

PRACTICE JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 86:1-13
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 21

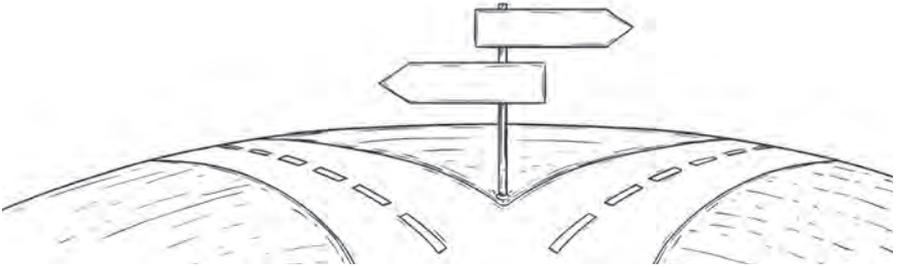


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JEREMIAH 21:8-14

8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

9 He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

11 And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the LORD;

12 O house of David, thus saith the LORD; Execute judgment in the morn-

ing, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

13 Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the LORD; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?

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.

I. To the People

21:8. Jeremiah turns his attention from the king (Jeremiah 21:3-7) to the *people* in general. God sets before them a stark choice between *life* and *death*. This Scripture seems to recall the words of Moses: “See, I set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil” (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 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 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). Though choosing life seems a no-brainer, many still choose death by trusting in their own wisdom. Only following Jesus leads to life (John 14:6, 7).

9. The choice that Jeremiah has presented abstractly, he now paints in real-life terms: to stay in Jerusalem and try to hold out against *the Chaldeans* will mean 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. Leaving the confines of the city and surrendering to the Chaldeans is the only path to continued life.

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 de-

cidated to punish His people; there will be no deliverance from the Chaldeans.

The phrase *his life shall be unto him for a prey* is a military figure of speech. 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 be rewarded with their lives and nothing more.

10. 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.

Doubtless the idea that God will do *evil* against His own people is a shock. The concept of evil 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.

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.

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

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 21:12a

those actions. Even so, God's wrath in this instance is also corrective in nature.

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.

II. To the King's House

11. The focus of Jeremiah's message shifts again as he begins the third of his three sections of address. In speaking to *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.

12. 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 ruling elites toward the people.

The judgment 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.

The phrase *in the morning* is a Hebrew idiom that implies “daily” or “regularly.” 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 *fury* will be *like fire*, and will *burn* as a result. Fire is not typically literal in contexts such as this, but sometimes it is. The latter will be the case when Nebuchadnezzar burns Jerusalem.

13. *The Lord* addresses Jerusalem by way of its geographical characteristics. Both the *valley* and *the plain* make the inhabitants feel secure. Jerusalem is bounded on three sides by deep valleys. Thus the city itself sits above its potential enemies on a defensive stronghold.

The people of the city are overconfident in this situation. The question *Who shall come down 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 thee?*

14. 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.

Commentators disagree on what is being referred to as *the forest*. 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.”

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Choose the way of life.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

PRACTICE JUSTICE

Into the Lesson

People reap what they sow.

Jot down as many real-life examples of this proverb as you can think of in one minute.

Today's lesson illustrates this proverb in a "truer words were never spoken" kind of way.

Into the Word

Read Jeremiah 21:8-10.

Message to the People

What difficult options did God present to the besieged people of Jerusalem?

Why was there no third option of a more pleasant nature?

Read Jeremiah 21:11-14.

Message to the Royal Court

What primary fruit (v. 14) did Judean leadership lack?

Into Life

How does today's lesson text from Jeremiah 21:8-14 refute the thinking expressed in the following scenarios?

- A person lives selfishly and sinfully for years, but when crisis comes to her life, she expects God to answer her prayer for help.
- A person's misbehavior causes him to lose his leadership role in the church, his family, and his reputation in the community. The best he can hope for is a low-paying job as he survives away from what was once home.
- A woman leaves her family to pursue a pattern of adultery and drug addiction. She continues her willful ways despite the pleas of her husband and children. Eventually she discovers she has no relationship with any of them.
- A person has no obvious sins and leads a basically decent life. But going to church has never been important to her. She asks, "Does that make me a bad person?"
- One man admits, "Yes, I'm in a horrible situation. I stole funds donated to my charity. I'm going to jail. There's nothing I can do but serve my sentence."

Write a testimony of a time when negative consequences resulted in repentance and a long-term benefit.
