

Practice Justice

Alexis sat trembling in the lounge outside the suite of the School of Business. She was petrified. She did not know what kind of penalty she would have to pay for her part in the wrongdoing. Because Alexis hated her classmate, she had done her harm. Christian, as her name said, was a Christian. She was beautiful, smart, and had a good personality. Alexis was a Christian, too. Why didn't Alexis have popularity and good fortune?

Alexis's good friend, DeShondra, felt the same way about Christian. The three women were currently in the same business class. Alexis and DeShondra agreed that Christian needed to be taken down a notch.

DeShondra had obtained access to one of Christian's reports that was assigned. DeShondra convinced Alexis to confirm that Christian had stolen her work. The two women went to the professor and accused Christian of lifting DeShondra's work, which Alexis witnessed DeShondra doing. After meeting with all three women, the professor decided to give both Christian and DeShondra a failing grade on the paper.

"I don't care," DeShondra had said. "She's not so perfect now, is she?"

The Lord's discipline of Alexis had been intense and relentless. Alexis subsequently emailed the professor and requested a meeting. She had to tell the truth.

Alexis looked at the time on her cell phone. It was five minutes before her appointment. She stood up and slowly walked toward the suite doors.

1. How important is it to follow the laws of God? Explain your answer.

2. How would you describe God's judgment?

3. Can a place or people escape God's judgment? Explain your answer.

Surrender, and Survive

Jeremiah 21:8-10, KJV

8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

9 He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

Jeremiah 21:8-10, NIV

⁸“Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. ⁹Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives. ¹⁰I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.’ ”

Jeremiah began prophesying about halfway through the reign of good King Josiah (640–609 B.C.) and continued to prophesy to the last four kings of Judah—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Zedekiah refused to pay tribute to the Babylonians, who had put him on the throne, so now the Babylonians had invaded the country. Zedekiah sent two envoys, Pashhur and the priest Zephaniah, to Jeremiah to ask the Lord’s counsel, and the prophet’s initial response to the king’s request was a grim one: God “will strike down those who live in this city—both man and beast—and they will die of a terrible plague. . . . [God] will give Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive the plague, sword and famine, into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who want to kill them . . . ; he will show them no mercy or pity or compassion” (Jer. 21:6-7). God said that He would judge Judah’s many sins, and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would be His instrument of judgment.

However, the people of Judah had a way out. Verse 8 says Jeremiah told Pashhur and Zephaniah to address the “people” of Judah—not Zedekiah or his officials—and tell them that God

offered an alternative, a way to choose between “the way of life and the way of death.” Jeremiah’s words echoed Moses’ words to Israel in Deuteronomy 30:15-20; although the people have wandered far from God, He still offered His promise of life, if they would only listen.

The judgment upon “this city” of Jerusalem was unavoidable; however, “whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians . . . will escape with their lives” (vs. 9). God offered deliverance, even though it was not in the way the people desired. Following God would mean allowing themselves to be conquered; nonetheless, if they chose to obey God and surrender their lives, they would live. Jeremiah’s words no doubt seemed treasonous to his listeners—and he was in fact later imprisoned for them—but they were God’s words to His people.

God continued to pronounce judgment in verse 10: “I have determined to do this city harm and not good. . . . It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.” Because the people had not practiced justice nor judged themselves, God would judge them, and His destruction of the city would be absolute. The people could surrender or burn with the rest of the city.

4. *How does God, through Jeremiah, respond to King Zedekiah’s request for help?*

5. *What choice does God give the people of Judah?*

6. *What more does God say about the destruction of Jerusalem in verse 10?*

A Choice: Justice or Judgment

Jeremiah 21:11-14, KJV

11 And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the LORD;

12 O house of David, thus saith the LORD; Execute judgment in the morning,

Jeremiah 21:11-14, NIV

¹¹Moreover, say to the royal house of Judah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD.

¹²This is what the LORD says to you, house of David:

“Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor

KJV

and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

13 Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the LORD; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?

14 But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the LORD: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.

NIV

the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire

because of the evil you have done—

burn with no one to quench it.

¹³I am against you, Jerusalem, you who live above this valley on the rocky plateau, declares the LORD—

you who say, 'Who can come against us?

Who can enter our refuge?'

¹⁴I will punish you as your deeds deserve, declares the LORD.

I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you.' "

Even after pronouncing the impending destruction of Jerusalem, God gave the leaders of the "royal house of Judah" (Jer. 21:11) one more chance to change their ways: "Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed" (vs. 12). This call to practice justice "every morning" was not about a time of day but about urgency—justice was to be carried out right away, at the time it was required. One of the basic functions of any government is to administer justice, and to protect those who cannot protect themselves. It is clear that Zedekiah and the other members of the royal house had not done this.

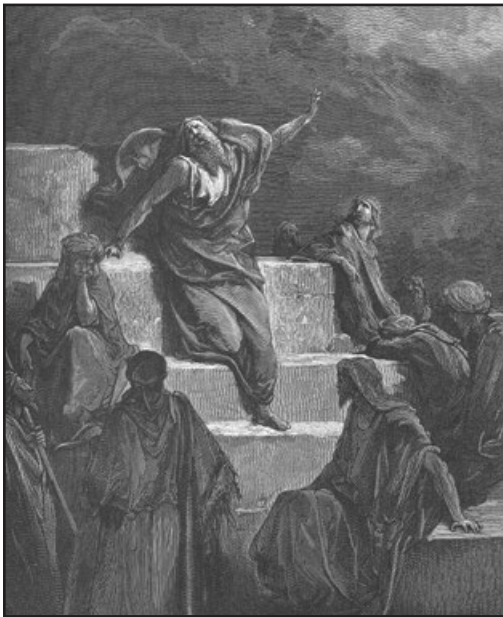
Because of the shred of hope still present at the beginning in verse 12, some commentators believe this section of Jeremiah took place at an earlier time. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to believe that God would offer Zedekiah and the people one last opportunity to repent, even in the face of impending judgment. Although God's words would almost certainly continue to be disregarded, there was still a chance to turn back, even now.

In either case, the rest of verse 12 (and rest of the chapter)

returned to describing the Lord’s judgment if His words remained unheeded. God’s “wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it.” God declared that He was “against . . . Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem had a seemingly impregnable location “above this valley on the rocky plateau.” Surrounded by valleys on three sides, only the north side of the plateau was vulnerable. Therefore, they could arrogantly assert, “Who can come against us? Who can enter our refuge?” (vs. 13). However, God would exact judgment upon them. Their identity as the city where His house was would not protect them; no miraculous deliverance was coming. Centuries before, the Lord had saved the city from the seemingly invincible Assyrian army when Hezekiah prayed for the city’s deliverance (2 Kings 19). This time, Zedekiah and his royal court were neither repenting nor praying for the city. In verse 14, God once more made clear that Jerusalem’s destruction was a punishment, “as your deeds deserve”; and

once more, God called up the image of consuming fire: “I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you.”



The prophet Jeremiah warns the people that Jerusalem will be destroyed in this engraving by Gustave Dore, published in 1866.

7. What did God call the “royal house of Judah” (vs. 11) to do?

8. What other attitudes did God speak against, especially in verse 13?

9. What were the consequences if Zedekiah and the people of Judah continued to disobey God?

A Great Lesson

It was a cold winter morning in Chicago. It was so cold that Doniece thought if she spoke words they might freeze in midair before anyone could hear them. Instead Doniece thought, *I'm going to be late yet again for work and I am already on probation due to tardiness.* The temperature was 20 degrees below zero, and the streets were slick. Doniece thought if she tried to drive faster it could be a life or death situation. She thought if she called her supervisor and told him her situation, it would be fruitless because he had zero tolerance for tardiness. She could hear Mr. Briggs's voice in her head: "Doniece, if you knew the roads were slippery, you should have left much earlier!"

Doniece's good friend and co-worker Linda, the receptionist, was already at work and could sign her in. Although this was against the rules, Linda had done this for her several times before. Doniece knew since she had started going back to church and following the Word of God that this was nothing but a lie. Doniece said within herself that this would be her last time falsifying timesheets. She called Linda.

"Don't worry about it, I got you covered," Linda whispered. "Everyone is in their offices, and I'm out here alone."

As Doniece drove slowly to work, she felt some relief and disappointment all at the same time. She promised herself that she would not go that route again.

Five months later, Doniece and Linda were called into Mr. Briggs's office. The falsifying of timesheets was revealed, and they were both fired.

Our lives are totally open to Him, and while He is a loving and forgiving God, He also punishes sin—often letting the consequences of our actions follow naturally from our actions.

10. *When have you tried to "cover up" your sins? What happened?*

11. *Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "Judgment for our sins can work for our good"?*

12. *What should we learn from the fact that God knows everything we do?*

Judge Yourself

We should judge ourselves first because God judges sin, and we don't want the consequences for sin. Even as believers we can take ourselves down paths He does not want us to go, and we suffer the consequences of being out of His will. Thankfully, He is a merciful Judge who listens to His repentant children when we turn to Him and ask for His forgiveness.

► *On the piece of cardboard, write an X to indicate a sin you have that you know God will judge. Throw your piece into the "throw away hat" and commit to not doing that sin any more.*

KEY VERSE

O house of David, thus saith the LORD; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor. —Jeremiah 21:12a, KJV

This is what the LORD says to you, house of David: "Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed." —Jeremiah 21:12a, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of May 18 through May 24

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Deuteronomy 24:17-22—Justice for Aliens, Orphans, and Widows.
- Tues.** Deuteronomy 17:18-20—God Requires Godly Rule by Kings.
- Wed.** Psalm 15—Who May Enter God's Holy Presence?
- Thurs.** Jeremiah 22:11-19—God's Justice for the Unjust King.
- Fri.** Jeremiah 22:20-23—The City Suffers for Its Disobedience.
- Sat.** Jeremiah 22:24-30—Injustice Ceases the Rule of David's Throne.
- Sun.** Jeremiah 22:1-10—Repent of Misdeeds and Unjust Actions.