

PROMISED LAND 2: Lesson Eleven, The Fall of Judah

2 Kings 23:31 – 2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36; Habakkuk, Obadiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations

Subject: Judah fell to Babylon, just as the prophets foretold.

Main Idea: The Lord disciplines those He loves.

Principles:

1. *God permits the worst possible circumstances of life to fall on us, if that is what it takes to drive us back to Him.*
2. *God enters our suffering with us.*

Introduction

One of the things every wise parent suffers is watching their children face the natural consequences of their own bad choices. Our natural inclination is to shelter them, but rescuing them from all their mistakes does a child greater harm in the end.

After centuries of patience, the Lord finally allowed the people of Judah the full consequences of their sin against Him. Their cities were pillaged and burned, their wives and daughters raped, their leaders killed, and their citizens carried off into exile (perhaps even dividing families). The punishment was well deserved. God had forewarned them centuries earlier, through Moses:

If you fully obey the Lord your God... you will be blessed [in every way]... However, if you do not obey the Lord, all these curses will come on you and overtake you... The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand... They will lay siege to all your cities... until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down... You who were numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number... the Lord will scatter you among all nations... These are the terms of the covenant the Lord commanded... Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do... Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of [other] nations... (Deuteronomy 28-29)

After patiently enduring Israel's pride and idolatry for generations, the Lord finally sent the Northern Kingdom into exile and 136 years later, the curses of the covenant also fell on Judah. The warning they received through Moses must have haunted them. But Moses had other instructive words. He had also said, "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deuteronomy 8:5). Apparently, it was not in Judah's best interest to keep the consequences of their sin from them any longer (Jeremiah 30:11, 46:28). The Lord disciplines those He loves (Proverbs 3:12).

I. **The Fall of Judah** – 2 Kings 23:31-25:30 and 2 Chronicles 36

A. **Babylon**

- i. Changing World Powers: After the combined forces of the Medes, Scythians, Cimmerians, and Babylonians destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C. (just as Nahum had prophesied), the severely weakened Assyrian Empire struggled on for a few more years. Their capital was moved twice, first to Harran, and after it was captured, to Carchemish. The Egyptians finally came to Assyria's aid in 609 B.C. King Josiah of Judah attempted to stop Pharaoh Neco en route and was killed. With his death, Judah came under Egyptian control. But the Egyptian help was too little and too late to save the Assyrian Empire. When Nebuchadnezzar, son of the Babylonian king, attacked and destroyed Carchemish in 605 B.C., Assyria was finally defeated. Palestine has always been a politically desirable region since it forms a land bridge between Eurasia and Africa. So Nebuchadnezzar acted quickly to bring Palestine under *his* control. A few years later, Nebuchadnezzar had a second fierce battle with the Egyptians (601 B.C.). This time, he failed to completely subdue them. The implications of all this for Judah was that the first of Josiah's sons to reign was under *Egyptian* authority, but Judah's very last kings were under *Babylonian* authority. Furthermore, in those last years, a Pro-Egyptian party emerged in Judah that looked to Egypt for deliverance from Babylon. Ironically, Egypt never again dominated the region and the help the Judeans awaited never came.
- ii. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire: Babylon was an ancient city (Genesis 10:10) that sat on the Euphrates River. It had influence for at least 1000 years before the time of Nebuchadnezzar. The time at which he and his father came to power is known as the Neo-Babylonian period. Sometimes, the neo-Babylonians are referred to as Chaldeans (Chaldea was a tribe they absorbed). The Babylonian Empire lasted only about 70 years. Nebuchadnezzar was the most famous of its kings. He defeated the Scythians and Cimmerians and his political marriage to the daughter of the Median king assured him of peace with the powerful Medes to his north. Nebuchadnezzar is traditionally credited with the building of the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. According to legend, he built them to satisfy his Median wife, who longed for the greenery of her homeland. He also finished the work his father had started of rebuilding and refortifying Babylon. A triple set of walls made the city (supposedly) impregnable. However, the Babylonian Empire was never as grand as the Assyrian Empire had been. Nebuchadnezzar was the power and brilliance behind it. After he died, the empire waned and the Persians overthrew it barely fifty years after the Babylonians had taken people of Judah into exile.

B. Judah's Last Kings

- i. The Beginning of the End: King Josiah's reforms had changed the religious behavior of the people of Judah but not their hearts. All of his successors reflected the stubborn, evil bent of the people. 2 Kings 23:26 says, "The Lord did not turn away from the heat of His fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to arouse His anger. So the Lord said, 'I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, 'My Name shall be there.''" After Josiah's death on the Plains of Megiddo, Judah survived for about twenty years. The last years of Judah were tumultuous and chaotic. Three of Josiah's sons and one of his grandsons ruled Judah as puppet kings, first under the authority of Egypt and then under Babylonian control.
- ii. Jehoahaz (also known as Shallum)
 1. According to 1 Chronicles 3:15, Josiah had four sons. The youngest Jehoahaz (or Shallum) was his father's immediate successor. Perhaps the people of Judah believed Shallum was more capable than his older brothers (2 Kings 23:30 says the people of the land put him on the throne), although it has been suggested that the decision to appoint this youngest son may have been driven by Pharaoh as a sign of his influence over Judean politics.
 2. Shallum's mother was the daughter of a man named Jeremiah (2 Kings 23:31), but not Jeremiah the prophet, since that Jeremiah never married (Jeremiah 16:2). Shallum followed in the evil ways of many of his predecessors (2 Kings 23:32) and reigned only three months before Pharaoh Neco dethroned him, levied a heavy tax on the land, and took Shallum to Egypt forcibly. Shallum died there, as Jeremiah had foretold (Jeremiah 22:11-12).
- iii. Jehoiakim (also known as Eliakim) and the First Deportation
 1. Neco placed Shallum's older brother Eliakim on Judah's throne and renamed him Jehoiakim (the renaming was also a show of Neco's authority). Perhaps Neco chose him believing he would be easier to control than had Shallum. Jehoiakim was Josiah's second-born. He ruled Judah for eleven years and did evil in the eyes of the Lord.
 2. In the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, the Lord graciously spoke to him through Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

For twenty-three years – from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day – the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened... Therefore, the Lord Almighty says this: 'Because you have not listened to my

words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon... and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations... This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (Jeremiah 25:3, 8-11)

The message, along with all God had foretold about Israel, Judah, and the other nations, was delivered to Jehoiakim on a scroll (Jeremiah 36). Instead of receiving God's word, he burned the scroll, page by page, as it was read to him.

3. That same year, the Battle of Carchemish occurred, finally collapsing the Assyrian Empire and leaving Egypt too weak to maintain control of the desirable land of Palestine. Nebuchadnezzar immediately marched into Palestine (late 605 B.C.), made Jehoiakim his puppet, and deported some of Judah's royal family and nobility. Daniel (a royal family member) and his friends (Daniel 1:1-3, 6) were among those deported.
 4. Just over three years later, in 601 B.C., the second battle between Egypt and Babylon occurred. In keeping with the Pro-Egyptian mindset, Jehoiakim also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar that year. Nebuchadnezzar responded by invading Judah. In 598 B.C., he removed valuable articles from the Temple and took Jehoiakim to Babylon in shackles. Jehoiakim may have later been released or escaped (Jeremiah 22:18-19 seems to indicate that he was buried outside Jerusalem's gates). 2 Kings 24 says all this happened according to the Lord's command (verse 3).
- iv. Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah [Matthew 1:11] or Coniah [Jeremiah 22:24]) and the Second Deportation
1. Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin inherited a kingdom in turmoil at 18 years of age. His evil reign lasted only three months. In early 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and Jehoiachin, his attendants, nobles, and officials all surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar further looted the Temple and carried off 10,000 of Judah's citizens, including Jehoiachin (as Jeremiah had predicted [Jeremiah 22:24-30]) and his family, the leading men of the land, the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans (2 Kings 24:14-16). Ezekiel was also deported at this time (Ezekiel 1:1-2).
 2. Although exiled, Jehoiachin retained his title as king of Judah and was treated well by the Babylonians. Many years later, after Nebuchadnezzar died, he was even granted dining privileges with Babylon's new king (Evil-Merodach [2 Kings 25:27]).

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiachin's uncle (another son of Josiah) to rule Judah in Jehoiachin's place. However Jehoiachin seems to have been the last king the Jews recognized. All of Ezekiel's dates are based on Jehoiachin's exile (1:2, 8:1, 20:1, 24:1, etc.) and 2 Kings ends with a final reference to Jehoiachin's survival. The arrival of the Messiah depended upon the survival of the Davidic dynasty.

v. Zedekiah (also known as Mattaniah) and the Third Deportation

1. Zedekiah ruled Judah eleven years, from 597-586 B.C. He was the Josiah's third-born son, the third of his sons to sit on Judah's throne, and the last king of the Southern Kingdom.
2. Jeremiah told the exiles to settle down in Babylon under God's hand of discipline, rather than resist. Although he repeatedly stated that the Babylonian Captivity would last 70 years, false prophets of Zedekiah's day told the people to expect Babylon's power to be broken in only two years (Jeremiah 28:1-4). Of course, that is what the people wanted to hear. Furthermore, it fueled the cause of the pro-Egyptian party, which encouraged Zedekiah to rebel against Babylon. Jeremiah warned Zedekiah not to involve himself with the pro-Egyptians (Jeremiah 27:1-4, 51:59), and for his warning, the people labeled Jeremiah "pro-Babylonian" and (on more than one occasion) imprisoned him.
3. Zedekiah did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet. He became stiff-necked and hard-hearted. 2 Chronicles 36:14-16 says:

Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the Temple of the Lord, which He had consecrated in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through His messengers again and again, because He had pity on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against His people and there was no remedy.

The pro-Egyptian party finally had their way, and in his ninth year (589 B.C.), Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem again, this time for eighteen terrible months. According to Jeremiah, the famine was so severe that it motivated even the most compassionate women to cook and eat their own children out of self-preservation (Lamentations 4:10).

Zedekiah and his army fled through a breach in the wall but Nebuchadnezzar went after them. Zedekiah's men scattered but he was captured and his sons were put to death before his very eyes. Then, his eyes were put out and he was carried into captivity, where he remained imprisoned until his death (Jeremiah 52:11). The remaining treasures in the Temple were carried off, the walls of the city were broken down, the women were raped, and the Temple was set on fire and destroyed, along with the palace and other important buildings. Jerusalem was left in ruins. This time, thousands and thousands of people were carried off to Babylon.

vi. Gedaliah, the Governor, and a Fourth Deportation

1. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah to govern the land. Gedaliah was the grandson of Shaphan, the secretary who had read the re-discovered Book of the Law to Josiah (2 Kings 22:8-10). Gedaliah was loyal to Babylon and (like Jeremiah) urged the few remaining Judeans to settle down and submit to Babylonian rule. However, the pro-Egyptian party prevailed and a man from Judah's royal family named Ishmael assassinated Gedaliah. In fear of Babylonian reprisal, the city's few remaining residents fled to Egypt, under the leadership of a Jew named Johanan, and they forced Jeremiah to go with them (Jeremiah 43:6). Jeremiah had specifically warned the group not to go to Egypt or they would never return. Nevertheless, they "entered Egypt in disobedience to the Lord" (Jeremiah 43:7).
2. In retaliation, Nebuchadnezzar carried off what must have been a fourth group of people. Three deportations are mentioned in Jeremiah 52:30. The first two of these might possibly be the same as two of the deportations listed in 2 Kings, but the date assigned to the third in Jeremiah's list does not correspond to any of the dates in 2 Kings. Therefore, four deportations must have occurred, and possibly more. Although the Babylonians were not as cruel as the Assyrians, some have estimated that they deported upwards of 65-70,000 people from Palestine in these captivities.

Summary Statement: The fall of Jerusalem was a critical moment in the history of the Jews, equal in weight with their Exodus from Egypt. The Lord's covenant with His people was broken and all the curses of it fell upon them. It was a punishment that they deserved.

Principle: *God permits the worst possible circumstances of life to fall on us, if that is what it takes to drive us back to Him.*

Jeremiah 7:29 is one of several passages that speaks of God abandoning His people: “Take up a lament on the barren heights, for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.” Those are frightening words! You may wonder, “Can the same thing happen today?” Might God abandon *us*? Can Christians who are disobedient lose their salvation?

This is an issue that evangelical Christians have debated for a long time. Some believe that it is possible for a person to be genuinely converted and then lose their salvation. However, too many Bible passages teach otherwise. The doctrine of “eternal security” means that “*all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.*”¹ Notice that there are two important parts to this definition.

- The first is that all who are genuinely Christians will continue in the Christian faith until the end of their lives and then go to heaven. In other words, God will never abandon those who are truly His children. This truth is affirmed in passages such as John 6:38-40, in which Jesus says, “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should *lose nothing* of all that He has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that *everyone* who sees the Son and *believes* in Him should have *eternal* life; and I will raise him up at the last day [my emphases].” Eternal life is repeatedly promised to those who put their faith in Jesus. If we can lose our salvation, how can it be *eternal*? In John 10:27-29, Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.* My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and *no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.*”
- The second part of this doctrine is that only those who continue in their faith to the end of their lives have truly been born again. We must take seriously the Bible’s commands to *continue in the faith* (John 8:31-32, Colossians 1:22-23, Hebrews 3:14). Jesus warned people against falling away in times of persecution with the words, “*He who endures to the end will be saved*” (Matthew 10:22). These passages aren’t saying that it is impossible to have assurance of salvation until we die. Rather, they teach that continuing in our faith is one such assurance. It is critical that we convey this truth so that we do not give people false assurances. A person may feel moved to “come forward” in a service or pray to receive salvation, be baptized afterward, and for a period of time, give other external evidences of salvation. However, if there is no real long-term spiritual growth or they later fall away and do not repent, we must be concerned they were never genuinely converted.

Application: Summarizing, although God’s judgment fell on the people of Judah *corporately*, He was still dealing with them *individually*.

- A few godly individuals were carried into captivity with the evil majority and they were in no sense abandoned by God. Daniel and Ezekiel are two examples and will be covered in the next lesson. Today, Christians often suffer loss or are even killed by the same catastrophes that overtake nonbelievers. At the time, we may *wonder* if God has abandoned us, but He has promised *never* to leave or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, 8, Joshua 1:5, Hebrews 13:5). Although Daniel and Ezekiel suffered, they determined to serve the Lord with all their hearts while in exile. The fire of affliction caused them to shine all the more brightly (Daniel 3:19-30) and they will be rewarded for their faithfulness (Matthew 16:27). If you have been caught in the backwash of another person's sin, remember the admonishment to *continue in the faith*. God's reward awaits the faithful.
- Sadly, there were certainly some Judeans who responded to God's retribution by further hardening their hearts against Him, refusing to repent. One day, they will find their exile in Babylon to have been a mild judgment, sent as a gracious warning against the terror of permanent separation from God (Revelation 20:15). Have you professed faith in Christ for the benefits of doing so, all the while knowing that you resist the transforming power of God in your life? If so, do not deceive yourself that you will be saved. God is not deceived.
- Finally, some of the people of Judah undoubtedly recalled the words of the prophets while in exile, responded to God's hand of discipline, and repented. Whether or not they ever saw the Promised Land again on earth, they will be in God's eternal paradise. God permits the worst possible circumstances of life to fall on us, if that is what it takes to drive us back to Him. One day, those individuals will testify, "His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). God's mercy is severe and His love is tough when it needs to be. Is God dealing with you harshly at the moment because you have wandered from Him? Hear the word of the Lord in Hebrews 12:6: "The Lord disciplines those He loves."

Transition: God's hand of judgment was heavy. In one sense, He abandoned His people, abandoned them to the consequences of sin. But in another sense, He had never been more present. In their hour of greatest pain, He continued speaking through His prophets, challenging, warning, directing, and encouraging them.

II. The Voices of the Prophets – Habakkuk, Obadiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations

A. Habakkuk

- i. Background: Habakkuk prophesied in the last days of Judah, when the Assyrian Empire was also collapsing and the Babylonian Empire was on the rise. His work is like Jonah's, in that it tells us something about the relationship between the Lord and His prophets and the burden the prophets bore.

- ii. Message: While other prophets of Habakkuk's time delivered God's message to Judah, Habakkuk delivered Judah's concerns to God.ⁱⁱ The theme is found in 2:4, "the righteous will live by his faith." The Book of Habakkuk is in the form of a conversation, in which Habakkuk questions God and receives God's answers.
1. *Habakkuk's first question* (1:1-4): As we have learned, the Judeans were unfaithful to God, callous, and corrupt. Habakkuk was upset by the injustices being committed among his own people. He asked God how He could allow these injustices to go on.
 2. *God's first answer* (1:5-11): God answered Habakkuk by saying that He was raising up the Babylonians as His instrument of punishment on the disobedient Judeans.
 3. *Habakkuk's second question* (1:12 – 2:1): Habakkuk then asked God how He could possibly use a people that were even more evil than the Judeans as His instrument of judgment. He questioned the justice of it. Habakkuk said he would wait patiently for God's answer.
 4. *God's second answer* (2:2-20): The Lord assured Habakkuk that the cup of His just judgment would eventually come to the Babylonians as well. He reminded Habakkuk that He is in charge (2:20) and Habakkuk could be certain His justice would prevail (2:2-3). God also exhorted the righteous to live *by faith* in times of uncertainty (2:4). The wicked puff themselves up with *pride* when they are unsure but that response never brings peace. Those who live by faith when things around them seem to be falling apart will experience God's rest.
 5. *Habakkuk's prayer* (3:1-19): It is sometimes said that Habakkuk's book begins with a sob and ends with a song. Chapter 3 contains Habakkuk's praise, in the form of a prayer, to the God who gives him strength to think in terms of the bigger picture. God is sovereign and just, and Habakkuk has learned to trust Him when life doesn't seem to make sense: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to tread up on the heights" (3:17-19).
- iii. Application: Suffering often causes us to lose perspective. Deep questions and doubts rise to the surface. The Book of Habakkuk teaches us that it is not wrong to bring our sincere questions to God, but ultimately, He expects us to live by faith and trust Him.

B. Obadiah

- i. Background: The Book of Obadiah is the shortest in the Old Testament. His message is one of judgment on the Edomites, specifically because of their mistreatment of the Israelites. Obadiah accused them of standing aloof while Jerusalem was being looted. The question of the date of the book revolves around when in history Edom responded to Israel's misfortunes in this way. Since he refers to Judah's destruction (verses 12-14), it seems most fitting to date it shortly after Jerusalem's fall. His book bears some similarity to Habakkuk in that both declare that Judah would not be alone in receiving God's judgment. Her enemies would also face the Day of the Lord's judgment.
- ii. The Edomites
 1. The Edomites were cousins to the Israelites. Their forefathers, Esau and Jacob, were twin brothers. From their youth, Esau and Jacob were hostile to one another and enmity also characterized the relationship between their descendants. Esau was born hairy and *red* (Genesis 25:25). He later begged Jacob for his *red* stew (Genesis 25:29). The land in which he and his descendants settled was a land of dark *red* sandstone cliffs. Thus, Esau, his descendants, and their land came to be known as "Edom," meaning "red." The cliffs of the land rise to over 5000 feet and became a natural fortress for the Edomites. Their capital Petra (first called Sela) was believed to be impenetrable because it could only be accessed through a narrow gorge, with massive cliffs on both sides. The Edomites took great pride in their fortress and the security they believed it offered them. Jesus renamed Simon "Peter," meaning rock, from the same root as "Petra."
 2. Obadiah's prophecy was fulfilled and Edom was overthrown in 312 B.C. when an Arab group of Nabateans dislodged the occupants of Petra and renamed it Idumea (the words "Edom" and "Idum" are related). From the Hellenistic (Greek) age through the New Testament period, Idumea was the designation given to the southern portion of the Judean hill country down to the northern part of the Negev desert (heading toward Egypt). The final antagonism between the descendants of the Edomites and the Israelites came in the persons of Herod the Great and Jesus Christ. The Romans appointed Herod, a man of Idumean stock, as king of Judea in 39 B.C. Idumea served as an important power base throughout his reign. Today, that territory is part of the country of Jordan and Petra is a tourist site.

- iii. God's Cup of Wrath: Like many of the prophets, Obadiah's message includes the judgment of God's enemies. The prophets sometimes described the outpouring of God's judgment as a bitter "cup of wrath," which those judged are made to drink. That judgment is certain, even though (as in the case of Edom) it is not always immediate.
- iv. Judah's Restoration: The last verses of Obadiah speak of God's people once again possessing the lands that were taken from them.
 1. Some believe this prophecy was fulfilled after the exile when the Jews returned and rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple, although it is difficult to see a time in history when the Jews again occupied all of these tracts of land.
 2. A second view is that the Church of Christ is fulfilling Old Testament promises such as these in a *spiritual* sense.
 3. The third view is that these prophecies still await a literal fulfillment and that, at some future date, the Jewish people will once again occupy *all* the land God gave to Abraham.

C. Jeremiah

- i. Jeremiah's Life: Jeremiah is often called the "Weeping Prophet," since he witnessed all the deportations, the siege against Jerusalem and its destruction, and the misery of the remaining survivors. More is known about his life than any other classical prophet. Jeremiah suffered much persecution. His scrolls were burned, he was thrown into a deep pit of mud in which he sank, he was imprisoned, put in stocks, and faced an attempted assassination. Eventually, he was carried off to Egypt against his will (Jeremiah 42-43). In addition to these hardships, the Lord required Jeremiah to live as though disaster would overtake him at any moment. He was forbidden to marry or to participate in celebrations or funerals (16:1-9). In this way, his life and message both conveyed the imminence of God's judgment.
- ii. Jeremiah's Message
 1. After delivering God's word to Judah orally for more than twenty years, God instructed Jeremiah to record his prophecies in writing. In order to do that, he employed a scribe named Baruch. Baruch wrote as Jeremiah preached or dictated the words God gave him to proclaim (36:1-4). These oracles were given to him over the span of the reigns of Judah's last five kings, but they are not presented to us in a chronological sequence. Also, they are intermixed with narratives.
 2. Jeremiah specifically foretold the downfall of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people. However, he also prophesied a future and a hope for God's people (29:11).

3. A particular prophecy of great importance concerns the time when the Lord would establish a *new covenant* with His people:

The days are coming... when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant though I was a husband to them... This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time... I will put My Law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Jeremiah taught that outward forms of religion were not what God had ever wanted (7:4-15, 21-26); change of heart was what was essential. The new covenant involved the *forgiveness of sins* that could only occur because of the work of Jesus on the cross. The *internalizing* of God's word has been made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit since Pentecost. Some scholars believe this prophecy is entirely fulfilled today in the Church. Others believe that it was inaugurated in the church, but that since it was given specifically to "Israel" and "Judah," it won't be completely fulfilled until the time when the Jews, as a people group, turn and recognize Jesus as their Messiah.

D. Lamentations

- i. Overview: The Book of Lamentations is not prophecy in the strictest sense of the word. As the title suggests, it is a lament. However, the book vindicates the prophets' assessment of the consequences of violating God's covenant.ⁱⁱⁱ It is sometimes called "the Book of Sobs (or Dirges)" since it describes and mourns the Fall of Jerusalem. Although some argue that it is not written in Jeremiah's usual style, it has always been traditionally considered his work.
- ii. Form: The first four chapters are alphabetic acrostics; each chapter begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each new stanza introduces the next letter of the alphabet, using all twenty-two letters. In chapter 3, there are sixty-six verses. The first three lines all begin with the first letter of the alphabet, the second three with the second, and so on.

iii. Message

1. Lamentations describes the harsh realities of the siege on the Jerusalem and the great loss the people suffered at its fall. The writer called on the Lord to look and see and hear (1:9, 11, 20, 2:20, 3:55-56, 5:1) their cries and disgrace. He wrote, “This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears” (1:16).
2. However, the people could rejoice, despite the darkness of the times around them, because they knew this judgment was sent by God and was intended for their good. He declares, “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness... The Lord is good to those whose hope is in Him... For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Let us examine our ways and... return to the Lord” (3:21-40).

Summary Statement: While the prophets proclaimed the Lord’s anger over sin, their voices also reflected *God’s lament* over the fall of Jerusalem and misery of His people. In Jeremiah 8:21-9:1, the Lord says, “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed... I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.” Our sin hurts God deeply, like a parent watching their child destroy their life with bad choices. He must punish sin, but He also weeps over the consequences.

Principle: *God enters our suffering with us.*

Nowhere did God display that more clearly than on the Cross. He sent His only Son, who willingly left the unfathomable riches of heaven to become human and identify in full with our sorrow and suffering. Our sin was the cause of His suffering. Oh, the depth of love that would cause Him to do this!

Sometimes, God seems silent when we suffer. Jeremiah expressed this feeling of abandonment when he wrote, “Even when I call out or cry for help, He shuts out my prayer” (Lamentations 3:8).

Illustration: A few years ago, a hurting soldier was staying in our home. I clearly remember the pain on his face as he pounded the walls and shouted with the intensity of a warrior, “WHY IS GOD DOING THIS TO ME?” We decided to leave the question with God. What our family friend really needed most was our embrace.

That is God's response to our suffering as well. He put His arms around us when He sent Jesus to live a difficult life and die a terrible death. On the Cross, God poured out the full measure of His wrath against sin on Jesus, and He also entered into our suffering more fully than we can imagine.

God may have *seemed* absent on the day of His wrath against Judah, but He was not. And He was not silent. He spoke through the prophets of the future and hope He offers those who put their trust in Him. When He *seems* absent in *our* suffering, He is not. Neither is He silent. The Cross is His word to us. It is the ultimate expression that He weeps along with us, His "I love you."

Conclusion

How have you responded to God's hand of discipline in your life? He disciplines us in a variety of ways. It may not always be our complete ruination. He also disciplines us through the normal trials and frustrations of everyday life. Proverbs 3:11 exhorts, "Do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent His rebuke." Which trial or difficult circumstance will you stop resenting and begin learning from? He will permit the worst possible circumstances of life to fall on us, if that is what it takes to drive us back to Him. Is that what it will take for you?

ⁱ Grudem, Wayne (2000). *Systematic Theology* (p. 788). Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press.

ⁱⁱ Bullock, C. Hassell (1986). *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (p. 175). Chicago:

ⁱⁱ Bullock, C. Hassell (1986). *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (p. 175). Chicago: Moody Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bullock, C. Hassell (1986). *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (p. 264). Chicago: Moody Press.