

This summer we mourned the death of elder Rolf Caylor.

Death is no fun.

In some ways the human body is delicate and fragile –
but when it comes to relinquishing life,
we are amazingly resilient and stubborn.

But exile is worse than death.

Think back to Abraham.

When Sarah dies, Abraham wants to buy a burial plot for her.

In Genesis 23, Abraham goes to the Hittites and asks for a burying place.

They offer to let him bury his dead in their tombs.

Abraham refuses.

Now, you need to understand ancient near eastern burial practices.

They would have an underground vault or cave,
with stone platforms where they would put the deceased.

When the body had rotted away, they would push the bones off the platform,
so that the bones of many generations would pile up in the tomb.

Abraham does not want the bones of his wife

to mingle with the bones of those who are under God’s curse.

Abraham lived in the land – but the Promised Land was not yet what it should be.

He lived as a sojourner and a foreigner in the land of Promise.

But Abraham was not in exile!

Abraham lived in the Land of Promise – awaiting the fulfillment of what God had said.

Now, more than a thousand years later, his descendents would be exiled from the land –
banished by God for their sins!

So far in Jeremiah we have heard a lot of sermonic material –

but we haven’t been told much about *when* it was delivered.

In chapter 1 we heard that Jeremiah preached over a thirty year period.

In chapter 3 we heard that Jeremiah preached “in the days of King Josiah.”

There are several references to undated events in chapters 11, 14, 17, and 19.

But here in chapter 21 we have the first clear reference to a particular datable event –
the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

Introduction: A Fate Worse Than Death – the Sons of Josiah

Josiah reigned from 640-609 BC.

He died in battle against Egypt.

Then his son, Jehoahaz (also called Shallum), reigned for three months in 609
before Pharaoh Necho II took him captive

and replaced him with his brother, Jehoiakim
(who was more friendly to Egypt).
Jehoiakim reigned for 11 years (609-598),
vacillating between allegiance to Egypt and allegiance to Babylon.
He died during Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem in 598 BC,
and was replaced by his son, Coniah (or Jeconiah or Jehoiachin).

Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, reigned for three months.
Finally, Jeconiah surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar in early 597 BC
and he and the elite of Jerusalem were taken into captivity
(Ezekiel the prophet was one of the exiles at this time).

Nebuchadnezzar took Jeconiah back to Babylon and installed his uncle Zedekiah,
the last remaining son of Josiah, as king in place of his nephew.

It appears from the text that chapters 21-22 were spoken at different times.
Jeremiah 21:1 tells us that this is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD
when King Zedekiah sent messengers to him as Nebuchadnezzar invaded (587),
but Jeremiah 22:18 speaks of Jehoiakim as though he was still alive
(he died eleven years earlier in 598).

But the whole passage fits together as an indictment of the sons of Josiah,
showing us how much we need Jesus – a king who will do justice!
We will hear later in Jeremiah about the *response* to Jeremiah's preaching here –
but for now, Jeremiah just gives us the message.

1. The Way of Life Is Surrender (21:1-14)

The Inquiry: Will the LORD Save Us with His Wonderful Deeds? (v1-2)

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, ² "Inquire of the LORD for us, for Nebuchadnezzar^{al} 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."

The messengers had asked Jeremiah to inquire of the LORD.

Would the LORD do for Zedekiah what he had done for Hezekiah a century ago?
Would the LORD make Nebuchadnezzar withdraw?

The false prophets of Jeremiah's day would all have been anticipating Paul's great line:
"if God is for us, who can be against us?!"

But Jeremiah has a different calling than Isaiah!

There is no more time.
There will be no delay.
The LORD will fight against Zedekiah!

a. The Answer of the LORD to Zedekiah: I Will Fight Against You (v3-7)

³ Then Jeremiah said to them: “Thus you shall say to Zedekiah, ⁴ ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of this city. ⁵ I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. ⁶ And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence.

God had brought Israel out of Egypt “with an outstretched hand and a strong arm.”
But now the mighty hand of God will be turned against his people.
The great pestilence that had struck the Assyrians in the days of Hezekiah
will now strike Jerusalem.

It is true: if God is for us, who can be against us?!
But it is also true: if God is against us – we’re just dead.

And afterward...

⁷ Afterward, declares the LORD, I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion.’

It sounds pretty much hopeless!

But the LORD gives to the people of Jerusalem *one glimmer of hope*:

b. The Answer of the LORD to This People: Surrender and You Shall Live (v8-10)

⁸ “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. ⁹ He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, but he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have his life as a prize of war.

Jeremiah uses the language of Deuteronomy 30 – the way of life and the way of death.

But everything has been turned on its head!

In Isaiah’s day the way of life was to *withstand* the siege of the Assyrians.

The way of death was to ally with foreign powers.

Hezekiah was told *not* to surrender.

But the LORD has abandoned Jerusalem:

¹⁰ For I have set my face against this city for harm [literally, “for evil”] and not for good, declares the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.’

Jerusalem is no longer the city of God.

Jeremiah wants you to understand that *no earthly city* can protect you!

Even the city that God himself chose to be his dwelling place!

Now, many would have replied to Jeremiah –

“But Jeremiah, God *promised!*”

He said that he would bless Jerusalem – the city where his name dwells!

He said that he would bless the house of David *forever!*”

And so in verse 11 the LORD explains *why* he has turned away from the house of David:

c. The Answer of the LORD to the House of David: Execute Justice in the Morning – Because I Will Judge You According to Your Deeds (v11-14)

¹¹ “And to the house of the king of Judah say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, ¹² O house of David!

Thus says the LORD:

“Execute justice in the morning,
and deliver from the hand of the oppressor
him who has been robbed,
lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it,
because of your evil deeds.’”

Jeremiah is not saying that the house of David can escape the coming judgment.

Jeremiah is saying that the house of David *could have escaped* the coming judgment.

Jeremiah is reminding Jerusalem that the covenant with David had *conditions*.

Yes, God promised that he would bless the house of David forever –

but he also said *if* the sons of David rebelled against him,

then he would cut them off from his presence.

And so in verses 13-14, the LORD says that he will judge his people

“according to the fruit of your deeds.”

¹³ “Behold, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley,
O rock of the plain,
declares the LORD;

you who say, ‘Who shall come down against us,
or who shall enter our habitations?’

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.”

The fire of God’s wrath will devour the city of Jerusalem
because the house of David has *not* done justice.

This sets up chapter 22.

We need a king of the House of David who will do justice.

Because God *did* promise to bless the house of David forever.

Therefore we need such a king!

2. But You Need a King Who Does Justice and Righteousness (22:1-30)

a. Do Justice and Righteousness – Then the Throne of David Will Endure (22:1-5)

22 Thus says the LORD: “Go down to the house of the king of Judah and speak there this word,² and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates.’³ Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.⁴ For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people.

Remember that King Zedekiah is the last king of Judah.

His name means “the LORD our righteousness”!

O Zedekiah – do *zedekah*!

Do righteousness!

Elsewhere the focus is on idolatry.

But here the focus is *entirely* on how the house of David has treated the helpless.

If the king who sits on the throne of David does justice and righteousness
then the kingdom of God will endure.

You often see this language of “justice and righteousness” in the scriptures.

Righteousness and justice can be used as synonyms,

but when they are paired like this, there is generally a distinction:

righteousness has to do with how you organize your society,
justice has to do with particular decisions.

A king who does righteousness is one who organizes his realm in a “right” manner.

A father who does righteousness is a father whose government of his children
is characterized by “right-ness.”

How do you organize your community?

Is it characterized by love for God and neighbor?

Because that is what a righteous community will look like.

Justice has to do with particular decisions.

(That’s why it said “execute justice in the morning” –

it’s referring to a particular case – delivering the one who had been robbed
from the hand of his oppressor).

As we complete the ordination of our new deacons this evening

we are reminded that God will judge us based on how we treat the helpless –
how we treat those who have *no one* else to help them.

The deacons will be calling on you in future weeks and months to help those in need –

to rescue those who are helpless and protect them from those who would oppress them.

And as you look around your neighborhood – your community –
let us know if there are places where we can work together
to show the mercy of Christ to those around us.

How do we organize our community to be a place where righteousness flourishes?

And while we are working on that –
we should not hesitate to *do justice* day by day.
Just because we don't have all the principles fully implemented
does not mean that we have to wait on the details!

What does it mean *this week* to *do justice* in your home, your neighborhood,
your workplace?

It can be as simple as showing love to a new neighbor down the street –
showing hospitality to a stranger.

Do not assume that “someone else” will take care of them!
If you hear of a situation where someone has been treated unjustly,
King Jesus calls us to become their advocate.

Think of the Good Samaritan who became the advocate for the helpless Jew:
he was in Jewish territory – a stranger in hostile territory –
it would be like if a white man was driving through a black neighborhood
and he saw a black man lying by the side of the road.
It would be easy to say “someone from around here will surely help...”

I don't know the culture.
He's got legal problems – and I'm not a lawyer...

But who will be their advocate?
Maybe you don't know how to help –
but you may have connections to someone who does.
If we are seeking first the kingdom of God and *his righteousness*
then we must be characterized
by the righteousness that Jesus has taught us.

How do we make disciples?
By baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
and *teaching them to observe* all that Jesus has commanded.

Listen to verse 5:

⁵ *But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.*

Without justice, without righteousness, you are not part of the kingdom of God!

b. The King Will Return No More to See His Native Land (22:6-10)

In verses 6-7 God says that he will bring destruction on the house of the king of Judah.

i) I Will Bring Destruction (cedars and Lebanon) (v6-7)

⁶ *For thus says the LORD concerning the house of the king of Judah:*

*“You are like Gilead to me,
like the summit of Lebanon,
yet surely I will make you a desert,
an uninhabited city.”^[b]*

⁷ *I will prepare destroyers against you,
each with his weapons,
and they shall cut down your choicest cedars
and cast them into the fire.*

God had said to David “I will build your house.”

But God had also warned David that if his sons forsook his covenant
then God would judge them.

ii) Because They Have Forsaken the Covenant of the LORD (v8-9)

⁸ *“And many nations will pass by this city, and every man will say to his neighbor, “Why has the LORD dealt thus with this great city?”*

And in verses 8-9 God calls the nations to witness.

Why has the LORD done this to Jerusalem?

⁹ *And they will answer, “Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God and worshiped other gods and served them.””*

Notice here that Jeremiah brings back idolatry as the *root cause* of Jerusalem’s fall.

Think of modern liberal churches – whether Protestant or Catholic.

In some ways they care for the poor better than we do (to our shame!).

But they have set aside the deity of Christ – the resurrection of the body –
to the point that some have rejected the Triune God

and now baptize “in the name of the mother, of the daughter, and of the womb.”

Truly they worship other gods and serve them.

And with the corruption of worship – with idolatry –

inevitably comes the corruption of righteousness and justice.

The same liberal churches will encourage abortion –
oppressing the helpless –

and now embrace same sex marriage.

But think about what this means:

if we see among ourselves a failure to do righteousness and justice,
that means that *we also* have a problem with idolatry!

We are loving something more than we love the LORD our God.

We love our comfort – our stuff.
It is uncomfortable to do justice.
It may cost us – no, it *will* cost us – to establish righteousness in our community.

Our comfort and our convenience has become our god.
And if we do not put away our idols and follow Jesus,
then it will destroy us.

Verse 10 is *crucial* for understanding what God is saying to us:

iii) Exile: A Fate Worse Than Death (v10)

¹⁰ *Weep not for him who is dead,
nor grieve for him,
but weep bitterly for him who goes away,
for he shall return no more
to see his native land.*

This is not talking about some generic “him.”
This is talking about the Son of David.
Josiah, the good king, had died a few years before,
and his son Shallum (also called Jehoahaz) reigned in his place.
But Pharaoh did not like Shallum,
and so he carried him away captive to Egypt.

Look at verse 11 – (read)

c. The King Will Die in Exile (v11-12)

¹¹ *For thus says the LORD concerning Shallum the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who reigned instead of Josiah his father, and who went away from this place: “He shall return here no more,
¹² but in the place where they have carried him captive, there shall he die, and he shall never see this land again.”*

Shallum may well have still been alive in Egypt.
But Jeremiah tells his brother, Zedekiah, that Shallum is not coming back.
Do not weep for the dead.
There is more hope for the dead than for the exile!

The heart of our passage tonight is found in verses 13-17.
What makes a king?
What sort of king do we need?
We need a king who does righteousness!

d. What Makes a King? Righteousness (v13-17)

¹³ *“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice,*

*who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing
and does not give him his wages,
14 who says, 'I will build myself a great house
with spacious upper rooms,'
who cuts out windows for it,
paneling it with cedar
and painting it with vermilion.*

Verses 13-14 open with a woe against the unrighteous sons of Josiah.
You think that you are a king because you have power and wealth.
That is not what makes a king in *my* kingdom! (read v15-16)

*15 Do you think you are a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
16 He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me?
declares the LORD.*

Josiah was a king!
Your father did justice and righteousness!
Your father judged the cause of the poor and needy!

“Then it was well!”
Is not this to know me? declares the LORD.

Notice that Jeremiah does not say that if you know me, then you will do justice.
Rather, doing justice *is* knowing God.
You do not come to know God through *study*.
You come to know God through *obedience*.

I want you to think about that.
I recently heard a friend say that Bible study wasn't drawing him near to God.
That's not surprising!
We do not study our Bibles in order to draw near to God.
We study our Bibles so that we might know
what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us.
It certainly helps to know these things!
But we only *know God* through believing and doing what he says.
Until the printing press, generations of Christians did not have access to Bibles.
But they often knew God better than we do!
How?
Because they heard *enough* in the public reading and preaching of the Word

to know what to believe and what to do.
It is *wonderful* that you can all have your own Bible.
I highly recommend that you read it daily.
It's a great privilege!
But nowhere in Scripture are you commanded to read your Bible every day.

Jeremiah says that the way you know God is by doing justice and righteousness,
and judging the cause of the poor and needy.

Now, children, this includes you!
How do you judge the cause of the poor and needy?
When you see another child being bullied or mistreated –
you can stand up for them!
You can say, “No, that’s wrong – stop it!”
All of you can do justice – and stand up for the poor and needy.

Indeed, we see this most beautifully in Jesus the faithful Son of David who *knew* the Father.
His righteousness was expressed in how he cared for the poor and needy –
and how he laid down his life to save us –
who could not possibly have saved ourselves!

As Paul says, “have this same mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.”

The righteousness of the kingdom of Jesus
is a righteousness that does not concern itself with personal gain.

“Let each of you look not to his own interests – but rather to the interests of others.”

¹⁷ *But you have eyes and heart
only for your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression and violence.”*

Now, remember, who is the “you” here?
Look at verse 18:

c'. The King Will Die in Exile (v18-19)

¹⁸ *Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah:*

*“They shall not lament for him, saying,
‘Ah, my brother!’ or ‘Ah, sister!’
They shall not lament for him, saying,
‘Ah, lord!’ or ‘Ah, his majesty!’
¹⁹ With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried,
dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem.”*

There is nothing worse than having no one to lament your death.
When Rolf died, those who knew him all showed up –
his family came from all over the Midwest –
old friends came to pay their respects.
Rolf Caylor may have been a lifelong bachelor –
but his name will be remembered!

Jehoiakim was king.
He was of the house of David – a son of the great king Josiah!
He reigned for 11 years – from 609 to 598 BC.
Surely *someone* would lament his death?!

Jehoiakim died during the siege of 598 BC.
We’ll hear in a few chapters (ch 36)
that Jehoiakim listened to the book of Jeremiah’s prophecies
and as they were read, he cut off the part of the scroll that had been read
and threw it in the fire!

A king who is characterized by injustice will not be lamented.
And so he will be dragged out of the city and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

b'. You and Your Mother Will Not Return to the Land (v20-27)

And then in verses 20-27, the LORD speaks to Jerusalem
(the “you” is a *feminine* second person singular).

i) You Refused to Listen to Me (v20-21)

²⁰ *“Go up to Lebanon, and cry out,
and lift up your voice in Bashan;
cry out from Abarim,
for all your lovers are destroyed.
²¹ I spoke to you in your prosperity,
but you said, ‘I will not listen.’
This has been your way from your youth,
that you have not obeyed my voice.*

Jerusalem has not listened to the LORD.

ii) So You Will Ashamed and Confounded: Cedars and Lebanon (v22-23)

²² *The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds,
and your lovers shall go into captivity;
then you will be ashamed and confounded
because of all your evil.*

²³ *O inhabitant of Lebanon,
nested among the cedars,
how you will be pitied when pangs come upon you,
pain as of a woman in labor!”*

Jerusalem had been glorified with cedars from Lebanon –
but now Jerusalem has chased after many lovers – foreign gods who cannot save.
Lebanon is a fitting image for this:
after all, the royal house of Lebanon was the king of Tyre –
Jezebel was a princess from that house – and she had led Ahab astray.

The royal family in Jerusalem had shifted back and forth
in their alliances with Egypt and Babylon –
and so they would be put to shame.

iii) Exile: There You Shall Die (v24-27)

Then in verse 24 it shifts back to the masculine second person singular.

²⁴ *“As I live, declares the LORD, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off²⁵ and give you into the hand of those who seek your life, into the hand of those of whom you are afraid, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of the Chaldeans. ²⁶ I will hurl you and the mother who bore you into another country, where you were not born, and there you shall die. ²⁷ But to the land to which they will long to return, there they shall not return.”*

The son of David was supposed to be a signet ring on God’s right hand.
The king wore a ring that he would use to stamp a document as authentic.
If it has the king’s stamp, then you know that it is the king’s decree.
But God says that Coniah is a worthless signet ring.
Coniah keeps stamping decrees that are *not* from the LORD!
He does not do justice and righteousness in Jerusalem.
And so God will hurl Coniah into Babylon – together with his mother!

The queen mother is brought into the story in verse 26
because the queen mother was often a key player in forming alliances.
God had promised that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head –
but when the queen mother leads her son astray,
she, too, will go into exile and die there.

And the LORD concludes by warning the Land of Israel:

a'. None of His Offspring Shall Sit on the Throne of David (v28-30)

²⁸ *Is this man Coniah a despised, broken pot,
a vessel no one cares for?*

*Why are he and his children hurled and cast
into a land that they do not know?*

²⁹ *O land, land, land,
hear the word of the LORD!*

³⁰ *Thus says the LORD:*

*“Write this man down as childless,
a man who shall not succeed in his days,
for none of his offspring shall succeed
in sitting on the throne of David
and ruling again in Judah.”*

Coniah (or Jehoiachin) had children –
but he might as well be childless,
because his sons would never sit on the throne of David.

Our Lord Jesus was descended from *David*,
but not through Jehoiachin.

Exile is a fate worse than death:
the one who is cast out of the land into Exile dies to return no more,
but the one who dies in the land may be raised from the dead and return to the land!

Our Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God
on the throne of his father David.

And he has established justice and righteousness.

Doesn't this explain so much of what we see in the gospels?
Why does Jesus heal the sick? cast out demons?
Why does Jesus tell us to *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?*

Because Jesus has come as the Son of David
who will become all that the house of David had failed to be!

And because Jesus is all that the house of David failed to be
(and all that Israel failed to be – and all that Adam failed to be!)
therefore those who believe in Jesus are justified in him –
and as the justified community – as the righteous people of God –
we must now exhibit that righteousness to the watching world.