

Sunday School Lesson May 17, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and blessed.

Prayer: Most Holy God, hear our prayer. Sometimes our lives are a mess because of the choices we have made. Sometimes our lives are great, and we are kind and generous, other times we forget to be grateful and humble. We trust that you Father are with us and will bring us back into your fold when we stray. Father, thank you for your word and the time that you have given us to study it. Help us bind your words in our heart and live by them each day. Thank you for your mercies and goodness. We confess our need for you and we ask that you renew our hearts, minds, and lives, for the days ahead. Keep us focused on what is pure and right and give us the power to be obedient to your word. We ask that you bring healing mercies to our church family members, our friends and neighbors that are going through sickness and battling health ailments. Father, you know our burdens and concerns. We ask for your help, to overcome them. We pray that you will protect all personnel in the medical community as they continue to care for the sick. We pray for our national, state, and local leaders, asking that you give them the wisdom to handle daily situations as they lead our country. Forgive us of our sins and open our hearts and minds as we try to live a life glorifying and pleasing you. We ask these things in our Lord and Savior's name, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lesson for May 17, 2020 "Practice Justice" Scripture passage is from Jeremiah chapter 21:8-14.

Sources used for this lesson: The Bible, The Bible Knowledge Commentary by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Exploring The Minor Prophets by John Phillips, Halley's Bible Handbook with the King James version, Frank E. Gaebelin, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 6, Dr. Hal Brady Ministries and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.

There is so much information in Jeremiah, we could spend months studying the book. The Present Word Bible Lessons this quarter only cover two chapters, 21 and 22. Here are some notes that I obtained from the sources

mentioned above that provides insight about Jeremiah as we look at our lessons.

The purpose of the book of Jeremiah was designed to show the exiles the reasons for their captivity. They were not in Babylon because God had forgotten his promises to Israel, but because Israel had been unfaithful to him. The book also taught the captives to wait patiently for the seventy years to elapse and not to seek a quick release through military or political means by trusting in other nations for deliverance. Finally, the book encouraged the captives that after their bondage, there would come a time of restoration and renewal under the new covenant.

The long book of Jeremiah, unlike the majority of the other prophets, is not arranged in chronological order. Stories and prophecies from various periods in Jeremiah's life are arranged together. Messages of hope or destruction, personal stories from Jeremiah's life, and historical events appear side by side. Some scholars account for this apparent lack of usual order in arrangement by noting the process leading up to the writing of the book.

Jeremiah had prophesied for twenty years before God told him to write his messages down. Thus, the first compilation of Jeremiah contained some kind of listing ("all the words"; Jeremiah 36.2) or summary version of twenty years of warning and encouraging the nation. When King Jehoiakim heard the prophecy, he burned the scroll, section by section (Jer. 36.22-23), showed no fear of God, and sought to arrest Jeremiah. Jeremiah then rewrote the original prophecy and added even more to it (Jer. 36.32). Thus, some scholars believe the turbulent times, surrounding the writing of Jeremiah, account for the book's seeming lack of order.

It begins with the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry (Jeremiah 1:1-19), then encourages God's people to repent, shows God's absolute rule over the nations and concludes by describing not only the fall of Jerusalem, but also the elevation of David's son, Jehoiachin, in captivity. This clearly shows that the book was purposely designed to contribute to the ongoing development of God's promises to Abraham's children. Moses, in Deuteronomy, had told them that disobedience would bring destruction, but they also had been told of God's promises to Abraham to bring in a large nation and universal blessing and of God's promises to David to always have one of his sons ruling on the throne of Israel. Jeremiah's structure shows how. The prophecies of destruction were accomplished without destroying the promises of Davidic rule that would someday be perfectly fulfilled in the Messiah.

From Stepping into the Word – What are the qualities any leader needs? Our passage today provides the basic Old Testament answer: it is exercise authority in a way that ensures the protection of people who might be taken advantage of by others. Jeremiah 21:12 says, “O house of David, this is what the LORD says: Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his 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.”

The primary purpose of the monarchy is to do justice and to care for the needy. The purpose of the prophets is to deliver the word of Yahweh. As we have seen in the writings of other prophets, both kings and prophets have been corrupted by power and money. They serve themselves and therefore lead the people of Judah away from Yahweh. The chapters of Jeremiah give us a good picture of Jeremiah’s message to the kings and prophets and his understanding of their role in the downfall of Judah.

By word count Jeremiah is actually the longest book of the Bible, with even more words than Psalms. The members of Jeremiah’s family were priests. Jeremiah was a Judean, from the town of Anathoth located about three miles outside of Judah’s capital city, Jerusalem. His prophecy came around 627 B.C. He was assisted in compiling the book of Jeremiah by his scribe, Baruch, who is referenced several times in the work and accompanies Jeremiah on many of his journeys. King Jehoiakim burnt that record (Jeremiah chapter 36). Baruch wrote it again and Jeremiah added more messages. He is deeply burdened for his fellow countrymen’s spiritual state. It is from emotional overtones and many recorded laments that Jeremiah was nicknamed the weeping prophet. Jeremiah is chosen by God to speak judgment to a people who have turned their back on Him. For his troubles, Jeremiah is beaten, throw in pits, placed in stocks and publicly ridiculed. His own townspeople put out a contract on his life. God instructed Jeremiah not to take a wife – his ministry was to be too difficult to sustain a marriage and the coming judgment so severe as to preclude having a family.

During the 7th century B.C., the nations called Assyria, Egypt and Babylon wanted to gain political control in the Middle East. The Assyrians defeated the ten tribes in the northern kingdom in 721 B.C. These 10 tribes were called Israel. The Assyrian kingdom ended and the powerful Babylonian nation defeated Egypt in 605 B.C. Then the Babylonians attacked the two tribes in the southern kingdom called Judah. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The Babylonian army took their prisoners away from Judah. They took the prisoners into exile in Babylon.

The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as the ruler of Judah. The chief officer in the army freed Jeremiah from prison. They invited Jeremiah to go to Babylon. Jeremiah preferred to stay with the people in Judah. Ishmael and his followers killed Gedaliah. The people asked Jeremiah what they should do. He told them not to leave the country. But, against his advice, they ran away to Egypt and they took Jeremiah with them. Jeremiah continued to prophesy in Egypt (Jeremiah chapters 40 to 44).

After Jehoiakin, also called Coniah and Jeconiah (compare II Kings 24:5-6 with Jeremiah 22:24 and 24:1) became king of Judah in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon came against Jerusalem and besieged the city. Fearing the worst, Jehoiakin and his royal court surrendered to the king of Babylon (see II Kings 24:8-11). Nebuchadnezzar carried Jehoiakin, his family, all his princes, at least ten thousand other captives, seven thousand men of might and a thousand craftsmen and metal workers to Babylon (see II Kings 24:12-16). This was the first of three deportations of Jews to Babylon. The captain of the Babylonian guard left many poor people behind to farm the land (see II Kings 25:12). After Jehoiakin was taken captive, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, appointed Mattaniah king in Jerusalem and changed his name to Zedekiah, and he was an evil king (see II Kings 24:17-19). In Zedekiah's ninth year as king in Jerusalem, he rebelled against Babylon (see II Kings 24:20; II Chronicles 36:11-13), and Nebuchadnezzar again laid siege around Jerusalem for two years (see II Kings 25:1-3). Our lesson takes place during those two years. King Zedekiah, fearing what would happen to Jerusalem as a result of the Babylonian siege around the city, sent two of his representatives to beg Jeremiah to petition the LORD for help (see Jeremiah 21:1-2). The LORD had protected Jerusalem earlier (see Jeremiah 37:3-5), so Zedekiah undoubtedly thought that God would do it again. But Jeremiah sent word back to the king declaring that no help from the LORD was forthcoming (see Jeremiah 32:6-8). In fact, God told Jeremiah to tell Zedekiah that instead of helping, He Himself would fight against Jerusalem, using Babylon as His weapon. As a result, Zedekiah and many others would be carried off in captivity to Babylon (see Jeremiah 21:3-7). This is where our lesson begins.

Jeremiah chapter 21 - "The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord when King Zedekiah sent him to Pashhur, son of Malkijah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. They said: Inquire now of the LORD for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us."

Let's clear up something that could be confusing. A man named Pashhur (son of Malkijah) here is said to be sent to Jeremiah with a message. If you read Jeremiah chapter 20, there is a person named Pashhur (son of Immer).

These two Pashhurs are different. Pashhur in Jeremiah 20 was the son of Immer. And the Pashhur here in Jeremiah 21 is the son of Melkijah.

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's request for the prophet to seek a word from the Lord is really a request to intercede on their behalf with the Lord. And the "wonderful deeds" are the mighty acts of God manifested in the Exodus and the journey into the land and in the whole history of this people whom the Lord has delivered from the hands of their enemy. Knowing that history, Zedekiah hopes and prays for such a magnificent deliverance now (2 Kings 19:35-36).

As Jeremiah's response shows, the request demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of Judah's standing with God. Jeremiah's response comes in three parts. First, there came words against King Zedekiah himself (Jeremiah 21:3-7). The prophet was blunt: Jerusalem's weapons will become a liability as God himself fights against the city.

Today's scripture lesson opens with the second section of Jeremiah's response.

Jeremiah turns his attention from the king, without excluding him, to "the people" in (21:8-10). God sets before them a stark choice between "life" and "death." "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. 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; he will escape with his life."

Though similar expressions are common throughout scripture, this particular 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. Though sometimes it seems overlooked, God still requires obedience and loyalty. The people's often-repeated refusals to render to him their exclusive worship have brought them to this dire point. God's covenant people had forgotten their responsibility of putting God first, and they were now facing the consequences of their mistakes.

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 the obvious choice, many still choose death by

trusting in their own wisdom. Proverbs 3:5-7 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight".

Only following Jesus leads to life. From John 14:6-7, Jesus answered, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Jeremiah's advice was practical. (see Jeremiah 21:9-10) Those people, who gave themselves to the Babylonians, would escape alive. If the people stayed in Jerusalem, they would starve, or they would die because of disease. When the enemy attacked the city, they would kill the people there. The LORD was using the Babylonian army to punish Judah. Jeremiah himself did not leave the city. The officials accused him, saying that he was trying to join the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37:11-15). Jeremiah was loyal to his people. In 587 B.C. he had the choice to go to Babylon, but he remained with those people who remained (Jeremiah 40:1-6).

Leaving the confines of the city and surrendering to the Babylonians is the only path to continued life. To be sure, 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. Because God has decided to punish his people, there will be no deliverance from the Babylonians (Jeremiah 27:11, 12). In this situation, if the people surrender to the Babylonians, they will be rewarded with their lives and nothing more. If the people accept God's judgment they will live.

Jeremiah's address to the people closes with a sobering restatement of the truth as God has "determined". Jeremiah 44:11 says; "Therefore, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says; I am determined to bring disaster on you and to destroy all Judah." Literally, God has "set his face" against the people and He will "do this city harm".

Without doubt the idea that God will do "harm" against his own people is a shock (Jeremiah 44:26-27, and Amos 9:4). However, God's harm is not intended only as retribution; it is intended also to correct his wayward children (Jeremiah 5:3, Hebrews 12:4-11).

The nation of Judah, represented by its capital city of Jerusalem, certainly deserves God's wrath in a retributive sense. God's 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. This whole situation is a reminder of the absolute sovereignty of

God. Zedekiah, in seeking to inquire of God (Jeremiah 21:2), seems to assume that God is on call to perform miracles whenever the people desire.

But God cannot be manipulated, and it is dangerous to presume on God. The destruction of Jerusalem at the "hands of the king of Babylon" will happen because God has determined that it should. Words from Jeremiah 20:4, "For this is what the LORD says: I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with you own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword."

Judah had a long history of listening only to themselves rather than to the prophets' warnings. It resulted in the destruction of their nation. Point to think about, is there is any kind of message for us in all this. I believe there is.

Here is another point that I read. "Sooner or later, the wheels of God's righteousness will right every wrong, balance every scale, and correct every injustice in the world".

William Wadsworth Longfellow expressed it this way:

*"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceedingly small,
Though with patience He stands waiting
With exactness He grinds all."*

Jeremiah 21:11-14 - The focus of Jeremiah's message shifts again as he begins the third of his three sections of address. In speaking "to the royal house of Judah," the reference seems to be to all members of the royal court including those who live in the palace and assist in the carrying out the affairs of the state. They are not exempt from the indictment against king and commoner. The household of the king was proud and not enforcing justice. They were proud – the king and his princes and officials. They were boasting as if no one could attack them and prevail. We'll see that their proud boasting was definitely not correct.

Instead of acting as father and guardian of his people, each of Israel's (Judah's) kings had shown himself to be an exploiter and oppressor of the people. Few had been an exception to this. The traditional description of the royal duties as those upholding justice and delivering those who are oppressed had too often in practice been little more than a hollow fiction. For the most part, the kings had readily become agents of injustice and exploitation.

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).

The phrase "every morning" implies "daily" or "regularly." It is customary for cases to be dealt with at the city gates in the morning. Starting each day with the right judgment will help ensure that the people act in ways please to God. This certainly includes the royal officials of the "house of David" ending the evil schemes of the "oppressor." Such people seek to take what is not theirs.

The king was the final authority when it came to enforcing justice in the land. And God held them responsible for being unjust and not being concerned for the carrying-out of justice. There are people in any society that are stronger than others and intent on abusing the weaker ones.

If human judges refuse to end this injustice, God's "wrath" will be like "fire," and will "burn" as a result. Can there be any worse words to hear from God than "I am against you?"

This lesson today brings us face to face with 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 destruction and death. The question before us is, will we learn from history? And unlike the people of Jeremiahs' day, will we repent while there is still time?

According to Jeremiah, Israel and Judah have failed to keep covenant with God. They had ignored God-given responsibilities to do justice and instead do whatever it pleases them to do. They think that their status as God's covenant people gives them automatic protection, regardless of whether they keep the statutes of the covenant. Their attitudes do get them into trouble with God. It falls to Jeremiah to point out to the people of Judah the error of their ways, as well as to the various rulers of the court and the temple. But his words fall on deaf ears, in part because of the mistaken belief that Yahweh's promises were irrevocable and would guarantee their safety and security regardless of their actions.

Our lesson says: "God chief requirement for kings and other leaders was that they pursue and uphold justice for oppressed people. Is this high on our list of priorities for leaders today?"

This hits home, if we really stop to think about the poor, the widows, orphans, people with mental illness, handicaps, homeless and others that struggle each day. Do we or our leaders in charge place them on the priority list?

God will tolerate sin only so long and then He will act. Because of her sinful disobedience, the northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Our lesson this week takes place about 135 years later. One would think that the southern kingdom of Judah would've learned a lesson from what happened to the northern tribes. They didn't. They continued to live ungodly lives, being led by many of their ungodly leaders. Even after numerous warnings from God's prophets, God's people failed to listen. As a result, time ran out on them and the LORD prophesied through Jeremiah that their punishment was on the horizon in the form of the Babylonians. It was too late to make any changes, for God had pronounced the consequences of their repeated disobedience—removal from their own land (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 49-52).

Our society admires assertiveness, independence, and defiance of authority. In a relationship with God these qualities become stubbornness, self-importance, and refusal to listen or change. Left unchecked, stubbornness becomes a way of life hostile to God. The lesson for us is that we must be obedient to God's will, His Word and His way. Anything less will result in His judgment.

From stepping into the world section— The Bible is full of tensions. God is sovereign, yet we are responsible for the choices we make. God's love is unconditional, and our status as God's beloved cannot be enhanced by our good works' nor diminished by our wanderings. We are called to obedience and faithfulness. God gives the law after having delivered the people from slavery, not before. It was not a matter of, "If you obey me, I will save you and you will be my people." Instead, it was, "Because I am your God and you are my people, and because I have saved you, this is how I want you to live." Judah has plenty of chances to turn back to God, but they did not. Josiah instituted many reforms, but his sons did not continue in the path he marked for them, and they and their people suffered the consequences. God still calls each of us to turn back to God's ways and promises forgiveness and wholeness to all who respond to that call.

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson May 24, 2020 "Repent of Injustice" from Jeremiah chapter 22.

** Summer quarter Sunday school books will be available, for pick up in the church office, this week. If you are unable to get by the church office and pick up a book, let me know and I will

place one in the mail for you. Summer quarter lessons start Sunday June 7, 2020. We have two more lessons in spring quarter book May 24 and May 31.