

PRACTICE JUSTICE

Lesson Scripture: Jeremiah 21

Focus Scripture: Jeremiah 21:8-14

Key Verse: Thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. Jeremiah 21:12a (NRSV)

JEREMIAH 21:8-14 (NRSV)

8 And to this people you shall say: Thus says the Lord: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

9 Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war.

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

11 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 anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings.

13 See, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, says the Lord; you who say, "Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?"

14 I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the Lord; I will kindle a fire in its forest, and it shall devour all that is around it.

JEREMIAH 21:8-14 (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.

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, 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.

VOCABULARY

- **Sedition** – Inciting people to rebel.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, if we are not careful, we will drift into a world of complacency as it relates to God's ideals of justice. As we can see in this lesson, that can be dangerous. In that world of complacency and compromise, we practice double standards. We are firm in our belief that evil must be punished and good rewarded. After all, is that not what God commands? Sure enough! But the question is, do we apply the same standards when the evil is done by our family, friends, or ourselves? For a few persons, the answer is yes. And for many others the answer is no. If the evil is from within our home, we usually find scriptures which point to God's grace and mercy. Instinctively, in those cases we slide away from our strict position that evil must be punished.

Watch for this response to evil as it is displayed in the text. And as you work

through the lesson, keep in mind that a just God applies the same standards to everyone. The fact that Israel and Judah were descendants of Abraham and Jacob could not shield them from the divine wrath that their injustice had earned them. Similarly, our membership in a particular church will not save us from the consequences of our sins. God is indeed merciful to the repentant sinner. When

we are truly sorry for our sins and appeal to the Lord for forgiveness, Jesus is available. The same divine mercy is also available to our enemies when they commit wrong. If we hold this balanced view of the injustices around us, "Pride must die in you, or nothing of heaven can live in you."

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In this lesson, we see King Zedekiah playing the same game of double standards mentioned in the **Introduction**. The king and his people were guilty of sinful living. When all was well, they disregarded God's righteous commandments. So, God lifted God's



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hand of protection from over them. As a result of their exposure, the nation of Babylon came to war with them. The odds were against them. It looked certain that the Babylonians were going to defeat them and take them hostage. King Zedekiah was afraid, so he sent two messengers (one a priest) to ask the prophet to ask God for protection favors.

King Zedekiah did not expect the answer he got from the prophet. God was not about to save the king and his people. On the contrary, God had set up the invasion. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was an instrument of God. Therefore, Judah was about to pay a heavy price for turning its back on the Lord Jehovah. And so Zedekiah and his people were faced with a hard choice. They could try to resist the Babylonians and be slaughtered; even if they did escape for a while, they would face hardships in the form of starvation and disease. Alternatively, they could give in to God's design and surrender to the invaders. In this case, God would keep

them while they were in captivity.

A striking feature in the **Lesson Scripture** is the message that God personally will be in the fight against Zedekiah and his people. No one wants to take on God in hand to hand combat! And, in fairness to the nation, God spelt out the charges against them. They were systematically practicing injustice. God could not ignore this. Punishment was inevitable.



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SANKOFA

In Africa, there is a history of violent changes in governments. This was especially true in the period leading up to and shortly after the ending of the rule of the European empires in Africa. In some cases, we saw the “Zedekiah syndrome” played out. While in power, some of those leaders executed use of terror and/or unjust means to take or maintain control. In some cases citizens were brutally murdered. Activists disappeared without a trace. People had their freedoms severely restricted.

However, when those same leaders

were overthrown or otherwise removed, they sang from a different hymnal. It was usual for them to demand justice in a “fair trial.” This, despite the evidence that they themselves had denied this to others. If found guilty of crimes in their home courts, they would apply for justice through international courts and tribunals. That is the “Zedekiah syndrome.” The rule for us to treat other people the way we want to be treated is firmly rooted in scripture (e.g. Luke 6:31).

CASE STUDY

A modern-day example of this “Zedekiah syndrome” was seen in the Pennsylvania court case of former Luzerne county judge, Mark Ciavarella, Jr. in 2011.

In that famous ‘Kids for Cash’ case, the judge was charged and convicted of taking bribes from developers of juvenile detention centers. For his part, the judge would sentence juveniles to these centers. During the case, the judge’s lawyers begged for a “reasonable” sentence. In other words, they wanted a just sentence. They wanted what according to the court papers their

client may have denied over 4,000 juveniles. The court gave the corrupt judge 28 years in jail.

As a result of this case, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned about 4,000 convictions which had been issued by that judge between 2003 and 2008. The Supreme Court ruled that the judge had dealt unjustly in these cases. He had violated the constitutional rights

of the juveniles. One can only hope that the judge was satisfied with the reasonable sentence of 28 years imprisonment which *he* got.

LIFE APPLICATION

In today’s scripture, the prophet Jeremiah spoke as God’s communication director. The message from God was harsh. Please note that in those times Jeremiah could easily have been charged with sedition (inciting people to rebel). That charge carried the death penalty, and there was no appeals court. This raises the question of our willingness to obey God’s messages, even when they conflict with the wishes and orders of civil authorities.

The rule for us to treat other people the way we want to be treated is firmly rooted in scripture (e.g. Luke 6:31).

Currently, some practices which were once considered ungodly are now permitted by civil society. Consider what response you would give if called upon to speak publicly on one of these practices. How would you go about telling your employer, a significant client, or a senior government official that a position is contrary to your understanding of the Word of God? Jeremiah knew the risk he was taking, yet he spoke for God. This is something to think about and apply to your own circumstances.

Based on the passage, God did not judge and condemn Zedekiah for the first or second act of injustice. It appears that the practice of injustice had become widespread and habitual. Since as believers we claim that God is the same now as he was then, this lesson should cause us to pause and consider if we are indeed living to please God. Make it a point to consider this in your next private prayer and meditation session. When you look at your life, what do you see? And, if you do not like the picture you see

on the playback of your life, what do you plan to do to change it?

Serving God can be demanding. Usually, we have no problem in making a choice when the options point between good or bad. But life can hit us with some choices when the options are not that straightforward. Although the text said that the options were life or death (v. 8), it was a hard call to make. It was

a choice between two undesirable options: surrender and be enslaved, or fight and die. Consider your strategies for making hard choices. Do you have criteria for selecting the best from among equally horrible options? If you are going to serve God faithfully, you must have guiding principles

to use in the times of hard choices. Set about developing some before you need them.

There is a view that as believers in the period of grace, we shall not suffer the wrath of God like the people in Old Testament times. This view holds that we have what they did not have: the blood



Jeremiah knew the risk he was taking, yet he spoke for God.

of Jesus the Christ. Consider the extent to which you accept that view. What are the consequences of relying unduly on that view? Consider that the people in Jeremiah's day thought they were safe because they were the descendants of Abraham (v.13).

QUESTIONS

1. How can we guard against complacency regarding God's call for us to act justly?
2. How do we stop ourselves from applying double standards to acts

of injustice: one standard when our enemies are guilty and another standard when our friends are guilty

3. How do we approach God and ask for favors when we know within ourselves we have committed acts of injustice?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

The Closing Song: "Lord, Prepare Me to Be Your Sanctuary."

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to be sensitive to your Holy Spirit, and to be responsive to your prompting to live upright lives. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

May 11-May 17

Monday	Psalm 86:1-13 (Seeking Divine Help in Troubled Times)
Tuesday	Jeremiah 27:1-11 (Land Now Belongs to Babylon)
Wednesday	Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (Choose to Love and Obey the Lord)
Thursday	Jeremiah 38:14-18 (Surrender and the People Will Live)
Friday	Jeremiah 21:1-7 (Jerusalem Will Fall)
Saturday	2 Kings 24:20b–25:7 (Jerusalem Defeated and Zedekiah Exiled)
Sunday	Jeremiah 21:8-14 (Choose the Life of Justice)