

Jeremiah organized his writings based on topics, not timeline. This helps us see why in chapter 20 the attack of Babylon was first announced as a distant threat, and why already in chapter 21, verse 4, Babylon is suddenly outside their walls.

Babylon followed an ancient strategy of war - to surround the city and cut off food supply, causing starvation. Enemy armies would do this in order to force the inhabitants to surrender. It is a cruel process leading to misery, death, disease, and devastation. One of the most cruel examples of this in world history was the army of Babylon surrounding Jerusalem.

In chapter 21, we suddenly we time-leap 20 years ahead. Jeremiah will not give us more about that story until chapters 32, 34, 37, 38, and 39. So, here in chapter 21, we are suddenly faced with this King, without a proper introduction. Let me introduce him to you – church, this is King Zedekiah.

Let me explain the missing 20 years of how we got to Babylon surrounding Jerusalem. Give your attention, and in 2 minutes, you will be caught up.

Babylon's first invaded back in 605 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar first became King of Babylon, and when Jehoiakim was king of Judah. In that invasion, Nebuchadnezzar seized treasures from the royal palace and the temple built by Solomon. A number of young men from Judah were taken away to Babylon. Among them was a young man named Daniel, and 3 of his friends Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, better known by their new Babylonian names – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Yes, this is the same Nebuchadnezzar.

Now fast forward 8 years. The year is 597 BC. Babylon invaded a 2nd time. This time, King Jehoiachin was king of Judah. The Babylonians captured Jerusalem and forced a second wave of people to go to Babylon as prisoners. Among those who were sent away were King Jehoiachin himself, who had only been reigning for a little more than 3 months. Babylon had control of Jerusalem, and so Nebuchadnezzar put a local man that he could control, as king in Jerusalem. Guess who? Our King Zedekiah. King Zedekiah was the uncle of Jehoiachin, the King we read about here in chapter 21. Again, he was was under the control of the Babylonian Empire.

But our King Zedekiah was very foolish and very arrogant. After ruling like this for 8 years, then in the 9th year of his reign, he decided to revolt against Babylon and instead become friends with Egypt. Egypt and Babylon were enemies. The King of Babylon was angry, so he again invaded the region of Judah. But the city Jerusalem was up on the plateau surrounded by valleys on 3 sides, and so the city of Jerusalem thought they were safe.

As we come to Jeremiah chapter 21, we are seeing the beginning of Babylon's third attack on the city of Jerusalem. The year was 589 BC. King

Zedekiah was on the throne. King Zedekiah was the last, and he was also the weakest of all the kings that Judah ever had.

We pick up the story in chapter 21 with King Z in a panic. He remembered that Jeremiah has been warning of attacks for years. So, King Zedekiah sent two men to Jeremiah with an urgent message, asking Jeremiah to pray that God would deliver them. That was 20 years of missing history between ch. 20 and 21.

Now you are ready for ch. 21, verses 1-2, *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur the son of Malchiah and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseiah, saying, “Inquire of the Lord for us, for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all His wonderful deeds and will make him withdraw from us.”* They wanted a miracle. Something like the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, or something like a powerful angel who conquers whole armies in a day. Something like that would be nice, please.

The main point of this sermon is: The way of life is to acknowledge our sins and our need for judgment, and surrender to Christ, who had God’s wrath poured out on Him on the cross. By dying to sin, we live.

1. Judgment is coming. (v.1-7)

It was typical for King Zedekiah over 8 years of his reign to not listen to Jeremiah, until there was a crisis, and then suddenly to turn to Jeremiah in desperation, asking Jeremiah what to do. It was then typical for Jeremiah to inform King Zedekiah how God wants him to respond. And further, it was typical for the king to lack the courage to take action, and to lack the personal character necessary to make the changes that God required of him.

The topic that organized Jeremiah to skip 20 years of history was the two different men named Pashhur, chapter 20 started with a man named Pashhur, and chapter 21 started with a different man named Pashhur. In chapter 20, the 1st Pashhur beat up Jeremiah. In chapter 21, the 2nd Pashhur asked Jeremiah to pray for deliverance from attack. However, in the end, the 2nd Pashhur was not any better to Jeremiah than the 1st Pashhur. Later, in chapter 38, the 2nd Pashhur would be involved in putting poor Jeremiah down into a muddy hole. As for the other fellow in verse 1, Zephaniah the priest, later in chapter 29, he threatened to put Jeremiah in the stocks.

So, given this king, and these two messengers, what should Jeremiah reply? As dangerous as it was, Jeremiah was a prophet of God, and so he must reply with the whole truth. So, we get Jeremiah’s reply, from verse 3 to verse 7.

There is also a change in messages from Jeremiah now in chapter 21. No longer is the issue whether the people will repent and escape judgment. It is too late. Rather, now that God’s judgment is certainly coming, the question now is how the people will respond to judgment. Jeremiah had been ignored in the past,

because there never was an attack that he kept warning was coming. But now Jeremiah could no longer be dismissed. Now Jeremiah's prophecies were being fulfilled! There was no longer some vague idea about a mysterious enemy from the north – now in the days of King Zedekiah, it was painfully obvious that it was Babylon - again. As the threat from Babylon grew stronger this time, this King Zedekiah consulted Jeremiah more and more regularly. King Zedekiah kept hoping for Jeremiah to bring a word of deliverance from the enemy attack. Jeremiah was consistent in saying that this is no longer a time for deliverance, but rather this is a time of punishment. Starting in verse 4 is the terrible answer to the King's hope for being delivered.

The answer is biting. The answer makes the attacking Babylon the least of their problems! Their real enemy is infinitely greater, and more to be feared. God.

Verse 5 – *“I Myself will fight against you...”* the language shows God's power in war in a horrifying way – turned against His own people! *“with outstretched hand and strong arm...”* This vocabulary was always the way that prophets spoke about God fighting AGAINST enemies. The book of Exodus used this language for when God fought against Egypt. Deuteronomy used this language about the destruction of the enemies in Canaan. Tragically, the people are now facing God as their enemy. The hand of God would pick up the hammer of Nebuchadnezzar.

Verses 6-7 mention pestilence, sword, and famine. All 3 are typical consequences of military siege of walled cities. The devastation placed on the citizens is clear. And for any who survive that, Babylon will put them to death. That enemy King of Babylon *“...will not pity them or spare them or have compassion.”* So, that is point 1 of the sermon. Judgment is coming!

2. Surrendering is the only way to survive. (v.8)

In verse 8, God provides a way out! Here the LORD speaks to the people, through Jeremiah. Verse 8 reads, *“And to this people you shall say, ‘Thus says The LORD: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.’”*

Jeremiah no longer had any hope of a national repentance that might lead to the suspension of God's judgment on the whole city and nation. The city will fall and burn. But there a way for individual citizens to flee and survive!

The instruction from Jeremiah to the people for how to survive is surprising. Most of them would assume that holding fast to the LORD would mean staying in the city of God and trusting in the temple of God in Jerusalem. Not anymore, says Jeremiah. Everything has changed. If you stay in Jerusalem, it means certain death by pestilence, sword and famine. At this point, the only safe option is to leave the city and surrender to the Babylonians! Nebuchadnezzar was actually an agent in the hand of God. Surrender and live!

The ancient war practice of surrounding a city was an act of total war. That meant that either the whole city would surrender to the enemy, or the whole city would be destroyed. There was no other outcome. Jeremiah is saying surrender.

Verses 9-10 go on to describe the two choices that the people had were a) to keep their hearts hard and die in the city, or b) to repent, which meant to surrender to the attacking King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army and be taken away as prisoners of war!

Their only chance of survival was to surrender. Surrender meant an exile in Babylon!

Life by exile! Life by death! Or, as the sermon title – By dying, we live.

Two paths. Path of life and path of death.

We see the two paths in the book of Proverbs, by Solomon. We see the two paths in the book of Deuteronomy 30, by Moses. We see the two paths in Jeremiah.

3. God reversed, and now fought against the dynasty of David! (v.9-14)

In verse 11, God gave Jeremiah a message for the royals. The house of the king of Judah. Verse 12 says, "*O house of David!...*"

This is the king of Judah, and all of his predecessors, the kings all the way back to King David.

What is the primary duty of a king? Some would say to protect the nation from attack. But here Jeremiah shows that justice and caring for the needy.

Those with power in society are supposed to take action and speak up for those who lack power. Especially those without land, without homes, without families to care for them.

The big test for leaders is how they care for the most poor, the most needy. God demands that the kings do their job according to God's standards.

Verse 12 says, "*Execute justice in the morning...*"

Help victims. Stand up for people being robbed.

And if they won't?

God says that His wrath will go forth like fire.

The implication is that the justice system in Jerusalem was broken. No one was standing up for people being exploited and emptied out by robbers. No one was protecting the innocent victims. The police and the judges were not protecting people. So, God threatened judgment.

Verse 13, God said, I am against you. God was against the city of Jerusalem, the city that was on a plateau, surrounded by 3 valleys.

Why was God against them? Verse 13 says it was because of their arrogant words, "*Who shall come down against us, or who shall enter our habitations?*"

They thought that God had made their city unconquerable, and that therefore they could become unethical if they wanted to. They presumed that God would

protect them, no matter how bad they became! Perched on a high plateau above 3 valleys all around, the city of Jerusalem felt an unjustified security. God said he was against them, and they answered – who can come against us? Their bravado was irrational, because God had already brought the Babylonian army to surround them on all sides! Who ever said that sin is rational?

So, in order to send a very clear message to an irrational people, God gave the last statement in verse 14, *“I will punish you according to the fruit of your deeds, declares The LORD; I will kindle a fire in her forest, and it shall devour all that is around her.”*

God repeated His intention. Their wicked actions required God’s punishment. Again, the instrument of God’s judgment here is fire. This is the image of a forest fire that consumes everything in its path.

We ought to end the chapter in shock that God would fight against the person on the throne of David.

Concluding Lessons:

1) We have to die in order to live.

Jeremiah’s ministry is often mirrored by the ministry of Jesus. What about the kings and rulers and people in the days of Jesus? The chief priests of Israel chose their pathway while Jesus was on trial. We read it in John 19:14-16, when Pilate *“...said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” So he [Pilate] delivered him [Jesus] over to them [the Jews] to be crucified.”* No king but Caesar. They chose their pathway!

What is your pathway?

Luke 1:32, says that Jesus *“...will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of his father David...”*

In Revelation 22:16, Jesus said, *“...I am the root and the descendant of David, the bring morning star.”*

God was our enemy. God was against us. We were earmarked for complete destruction. We were chosen by God before the foundation of the world, and yet God had turned against us, His own chosen people. How did this get fixed? The death of Jesus and His rising again has reconciled God to us and us to God.

Romans 5:10-11, *“...if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have now received reconciliation.”*

Total surrender.

We have to give up.

We have to turn ourselves over to Christ. To believe what God says, and do what God commands. By dying to ourselves, we live.

The clay has to be re-shaped.

The pot has to be smashed.

The old self has to die, to be reborn.

The choice of God is repeated by Jesus, when He taught in Matthew 7:13-14, *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*

Jesus also said in John 14:6, *“I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”*

In Luke 18:13, Jesus told about our proper approach to God is like the sinning tax collector, who *“standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”*

2.) We make it a priority to help hurting people with justice and with needs. We seek out the poor and satisfy the spiritual and material needs of the poor. We notice widows in our church, and we honor them as we honor our own mothers or sisters.

Our homes are places that welcome newcomers, strangers, internationals, and those who are homeless or hurting. This is what it means to die to ourselves and to live to God. We carry out justice. We make things right.

Luke 1:74-75, *“... (v.69) God has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David....that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.”*

3) Do not assume you are so secure with God that you can disobey.

People today think too much like King Zedekiah. Zedekiah thought that God exists to get us out of trouble, and to rescue us when the consequences of our sins get strong enough. Zedekiah thought he could ignore God his whole life, and still get saved at the last minute.

People assume that they can go on living more and more sinfully, that they can ignore God’s Word, and that they can pretend that their actions have no consequences. Church-going people assume that they can slide and backslide, and whenever they feel ready, that they can call on God and God, with all of His amazing power to work miracles, and God, with all of His well-known love for us church-going type of people, will do God’s job. And for them, God’s job is to make everything come out okay. Just listen to their prayers. Their prayers are that God will make everything come out okay.

When do they start to pray? When they realize that their sin is about to be exposed. Or, when their sin has brought hurt into their marriage, their extended family, their reputation, their job, or their church. All of the sudden, they will be

praying desperately, and wanting to know the direct phone number for the pastor, for him to pray also.

They are asking God to work a miracle on their behalf.

Here is the question of Jeremiah chapter 21, which is written by God Himself, you know – the One being asked to work a miracle?

The question of chapter 21 is this – why should God work a miracle on behalf of the disobedient and unrepentant?

Here is another question – hasn't God issued plenty of warnings?

Here is another question – when is it time to reap what we have sown?

Many people view God as the genie in the bottle. We rub the bottle, the genie appears, and we tell the genie what we want.

But Jeremiah 21, God says through Jeremiah to King Zedekiah, and to all of us, that God is not our personal genie in a bottle. God does not exist in order to grant all of our wishes. We are not the master of God. God is the master of us.

God is gracious.

God is patient.

But God is not to be mocked.

King Zedekiah led his people deeper and deeper into lives of sin, idolatry, and disrespect toward God and toward God's prophet Jeremiah.

Now King Zedekiah demanded that God pull him out of the fire.

The answer of God that God would not rescue, was not enough.

God also said that God would help Babylon to fight against Judah. Why?

Had King Zedekiah reached the breaking point of God? No.

God still had an offer of mercy to King Zedekiah. Even at that point, God told King Zedekiah that if he knelt before God, confessed his evil actions, and called upon God for mercy, that God would show mercy to him.

1 Peter 2:24, "*He [Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.*"