

Jerusalem's Fall

Devotional Reading: Lamentations 1:18–22

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

Today's Scripture: 2 Kings 24:18–20; 25:1–9

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

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. ^{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.**

18. The four kings who reigned over the final days of Judah were all young by today's standards when ascending to the throne: Jehoahaz (23), Jehoiakim (25), Jehoiachin (18), and Zedekiah (21).

We may be tempted to blame the sins of the kings on the impulsiveness of youth. 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).

19. The disheartening evaluation of having done *evil* or being wicked *in the eyes of the Lord* occurs about 50 times in the Old Testament. 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.

The scope of Zedekiah's sin is revealed in the phrase *just as Jehoiakim had done*. Similar copycat behavior is attributed to Jehoiakim himself as well as to Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin (2 Kings 23:37; 23:32; 24:9, respectively).

20a. 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.

But the biblical authors do not see the falls of the northern and southern kingdoms as inevitable results of rebellion against superior military powers. Instead, they attribute these falls to *the Lord's anger*. When God defends his people, they need no human allies. 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. God's covenant with Israel had conditions for Israel to meet; failure to

meet those conditions would result in promised consequences. For the residents of Judah, it is their violation of the covenant that results in God's wrath.

II. Another Reckless Rebellion 2 Kings 24:20b–25:5

^{20b} Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

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,

20b. 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). Rebellion had already been tried against Babylon a few years earlier, and it had failed (2 Kings 24:1). It would fail again.

25:1. The siege of Jerusalem likely began

on January 15, 588 BC, as the Babylonian king takes extreme action to squash the rebellion. 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, then wait until the defenders give up due to starvation.

2–3. A siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC had failed, 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. 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.

4. 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. 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. As the king and *the whole army* flee, they belatedly seem to realize that Jer-

emiah 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 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.

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

5. *The Babylonian army* knows what they're doing, and their pursuit of *the king* ends successfully *in the plains of Jericho*. More commonly, however, the area is known as "the plains of Moab" "by" or "across from Jericho" (Numbers 22:1). 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.

III. Another Evil King 2 Kings 25:6–9

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.**

6. *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.

7. The king exacts a vicious and gruesome price for Zedekiah's disloyalty. Such punishments were to serve as examples to others contemplating rebellion.

8. Our narrator now shifts from naming the year of Zedekiah's reign to naming that of the Babylonian 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. Having made an example of Zedekiah, the Babylonians now make an example of the entire city of Jerusalem. The prophets had predicted this outcome, and the speaker in Psalm 74:3–8 laments it.

Involvement Learning

Jerusalem's Fall

Into the Lesson

Write attributes of *justice* and *mercy*.

Justice: _____

Mercy: _____

Today's lesson will look at a terrible story describing how a king of Judah was violently removed from his home. We'll consider why this was an act of God's justice and why believers today can also see God's patient mercy.

Into the Word

Read 2 Kings 24:18–25:9 and complete the following closed-Bible pop quiz.

- 1–How old was Zedekiah when he began to reign?
A. 11; B. 12; C. 21
- 2–How long did Zedekiah's reign last?
A. 10 years; B. 11 years; C. 12 years
- 3–Which Babylonian king marched against Jerusalem?
A. Nebuchadnezzar; B. Nebuzaradan; C. Darius
- 4–Which of the following is said to have occurred on the "ninth day of the fourth month"?
A. plague; B. hailstorm; C. famine
- 5–Who was killed in front of Zedekiah?
A. his wife; B. his sons; C. his daughters
- 6–Who is said to have burned down the house of the Lord in Jerusalem?
A. Nebuchadnezzar; B. Nebuzaradan; C. Darius

How do the events in today's Scripture text reveal God's anger?

What was God's anger a response to?

How does today's text reveal God's patience and justice?

Key Verse

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

Into Life

Brainstorm how believers can reflect on God's patient mercy today, especially in the face of disobedience. Write your answers below:

Write one way you will reflect on God's mercy throughout the week.

Thought to Remember

God means what he says.