

*In Disaster, Promise*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*2 Peter 1:1b-11, Ezekiel 37:1-14, 2 Chronicles 36:11-21*

Our final Scripture reading is from 2 Chronicles 36:11-21. Listen now to the Word of God. “Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him take an oath in God's name. He became stiff-necked and hardened his heart and would not turn to the LORD, the God of Israel. 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. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.”

We're going to start the sermon today a little differently. In your mind's eye, I want you to picture the most obnoxious hellfire and brimstone preacher you can think of. What's he doing? Is he pounding the pulpit? Is he yelling at the top of his lungs? Does it look like he's having fun condemning everything and everybody? Are you getting embarrassed just thinking about him? He's a turnoff. You'd never attend his church. You wonder if you even share the same faith. We've created this picture in our minds today so we can deal with it and set it aside.

Now when we talk about God's judgment today, I want to give you a truer, biblical picture. Bring to mind another picture of a preacher...a prophet of Israel. His voice is level and quiet. He is predicting Jerusalem's destruction and the kingdom's fall. As he warns his hearers, his head bows, tears forming in his eyes. He weeps for his people and begs them to turn to God. Who you've just pictured is the prophet Jeremiah, expressing God's desire for His people to come back to His loving care.

In chapter 17 of *The Story* this week, we reach the end of the line for the southern kingdom of Judah. Last week, we read how the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed and its people were exiled into Assyria in 722 B.C. We heard how King Hezekiah of Judah loved God, and his removal of idolatry from Judah and his valiant prayers influenced God to spare Judah for over a hundred years.

But since then, things have gone from bad to worse. Hezekiah's son Manasseh was more wicked than any other king in Judah or Israel's history. Manasseh did eventually repent when he was captured and taken in shackles to Assyria, and God restored him. But his son Amon not only followed in his dad's wicked footsteps, he never turned to God. Finally, the kingdom had a time of relief in King Josiah, whose dedication to the LORD rivaled that of David and Hezekiah. God told Josiah that He would destroy the country for its wickedness, but because of his faithfulness Josiah would not witness its devastation. Then Josiah died, and once again, the country and its kings turned from God. God's judgment was finally about to come to pass.

In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Babylon, and he captures Judah. A first wave of Jews – mainly the elite and upper classes – are deported to Babylon. In 597 B.C., Judah goes into rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem, and a second, much larger wave of Hebrews is exiled to Babylon. Eight years later, in 589 B.C., there is a final revolt. The Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem for almost two years. When they finally break through in 586 B.C., they destroy everything...the temple, the city walls and gates, all of it. There's a massive exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. The entirety of what was once David's kingdom is now gone...north, south...all demolished.

But through this time, God's prophets still spoke. There was Ezekiel, who prophesied to the brokenhearted exiles in Babylon, and there was Jeremiah, who saw Jerusalem fall. They warned constantly of God's impending wrath, but they also spoke of a return from exile. They tearfully spoke of what would happen to Judah, but it was tempered with the promise that by God's hand, they would one day come home.

Nobody wants to focus on the difficult stuff. Jeremiah repeatedly asked God not to have to do this job...because nobody listened to him. For his troubles, he got abused, thrown down a cistern, you name it. But God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." God made him specifically for this purpose. And Jeremiah knew God's truth. He wrote the book of Lamentations, one of the most depressing books in all of Scripture. But even there, Jeremiah wrote, "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!" In his own bitterness, he still remembered that God was always with him.

When we read about all this destruction and suffering, we wonder, "what does God want me to learn about Him from *this*?" As I studied this week, I saw three truths in the destruction of Judah. First is that *Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the just God of all nations and every people.* Second is that *God does not punish anyone for fun but does so sorrowfully, in order to turn His people back to Him.* And finally, *God extends hope to us even in our darkest moments.*

First – *Yahweh is just, and He reigns over all people.* We talk a lot about justice in our society. We heard this week about 400 people who had SuperBowl tickets for seats that weren't ready in time for the game. They had to watch the game on TVs inside the dome, and they've begun suing the NFL for fraud. We might think of it as silly, but it's not to the people who spent thousands of dollars on tickets and travel and hotels. Justice is a part of our make-up. We want things to be fair, or at very least, fairer than they are. When someone is wronged, we want it to be set right. And what we see in the Bible is no less than God's finally doing justice to Judah.

If God were unfair, He might look the other way at the sins of Israel. God answers to no one but Himself; these were His chosen people, and God has the right to extend His mercy as He so chooses. But God *is* just. 500 years after warning the Canaanites, God drove them out of the Promised Land to show His judgment of their immorality, and He gave the land to the Israelites. At the time of the exile, the Hebrews had been there for 800 years, yet they had acted even more wickedly than the people God had judged before them. They continually killed His prophets, worshipped other gods, and practiced gross immorality. All the kingdoms around Israel had seen God's protection of this people...and yet their actions were abhorrent! No just God could let that go on forever, and God didn't.

Before we go on, we need to realize that God's wrath is always righteous. Our anger is almost always mixed with rage and revenge. Our anger is tainted with our sin. But God's anger is based on His perfect knowledge of every situation, and His anger is always mixed with forgiveness until the very end. Even in the middle of the siege of Jerusalem, God gives the Jews the option to leave the city and live. God is so righteous, He will spare them simply if they pack up and go.

When the Israelites go into exile, we see something amazing happen. In virtually every civilization, if a society is destroyed, its gods go with it. The remnants of that culture wind up worshipping the gods of their conquerors. But this never happened with the Jewish people. They actually grew closer to God through the exile. They wound up spreading word of Yahweh in the midst of their captivity! God sent His people into exile for a reason. And one of those reasons was to show the world that He is just, and that in His justice He would not favor His chosen people if they refused to follow Him.

But God also had another purpose in sending His people into exile: through His justice, we learn that God is the Creator of *all* people and wants *all* the nations to worship Him. In exiling His people, God made Himself all the more known! And in the coming era, God will make Himself known through His Son, Jesus. Jesus makes it clear that salvation is offered to all people. Jesus goes to the Samaritans, the hated remnants of the northern kingdom, and ministers to them. Jesus' disciples take the message to the entire Roman empire. And today, we see Christians all around the globe. It turns out that God's justice also reveals God's love and grace towards the entire world.

Let's look at the second truth in today's reading...*God does not punish anyone for fun but does so sorrowfully in order to turn His people back to Him.* Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel are called to lament the state of God's people. Jeremiah was "the weeping prophet." And God genuinely wanted to spare Judah catastrophe. In Jeremiah 5:1, God tells him, "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city." Twice in the book of Ezekiel, God says, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."

Sometimes we hear about the judgment God passes in the Old Testament era and we think that God is a God of wrath. That's true only to the extent that for God to be just, He must bring His wrath upon those who have continually forsaken Him. There's no doubt that God is genuinely angry about His people's continual betrayal of Him. But that judgment and anger and wrath is always tempered by God's genuine sorrow at their sinfulness.

One of the few religious figures still mentioned in literature classes today is the great American preacher Jonathan Edwards. I studied one of his sermons when I was in high school, and I suspect many of us did. It was called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In it, he described to his congregation just how close all of us are to hell and utter destruction, and how it's only God's holding back of His wrath that keeps us safe. His words pull no punches. Yet every biography of Edwards says that he was not a fiery preacher at all. He spoke softly, naturally, and solemnly. He regularly wept in the pulpit. He shared the grief God feels when His creation walks away from Him and defies Him at every turn. Yes, punishment is coming for all who do not turn to God...but it is the last thing God wants.

For us, this has two sides. If you are listening today and you have never turned to God in faith, if you have never declared that Jesus is your savior and lord and asked Him to take away your sin, do it today. God weeps over you. God does not want you to perish. He wants you to come to Him and receive everlasting life. He wants to change you from the inside out into a person after His own heart. He is not standing there just waiting for you to sin so He can punish you and condemn you. Not at all! As Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Jesus has already paid the price for the sins of all who will come to Him. He's taken that punishment in our stead. His invitation is open; now is the time to turn to Him. For one day, it will be too late...so make your choice today.

For those who have given their lives over to Jesus Christ, we have a different role to play. Our call is to share the love of Christ with others, to help them see their need to follow Him and receive His salvation. But many people don't realize their need of salvation until they become aware that they are sinners before God in danger of His judgment. We're told that the very first thing Jesus did in His ministry, what summarizes His entire ministry, is that He called people to repentance. The apostle Peter preached his first sermon shortly after Jesus' resurrection, and his call to the people was to repent and believe. Turning from sin is an essential part of the gospel.

Now I'm not telling you to go over to your neighbor's house and shake them by the shoulders and say, "Repent!" But I'm asking us this: when was the last time you were so concerned about a person's salvation, about their relationship with God, that you wept over it like Jeremiah did? Do we feel the weight of their lostness? When was the last time the Spirit moved you into a discussion with someone else about their faith or lack thereof? We don't need to go into it with both barrels blazing. Most people know they aren't right with God, and many are just waiting, hoping that someone might start that conversation with them.

And we go into those conversations without condemnation or superiority – we are sinners too, whose only hope is in Jesus Christ. We don't talk with our friends and neighbors about God in order to judge them. Any discussion we have on behalf of Christ Jesus should be full of grace and compassion, full of the knowledge that God can save anyone. But we ourselves should be moved to action. God weeps for those who reject Him, but His perfect justice requires Him to judge every sin. We as God's followers have the privilege to help people move from under God's judgment to under His mercy through Jesus' blood shed on the cross. Let's not shirk our responsibility.

Finally, the third thing I learned from this passage is this: *God extends hope to us even in our darkest moments.* A hundred years before the fall of Jerusalem, God told the people of Judah it was coming. And yet even as far back as that, God told the people He would preserve them through the exile and bring them back home. Jeremiah and Ezekiel went through the terrible tragedy of Judah's fall – a time unparalleled since the Hebrews left Egypt. But they continued to give the people hope. God had not forsaken them forever. Their exile was in his hands, and so was their return. The Jews would mourn the loss of their home, but God was not willing to leave them in Babylon without hope.

Our lives can get pretty dark too. We know what it's like to lose jobs we love. We've lost loved ones and suffered from broken relationships and broken hearts. We've fought with chronic illnesses. We wrestle with the depression that comes from living in a place where the sun doesn't shine much in the winter. We worry about social security and pensions, about the world we are bringing our children up in, whether or not their lives will be better or worse than our own. Some of us are in dark tunnels and we aren't sure if the light at the end is the sun or an oncoming train.

Yet God always gives us hope. In John 10:10, we hear Jesus' words: "I came that [my sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus' last words to His disciples recorded in Matthew 28:20 are, "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." We're told both in the Old Testament and the New, God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." We can count on God. Even in times of trial or suffering or, yes, even for a time punishment, God has not given up on us. And we should not give up on Him. He will deliver us. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not until eternity, but every Christian can know that He is and will always be our rescue. No matter what your situation may be, no matter how bleak, run into His loving arms and know He will always be there for you.

The last few chapters of *The Story* have been among the hardest for us to understand, with lots of confusing names, a lot of kings, lots of sin, lots of disasters. Don't lose hope...it gets better from here. In the midst of all this tragedy, hope is on the way for God's people. And we can rejoice – our hope is already here in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who frees us from our captivity to sin and releases us into the joyous light of God our Heavenly Father.