

Sermon 70, God's Project Fails, 2 Kings 23:31-25:26

Read Psalm 89

Proposition: The end of Judah shows us God's flair for the dramatic. God demonstrates His wrath against His people's sin. God will judge His people if they persist in wickedness

- I. God Judges Judah Completely
 - A. Her Kings
 - B. Her People
 - C. Her Temple
 - D. Her Empire, 24:7 with Genesis 15:18
- II. God Judges Judah Speedily
 - A. Four Kings
 - B. Twenty-Two Years
 - C. Three Deportations, 24:1, 14; 25:11
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- III. God Judges Judah Poetically
 - A. Jericho: The Place of Entry to the Land, 25:6
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 - C. Babylon: The Place of Abraham's Birth, 24:14-16
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our text tonight is devastating on many levels. Even today, through the cotton wool of historical distance, we still feel the impact of these blows, however muffled it might be. God's project of redemption went down in flames. His goal of having His people live in His presence on His Holy Mountain fell apart under the battering rams of Babylon. Even if God didn't fail, His people failed Him.

This book, like every portion of Scripture, was written to show us the character of our God. We see here that He is wrathful against us, His people, when we give ourselves over to our sin. What I hope to show you tonight is that God can and will judge His people. Though our text is long, I think it's important to cover it all in one session. Clearly we are hurtling onward through these final chapters. The end is inevitable, so we might as well get it over with. We will take the text rather topically, looking at four aspects of God's judgment.

I. God Judges Judah Completely

The first aspect of the judgment we see here, as Jerusalem is left nearly unpopulated and lying in ruins, is the *completeness* of God’s judgment. He has chastened His people before many times in the pages of Kings, but this chapter stands out for the finality and extent of the devastation. The monarchy is over. Judah will not rise from the ashes in any way for 70 years, and will not again be independently ruled for over 300 years. You see, when God determines to chastise His people, He chastens them *thoroughly* for their sin. He doesn’t leave some things out. He doesn’t administer lashes with a wet noodle. God’s chastening means something. If you come under His judgment, don’t expect that things will be just the same in minutes or hours.

A. Her Kings

First of all, perhaps the most obvious truth of these chapters is that God judges the rulers of His people. None of the four kings had what could be described as a pleasant, easy, or prosperous reign. All of them were aware that Babylon was devouring everything in its path, and they were not at all likely to be spared from its rampages. The chart below makes clear just how little time Judah had after the death of Josiah, and how comprehensive God’s judgment was, from the kings on down.

King	Father	Cause of Death	Favorable toward	Reign Length	Reign Dates
Jehoahaz ben	Josiah	Captivity in Egypt	Babylon	3 months	July-Oct. 609
Jehoiakim ben	Josiah	Old Age?	Egypt	11 years	Oct. 609-Dec. 598
Jehoiachin ben	Jehoiakim	Old Age	Babylon	3 months	Dec. 598-Apr. 597
Zedekiah ben	Josiah	Captivity in Babylon	Babylon	11 years	Apr. 597-Aug. 586

B. Her People

But God also judged the people. Many of them were killed. Many of the elites were exiled. The city ran out of food. Being a common person, someone on the low end of the social scale, didn’t spare you from this judgment. Again, God’s chastening of His people for their sin (and His punishing of those who don’t truly know Him) is impartial. When He makes up His mind to judge, He does so completely. He finishes His work.

C. Her Temple

And so, He also judged the temple. Despite His promises, despite the fact that it was His special house, the place where He had promised to dwell with His people, He abandoned it without a qualm and let the Babylonians burn it up and tear it down. Where was God’s holy presence that would have, all by itself, killed the entire Babylonian army if they tried to even touch the temple? It was gone. God had withdrawn. The one who smote Uzza for touching His ark went away and left the temple to the tender mercies of Nebuchadnezzar.

What? How? Why? Where? Surely His people must have been stunned! Even today, as we reread God's glorious promises, we have a hard time with this one. God said He would stay forever, but then He left. Brothers and sisters, He left because of His people's sin. He left because when He judges, He judges completely. His judgment does not spare certain prestigious institutions that are too big or important to fail. He is willing to take things to catastrophic conclusions if necessary.

I remember one of my mom's longtime friends filing for divorce a few years ago. She claimed that her husband just hadn't treated her well enough, and that she was finally sick and tired of it. The husband, meanwhile, was stunned. We asked him "Well, did you think your actions would never have consequences?" He said, "I never thought she would do this to me." He said it in a daze. That's where Judah was as they watched the temple burn. They never thought that God would do this to them. They thought that this "chosen people" thing meant that they were safe from this kind of pain and suffering! But it didn't. Instead, it meant the opposite: That precisely because God knew them and loved them He was going to chastise them for their sins, revealing to them His holy heart and powerful hatred for all forms of sin.

We so easily forget how offensive sin is; God sometimes has to use His megaphone of suffering to wake us up and remind us of sin's stench in His nostrils. The writer mourns over the loss of the temple, describing it again in loving detail even though he had already devoted several chapters to it at the beginning of the book. He loved the thought of God dwelling with His people, and sorrowed deeply, weeping by the rivers of Babylon, at the thought of everything that had once been used to worship Yahweh now being used merely to decorate the palace of the king of Babylon. Do you have this kind of deep-seated reverence for the things of God? Are you moved to praise God by the very chairs in our sanctuary in this nondescript little church building? Because the writer of Kings certainly was. He still believed in God's faithfulness, but he was absolutely crushed by the losses God inflicted on His people in judgment.

D. Her Empire, 24:7

Well, Judah also lost her empire. The kings, the people, and the religious establishment were judged. And so was her territory. Remember God's promise? Gen 15:18 records it. "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.'"

God's promise was taken away in so many words. From the brook of Egypt to the River Euphrates, a territory which God had promised to Abraham and which Solomon had actually ruled, the land was alienated. It belonged to Babylon.

So are God's promises untrustworthy? Why all this attention to the fact that God's promises to kings, people, temple, and land have all been reversed, undone? Because brothers and sisters, God is a God who judges completely. His people had given themselves over to sin for generation upon generation. They had done what He specifically had commanded them not to do. And He had therefore acted to chasten them. God's promise of life in the land was conditioned on obedience. They had disobeyed. And so they had forfeited life in the land.

If we disobey, will we be judged completely? The answer is undoubtedly “yes.” We cannot lose our salvation, but we can be chastened so completely as to lose virtually all comfort and joy in our salvation! We can also, of course, be externally among the people of God but be chastened even while the apostate mass around us is punished. God’s promises do not fail, but those externally numbered among His people do fail to appropriate them.

II. God Judges Judah Speedily

Yet in addition to the thoroughness of His judgment, God also judged Judah speedily. Our text highlights how quickly things went downhill after Josiah’s death. Indeed, we speed through these chapters quickly. They do not record triumph after triumph, as the chapters in the middle of the book on Elijah and Elisha do. They record disaster after disaster.

A. Four Kings

Thus, we have four kings, reigning in a 3-11, 3-11 pattern. Three of the kings are sons of Josiah; one of them, the three-month wonder Jehoiachin, is his grandson.

B. Twenty-Two Years

And thus, in a mere twenty-two years, judgment falls. Josiah’s fate prefigured the end that would fall on his nation.

C. Three Deportations, 24:1, 14; 25:11

Judah suffered three different deportations. In the days of Jehoiakim, Daniel and his friends were carried off. This was in 605 B.C. Then, in the days of Jehoiachin, in 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar carried away a huge chunk of Judah’s elite. This was the deportation in which Ezekiel was brought into exile. And finally, of course, when the city fell in 586 B.C., a few more elites and some lesser Judeans were carried away into exile. Judah, in other words, had lost all territorial integrity.

D. One Assassination, 25:25

This reality is only highlighted by the final episode of life in the land, where the Babylonian-appointed governor, seemingly a good man, is assassinated by some hothead. Judah, more obviously than ever, is completely and totally under Babylon’s control. Not even a puppet governor intervenes between Babylonian arms and the Promised Land.

And it all happened so fast! When God judged His people, He did so quickly. He took Judah from flourishing under Josiah to bleeding under Nebuchadnezzar in less than 25 years.

Do you fear His judgment? Are you afraid of offending Him? Do you tremble before God? Brothers and sisters, it is right to read this story with fear. God is a jealous God, and His anger can smoke not just against bad people out in the world but also against us, the self-identified “righteous,” the church people who believe strongly in our own uprightness. Yes, not all chastening is because we have sinned — but much of it is, as this chastening clearly was. Are you afraid of seeing this kind of thing happen to the American church? Do you repent for, mourn over, and pray about the sins of the church in our nation? Are you a sinner in Zion or a mourner in Zion?

Let me put it this way. When judgment comes, will you be the one responsible for it, or will you be the reason it's been delayed so long? Will you be a Manasseh or a Josiah?

But also, take comfort from the speed of God's judgment. He will not leave us in suspense a long time. He will not strike us in 300 years for our sins today. When the cup of iniquity is full, He acts quickly.

III. God Judges Judah Poetically

Not only is God's judgment speedy and complete; it is also poetic. Did you notice the three literary name-droppings that tie this, the end of Israel's recorded history in the land, back to three key places?

A. Jericho: The Place of Entry to the Land, 25:6

The first of these places is Jericho, the place where Israel entered the land way back in the book of Joshua, some 800 years previous to the events narrated in our passage. In 2 Kings 25, Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, is captured by Jericho. Things have come full circle. Jericho, the cursed place last mentioned in 1 Kings 16 as a town rebuilt in Ahab's time, is the place of Israel's final undoing. That's where Israel came in, and its ruins declared that it was only through God's saving power that His people could dwell in the promised land. Now, though, it is clear that the sin of God's people is more potent than the Exodus and the Levitical system. God brought them into the land, but the law of Moses was not enough to keep them there. Jericho had been rebuilt in Ahab's time, and Israel had been heading for destruction ever since.

B. Egypt: The Place of God's Redeeming Power, 25:26

Yet in addition, God's people didn't just return to Jericho. They returned to Egypt, the place of the Exodus, the place where God showed His redeeming power and outstretched arm, the place where their nationhood was forged. Jeremiah told them not to go, but they went anyway. Indeed, the main narrative of Kings ends with this trip. They went to Egypt, the land of slavery, because they were afraid of Babylon. God had warned in Deuteronomy that they would go back to Egypt, and that literally came to pass. God's people have willfully chosen Pharaoh's oppression once again.

C. Babylon: The Place of Abraham's Birth, 24:14-16

And, of course, the main villain throughout these narratives is Babylon itself. Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldeans. God called him out from there and promised to make him a nation from which all the families of the earth would be blessed. Yet here, at the end of that narrative, we have come full circle. Abraham's descendants, including the seed of David, are stuck in Babylon. There has been no progress. The nations of the earth are not blessed. Indeed, God's plan appears to have simply failed. They were called out of Babylon for a purpose, to be the answer to the spreading wickedness that had sought to get into God's presence by building the Tower of Babel. Yet when God had brought them into His presence through the Exodus and the Levitical system, it had proven inadequate to keep them there. They were exiled in the land of enmity, the place that symbolizes the world as anti-God system.

Give yourself to sin, in other words, and beware God's poetic justice! You will be chastened (if you are truly God's child), and that chastening might take the form of subjecting you to the world, to the slavery of sin symbolized by Egypt, and by an exile from the presence of God! All of us know what it's like to feel far from God — and it is truly possible to *be* far from God if you let yourself do whatever feels good rather than doing what is right.

These judgments have relevance to us as individuals, of course, but their major relevance is to us corporately. We as a church, we as the American church, we as the whole church, will be judged and chastened in this life. And the more thoroughly we choose sin, the more thoroughly we will be chastened.

It looked like Israel had failed to do everything that God wanted. They had not blessed the nations. And so God judged them.

IV. God Judges Judah Mercifully

Yet God also judged Judah mercifully. Though His wrath was speedy, complete, and perfectly adjusted to their sins, it was also merciful. This mercy is seen in three particular facets of the judgment recounted in this passage.

A. The Third and Fourth Generations

First, God delayed His judgment until the third and fourth generations of those who hated Him. Remember how we saw judgment begin with the first generation after Ahab? Athaliah and Jehoram were children of Ahab, and they were slaughtered. Though God had indeed promised that the judgment would not come in Ahab's day, it came within a few years of his death. But the judgment Manasseh brought did not come on the first generation (Amon), nor the second (Josiah). Instead, the iniquity of Manasseh was poured out in wrath on the third generation (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah) and the fourth generation (Jehoiachin). Even here, God shows more mercy to David's house than to Ahab's.

Do you remember how Solomon came to the throne determined that no bloodguilt would attach to the house of the David? That was at the beginning of the book. By the end of the book, bloodguilt in spades attaches to the house of David. Yet God is still merciful, delaying His wrath until the bitter end, sparing people until the third and fourth generations.

B. The High Priest's Line Spared, 25:18-21; 1 Chron. 6:14-15

God also spared the line of the high priest. Though Seraiah was indeed struck down at Riblah, his son survived and was taken into exile. Though much is taken, Judah still has a high priest!

C. The Royal Line Spared

And though the royal line has been frayed almost to breaking point, yet Jehoiachin lives. We will take up this point at greater length next week. But for now, remember that the Messianic promise endures. God has judged His people severely, but He has not cast them off altogether.

Brothers and sisters, even in His greatest wrath God remembers mercy. Do we need to fear His wrath? Absolutely. And yet even our fear of His wrath should not be nervous or slavish, but rather confident. You see, Christ suffered God's wrath in its fullness. The Levitical system was not enough to keep God's people in God's presence — but the life, ministry, death, and

resurrection of Jesus is enough. In the midst of judgment, the royal line was spared. And in the final judgment to come, Christ and those in Him will be spared. Prepare to be chastised; prepare for God's judgment by taking refuge in the One who endured it for you. Amen.