

Sorrow Horror Tinged with Hope

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Date: 01 September 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now we're going to turn to our reading for this evening. As we reach the very conclusion of the Chronicler's work, we're going to read this evening 2 Chronicles chapter 36.

2 Chronicles 36. If you're using one of the visitor's Bibles, that's on page 387. And if not, then you'll find it just before Ezra or just after Samuel and Kings.

2 Chronicles 36, beginning verse 1.

The people of the land took Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah, and made him king in his father's place in Jerusalem. Jehoahaz was 23 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem.

Then the king of Egypt deposed him in Jerusalem and laid on the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. And the king of Egypt made Eliakim, his brother, king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim.

[1 : 1 3] But Neco took Jehoahaz, his brother, and carried him to Egypt. Jehoiakim was 25 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. Against him came up Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar also carried parts of the vessels of the house of the Lord to Babylon and put them in his palace in Babylon. Now the rest of the acts of Jehoiakim and the abominations that he did and what was found against him, behold, they are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.

And Jehoiakim, his son, reigned in his place. Jehoiakim was 18 years old when he became king, and he reigned three months and ten days in Jerusalem.

He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. In the spring of the year, King Nebuchadnezzar sent and brought him to Babylon with the precious vessels of the house of the Lord and made his brother Zedekiah king over Judah and Jerusalem.

[2 : 2 1] Zedekiah was 21 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 11 years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the Lord.

He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who'd made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord, the God of Israel.

All the officers of the priests and the people, likewise, were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations, and they polluted the house of the Lord that he'd made holy in Jerusalem.

The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rues against his people, until there was no remedy.

Therefore, he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with a sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged.

[3 : 39] He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon.

And they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who'd escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons, until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had its Sabbaths.

All the days that it lay desolate, it kept Sabbath to fulfill 70 years. Now, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing.

Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he's charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. Amen.

[5 : 10] Amen. This is God's word. Well, do you have your Bibles open again to 2 Chronicles chapter 36.

One of the great skills about storytelling is in what to do with the ending. Will it end on a cliffhanger? A twist?

Everything tied up nicely in a boo? Will the crisis be resolved? Will it have the ending that shocks? Will it look like a triumph for evil?

We're at the end of the chronicler's story. Of course, his story is history. And he's been using it as a guide, a roadmap to his readers, to show them how to avoid another exile.

And more than that, he's using it to set up for them the path to true and lasting blessing. A blessing that can come only with God.

[6 : 15] But with this ending to his story, things get worse, a lot worse, before it gets better. But again, this is the chronicler showing God's people what their priorities must be.

What being God's people really looks like. And so really, the ending of the story is a challenge. In fact, look at the very last sentence of the book. It simply says, let him go up.

He finishes on an incomplete sentence. Go up where? Go up and do what? It's a challenge. The point is that this whole book is the roadmap laid down.

Now, will you follow it? Will you do it? Go up and do what I've been teaching. But before we get to the hope that awaits for God's people, before we get to the hope that awaits for those who do go up, there's horror.

This final chapter is a scene of horror that is tinged with hope. And so following on from the great king Josiah and his demise, we head into a truly dark and grim period for Judah.

[7 : 33] Even a great king like Josiah couldn't ultimately solve Judah's great problems. He was great for a time, but remember the prophecy that he received from Huldah when he discovered the book.

Look back just a page or two to chapter 34, verse 25. He was told, because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands.

Therefore, my wrath will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched. Wrath was coming for Judah. Look a few verses later at verse 27 in that chapter.

The words to Josiah, because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants and you've humbled yourself before me and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the Lord.

Behold, I will gather to you your fathers and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace and your eyes, Josiah, shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place.

[8 : 53] Josiah was a great king. He did great things, but even the greatest of the kings of men cannot ultimately turn away God's wrath.

And so now that Josiah is gone, the time of wrath has come. We see the spiral downwards go into full swing. Judah takes a huge nosedive.

We see firstly the downward spiritual spiral away from God, verses 1 to 11, the downward spiritual spiral away from God. We see here that when God's people cease to listen to his word in any way, then it foreshadows a bleak future for them.

Following on from Josiah, there are two further kings in the same years as death. His successor lasts only three months and the general picture is all grim. We see in these verses a repeating pattern.

All four kings have their reigns summarized as being essentially the same. All of them face the same consequences in their own lifetime. And all of them see the same consequences for the temple.

[10 : 04] So all four of them were firstly evil kings. Look at verse 2. Jehoahaz begins to rain and his reign lasts three months only.

Short rains and chronicles are always a sign of bad kings. Well, what about the next king? Eliakim, whose name is changed to Jehoiakim. He's placed into power by Necu.

Not a great start. He's a puppet king in total subjugation to Egypt. And then look at verse 5. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

Verse 8. All his abominations and all the claims against him are recorded in the history books. And then we have the next king, Jehoiakim.

Similar name, similar pronouncement. Verse 9. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Fourth king, Zedekiah, verse 12.

[11 : 04] He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They were all evil kings, but there's more to the pattern than this, for they were also all exiled kings.

Look at what the consequences are for the kings and their evil. Jehoahaz, after he was deposed in favor of his brother, Necu doesn't stop the humiliation there, but verse 4, he takes Jehoahaz into exile, dragged off into Egypt.

The opposite journey that God's people had done when he rescued them. What about Jehoiakim? Well, his problems weren't with Egypt, but with Babylon, the other place of torment for God's people.

Verse 6. He's bound and he's dragged off to Babylon. We might recognize these events from the start of the book of Daniel. What about Jehoiakim? Verse 10.

He too is dragged off to Babylon at the will of Nebuchadnezzar. The fourth king, Zedekiah. Well, he faces the same thing. Verse 20. But we'll return to that later.

[12 : 13] So all these kings are evil. All of them were exiled. But then we also see under each one the extraction of valuables. And that's particularly from the temple.

So Jehoahaz, verse 3, we see a tribute that has to be paid. Jehoiakim, verse 7, Nebuchadnezzar carries some of the vessels from the temple and put them in his palace.

He plunders the temple. Verse 10, Jehoiakim. Nebuchadnezzar again brings Jehoiakim to Babylon along with the precious vessels from the temple. And the same thing for Zedekiah, verse 18.

Evil kings, exiled kings, and extraction of valuables, particularly from the temple. That's the pattern. And the reason that this pattern is here is to make obvious that the fate of God's king and the fate of God's temple are intertwined.

And Judah is in disarray. Abandoning God means that all his promised blessings are removed. His kingdom, when it's flourishing, has a king with all the people in place and able to worship together in the temple.

[13 : 33] But those two main pillars of the kingdom have been removed. It is literally the signs of God's kingdom falling down around Judah. Temple gone, kings gone.

The temple's plundered and the kings are puppets in the political affairs of other nations. Christians. The chronicler wants us to see that this is the real low point for God's kingdom.

This is things at their very worst. Four kings in a row who show no signs of taking God seriously. And so the rot in the throne brings with it the ruin in the temple.

The point for God's people here is that continual refusal to bow to God to embrace his life-giving word that is to pursue ruin.

It is not the path to blessing but it's the path to ever spiral ever worsening horror. And that's what we see in the second point verses 12 to 14 the damning scorn for God the damning scorn for God.

[14 : 45] Forsaking God's word is always the same. Fads will come and go but any rejection of God's word no matter how it's dressed up is still outright scorn and rebellion against God.

The verdict is passed down upon the king of Judah here. The chronicler has been summarizing these reigns together and he follows a similar pattern for all of them and really what he's saying is that they're all one and the same.

And so as he expands the summary of Zedekiah the last king what we see about Zedekiah is really the verdict against all four of these kings. They've all been doing the same things.

So look at verse 12. The spiral downwards centers around ignoring the prophetic word. the kings did what was evil and failed to humble themselves before the prophet.

Here it's Jeremiah. They failed to humble themselves to listen to the words that notice come from the mouth of God himself. When confronted with God's word exhorting you to change there is only one response that's right.

[16 : 00] Humble yourself. Remember Zedekiah's exemplary show of that. He responded by humbling himself. That's what Huldah the prophet said about him.

And because he had humbled himself then the disaster wasn't going to come to him. God's word is the offer of life because if we hear it and listen to it then disaster is averted because God is gracious.

But here these kings here Zedekiah doesn't care. The fingers are in the ears. And worse than ignoring the prophetic words verse 13 he also desecrates God's name.

God's good name. The name that was at the very center of God's rescue of his people from Egypt all the way back in Exodus. the name that was not to be taken in vain.

Before God rescued his people from Egypt he revealed himself in power to Pharaoh who'd scoffed by saying who's the Lord that I should let my people go with him.

[17 : 12] And after he scoffed about who the Lord was he found out well and truly who he was. The plagues came and there was no doubt who the Lord was.

And God's people were assured through all of this just who the Lord is as they sang Moses' song they were finally able to sing in Exodus that Yahweh the Lord is his name.

We finally know who he is. And so when the Ten Commandments were given we see that precious name is to be held in honor. It's the intimate name of God that's revealed for his treasured people.

But here verse 13 even though Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah swear by God's name to not rebel against him he does so anyway making a vow over God's name and then trampling it in the dirt.

Well if that wasn't enough ignoring the prophetic word and desecrating God's name the final charge laid against Judah and its kings verse 14 all the officers of the priests all the people had become unfaithful becoming just like the other nations with their abominations things like perverse orgies their practices like sacrificing babies all these barbaric things have been practiced by the Lord's own people and with it all look they polluted God's house those are the charges brought against Judah the verdict is in guilty in all ways and so notice what that makes these people look again at verse 13 look at the two phrases used there about Zedekiah and what he did towards God he stiffened his neck and he hardened his heart they're two particularly highly charged phrases aren't they signpost back to

[19 : 15] Exodus signpost back to the golden calf here God's people have yet again betrayed him in the most outrageous way possible turning to other things turning to idols to anything but God who so richly blessed them the chronicler is making clear that when the prophetic word is ignored no matter what way it's ignored it is tantamount to what happened with the golden calf so for the remnant who'd returned to the land for us whatever form our rejection of God and his word takes then we might dress it up in respectable language we might try and justify it but rejection is rejection when we're confronted by what God says and we harden ourselves to it and don't listen choosing to go our own way then that is an outrageous rejection of God a betrayal and offense just like the golden calf if you're here tonight and you don't know what to make of

God or you're here and you know that you don't belong to him or if you're here and you think that in the end you'll be fine because you're a nice guy you haven't murdered anyone then look at this this damning scorn flows from not listening to God it centers around hearing God and thinking his word isn't for you and the horror continues the chronicler is building up to the grand finale of the great story of God's people that he's been retelling and next we see the disastrous sentence given out by God the disastrous sentence given out by God verses 15 to 20 there is only one outcome to settle defiance of God there's only one fate for those who continue unabated to scorn and ignore God and it's disaster despite

God's people continuing to reject God we actually see that God is still merciful and patient with them look at verse 15 he shows mercy God gives opportunity after opportunity for his people to turn away from their disaster he persistently sends messengers to them he kept sending prophets he kept warning what would happen he kept giving time and opportunity to relent to stop the rebellion he shows compassion again and again Jeremiah amongst others were there with the king speaking God's word to them you see it is an absolute mercy to have God's word as long as he is speaking to us as long as we can hear his word there's hope I'll never forget the look of amazement on a new Christian's face when we were reading a book together and he said it's common to think that we're doing God a favor when we read his word or listen to sermons he said but I've just realized that it's the opposite

God's being amazingly kind to us by speaking and revealing his word to us the light had gone on God's word is good for us it's his silence that's disastrous God kept doing this because warning about what will happen is actually the offer of salvation the consistent warnings of God are a good thing it's offering a way out it's saying that there's still hope but even with this profound kindness what happens verse 16 his mercy is met with mockery God's word is offered to the people a word saying don't go down the road of disaster saying go the way that led to Josiah's glorious celebration go the way that leads to life go the way that leads to blessing forever but verse 16 they mocked they despised they scoffed at the prophets

God is merciful he's been patient he's kind he offers to anyone with breath in their lungs the opportunity to choose life but if it's met with mockery or malice then the mercy will eventually run out the time to act the time to listen is always now but they didn't and things get very bleak indeed verse 17 from their mockery comes massacre God handed Judah into the hands of the Chaldeans he handed them over to be killed and notice that these killings even happen in the temple itself it's total it's all encompassing and on top of the massacre verse 18 there's the mugging of the temple everything's removed from it completely shut down completely pillaged completely abandoned and then verse 19 demolished the city's left in ruins as well as the temple but notice that the detail there is particularly about the wall and the temple building both were demolished it's a particularly important detail for the remnant who the chronicler was writing to it was their mission to rebuild those so he's drawing attention that they were destroyed and they must be rebuilt massacre mugging demolishing verse 20 imprisonment any who weren't killed were imprisoned carried off to exile in

[25 : 20] Babylon scorning God repeatedly and continuously abandoning his word completely leads to exile and of course for God's people to be out of the land removed from Canaan and Jerusalem was a more significant thing than just losing a home it was to be removed from God's kingdom from his blessing it was to be banished to grim existence it's all so disastrous but the chronicler isn't writing this to depress us he's writing this not as a sentence against God's people who would read it he's writing this as a road map to blessing he's wanting to show God's people the path to life the path to glory and that's where he ends but before he gets to that ending this is his last stop on the way and it's a big warning sign on the road map that says do not take this path think of it a bit like the signs that are around the fallout area in

Chernobyl danger radiation do not enter caution be careful this is not a place to take a shortcut through the chronicler is saying far worse than exposure to radiation is deciding to go your own way away from God the chronicler wanted his readers to see the horror of what had gone before to see again the history that they're a product of to see what led to exile and to be reminded just how disastrous it was he's saying don't go back there the chronicler serving just as the prophets did he were mentioned in verse 15 he's another messenger sent from God and it was vital for the remnant who returned to the land to not make these same mistakes do not neglect

God's word do not neglect God's temple take him seriously embrace his word because it brings life worship him because that's where true joy is found and so giving this rather horrific tale the chronicler finished his story on a note of possibility a note of promise and fulfillment a note of hope and so we see finally in verses 21 to 23 the determined salvation of God the determined salvation of God God will achieve his purposes for this world he will establish his kingdom throughout this world his promises will not fall those who remain faithful will be saved those who listen will enjoy all that God's kingdom means forever even if you find

God's word hard to listen to if you're prepared to submit to it if you keep listening to it there's hope here even in the face of exile there was hope the story wasn't over and we see that come through in these verses in two ways look firstly at verse 21 we see all this was happening to fulfill the word of the Lord but then notice the change of tone in these verses after the spelling out of all the curses that fell upon unfaithful Judah look at what the chronicler says the exile would happen until the land enjoyed its sabbaths all the days that lay desolate it kept sabbath to fulfill 70 years that's the length of time that Jeremiah had prophesied the exile would last so the chronicler is pointing to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's words but along with the fulfillment of

Jeremiah's words the chronicler is actually showing how the exile had a positive purpose for God's plans for the chronicler here is also referring to Leviticus listen to these words from Leviticus chapter 26 Leviticus tells us that the land was to have its own Sabbath every seven years that was the law six years for sowing and tending and the seventh year for rest a year for the people to look to God to rely on him but of course that hadn't been happening for a long time so the land was going to enjoy 70 years of Sabbath in a room to make up for hundreds of years that it hadn't under unfaithful

[30 : 41] Judah the chronicler is writing this to the remnant who returned to the land were a preparation a reset for them they were returning to a land that would be once again ready and able to prosper remember the land was the place that God promised would be flowing with milk and honey a place that would prosper and flourish and provide and now for the remnant they're back in the land and it's ready for them the chronicler is giving the people a roadmap to blessing and then he's saying at the end that the blessing is waiting the land's ready it's ready to unleash its fruit once again the land's ready it's prepared there's real hope God has planned this he said centuries before he'd enshrined in his law along with the curses for disobedience he'd enshrined this promise this hope that the land wouldn't decline and disappear instead even in exile

God was still at work to order things for the blessing of his people hope is not lost well that's the first way that we see it but we also see that God's promises won't fall in verses 22 to 23 notice again the emphasis here that this is all to fulfill what the Lord has said but then look at what God ordered for his people he moved to make a foreign king Cyrus king of Persia the latest superpower in the neighborhood he moved King Cyrus to make a proclamation throughout his kingdom and it says verse 23 the Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he's charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah if we ever struggle to see how

God might be at work when things look bleak read this verse God works in King Cyrus to free his people and to fund his temple even when it looks like God's promises are failing even when it looks like this world will be victorious even when it seems that we're so outnumbered and so under pressure that defeat is imminent look at what God can do he can move the Vladimir Putins the Boris Johnsons the Nicholas Sturgeons of this world to do his will and to build his kingdom to bring exile to an end God worked through a Gentile king to promote and to pay for example it's astonishing we do not have to worry about God doing his part we do not have to worry that we might do what we're meant to do and God might drop the ball quite the opposite look at how the chronicler ends whoever is among you of all his people may the

Lord his God be with him let him go up the chronicler is saying that God has been at work he'll honor his promises so over to you even a foreign king is making it possible for the temple to be built that's how set and how determined God is to bring this to fruition so with the will of the king behind you go go and take hold notice that the chronicler basically finishes mid sentence let him go up he's saying to the remnant God has brought you back to the land and I've spent this whole book laying out the way to blessing so are you going to take hold of it I've brought you back I've prepared you for it I've paid for it I've stored up blessings for it the king saying go if you want go will you go and take hold of it that's what he's been going to great lengths to make clear that the remnant are to go and restore their temple that's the mission go build the temple go put your hope in all that

God promises and as you do there is a waiting for you all the blessings that God has always promised the land's ready if you go you will flourish the promises are there to be enjoyed take hold of them put your hope in God's promise to establish his kingdom throughout the whole world take hold of his promise to bless the hope amidst this horror of exile is that God didn't abandon his promises or his people the remnant now have a model laid before them a map to lead them to true flourishing go up and restore the temple go and worship the Lord your God go and listen to his life giving word to you and how much more do we know the hope that

[36 : 29] God promises God's prepared the promised land for us the true Jerusalem awaits the church but we too have a mission and every one of us is part of it worship God and tell the gospel that's that was the road mark for the remnant and it lays out the path for us Jerusalem awaits if that's our path a great hope comes with a great mission but God has assured us that the hope is real it will not fall let's pray father we can see that it is a picture of utter darkness for those who don't belong to you and for those who would go their own way so

Lord we pray that you would equip us and empower us and envision us to be a church that does whatever we have to to offer the word of life to our city to the praise of your glory amen