

Jerusalem's Fall

Devotional Reading: Lamentations 1:18–22

Background Scripture: 2 Kings 23:1–25:21

2 Kings 24:18–20

¹⁸ Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah. ¹⁹ He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as Jehoiakim had done. ²⁰ It was because of the LORD's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence. Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

2 Kings 25:1–9

¹ So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. ² The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

³ By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat.

⁴ Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, ⁵ but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, ⁶ and he was captured.

He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. ⁷ They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

⁸ On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ⁹ He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.

Key Text

It was because of the LORD's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence. Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. —2 Kings 24:20

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 3: Ezekiel and the Exile of Judah

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

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

1. Summarize the life and fate of King Zedekiah.
2. Explain the circumstances that led to the exile.
3. State one way he or she will reflect on God's patient mercy in the coming week.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Foreseen Disaster
- B. Lesson Context

I. Another Evil King (2 Kings 24:18–20a)

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II. Another Reckless Rebellion

(2 Kings 24:20b–25:5)

- A. Siege Begins (24:20b–25:1)
What's in Your Playbook?
- B. Siege Ends (vv. 2–3)
- C. Siege Aftermath (vv. 4–5)

III. Another Harsh Result (2 Kings 25:6–9)

- A. Zedekiah Sentenced (vv. 6–7)
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- B. Jerusalem Burned (vv. 8–9)

Conclusion

- A. Hope Beyond Disaster
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- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Foreseen Disaster

Most of our unwelcome experiences are unforeseen. An accident, a negative medical diagnosis, a conflict with a loved one—if we could foresee such events, we would likely take steps to avoid them.

Some things, however, we *can* reasonably foresee or predict. Failure to fix a leak in the roof will result in more and more damage. A poor diet will lead to a variety of illnesses. “I should have known better” is what we say when a foreseeable disaster befalls us. We experience the pain of regret and shame, thinking of what we could have done to avoid it. We may try to shift the blame. But our experiences in that regard are nothing new to the human condition, as today's lesson makes clear.

B. Lesson Context

Today's text takes us to the time frame of 597–586 BC. Many centuries had passed since Moses warned the Israelites of the consequences of breaking God's covenant (Deuteronomy 29:9–28; 30:15–18). The prophets reminded Israel and Judah of the coming judgment (2 Kings 24:2). The exile of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC had proven the prophets' warnings true (17:3–23). Now Judah too would face God's judgment.

The blame for the tragedy in today's text is most directly traced to the nation's line of leadership. Were we to draw a “good and evil” timeline of Judah's 20 rulers since the beginning of the divided monarchy in the tenth century BC (1 Kings 12), we would see startling swings from evil to good and back again to evil. Today's lesson introduces us to the last in that line of 20 kings, a man named Zedekiah.

Zedekiah's father, Josiah, was the last godly king of Judah (2 Kings 22:1–23:28). Josiah had four sons, Zedekiah being the third (1 Chronicles 3:15). Zedekiah might never have been king were it not for the untimely death of his father in battle (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chronicles 35:20–24; compare Jeremiah 46:2).

Following Josiah's death, his ungodly son Jeho-

ahaz (also known as Shallum, 1 Chronicles 3:15; Jeremiah 22:11–12) ruled briefly before being deported to Egypt by Pharaoh (2 Kings 23:30–33). Concurrently, Pharaoh installed Eliakim—another son of Josiah—as king, changing his name to Jehoiakim (23:34). When Jehoiakim died 11 years later, he was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin (24:1–6).

By that time the Babylonians were on the march, overtaking Jerusalem a scant three months after Jehoiachin’s ascent to the throne. The Babylonians installed one of his relatives, Mattaniah, in his place as king (2 Kings 24:8–17), renaming him Zedekiah. The first three verses of our lesson’s text are worded almost identically to that of Jeremiah 52:1–3 and are very similar to 2 Chronicles 36:11–13.

I. Another Evil King

(2 Kings 24:18–20a)

A. Zedekiah’s Reign (vv. 18–19)

18. Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother’s name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah.

The four kings who reigned over the final days of Judah were all very young by today’s standards when ascending to the throne: Jehoahaz (23), Jehoiakim (25), Jehoiachin (18), and Zedekiah (21). Some modern studies have proposed that the human brain does not fully mature until about



Visual for Lesson 10. *Display this visual as you discuss the consequences of evil actions unaccompanied by repentance.*

age 25. Thus impulse control is often lower until that point of development.

We may be tempted to blame the sins of the kings on the impulsiveness of youth. After all, it was a preference for the advice of “young men” over that of “elders” that had led to the division of Israel’s monarchy centuries before (1 Kings 12:1–19). But lest we be too hasty in that regard, we remind ourselves that King Josiah, one of Judah’s godliest rulers, was only 8 years old when he became king. He began to seek God by age 16. And in the twelfth year of his reign, at age 20, “he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem” of their idolatry (2 Chronicles 34:1–3).

Hamutal was the mother of Jehoahaz (see Lesson Context) and of *Zedekiah* (2 Kings 23:31). This *Jeremiah* from *Libnah* is not the same man as the more familiar prophet Jeremiah who was from Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1; 29:27).

19. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as Jehoiakim had done.

The disheartening evaluation of having done *evil* or being wicked *in the eyes of the Lord* occurs about 50 times in the Old Testament; the vast majority of those instances occur in 1–2 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles. By contrast, the evaluation of having done “right in the eyes of the Lord” occurs less than half as often—King Josiah having been the last to be acknowledged in that manner (2 Kings 22:2; see Lesson Context).

For Zedekiah to conduct himself in evil ways

How to Say It

Babylonians	Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.
Eliakim	Ee-lye-uh-kim.
Hamutal	Ha-mu-tal.
Jehoahaz	Jeh-ho-uh-haz.
Jehoiachin	Jeh-hoy-uh-kin.
Jehoiakim	Jeh-hoy-uh-kim.
Josiah	Jo-sigh-uh.
Mattaniah	Mat-uh-nye-uh.
Nebuchadnezzar	Neb-yuh-kud- nez -er.
Nebuzaradan	Neb-you- zar -a-dun.
Pharaoh	Fair-o or Fay-roe.
Zedekiah	Zed-uh-kye-uh.

carries a certain sad but pointed irony. His very name means “the Lord is righteous.” The irony intensifies as we see that this name was imposed on him by a pagan king (2 Kings 24:17)!

The scope of Zedekiah’s sin is revealed in the phrase *just as Jehoiakim had done*. Similar copy-cat behavior is attributed to Jehoiakim himself as well as to Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin (2 Kings 23:37; 23:32; and 24:9, respectively; see also Lesson Context). The expression “just as his predecessors had done” repeated in 2 Kings suggests not merely passive tolerance of evil but active promotion of it.

On Zedekiah’s reign, personality, fate, and interactions with the prophet Jeremiah, see Jeremiah 21:1–7; 24:8–10; 27:1–12; 32:1–5; 34:21–22; 37:1–39:7 (compare 2 Chronicles 36:11–13).

What Do You Think?

How do you think watching his father Jehoiakim’s evil behavior impacted King Zedekiah?

Digging Deeper

How can we break patterns of generational sin in our own lives and families?

B. The Lord’s Anger (v. 20a)

20a. It was because of the LORD’s anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.

Historians often point to political and military causes for Judah’s ruin. When the people of Israel in the north seceded from the united kingdom under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12), Solomon’s son Rehoboam was left only the small territories of Judah and Benjamin in the south. This little kingdom sat between two regions of great power: Egypt to the west and Mesopotamia to the east. Great empires sought to subdue Israel on their way to conquering other great kingdoms. Seen through this lens of relative military and political power, the kings of Israel and Judah did their best to navigate these treacherous waters by means of treaties to play one power off against another.

But the biblical authors do not see the falls of the northern and southern kingdoms as inevitable results of rebellion against superior military pow-

ers. Instead, they attribute these falls to *the Lord’s anger*. When God defends his people, they need no human allies (compare Isaiah 7:1–12; 30:1–5; 31:1; 36:6). When he withdraws his protection, then comes their defeat.

God’s anger is not selfish or petulant, as human anger often is. Rather, God’s anger is a reaction to rebellion and idolatry (Deuteronomy 9:7–9; 11:16–17; Judges 3:7–8; 1 Kings 16:33; 22:53; etc.). God’s covenant with Israel had conditions for Israel to meet; failure to meet those conditions would result in promised consequences (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). For the residents of Judah, it is their violation of the covenant that results in God’s wrath (4:25–27).

II. Another Reckless Rebellion

(2 Kings 24:20b–25:5)

A. Siege Begins (24:20b–25:1)

20b. Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

Now we learn the specific action that triggers Judah’s ultimate exile. The book of Jeremiah records straightforward talks between king and prophet (Jeremiah 37:6–10, 17–20; 38:14–26; etc.). Jeremiah warned of the coming exile, but the king chose to be persuaded by influential advisors and false prophets. They claimed that Judah could escape Babylon’s control by aligning with Egypt (Jeremiah 28; 37:5; Ezekiel 17:15; contrast Deuteronomy 17:16). Rebellion had already been tried against Babylon a few years earlier, and it had failed (2 Kings 24:1). It would fail again.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do our sins drive a wedge between God and his people?

Digging Deeper

How can we honor God’s heart by taking care of the innocent and the vulnerable in our societies?

What’s in Your Playbook?

Sally worked for a prestigious firm where she had oversight of a major account. One day she

inadvertently gave a client incorrect information. She debated whether to keep silent or go to her boss, Jeff, to explain what she had done. She chose the latter. As she explained the error to him, she burst into tears, aware that she could be fired.

But that's not what happened. At the end of the explanation, Jeff told Sally that they would call the client. He allowed her to take the lead in apologizing for her error. Jeff himself assured the client that he shared the responsibility. He affirmed that the company would accept loss of revenue or termination of business relationship as necessary.

The client was upset but also deeply impressed by Jeff's humility in taking responsibility. In the end, the client decided to stay with the company and pay the correct billing amount. As Sally rose through the ranks of the company, she used that experience as an example of how leaders act humbly.

The Bible makes clear in many passages that humility and pride are opposites, such as in Proverbs 3:34 (quoted in both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5). Pride says we are self-sufficient; humility admits our need. Trusting God's word for needed action was not in King Zedekiah's playbook (2 Chronicles 36:12–13). Is it in yours? —S. S.

25:1. So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it.

The siege of Jerusalem likely began on January 15, 588 BC, as the Babylonian king takes extreme action to squash the rebellion (see also next week's lesson). What is described is the beginning of a siege against a walled city. The Babylonians were skilled at such warfare, and their abundant artwork celebrating successful sieges shows the pride they took in their cruel skill.

The plan of a siege is simple: seal off the city from any outside source of food and water (compare Isaiah 3:1; Ezekiel 4:16), then wait until the defenders give up due to starvation. Deuteronomy 28:53–57 and Jeremiah 19:9 predicted that

parents would eat their own children. This gruesome prediction came true (2 Kings 6:24–29). To begin the siege, the Babylonians build encircling *siege works* that include battering rams (Ezekiel 4:2; 21:22).

B. Siege Ends (vv. 2–3)

2–3. The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat.

A siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC had failed (2 Kings 19:32–36), but this one does not. Jerusalem falls on *the ninth day of the fourth month* of Zedekiah's *eleventh year* of reign, computed to be July 18, 586 BC. Thus the siege takes a bit longer than two and a half years before it succeeds. Sieges gradually weaken the defenders and their defenses. Starvation and dehydration are deadly, and we may wonder how Jerusalem could have held out for more than 30 months!

Various factors contributed to the length of this siege. Previous kings of Judah had built cisterns for holding water supplies and had improved Jerusalem's defenses (2 Chronicles 26:9–10). Furthermore, Jerusalem may have had a source of water within its walls (2 Kings 20:20; Isaiah 22:9–11). But undoubtedly the biggest contributing factor to the siege's length was that it was lifted temporarily in order for the besiegers to deal with a threat from the Egyptian army (Jeremiah 37:5, 11). This respite undoubtedly allowed food and supplies to be restocked. We should also not discount pure human resilience as another factor.

What Do You Think?

During the two-year siege, do you think Zedekiah sought the Lord?

Digging Deeper

How can we learn to see and take advantage of the opportunities God gives us to change?

C. Siege Aftermath (vv. 4–5)

4. Then the city wall was broken through,

and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah,

The text of Jeremiah 52:7–8 repeats the narrative we see here, while Jeremiah 39:2–5 adds detail. The three narratives in general and the phrase *the city wall was broken through* in particular do not indicate that Zedekiah surrendered the city or otherwise capitulated (contrast 2 Kings 24:10–12). Instead, a violent breaching of a wall or gate is in view.

Earlier, the prophet had warned that only two outcomes were possible: (1) if Zedekiah surrendered to the Babylonians, then he and the city would be spared; but (2) failure to surrender would result in the opposite (Jeremiah 38:17–23). As the king and *the whole army* flee, they belatedly seem to realize that Jeremiah was right, and they know the fate that awaits them should they stay.

A knowledge of Jerusalem's topography helps us understand the escape route the defeated soldiers use. Valleys border Jerusalem to the east, the south, and (to a lesser extent) the west. Such areas are virtually unusable for an attacking army wishing to launch a direct assault against the city. So an attack has to come from the north. And although *the Babylonians were surrounding the city*, the main strength of their force is undoubtedly located in that northerly direction. Indeed, the additional information in Jeremiah 39:3 regarding "the Middle Gate" indicates just that.

Piecing together various texts reveals that the king's escape route was not quite the same as that of his soldiers. Although this text states that the soldiers flee *at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden*, it does not say that King Zedekiah did likewise. We find the king's escape route prophesied in Ezekiel 12:12: he would exit via a hole dug through the wall.

Presuming that the king would want to stay near his remaining soldiers, this hole is probably close to "the gate . . . near the king's garden." This serves to place the exit points at and near the Fountain Gate, which is at the extreme southeast-

ern end of the city, near what came to be called the Pool of Siloam (Nehemiah 3:15).

Travel during the darkness of *night* was very difficult in a preindustrial era. At the same time, the lack of light pollution from cities allowed the stars and moonlight to better illuminate the landscape. The defenders of Jerusalem thus likely had some light for sneaking through this thinly guarded section of the Babylonian lines. We speculate that the king and his entourage hoped to obscure their identities and so perhaps escape death or exile.

What Do You Think?

Why do you think the army fled at this pivotal moment?

Digging Deeper

How do we receive courage to face difficult situations in our own lives?

5. but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered,

The Babylonian army knows what they're doing, and their pursuit of *the king* ends successfully *in the plains of Jericho*. This area is also mentioned in Joshua 4:13; 5:10. More commonly, however, the area is known as "the plains of Moab" "by" or "across from Jericho" (Numbers 22:1; 26:3, 63; etc.). It is located in the Jordan River valley to the east of Jerusalem. The capture of Zedekiah in this area means that the king and others have traveled some 15 miles and negotiated an elevation drop of some 3,300 feet only to have their escape attempt foiled. The prophecies of Jeremiah 21:7; 32:4–5; and Ezekiel 12:12–13 are thus fulfilled in this verse and the next two, below.

III. Another Harsh Result

(2 Kings 25:6–9)

A. Zedekiah Sentenced (vv. 6–7)

6. and he was captured. He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him.

Riblah is a city that is well known to the residents of Judah: it is the very place where King

Jehoahaz had been imprisoned by Pharaoh some two decades prior (2 Kings 23:33). The distance to be covered to get there is nearly 300 miles. Zedekiah has several days to ponder his fate and why he didn't learn from the result of Jehoiachin's rebellion (2 Kings 24:15–16).

7. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

The Babylonian king exacts a vicious and gruesome price for Zedekiah's disloyalty. Such punishments were to serve as vivid examples to others contemplating rebellion. Also executed are all those of high standing in Judah (Jeremiah 39:6; 52:10).

Our Blindness

A titan of the computer industry once said that people tend to overestimate where technology will take us in two years and underestimate where it will take us in ten years. I like that observation and find it useful—to a point.

All observations that are based on human wisdom can be wrong (notice the waffling in the phrase “tend to”). We need only to think about the stock markets to see the truth of that: no one is able to pick all the right stocks to invest in all the time, despite various predictive tools at the trader's disposal. Our foresight into the future just isn't what God's is. Neither was Zedekiah's, whose spiritual blindness resulted in physical blindness.

The choice is stark: to determine where we end up in eternity, we can either trust the eyes of our personal experience or trust God's eyes, which see the certainties of the eternal future. Note that it's “either-or,” not “both-and.” And today is the day to make your choice. —R. L. N.

B. Jerusalem Burned (vv. 8–9)

8. On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

Our narrator now shifts from naming the year of Zedekiah's reign to naming that of the Babylo-

nian king, *Nebuchadnezzar*. Judah is vanquished. Babylon is utterly in charge. As historians correlate the dates of the kings' reigns, a month or less has passed since Jerusalem fell.

9. He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.

Having made an example of Zedekiah, the Babylonians now make an example of the entire city of Jerusalem. The prophets had predicted this outcome (Amos 2:4–5; Micah 3:9–12), and the speaker in Psalm 74:3–8 laments it.

What Do You Think?

How do we determine whether punishments are just or unjust?

Digging Deeper

How do we seek God's justice in our own lives and communities?

Conclusion

A. Hope Beyond Disaster

The story of the fall of Jerusalem attests to God's patience and justice. God told his people what would happen if they broke his covenant (Deuteronomy 28:15–29:29). He saved them from their enemies and gave them time to repent (Judges 2:10–23). Because they failed to repent, the covenant curses fell on Judah (2 Kings 24:1–4).

But judgment was not the last word. God also promised to restore his people and bring them into full relationship with him (Jeremiah 31:31–34). He sent Jesus Christ to keep that promise (Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:6). And God is still patient with us (2 Peter 3:9).

B. Prayer

God of justice, we acknowledge you are right in all your ways. Your righteousness shows us our wickedness, and so we come to you in repentance. Empower us to seek, learn, and apply lessons from Bible history. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God means what he says!