you as your deeds deserve,
declares the LORD.

I will kindle a fire in your forests
that will consume everything around you.’ ”

KEY VERSE

This is what the LORD says to you, house of David: “Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed.” —Jeremiah 21:12a

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 3: Called to God’s Work of Justice

LESSONS 10–14

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jeremiah’s message to the people and the royal court.
2. Explain why God’s covenant people sometimes suffered (or seemed to suffer) more severely under his judgmental wrath than did their pagan enemies.
3. Write a testimony of a time when negative consequences resulted in repentance and a long-term benefit.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. “Unexpected” Misfortune
 - B. Lesson Context: Historical
 - C. Lesson Context: Jeremiah 21
- I. To the People (JEREMIAH 21:8–10)
 - A. Choice to Make (v. 8)
 - B. Consequence to Consider (vv. 9, 10)
- Groupthink*
- II. To the King’s House (JEREMIAH 21:11–14)
 - A. Judgment (vv. 11, 12)
 - B. Punishment (vv. 13, 14)

Conclusion

- A. The End of the Line
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Ashurbanipal *As-shure-bah-nee-pahl*.

Carchemish *Kar-key-mish*.

Jeremiah *Jair-uh-my-uh*.

Josiah *Jo-sigh-uh*.

Nabopolassar *Nab-uh-puh-las-uh-r* or *Nab-oh-poh-las-er*.

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kad-**nez**-er*.

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.

Pashhur *Pash-uhr*.

Zedekiah *Zed-uh-kye-uh*.

Zephaniah *Zef-uh-nye-uh*.

Introduction

A. “Unexpected” Misfortune

Some of the most disheartening, even frightening, times in life are those when we come face-to-face with the negative consequences of our poor decisions. Perhaps you can remember an instance in school when you didn’t turn in an assignment on time and ended up severely damaging your grade in that class. Perhaps you even acted surprised when you received the penalty or tried to tell your teacher that it wasn’t fair. In situations like this, the lessons we learn often turn out to be very valuable to us later on. And so it was—or should have been—with God’s covenant people of the Old Testament era.

B. Lesson Context: Historical

The prophet Jeremiah ministered from about 626 to 575 BC. That ministry was to a people—the Judeans—who had disobeyed the Lord on a level far beyond the mundaneness of a late term paper. As a result, serious consequences loomed. God had sent prophet after prophet to warn both kings and commoners of pending destruction. But they didn’t listen. They acted as though they had God’s favor no matter what; they viewed Jerusalem’s temple as a good-luck charm (Jeremiah 7:4).

The northern kingdom, Israel, had been taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:6). A century later, the survival of the southern kingdom of Judah was by no means assured. The Assyrians were still the dominant military and political power in the ancient Near East.

King Ashurbanipal of Assyria died in 627 BC. Although he had been a strong ruler, his death laid bare serious internal weaknesses in Assyria. Disorder and revolt erupted in every part of that empire. Nineveh, the capital city, was destroyed in 612 BC (see the book of Nahum); the last vestiges of Assyrian might were wiped out at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2).

The consequences of Assyria’s decline were felt in Judah. After a reign of about 30 years, King Josiah was killed in battle in 609 BC. That happened as he attempted to halt the Egyptian army from aiding the remnants of the Assyrian army (2 Kings 23:29). The Babylonians stepped into the power vacuum left by the collapse of Assyria under the Babylonian king Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar (reigned 626–605 and 605–562 BC, respectively). Babylon came to dominate much of Assyria’s old territory. The last kings of Judah reigned in subservience to the Babylonians before the final exile of 586 BC (chap. 24, 25).

Jeremiah 1:2 places the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry at around 626 BC. The book of Jeremiah preserves a prophetic ministry that took place over the course of the next several decades—through the reigns of five Judean kings and a governor.

C. Lesson Context: Jeremiah 21

Jeremiah 21 is a coherent unit. The opening verses set the scene. Pashhur and Zephaniah were sent by Judah's final king, Zedekiah, to Jeremiah. Pashhur (not the same Pashhur as in Jeremiah 20) was a dogged opponent of Jeremiah, even trying to have him executed (see Jeremiah 38:1–4). Zephaniah, a priest (and not to be confused with the prophet of the same name), was not actively hostile to Jeremiah (see 21:1; 29:25–29).

The two emissaries intended to enlist Jeremiah's help in order to ensure God's aid against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Jeremiah 21:1, 2). King Zedekiah apparently thought that he would be aided by the Egyptians if he rebelled against the Babylonians (compare 2 Kings 18:21). The situation quickly became desperate when Jerusalem was besieged (25:1, 2).

Zedekiah and his messengers had some confidence in God's willingness to help them, based on his past work on Judah's behalf. Since he had protected Jerusalem before (2 Kings 19:35, 36), couldn't he be counted on to do so again? As Jeremiah's response shows, the request demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of Judah's standing with God.

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.

I. To the People

(JEREMIAH 21:8–10)

A. Choice to Make (v. 8)

8. “Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

Here in the second of Jeremiah's three-part response (see Lesson Context), 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 set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” (Deuteronomy 30:15).

Jeremiah's words of judgment and doom come 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 dire point.

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 narrow 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 (contrast Proverbs 3:5–7). Only following Jesus leads to life (John 14:6, 7).

B. Consequence to Consider (vv. 9, 10)

9. “ ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives.

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

This is not the advice the people hope 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 Babylonians (compare Jeremiah 27:11, 12).

The phrase *they will escape with their lives* in the original Hebrew is a military figure of speech, rendered in the KJV translation of this verse “his life shall be unto him for a prey” (examples: 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 Babylonians, the people will be rewarded with their lives and nothing more (compare 45:5).

10. “I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.”

Jeremiah’s address to the people closes with a sobering restatement of the truth as God has *determined* (compare Jeremiah 44:11; Luke 9:51). Translated literally, God has “set his face” against the people. He will *do this city harm and not good*.

Doubtless the idea that God will do *harm* against his own people is a shock (compare Jeremiah 44:26, 27; Amos 9:4). The concept of harm 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 (compare Jeremiah 5:3; Hebrews 12:4–11).

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 (examples: 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! And the Judeans’ preference to believe that God will punish only the enemies of the Jews—and thereby always deliver Judah—shows how badly they misunderstand what it means for God to be faithful. His wrathful judgment results from the actions of a people and their rulers who have received God’s word as no other nation has. They are without excuse in their repeated rejections of him. What is happening to Judah now is the promised result of those actions (see Deuteronomy 4:25–28). Even so, God’s wrath in this instance is also corrective in nature (see 4:29–31).

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 hands of the king of Babylon* will happen because God has determined that it should (compare 20:4; 32:28). Nebuchadnezzar will indeed burn the city (2 Kings 25:8, 9).

II. To the King's House

(JEREMIAH 21:11–14)

A. Judgment (vv. 11, 12)

11. “Moreover, say to the royal house of Judah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD.

The focus of Jeremiah’s message shifts again as he begins the third of his three sections of address (see Lesson Context). In speaking *to the royal house 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 (compare Jeremiah 13:18).

12. “‘This is what the LORD says to you, house of David: Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it.

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 *administer justice*. This is to be the foundational role of the ruling elites toward the people.

The 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 *every morning* is a Hebrew idiom that implies “daily” or “regularly” (see Psalms 5:3; 59:16). It is customary for cases to be adjudicated at the city gates in the morning. 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* thwarting the evil schemes of *the oppressor*. Such people seek to take what is not theirs. If human judges refuse to end this injustice, God’s *wrath* will be *like fire*, and will *burn* as a result. Fire is not typically literal in contexts such as this (see Psalms 79:5; 89:46), but sometimes it is (see 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.

B. Punishment (vv. 13, 14)

13. “‘I am against you, Jerusalem, you who live above this valley on the rocky plateau, declares the LORD—you who say, “Who can come against us? Who can enter our refuge?”

The Lord addresses Jerusalem by way of its geographical characteristics. Both the *valley* and *the rocky plateau* 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 (compare Jeremiah 49:4).

The people of the city are overconfident in this situation (compare 2 Samuel 5:6, 7). The question *Who can come against us?* indicates just how little they understand 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 you?*

14. “‘I will punish you as your deeds deserve, declares the LORD. I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you.’ ”

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 *as your deeds deserve*, he cannot be thwarted (Proverbs 1:31; Isaiah 3:10, 11).

Commentators disagree on what is being referred to as *your forests*, since there are no forests in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. One possibility is a figurative reference to the royal palace as being “the Palace 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” (compare 2 Kings 19:23).

Conclusion

A. The End of the Line

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 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. “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God” (Romans 11:22). May we, unlike the people of Jeremiah’s day, repent while there is time.

B. Prayer

Father, remind us daily that it’s either the narrow way of life or the wide gate of destruction. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Choose the way of life.¹