

Sermon 10, The City Against God's People: Babylon II, 2 Chronicles 36:11-23

We have here an account of the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans. Abraham, God's friend, was called out of that country, from Ur of the Chaldees, when God took him into covenant and communion with himself; and now his degenerate seed were carried into that country again, to signify that they had forfeited all that kindness wherewith they had been regarded for the father's sake, and the benefit of that covenant into which he was called; all was now undone again. — Matthew Henry, *in loc.*

The thing that ruined Zedekiah was not only that he turned not to the Lord God of Israel, but that he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart from turning to him, that is, he as obstinately resolved not to return to him, would not lay his neck under God's yoke nor his heart under the impressions of his word, and so, in effect, he would not be healed, he would not live. — *Ibid.*

"Israel's disobedience to God's charge aggravated by obedience of Cyrus, a heathen king."
— Wolfendale in *The Preacher's Homiletic Commentary*

Proposition: The OT ends with God's people back in Babylon, driven away from God's presence. Yet it looks forward to a rebuilt temple, where God will dwell with His people once more.

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Introduction

Brothers and sisters, we come today to the tenth sermon in our continuing look at The Bible's Big Picture. We have seen thus far God's faithfulness to the woman's seed, whom we have traced from the Garden to Abraham and then to God's bringing Abraham's descendants out of Egypt. We have also looked at the origins of Babylon, that great and wicked city which persecutes God's people in every age. We will see the destiny of Babylon in a few weeks, but for now, I want you to see what Babylon did to Jerusalem and ultimately to the people of God. This passage is about Babylon's invasion and destruction of Judah, the homeland of the woman's seed. Our expectation is that the woman's seed will be attacked, and that is fulfilled here. Babylon is the serpent's seed, trying to overcome God's people. But you will see that that's not where the book ends. Babylon conquered Jerusalem all right — but Babylon doesn't have the last word here.

That is all the more important because in the Jewish arrangement of what we call the OT books, 2 Chronicles is the last book in the Bible. That's right. The Bible that Jesus grew up reading didn't end with Revelation. It ended with the passage we just read. And though this passage describes the sins and downfall of Judah, it doesn't end there. It ends with an invitation to return to God's presence. How that invitation would be fulfilled forms the subject of the New Testament, and we will begin to look at it next week in our study of John 1:14. For now, what I hope to show you is that God's people were devastated by Babylon's invasion, and dragged out of God's presence. Yet the story ends on a note of hope, looking forward to the time when God will once more dwell with His people.

I. Elite Sins, vv. 11-14

Our account opens with the reign of Zedekiah, who ascended the throne in 597 B.C. He was the last king of Judah, and the son of the good king Josiah (about whom we will learn more in a few months in our evening sermons on 2 Kings). This final section of 2 Chronicles details the sinful aspects of his reign.

A. The King's Evil, vv. 11-13

First of all, he did evil in the sight of the Lord. That's a general summary of this man. Again, Biblically speaking, the measure of a leader (and of any person) is not the success or failure of his policies, but his obedience or lack thereof. In God's sight, character not only counts for something, but for everything.

Notice how this wicked character manifested itself. It showed itself first in his refusing to humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet. This means that he refused to listen to Jeremiah. Jeremiah said, “Surrender to the King of Babylon” and Zedekiah said “No.” Now, in God’s eyes this is not simply a policy disagreement within the Judean establishment. According to the Bible, you cannot sincerely and decently say “No” to God. The only way to tell God “No” is arrogantly. When God says to do something, your refusal is an act of overwhelming pride. For Zedekiah to listen to God’s word would have required that he humble himself and say, “Jeremiah, God’s right. I’m wrong. I’m sending that order to surrender to my field commanders right now.”

Do you listen to God’s messengers? Do you listen to your elders? To your parents? To what you read for yourself in God’s word? If I preach something that hits home to you, and you determine that you don’t like my message and you won’t change under any circumstances, then you are like Zedekiah, refusing to humble yourself before God. One message of this chapter is that if you don’t listen, God will escalate the situation until it becomes something you can’t ignore.

Notice, too, the description of Jeremiah’s prophetic activity. He spoke “from the mouth of God.” A word from a prophet is the same as a word from God’s own mouth. Jesus and Moses used this same phrase to describe Scripture. Do you recognize the Bible as containing God’s words? To say, “Well the Bible says this but I’m going to do the opposite” is to say, “I don’t care what God thinks.” And to say that, of course, can only be defined as arrogance.

Zedekiah demonstrated this arrogance even more clearly when he swore allegiance by God to Nebuchadnezzar, and then broke his oath. An oath is a request that God Himself bear witness and punish you if you’re lying. An oath is a means of making your bare statement more trustworthy by calling down God’s omnipotent curses on your head if you’re lying. And Zedekiah calmly did just that. He swore by God, and then casually broke his oath.

If you are married and you cheat on your spouse, then you’re guilty of breaking an oath. If you’re called to testify in court and you conceal some pertinent information, or give false information, then you are guilty of oath breaking. If you swore to become a member of this church and to support its worship and witness and study its purity and peace, and if you don’t do those things, then you are an oath-breaker like Zedekiah.

Yet the text also points out the solution to these sins. What should Zedekiah have done? He should have turned to Yahweh, God of Israel. He should have repented and sought God’s forgiveness. He not only failed to do so; he deliberately chose not to do it. He had the opportunity, and he hardened his heart against it.

You too will encounter this reality every day of your life. Whether you’re a believer or not, God is calling you, tugging at your heart, telling you to turn from your sins! How do you deal with that invitation? Do you accept it? Do you admit wrongdoing? Do you sincerely ask God to forgive your sin by Christ’s blood and empower you by His Spirit to obey more faithfully in the future? Or do you harden your heart and pretend like everything’s okay? Basically,

brothers and sisters, do you deal with your sin or do you ignore it? Do you harden your heart, or do you soften it? Zedekiah's choice was clear. He chose to harden his heart.

B. The Leaders' Transgressions, v. 14

Well, the attitude that's in the leader is going to be the attitude that's in the people. Such a statement is true more or less across the board. Fathers, if you wonder why your kids have a bad attitude, look in the mirror. Elders, if you wonder what's wrong with your flock, look in the mirror. Teachers, if you wonder what's wrong with your classrooms, look in the mirror.

Yes, I realize that that statement has to be qualified. Jesus is the leader of the church — and yet so often we as church people fail to have His attitude, don't we?

Nonetheless, in pre-exilic Judah, this statement was quite true. The leaders transgressed against God, just like King Zedekiah. Two sets of leaders are mentioned here, ecclesiastical and civil. The leaders of the priests led the priests to begin to act like pagan priests. The leaders of the people led the people to act like pagan people. Priests and people alike were engaging in the abominations of nations. What sort of abominations? Things like child sacrifice, or what we now call "abortion." Things like homosexual relationships. Things like devotion to the gods of convenience, pleasure, wealth, and power. That's what the nations have always worshipped. And now Judah was imitating them. Above all, God's people moved to defile His house. Remember the promise of Exodus 15, which we looked at two weeks ago — the promise that God would bring His people to dwell with Him? Remember last week, where we saw God moving in to live with His people? That was Israel's greatest privilege. That was their claim to fame. "God lives with us. We live in and around *the city of God!*" That's an amazing claim, and a stunning privilege. And how did late-monarchy-era Judah feel about it? Utterly blasé.

They were defiling God's house which He had made holy! They were taking the most holy thing on Earth and making it unholy, and they didn't give a blankety-blank. They didn't care that their activities were headed toward depriving them of the privilege of dwelling in God's presence. It didn't matter to them that they were making it impossible for Him to live with them.

II. God's Compassionate Warnings, v. 15

How did God respond to this state of affairs? First He warned, and then He judged. Notice the title the Chronicler uses: the warnings were sent from Yahweh, God of their fathers. The one in covenant with their ancestors, the God who saved and carried their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents is the same God who cared about each and every one of them! This is no fly-by-night God, some drive-by God who happens to walk in on a party and decides that He's going to smite these wicked people because they're having a good time without Him. No. He's a God who's known them and their families, who knows them in a deeply embedded social and relational way, who cared about their earliest ancestors, the founders of their nation, and the people who made their lives possible. Brothers and sisters, this is still the title of our God. Even if your parents lived and died as unbelievers, God has been the God of your spiritual ancestors — and likely of many of your physical ancestors as well. He was not about to let His people die unwarned and uncared for.

A. His Zeal, v. 15a

And thus, idiomatically the Chronicler tells us that God got up early in the morning to send messages to His people. He was so anxious, so zealous, so relentless in trying to get the message across that He, the unsleeping God, got up early to make more time for it. It was His top priority.

Can you worship a God like this? Do you see and rejoice in His zeal for His people? He loves to show His zealous desires for every one of us by sending us messages. These messengers were the prophets, who spoke and wrote pleading with Israel to return to God. Their messages are heartrending to this day! They spoke on God's behalf, showing how much He loves and cares for His people.

B. His Compassion, v. 15b

Indeed, His zeal reflects His compassion. He cared about two things: His people, and His dwelling place. Now, did God care about His dwelling place because He is short on vacation homes? Did He just happen to value Jerusalem a lot for its vibe? Not at all. Instead, He cared about His dwelling place because He cared about His people. He cared about the Temple because it was a visible signal that He lived in Israel, that He was and would be Immanuel!

God has compassion. He suffers with us, literally, in His Son.

Brothers and sisters, this is the God who brought up the Babylonians against Judah. This is the God who warned His people and had compassion on them. He is zealously compassionate for you this day. Turn to Him!

III. Popular Sins, v. 16a

But how did God's people respond? They mocked the the prophets, despised their message, and scoffed at the messengers. They laughed at God's serious word to them.

Do people do that today? Use King James English to make light of the Ten Commandments, for instance? You'd better believe it. Are we sometimes guilty of laughing off the word of God? Of course! If you hear or read something you don't like, and rather than truly trying to understand and submit to it you simply laugh at it, then you are guilty of exactly what's described here. Don't mock the word of God or the messengers of God. That means that you're not allowed to laugh at me, insofar as I am a bearer of the word of God. (Obviously, I am also a silly human being and well worth laughing at quite regularly. You know what I mean, I think: Insofar as I'm giving you the word of God, you may not laugh at it. That includes mocking the messenger to try to remove the power the word has over you!)

IV. God's Wrath Executed, vv. 16b-21

Well, the people mocked and mocked, and refused to listen, turn, or repent.

A. God's Patience Exhausted, v. 16b

So eventually, God acted. He still acted in compassion, still acted zealously, still did this because He cared about His people — but He did it. There had been a remedy. That remedy was called "repentance." But now, even that remedy was gone. The people were so far gone in sin that God's wrath had to be satisfied upon them.

This tells us that God is a wrathful God. He gets angry at sin, and He must and should get angry at sin. Sin is evil; sin hurts people; sin deprives God of His rightful glory, the glory which is fitting and necessary for Him. Some of you might be familiar with the Getty hymn which contains the lines,

Till on that cross as Jesus died

The wrath of God was satisfied!

The PCUSA wanted to include that hymn in its new hymnal a few years ago, but the denominational editors wanted to change the lines to

Till on that cross as Jesus died

The love of God was glorified!

Why the change? Because the editors did not believe that God is angry against sin! Yes, the cross glorified God's love. No question. But it equally satisfied God's wrath. God hates sin, and if you want proof, look at Calvary. See how sin pained and wracked Jesus Christ. That is how God hates sin, and when sin mounts to a certain point, God's patience is over. His wrath must and will be satisfied.

B. God's Wrath Inflicted by Babylon, vv. 17-20

In this case, He chose to use Babylon as His instrument. The king of the Chaldeans, Nebuchadnezzar, came up, besieged Jerusalem, and conquered it.

Remember Chaldea? It was the territory also known as Babylon. It was the city of the Ancient Near East which most clearly summed up the anti-God world system. God had scattered Babylon once, back in Genesis 11. That was the city against God. Here we see the city against God's people, right at the very end of the OT. In short, Babylon is important. Just as it appears at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, so it appears again at the end of it. Abraham was called out of Babylon; Israel was taken back to it. The entire sweep of 1500 years of redemptive history seems to have come to nothing. God's people cannot escape the power and allure of the corrupt world system. The story was God vs. Babylon, it looks as though Babylon might be winning this round. Look at all the things Babylon inflicts on Judah and Jerusalem!

1. Death, v. 17

The first thing mentioned is death. Babylon slaughtered God's people, paying no regard to age or sex. Yet this wasn't without God; it was from God. This was God's holy hatred of sin. God takes His glory seriously because His glory is the best thing there is, and He wants to protect it! Eventually, when His word has been despised long enough, death is the only fitting punishment.

2. Loss, v. 18

God also sent tremendous loss. The Babylonians took everything of value from everyone who had anything. This material they carried back to Babylon. As Matthew Henry pointed out, it is sin that destroys wealth. So if you want to be prosperous, nip sin in the bud because sin is the thing that destroys your prosperity!

3. Defilement, v. 17

Notice how the Temple is mentioned three verses in a row. It was defiled by the Babylonians; they murdered people inside it. It was plundered by the Babylonians; they took everything of value out of it.

4. Banishment from God's Presence, v. 19

Finally, it was destroyed by the Babylonians. They burned it along with most of the nice parts of the city. They also broke down the wall that protected the city, as if to say, "This city will never stand up to us again!" In fact, the city would not again be ruled independently by the Jews for centuries. The destruction of the Temple especially was God's way of saying, "I am no longer dwelling among you. I will no longer be God to you. Your greatest privilege has been revoked!"

This was a right and fitting punishment for God's people because they hadn't cared about the privilege of being His people. They didn't want to live with Him, and so He abandoned them.

5. Banishment from God's Land, v. 20

Not only that, but they were carried away from their homeland. Can you imagine being uprooted from the USA and forcibly transported to China? That was the reality that these people faced. They lost at a single blow their country, their homes, and their faith.

Brothers and sisters, this is the result of sin. Keep indulging in it, and it will cost you (and God's church) everything. In the final analysis, the greatest cost will be the loss of God's favorable presence. You will be truly alone in the universe, left to your own devices and your own emptiness for eternity.

C. God's Faithfulness Demonstrated, v. 21

Yet the book doesn't end with verse 20 (which itself hints that exile was temporary, not permanent). Instead, it continues with three verses describing God's faithfulness.

1. To His Land

He is faithful to His land. He had promised that the land would get to rest, and He had promised that the exile would be 70 years long. God cares even about His land. He knows that the Earth suffers because of our sin, and He has compassion even on the earth. How much more, then, does He have compassion on human beings! If you can trust God to care about the dirt, can't you trust to Him to care for you, you creature of dust?

2. To His Word

Secondly, though, God is faithful to His word. His word to Moses and Jeremiah would certainly be fulfilled.

Lev 26:34 Then the land will enjoy its sabbaths all the days of the desolation, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths.

You see, God had commanded His people to let the land have a rest every seventh year. Don't exhaust the land; give it a break. This was the same principle as the weekly sabbath. It was a reminder that God provides, that we don't have to work all the time. We need to stop and spend time with Him to be refreshed, and in the same way, He has made the land to "take a break" one

year out of seven. That was not always observed in Israel, though, and the land got behind on its Sabbaths.

The prophet Jeremiah also proclaimed truth about the coming exile before it happened.

Jer 29:10 "For thus says the LORD, When seventy years have been completed for

Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.

These are God's words of promise, and He was as good as His word. He always is! The Chronicler is emphasizing that when we are faithless, God remains faithful. When we sin, He doesn't change. He cannot deny Himself.

Can you trust this faithful God?

V. God's Royal Invitation to Return to His Presence, vv. 22-23

But Chronicles ends on a yet more positive note. Though we have seen all the sin and all the wickedness that accumulated among His people, God was not finished with them. The OT doesn't say, 'Well, that was that. Babylon won. Yahweh lost. Game over.' Not at all. Babylon was raised up by Yahweh to bring Yahweh's plans to pass. And those plans involved inviting and calling His people back into His presence.

A. God Keeps His Word, v. 22

He was as good as His word, stirring up Cyrus to proclaim the opportunity to return to God's presence. This was written down and cried out publicly in the town squares across the empire. Heralds literally went forth to declare this announcement that Yahweh, the God of Heaven, was inviting His people back into His presence. They did this in a pagan empire on the king's orders! Why? Because God had promised it, and because He delights to share those promises with everyone who wants to accept them.

B. God Calls His People Back, v. 23

But secondly, God called His people back to Himself. Notice how the Temple and the land are the center of attention here. God will come back to dwell in the midst of His people. He will give them the Promised Land once more.

Ezra and Nehemiah relate what a disappointment that return was. Isaiah had spoken of the trees clapping their hands and the mountains breaking out in song. But those two books make it clear that such prophecies were not exactly fulfilled. That's why the Jewish OT ends with this book, then, and not those books. This book makes clear that the return under Ezra and Nehemiah wasn't the final fulfillment of this invitation and those prophecies. From the beginning of Israel's national existence, as we've seen, the true goal was Heaven, the non-man-made dwelling place of Jehovah. That's what Exodus 15 tells us. The earthly Tabernacle and Temple were really places where God dwelt, but at the same time, they were symbols pointing to the day when God would truly dwell with His people. That day came in Jesus Christ, came in even greater fullness with the descent of the Holy Spirit, and will come in the greatest fullness of all at the Second Coming of Jesus. We'll look at that in weeks to come. For now, recognize that though Babylon seemingly triumphed, it was really God who triumphed. He judged His people for their sins, but in the midst of it, He showed them His faithfulness and left them for four hundred years of

silence with the message that He would once more make a way, a new and better way, into His glorious presence. Seek that way; walk in it. Amen.