

May 24 Lesson 13 (NIV)

REPENT OF INJUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 72:1–17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 22

JEREMIAH 22:1–10

¹ This is what the LORD says: “Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there: ² ‘Hear the word of the LORD to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. ³ This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. ⁴ For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. ⁵ But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.’ ”

⁶ For this is what the LORD says about the palace of the king of Judah:

“Though you are like Gilead to me,
like the summit of Lebanon,
I will surely make you like a wasteland,
like towns not inhabited.

⁷ I will send destroyers against you,
each man with his weapons,
and they will cut up your fine cedar beams
and throw them into the fire.

⁸ “People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?’ ⁹ And the answer will be: ‘Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and have worshiped and served other gods.’ ”

¹⁰ Do not weep for the dead king or mourn his loss;
rather, weep bitterly for him who is exiled,
because he will never return
nor see his native land again.

KEY VERSE

This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. —Jeremiah 22:3

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. State promised results of obedience to God and promised consequences for disobedience.
2. Compare and contrast God's statements regarding social justice and injustice with those in other lesson texts of this unit.
3. Evaluate his or her church's ministries to the most vulnerable and participate in a plan for improving those.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Natural Disasters?
- B. Lesson Context
- I. For Judah (JEREMIAH 22:1–5)
 - A. Audience Identified (vv. 1, 2)
 - B. Message Delivered (v. 3)
 - C. Consequences Specified (vv. 4, 5)
- House Rules*
- II. For the Nations (JEREMIAH 22:6–10)
 - A. Imagery of Destruction (vv. 6, 7)
 - B. Example of Disobedience (vv. 8, 9)
 - C. Mourning for the Exiles (v. 10)

Conclusion

- A. Supernatural Restoration
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Babylonians Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.

Gilead Gil-ee-ud (*G* as in *get*).

Jehoahaz Jeh-ho-uh-haz.

Jehoiakim *Jeh-hoy-uh-kim*.

Josiah *Jo-sigh-uh*.

Lebanon *Leb-uh-nun*.

Shallum *Shall-um*.

Introduction

A. Natural Disasters?

On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted in the state of Washington. It was the deadliest eruption ever in the United States. The estimated power of the blast was 1,600 times the size of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Miles of forest were leveled by the direct blast, and the very earth was scorched by its power. Fifty-seven people and thousands of animals died as a result. What had previously been lush forest and vacation area looked like moonscape. The ash cloud turned the sky dark as far away as Montana. The blast was a violent reminder of nature's potential for destruction.

The utter devastation that was to follow the destruction of Jerusalem probably looked equally shocking. A once thriving city would be reduced to wilderness and wasteland. A primary thing to keep in mind, however, is that the devastation of Jerusalem was definitely supernatural in origin.

B. Lesson Context

The historical context of this lesson is the same as that of lesson 12, so that information need not be repeated here. Even so, we can say a bit more about the man Jeremiah himself.

God called Jeremiah as a young man to be his prophet to Judah; Jeremiah's own evaluation was that he was too young and not qualified to speak (Jeremiah 1:6). The forthcoming confrontations would seem, at times, to be just two against everyone else. But since one of those two was God (1:17–19), there could be no question regarding the outcome.

At times in Jeremiah's lengthy ministry, the stress was so great that it seemed as if he was at the psychological breaking point. Nothing Jeremiah did seemed to persuade people. One example of his extreme frustration is his series of complaints in Jeremiah 12:1–4 (also 20:7–18). God's response? If we could be permitted a very loose translation of Jeremiah 12:5, it would be something like, "Cowboy up and get with the program!" But Jeremiah's early years of prophetic ministry under King Josiah were easy compared to what was to come.

I. For Judah

(JEREMIAH 22:1–5)

A. Audience Identified (vv. 1, 2)

1a. This is what the LORD says:

This is a common introductory phrase. It tells the reader that a new prophecy is beginning and to expect a change from the previous subject. Jeremiah is in Jerusalem as our text begins (compare Jeremiah 19:3).

1b. “Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there:

Go down is probably a directional command in a literal sense. Jerusalem features elevation changes. So the directive suggests that Jeremiah receives it while at or near the temple mount and therefore will need to walk downward to get to *the palace of the king of Judah*.

Based on the timing of the prophecy, the king currently sitting on Judah’s throne is probably Jehoiakim. However, God refers to the location of the king’s palace instead of to the king himself. This implies that Jeremiah will not be speaking only to the king (contrast Jeremiah 13:18; 21:11 [lesson 12]; 34:2).

2a. “Hear the word of the LORD to you,

This phrase is another introduction to prophecy (examples: Isaiah 28:14; Ezekiel 13:2). The expression demands not just listening but also comprehending and heeding the message (contrast Isaiah 6:9, quoted in Matthew 13:14). What Jeremiah is about to speak is an authoritative message. As such, it will be quite unlike the invented messages of Jerusalem’s false prophets (Jeremiah 23:14; etc.).

2b. “king of Judah, who sit on David’s throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates.

Referring to *David’s throne* confirms the sense that this prophecy is directed toward all David’s royal heirs and not necessarily to a single, specific *king of Judah* (compare Luke 1:32). Jeremiah explicitly extends this challenge to the king’s court and all his *people* (all those in the palace household). The *gates* are the entrances to the palace (see also Jeremiah 22:4, below; contrast city gates in 17:25). Everyone should listen to and be responsible to respond to Jeremiah’s words, but especially the leaders.

B. Message Delivered (v. 3)

3a. “This is what the LORD says:

Again, Jeremiah emphasizes that *the Lord* is speaking. Jeremiah himself is only the messenger.

3b. “Do what is just and right.

This is the point of leadership failure (compare Ezekiel 45:9; Amos 5:24). Doing *what is just* is to ensure fair treatment but is not limited to that. It also extends to developing and maintaining healthy, honest, and respectful relationships at all levels. To *do ... right* is to create and maintain those kinds of relationships. Even so, we should not see too much of a distinction between being just and right, given their many uses as parallel terms in Hebrew poetry (examples: Isaiah 32:1; Amos 5:24; see discussions of parallelism in lessons 4, 9, and 10).

God’s character sets the standard for what is just and right (compare Leviticus 25:17; Psalm 89:14; Isaiah 56:1; Micah 6:8). Both must be expressed toward everyone at all times. And it is the leaders who are to set the example.

3c. “Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

Oppression flourishes where justice and righteousness are absent. In such circumstances, *the oppressor* can cheat and steal without consequence (see also Jeremiah 21:12, last week’s lesson). The three kinds of victims mentioned are the most vulnerable in the ancient world. The three were

mentioned together 16 times in the Hebrew Old Testament (compare 7:6). *The foreigner* (that is, a non-Israelite living among the covenant people) should have legal recourse for righting *violence* done to himself and his family. *The fatherless* and *the widow* are most susceptible to poverty, lacking a family breadwinner.

C. Consequences Specified (vv. 4, 5)

4. “ ‘For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people.

God frequently sets his commands in the context of consequences and blessings (example: Deuteronomy 11:26–28). Here, God promises again to extend David’s legacy to David’s royal descendants if they will *carry out these commands*—namely, practice justice and righteousness.

The bottom-line question is simple: Do those *who sit on David’s throne* desire to keep their positions, or do they not?

5a. “ ‘But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD,

A warning against refusing to *obey* and heed God’s *commands* is in keeping with the blessing/curse pattern established early in the history of Israel (see Deuteronomy 28). Jeremiah does not use that couplet specifically, but blessing-and-curse is indeed the sense here (compare Zechariah 8:13).

5b. “ ‘I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.’ ”

To *swear* is a particularly weighty way of making a promise (compare Genesis 22:16). The more significant, permanent, or powerful the thing sworn on, the more definite and absolute the promise. There is nothing and no one more significant, permanent, or powerful than God (Hebrews 6:13). He will make sure he fulfills this promise if Judah refuses to respond obediently.

The consequences God describes are both symbolic and literal. The phrase *this palace* refers both to David’s descendants and to the physical structure of their dwelling. If Judah’s leaders disregard God, they will not only be dethroned; they also will be without a physical residence in Jerusalem (compare Jeremiah 39:4–8).

II. For the Nations

(JEREMIAH 22:6–10)

A. Imagery of Destruction (vv. 6, 7)

6a. For this is what the LORD says about the palace of the king of Judah:

Again, Jeremiah restates that the words he speaks come from *the Lord* and are addressed to *the palace of the king*. There should be no mistake about either the source or the intended recipients!

6b. “Though you are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon, I will surely make you like a wasteland, like towns not inhabited.

God uses imagery to affirm how precious his people are to him. *Gilead* is an area just east of the Jordan River (Numbers 32:1–4, 19); *Lebanon* is located along the seacoast north of Israel. Those areas were known for their forests (Judges 9:15; etc.). Both David and Solomon used

expensive wood from the areas in building projects (2 Samuel 7:2; 1 Kings 5:1–10; 7:2). Gilead was also known for its balm (Genesis 37:25; Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11).

Other than the text before us, mention of Gilead and Lebanon occur together in the same verse only in Zechariah 10:10. Just three verses later, that prophet speaks of fire destroying Lebanon's "cedars" and "oaks of Bashan"—an area lying north of and adjacent to Gilead (11:1, 2). The coming destruction will be heartbreaking. Though David's lineage is precious to the Lord, he will dispossess its kings if they don't change their unjust ways. But that is up to them.

7. "I will send destroyers against you, each man with his weapons, and they will cut up your fine cedar beams and throw them into the fire."

The *destroyers* to whom God refers are the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:17–19). Reference to *your fine cedar beams* may refer either to (1) trees of the forest or (2) the cedar used in construction for the wealthy, especially the king's palace. Considering the first possibility, the felling of trees is a natural thing for a besieging army to do for building its siege ramps and towers (Jeremiah 6:6; compare 43:12; Isaiah 10:34).

Since an army would use the trees closest at hand, which probably wouldn't be cedar, the reference to cedar in the king's palace is more likely. Under either interpretation, the victorious besiegers will burn everything of significance before leaving for home (Jeremiah 52:13). Judah will be a deconstruction zone. The sense of the verse is of priceless things destroyed that need not have been.

B. Example of Disobedience (vv. 8, 9)

8. "People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?'"

People of the ancient Near East generally linked the rise and fall of *nations* to the power of a nation's deities (see 1 Kings 20:23). Jerusalem's status as a *great city* has earned Judah a reputation for following a very powerful deity. This is what God intended (Genesis 12:1–3).

The injustice that infects Jerusalem and Judah does not draw the nations toward the just and holy God—the only God there is. Instead, the nations around Jerusalem see no difference between Judah's way of life and theirs, between their gods and Judah's God. And when those nations see the defeat and captivity of God's people, they will link it to God's activity. The scope of devastation Judah is to undergo will be so immense that everyone will conclude that it was a God-driven action. The extent of the destruction will accomplish what Jerusalem and her injustice had not: nations will acknowledge God in at least one sense.

9. "And the answer will be: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and worshiped and served other gods.'"

God's plan from the beginning has involved inviting others to experience and follow him. We see this in God's promise to Abraham, that Abraham will be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1–3). We see this again in Zechariah 8:20–23, as God's restoration of Judah draws the nations to seek him. We see it again in the New Testament, when Peter challenges his readers to live lives that draw questions—all so that we may respond with Jesus as our answer (1 Peter 3:8–15).

But in our text we see the opposite occurring. Jerusalem's injustice does not draw the nations to seek God, since they see no difference between Judah's actions and their own. So God plans to draw their attention to his ways of justice and righteousness by disciplining Judah for her failure to model God's character. That would invite others to see God for who he is (compare 2 Kings

22:17; Ezekiel 39:23). The forthcoming devastation will be seen as divine in origin. The predicted *answer* is nothing new (see Deuteronomy 29:25, 26; 1 Kings 9:8, 9; Jeremiah 16:10, 11).

C. Mourning for the Exiles (v. 10)

10a. Do not weep for the dead king or mourn his loss;

This lament is usually understood to refer to Josiah, Judah's last righteous king (2 Chronicles 35:25). Mourning *for the dead* is a significant ritual for cultures worldwide; the ancient Near East is no exception. Jeremiah's words suggest that there is a fate worse than death (compare Ecclesiastes 4:2).

10b. rather, weep bitterly for him who is exiled, because he will never return nor see his native land again.

The reference is to Shallum, also known as Jehoahaz (Jeremiah 22:11, 12, not in our printed text; 2 Kings 23:29–32). Shallum succeeded Josiah as king in about 609 BC. Reversing Josiah's initiatives, Shallum led Judah back into the evils of Josiah's predecessors; he was king for only three months, then was exiled permanently to Egypt (23:33; the Shallum of 2 Kings 15 is a different person).

It seems odd to mourn the exile of an evil king yet not grieve the death of a godly king (compare Jeremiah 22:18, not in our printed text). The force of Jeremiah's prophecy has been God's warning of destruction and exile if Judah's leaders refuse to practice justice. Shallum is to serve as an example of the grief of all the exiles. Jeremiah holds him up as a warning of his hearers' own possible future.

Conclusion

A. Supernatural Restoration

The word from the Lord to the house of David features two promises: (1) If David's descendants would renounce injustice, then God would bless them, but (2) if not, they would suffer punishment. Judah would experience the full and recognizable consequences of disobeying God. God would therefore exhibit his character to the world and draw people to himself in one of those two ways.

God calls us to the same challenge he posed through Jeremiah. As we demonstrate God's righteous and just character in our actions, we also must expose the injustice inflicted on the powerless by oppressive people and systems. But we don't just draw people to God as an abstract. Rather, we draw people to the living Jesus. To reject this mission is to risk experiencing God in ways we will not like.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us see ways in which we have been unjust so that we may repent and model you as you would have us do. We pray in the name of the one who suffered great injustice, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Does your example invite God's justice?¹
