

CHAPTER 17, THE KINGDOM'S FALL TIMELESS TRUTH: LISTEN AND LIVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Legacies are fragile things. Hezekiah had been King of Judah for nearly three decades. His reforms were sweeping, his achievements notable, his accolades many. He is listed among the few who *“did what was right before the LORD His God.”* After his death, his son Manasseh ascended to the throne and unraveled his father's spiritual heritage. Manasseh's reign marked a spiritual relapse from which the kingdom of Judah would not recover. He made a mockery of Hezekiah's faithful reign and did more evil than any of his predecessors.

King Manasseh set up altars in the LORD's temple where worshipping the stars accompanied worship of Jehovah. He filled Jerusalem with the blood of innocents and turned his own heart and his people's hearts away from God. Manasseh was eventually captured by the Assyrian king and led off to Babylon in utter humiliation. At last, he turned to the LORD who had compassion on him and eventually allowed him to return to Jerusalem. God re-enters the story to give ultimate forgiveness even to the worst of kings.

But God's people would not return to Him. They ignored the prophet's warnings. So God did what He said He would do—He sent foreign armies to raid Judah. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar laid three sieges against Judah and Jerusalem. The first came against King Jehoiakim and the second against King Jehoiachin. Nearly 10,000 Judeans were captured and taken away to Babylon. The king and the prophet Ezekiel were among their prisoners.

Ezekiel's visions are some of the most colorful in all ancient literature and foretold of Jerusalem's certain doom. God commissioned Ezekiel to speak truth to the exiles who disregarded their guilt, even when faced with such stern judgment. He refused to give up. He called Jeremiah to alert the adulterous people that they must own up to their reckless sin. And God also sent word that the worst was yet to come.

Zedekiah was Judah's last and most pitiful king. His government was controlled by Babylon and he and the people rejected God, broke His Law, and defiled His temple. The time for judgment had come, so God arranged the final battle: King Nebuchadnezzar vs. King Zedekiah. The outcome was certain. An 18-month blockade left Jerusalem's inhabitants weakened by famine. Zedekiah made a last ditch plea for help from the prophet Jeremiah, but no one much cared for Jeremiah's response. He reported that Jerusalem would not be saved and he urged surrender as their only hope of survival. Most regarded his claims as treasonous.

In 586 BC, the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They demolished the city, looted the temple, and led the people away to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who were left behind. He grieved the loss of his beloved city and mourned the sin of God's people. He knew that Judah could have been saved, but even in his sorrow, this weeping prophet stood firm on the sure promises of God. He trusted that God would have compassion on the remnant who remained in Jerusalem.

It had been eight centuries since God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. Now they were exiles in Babylon. Hope vanished. But God told Ezekiel that all was not lost. He reminded His people that He would one day cleanse and restore them. He assured their return to the homeland. And He promised that He would be their God.

To illustrate His point, God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones and asked, *“Can these bones live?”* When Ezekiel spoke God's message to the bones, they came to life and stood like a vast army. This astonishing demonstration confirmed that even exile in Babylon would not hinder God's great Upper Story and foretold a future resurrection for the faithful. Life would return to Israel's dried up bones. God would make them a nation again. He would bring them back to their land. Only He could.

I. The Function of the Covenant of the Law

- A. The law served as a way that God's people could demonstrate their allegiance and express their love for the LORD. Obedience was always associated with turning to the LORD. It was not so much a way to enter into a relationship with the LORD, but rather a means to express and maintain one's already established relationship with the LORD. The Law had three important functions:
 - 1. **Regulatory**—the Law taught Israel to be a holy nation, separate from the pagan nations, and to respond to the LORD and to one another according to a holy standard.
 - 2. **Revelatory**—the Law revealed the nature and character of a holy God and reveals sin
 - 3. **Preparatory**—the Law prepared for the coming of Christ by its sacrifices and festivals; demonstrated the need for a Savior
- B. The Law was NEVER a means of salvation—salvation has ALWAYS been by grace through faith.

II. The Failure to Keep the Covenant of the Law

- A. Israel had begun to transgress the Law while Moses was on the mountain for forty days receiving the Ten Commandments. They were drawn to return to the gods of Egypt and built for themselves a golden calf.
- B. The Lord's patience and mercy—sometimes severe mercy—compelled Him to send warnings to Israel to return to a covenant relationship with Him. He revealed Himself through the oppression of other nations and through deliverance from those very oppressors (as in the times of the Judges), through prophets (such as Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah), and through events like Elijah's three-year drought and his showdown with the prophets of Baal. Yet it was not enough to keep Israel obedient to the "Old Covenant"—the Covenant of the Law.
- C. Approximately 850 years after the LORD gave Moses the Law, Judah went into captivity. (Israel had already gone into captivity some 125 years before Judah.) The redeemed nation that had possessed the Promised Land was now expelled from the Land and under another foreign power. *And it was God's doing.* Just as God had warned the people through Moses before entering into the Promised Land, their failure to remain faithful to Him would result in expulsion from their Land and exile to a foreign land (Deuteronomy 28:24-49, 30:1-5). **The exile of the two kingdoms resulted from their consistent failure to remain faithful to the Law (Old Covenant). They were part of God's sovereign design.**
- D. Exiled in foreign nations and spit out of the Land of their inheritance, Judah was hopeless. They had had every possible advantage to become holy and to live up to their high calling as a nation.

III. The Future Hope of a New Covenant

- A. In Jerusalem, God revealed the coming New Covenant through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34). It would be different than the Old covenant made at Sinai. He would:
 - 1. Put His law in them, write it on their hearts
 - 2. Be their God, and they would be His people
 - 3. No need for teaching because they will know the LORD
 - 4. Forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more
- B. In Babylon, God revealed the New Covenant through Ezekiel (Ezekiel 36:24-28). Though "covenant" is not used in these verses, it is used in 34:25 and 37:26. Notice the similarities in the promises. The LORD said He would:

1. Gather Israel from the nations and return them to their Land
2. Cleanse them from their filth
3. Remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh
4. Put His Spirit in them to cause them to walk obediently

IV. The Foundation of the New Covenant—Jesus Christ

- A. About 600 years after the promise of a New Covenant to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant on the night He was betrayed. Three of the four gospels record it (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:17-20).
 1. Luke 22:17-20. *And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).*
 2. This was not new news to the disciples! They knew their scriptures. They knew of the failure of Israel to live by the Law and the hope promised in the New Covenant through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Notice that not one of the twelve disciples ever asks what Jesus meant by a "new covenant." They required no further explanation.
- B. Paul described the difference between the old and the new when he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3):

Old	New
Written on tablets of stone	Letter of Christ written with the Spirit of God
The letter of the law kills	Tablets of human hearts
It is a ministry of death engraved on stones	Paul was a servant of the new covenant
Ministry of condemnation has glory but fades	Spirit gives life
Old covenant is only removed in Christ	Ministry of the Spirit more glorious
Fading away	It remains

- C. The author of Hebrews describes the New Covenant as a better covenant and quotes from Jeremiah (Hebrews 8:6-13).
 1. Jesus, the better high priest, is the mediator of the better covenant.
 2. The better covenant has better promises.
 - a. The New Covenant makes the old obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).
 - b. The Old Covenant was inaugurated by blood, and so too was the New Covenant; without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).
 - c. Other Old covenant sacrifices could never make anyone perfect (Hebrews 10:1). Rather they were a reminder of sin (Hebrews 10:2) and could not take away sin. Can you imagine? Every sacrifice was a reminder of one's sin, a reminder that each person needs a Savior. Their sin was always before them under the Old Covenant. No wonder the New Covenant is said to have better promises—it takes the sin away!
 - d. *For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified* (Hebrews 10:14). Again the Hebrews author quotes from Jeremiah that the hope found in the New Covenant is basically two-fold (Hebrews 10:15-18):
- D. The New Covenant actually forgives sin.

The better covenant allows us to boldly come before God because we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-23).

V. Applications and Implications

- A. When Israel was hopeless, God provided hope. Even in my darkest, most hopeless moments, God is still there and His plan of redemption for me remains steadfast.
- B. The promise of the New Covenant reminds me afresh of the unfathomable grace of God.
- C. ***What God did for Israel and what He does for me are for His name's sake, not ours. His holy reputation is at stake.***
- D. God showed His justice when He punished Israel for her sin; **He shows His grace and faithfulness with the New Covenant promises.**
- E. God still shows His justice in the New Covenant by providing a substitute whose blood was shed; Jesus paid my penalty, which displays the grace of God.
- F. As a participant in the New Covenant, I have the indwelling Holy Spirit to help me maintain a right relationship with the LORD first and with others second. As a recipient of the New Covenant, I have a new heart. I am freed from the old heart of my past.
- G. I am forgiven! The New Covenant has a provision for sin. Sins under the Old Covenant resulted in curses (Deuteronomy 28). The LORD no longer remembers my sins—past, present or future!
- H. The New Covenant is not dependent upon what I do as the Old Covenant was. It is dependent upon what God did in Jesus Christ. I do not have to “work” to be righteous.
- I. Only the Spirit of God can bring true (eternal) life to “old, dried up bones.”

Questions

1. **List the evil things that King Manasseh did to arouse the anger of the LORD (p. 231-232). How did Judah compare to the pagan nations that the LORD had driven out of the Promised Land? (See the first full paragraph on p. 86 for insight.)**
2. **What are the “starry hosts” (p.231)? What are the implications for astrology, horoscopes, and other “harmless” and “fun” fortune tellers?**
3. **Who is most culpable for the sins of Judah—the people or their king? How can believers today avoid being led astray?**
4. **What happened to King Manasseh? What do you think led him to change his ways?**
5. **Review Isaiah’s prophecy made over one hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar’s attacks (p. 225-226). Compare Isaiah’s predictions with the events during the reigns of Kings Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.**
6. **During the exile, God gave Ezekiel the mission of sharing his word with the Jews living in a foreign land. How does the Christian mission today resemble this situation?**
7. **Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem after the first two sieges. According to his prophecy (p. 238-240), what single condition must be met for God to forgive the city? Are you as forgiving as God? Why or why not?**
8. **Nebuchadnezzar’s final siege lasted eighteen months ending in 586 BC. How did King Zedekiah regard the LORD? What was God’s final word to him?**

9. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah grieved for his beloved city (p. 243-245). What did Jeremiah believe about the Upper Story of God? What specifically can we apply to our own lives from Jeremiah's lament and praise?
10. What did God promise He would do for Israel in spite of their great sin, their Babylonian exile, and their stone hearts (p. 245-246)? What does this teach you about God's heart for His chosen nation?