

David's Line Down but Not Out

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, we are continuing our studies in the book of Jeremiah, and if you would turn to page 648, if you have the church Bibles there, we're going to read chapter 21 and part of 22.

So, Jeremiah 21, and then part of 22. This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord when King Zedekiah sent to Impashur, the son of Malkiah, and Zephaniah, the priest, the son of Messiah, saying, Inquire of the Lord for us, for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is making war against us. Perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all his wonderful deeds and will make Nebuchadnezzar withdraw from us. Then Jeremiah said to them, Thus you shall say to Zedekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls, and I will bring them together into the midst of this city. I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast.

They shall die of a great pestilence. Afterwards, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his servants, and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives.

[1 : 50] He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them, or spare them, or have compassion. And to this people you shall say, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.

He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. But he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have his life as a prize of war.

For I have set my face against this city for harm, and not for good, declares the Lord. It shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall burn it with fire.

And to the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David. Thus says the Lord, Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed.

Let my wrath go like fire, and burn with none to quench it because of your evil deeds. Behold, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, declares the Lord.

[3 : 00] You who say, Who shall come down against us, or who shall enter into our habitations? I will punish you according to the fruit of your deeds, declares the Lord.

I will kindle a fire in her forest. It shall avow all that is around them. The prophet continues in this vein for some verses, and then we go down to verse 11 of chapter 22, where he begins the telling the kings of Judah what the Lord has in store for them.

For thus says the Lord concerning Shalom, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who reigned instead of Josiah his father, and who went away from this place. He shall return here no more.

But in the place where they have carried him captive, there shall he die, and he shall never see this land again. Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice. Who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages. Who says, I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms.

[4 : 10] Who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar?

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Then it was well.

Is not this to know me, declares the Lord? But you have eyes and hearts only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood and for practicing oppression and violence.

Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah. They shall not lament for him saying, Ah, my brother, or Ah, sister.

They shall not lament for him saying, Ah, Lord, or Ah, his majesty. With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried. Dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

[5 : 11] Go up to Lebanon and cry out and lift up your voice in Bashan. Cry out from Abarim, for all your lovers are destroyed. I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, I will not listen.

This has been your way from your youth, that you have not obeyed my voice. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil.

O inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars, how you will be pitied when pangs come upon you, pains as of a woman in labor.

As I live, declares the Lord, though can I, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, wear the signet ring on my right hand. Yet I will tear you off and give you into the hand of those who seek your life, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and into the land of the Chaldeans.

I will hurl you and the mother who bore you into another country where you were not born, and there you shall die. And to the land to which they long to return, there they shall not return.

[6 : 27] Is this man, Caniah, a despised, broken pot, a vessel no one cares for? Why are he and his children hurled and cast into a land that they do not know?

O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord, write down this man as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, perhaps you could have your Bibles open, please, at page 648, Jeremiah 21 and 22, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

Let's pray. God, our Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us, and that you will open your words to our hearts and minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

And we pray this in the name of the living word, Christ Jesus himself. Amen. Amen. Next year, 2014, is the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, known for many years afterwards and still known sometimes today as the Great War, a war whose consequences are still with us, the kind of national boundaries that emerged after that war, the many things that came into the world as a result of that war are still very much with us in the 21st century.

[8 : 35] And obviously, many books are already being written about that war. There'll be many programs, and there'll be many other books commissioned. The moment I'm reading one of those books, it's called 1913, The World Before the Great War.

It's a survey of the year before Europe and the world was plunged into the Holocaust of the Great War. What struck me about that book is the sense of complacency of so many people on the eve of the war.

German Kaiser, for example, said, if war ever was in prospect, that prospect has diminished and will not happen in our lifetimes. Just a year before the Holocaust began, living standards were improving.

People were transport, communications, all these were improving. And it struck me as, while I was reading this and as preparing this passage in Jeremiah, that is exactly the position the prophet found himself in, on the brink of the exile.

This tremendous Holocaust that was to come over the people of God and whose consequences were to reverberate down the centuries. Complacency, indeed, later on will find false prophets saying it's not going to happen.

[10 : 00] So, the world often, and individuals often, are on the brink of a precipice and they don't recognize it. The other thing that struck me in comparison of this book and this passage we've read is that the author doesn't begin on the 1st of January and go straight through the year chronologically until the 31st of December.

What he does, he gives us a series of snapshots of major cities in 1913, London, New York, Berlin, Vienna, more distant cities like New York and so on, and the growing cities in America and Canada and Australia and so on.

Now, that's what Jeremiah is doing as well. He's not giving us a chronological account of how the exile is going to happen. He's giving us a series of snapshots of the last four kings of Judah before the exile happens.

Remember, we've noticed this already in Jeremiah. Something doesn't have to be chronological in order to be true. What Jeremiah is doing is he's arranging his material to make maximum impact. Now, let me make two introductory points to try and clarify this. First of all, a brief note on the historical background. May well be that you haven't been thinking very much about Shalom, king of Judah, in the last few months.

[11 : 24] This was the king in chapter 22, verse 11, who succeeded Josiah. He's also in the book of Kings called Jehoahaz.

Almost certainly, Shalom was his personal name and Jehoahaz was his throne name. He lasted only three months and then was exiled to Egypt where he died.

Three months reign of this man, Shalom. He was succeeded by Jehoiakim, who is in verse 18 and verse 24 of the chapter.

He only lasted a short time as well. And he had a violent and corrupt reign and he died dishonorably and was not given honorable burial.

Then we have Jehoiakim or Kaniah in verse 24 of the chapter, taken to Babylon, probably the same time as Daniel and others.

[12 : 26] And so you see what's happening. Josiah dies. He's succeeded by these three sons, Shalom, Jehoiakim and Jehoiakim or Kaniah.

And then Nebuchadnezzar installs the puppet king, Zedekiah, who reigns for about 10 years. Then he rebels. And Nebuchadnezzar returns and destroys the city.

And the exile proper begins. That's what Jeremiah is talking about here. These last four kings. Four incompetent and rather dishonorable individuals who occupied the throne of Judah in the years leading to the exile.

We want to look at its place in God's story. This is not an exercise in ancient history. This is not like some of those archaeological programs like Time Watch, which are interesting in themselves, where people dig up the debris of the past and try to reconstruct a Roman fort or an Elizabethan villa or something like that.

This is the story of how God expects justice and mercy. How God expects, as the prophet Micah said, what does the Lord require to do justly, to love mercy and walk humbly?

[13 : 44] And in verse 29 of chapter 22, the phrase, O land, land, land, land, could equally be O earth, earth, earth.

Even the word ereks, which can mean land or earth. Obviously, the land of Judah in the 6th century BC. But this applies to the whole earth, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly.

We want to see this, then, in these four kings who discredited David's line and one who showed that it still had a future. My title this evening is David's Line Down, but Not Out.

It looks the end for David and his descendants, but it's not the end yet. And as we look at the chapter, I want really to look at two major points.

If you look at verse 8 of chapter 21, To this people you shall say, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.

[14 : 49] Jeremiah, as so often, is echoing the words of Moses. These are the words of Moses to the people on the borders of the land. See, I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing.

Therefore, choose life. So we're going to look at these two broad areas. Those who chose death and the one who chose life. So first of all, choosing death.

Four kings who rejected the covenant. Four kings who dishonored God and who stand as warnings. Stand as warnings not to trifle with grace or flout the Lord's love.

You'll notice that. You'll notice verse 9. He who stays, verse 9 of chapter 21. He who stays in this city shall die. But he who goes out and surrenders shall live.

I set before you life and death. Now, these four kings who chose death are uniformly marked by make-believe and wishful thinking.

[15 : 51] It's never going to happen. The Lord is not going to reject his people. Remember what the task of the prophet is? To open people's eyes to reality.

T.S. Eliot said, humankind cannot bear very much reality. Sometimes I think humankind cannot bear any reality at all. And certainly there were many in Judah who were living in cloud cuckoo land.

Well, let's look at these four kings then. First of all, Zedekiah. Remember, this is not chronological. What this message to Zedekiah, given just shortly before the exile, is also going to pick up on his predecessors.

Zedekiah wanting rescue without repentance. That's what Zedekiah wants. Lord, forgive us. We're not going to change. We're not going to repent.

We're not going to do anything. In order to justify forgiveness. We just forgive us anyway. As either Voltaire or the Empress Catherine said, the good God will forgive me.

[16:55] That's his job. You know, it's not anybody's job to forgive. If you forgive, you do it out of grace and compassion. You don't do it because it's your job to forgive.

So, he sends delegates. Zedekiah sends these delegates to Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord, verse 2. Now, that, of course, is hypocrisy straight away.

Zedekiah does not want to hear what the Lord is saying. All Zedekiah wants to hear is a message of reassurance. And notice the breathtaking lack of realism.

Verse 2. And perhaps the Lord will deal us according to all his wonderful deeds. After all, the Lord specialized in this kind of thing. He rescued us from Pharaoh.

And, of course, the incident, which was probably in Zedekiah's mind, a century or so before, when the angel of Yahweh had rescued Jerusalem from the armies of Sennacherib, the Assyrian.

[17:57] Very, very different then. Then, it was godly King Hezekiah who humbled himself and said, Lord, rescue this city, not because I'm a good guy, but so that all the earth will know that you, Yahweh, are God.

So, you see, this is totally lacking in realism. Forgive me, although I have no intention of repenting. Like Claudius in Hamlet.

But, kneeling, asking that a sin of murder of his brother be blotted out without any intention of repenting of that sin.

My words fly up. My thoughts remain below, says Claudius. Words without thoughts never to heaven go. Can one be pardoned and retain the offense, says Claudius.

That's Zedekiah as well. Zedekiah wants pardoned. The Lord will do all his wonderful deeds. It's the kind of futile talk you so often hear nowadays, isn't it?

[19:01] Perhaps, even though we've rejected the word of the Lord, turned our back and he may still send revival into our church. Totally misguided and misleading.

The Lord will not send revival to people who do not repent. And that's what Zedekiah is thinking here. And you'll notice, as the chapter goes on, the guilt is shared by the whole city.

Verse, To the house of the king of Judah say, Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David. Verse 11. Thus says, Execute justice in the morning.

Deliver from the hand of the oppressor. Verse 12. The you there is a feminine singular. It's the whole city of Jerusalem. The king is guilty. The king is particularly guilty.

But the people are guilty as well. They followed like sheep. They followed heedlessly. And now they are standing expecting the God of the Exodus to perform a miracle.

[20:01] Rather like Herod. He was delighted to see Jesus because he wanted him to do a miracle. And this is so often the attitude of God's people.

Don't change anything. Don't repent. But expect the Lord will, according to all his wonderful deeds. So that repentance without forgiveness.

Then we come to Shalom or Jehoahaz in chapter 22, verse 10 and 11.

Weep not for him who is dead. That's Josiah. Don't weep for him, but weep bitterly for him who goes away. That's Shalom who is going to be taken into captivity in Egypt.

The book of Kings tells us that this king only reigned for three months. It also tells us those three months were marked by doing evil in the sight of the Lord.

[21:05] It doesn't take very long for people to reveal themselves, does it? You see, he had the opportunity to build on his father's good work. He had the opportunity to continue his father's reforming zeal.

What does he do? He throws it all away in a few weeks. You see, it takes patient years to build up a work of God. Yet so often it can be thrown away in a few months by those who think they know better, by those who think that they can choose their own way.

He's taken into exile in Egypt. That didn't need to be disastrous. After all, Joseph was taken into exile in Egypt. Daniel and Ezekiel are about to be taken into exile in Babylon.

It's possible even in the land of exile to be faithful to the Lord. It's possible even in the land of exile for God's purposes to be worked out. And these people I've mentioned show that.

However, weep for him. Weep for him. He shall return no more. Verse 12. And the place where they carried him captive, there she shall die.

[22 : 17] And she'll never see this land again. A three-month reign followed by exile, followed by death. This is a man who has chosen death.

This is exile without hope, if you like. Exile need not be without hope. Even the nation's exile was not to be without hope. But this man's was because he did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

And we come to the third son, Jehoiakim. This is 13 to 15a and 17 to 23. I haven't forgotten, by the way, 15b and so on.

We're coming to that. Jehoiakim, another unworthy son of Josiah. What's this son, Mark? By power without responsibility.

He wants position. He wants posture. He wants pomp and ceremony. Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice.

[23 : 20] The kind of thing that an earlier prophet, Amos, had denounced in the northern kingdom, which is now already in exile. Makes his neighbors serve for nothing. Doesn't give him...

Says, I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms. Cuts out windows for it. Painting it with vermilion. And can we not almost hear and say to my soul, Soul, you have goods laid up for many years.

Eat, drink, and be merry. That is Jehoiakim. A man of ostentation, of pomp, of circumstance. Position and appearance was all he cared about.

He was... I mean, after all, the land was teetering on the brink of exile. The nation was in a desperate state. And what does he do? He wants to build fine houses.

Verse 15, because you compete in cedar. And then continuing in verse 17, You have eyes and heart only for dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

[24 : 30] And this is to lead to a dishonored and to an unlamented death. This king, who later on in the book, in chapter 36, is to listen to the scroll of the words of Jeremiah.

He is to take his knife, cut off the pieces of the scroll, and throw it into the fire. This is a man who has utter, utter contempt for the word of the prophet, for the word of the Lord.

It leads to a dishonored and unlamented death, which is to be the death of the city and the kingdom. Notice how he's referred, the metaphor here, verse 20, go up to Lebanon and then 23, own habitant of Lebanon.

Lebanon's cedars, magnificent, wonderful, wonderful trees, are often used in Scripture as a symbol of magnificence and pride. Growing up like the cedar of Lebanon and then cut down.

And notice verse 22, the wind shall shepherd all your shepherds. The shepherds are the leaders, including these kings who have led Israel astray.

[25 : 38] They are the false prophets. They've been only too willing to follow. So you see this picture of those who chose death. Repentance without forgiveness.

Exile without hope. Power without responsibility. And finally, Kaniah, who is also called Jehoiakim. As I live, declares the Lord, verse 24, though Kaniah, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off.

And here we have barrenness and the end of hope. Kaniah, once again, the metaphor of the broken pot, verse 28.

We've seen this metaphor in Jeremiah throughout the last few chapters. This pot has been what Paul is to call in Romans 9 to 11, a vessel of dishonor.

The signet ring, a sign of possession, a sign of security. Even if he were to be that, the Lord is going to throw him away. Verse 20, I'll hurl you on the mother who bore you into another country.

[26 : 53] Now, Jehoiakim, or Kaniah, was not, in fact, childless. 1 Chronicles 3 tells us he actually had seven sons.

Now, that's usually a sign of blessing. Samus tells your sons around your table, a sign of blessing, a sign of fruitfulness, and so on. But none of them would come to anything.

Verse 30, none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah. And that's a matter of historical fact.

None of them would carry on the line. But you can imagine there'll be many in Jerusalem who would be still thinking, oh, the king is in exile, that he may come back.

Whereas in the 18th century, the Jacobites, in their conclaves, as they did a toast, would pass their wine glasses over the water to the king over the water, hoping that body Prince Charlie would return again and set up his kingdom.

[27 : 58] And you can pick up, as you read the prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, there was such a party in Jerusalem. The exiled king is going to come back. The Lord will show his wonders again.

Everything will be just as it was. Nothing changed, no repentance, and yet everything will be the same. These are men who chose death.

Now let's come to the verses you thought I'd forgotten about. 22, 15b, and 16. Let me read them. Chapter 22, verse 15b.

Did not your father, that's Josiah, eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy.

Then it was well. Is not this to know me, declares Yahweh. Now remember Jeremiah's technique that we've become familiar with, I hope, of placing pictures together, a kind of collage, to bring out the different shades of meaning.

[29 : 03] This little section here, which most of the commentators surprisingly ignore, this little vignette, this little picture of the godly king Josiah, shows us that while David's line is down, it is not out.

The godly king, now the godly king's reforms failed to save the nation. And I think that's hugely important. Josiah was told by the prophetess that his reforms would fail because the Lord had decided to judge the nation.

I've said this before, but I think it's worth pondering again. What would you feel if you were told that in your lifetime the decline of the church in Britain would continue? There would be no great movement of the spirit.

Now of course, you're not going to be told that. But even if we were, what's the right thing to do?

The right thing to do is to keep on doing what the Lord has commanded us to do, to preach the word, to pray, to pray that the Lord will do a work in our time, whether he does or not.

You see, Josiah could have said, well, stop that. I'm going to just give up all these reforms. They're not going to succeed. Don't ever get into that situation, brothers and sisters.

[30 : 26] When we feel our work is not succeeding, remember, it's only part of a bigger story. And we don't know when the Lord will move.

We don't know what the Lord will do. And that's why we have to continue faithful. Blessed is the one whom when the master returns will find faithfully doing his duty.

And just before the darkness falls, here we have a genuine glimpse of the king and the kingdom that is to come. Here we have a man who chose life.

Remember, this is a genuine glimpse of the coming kingdom. This is a picture of what it will be like when the king returns. Maybe it's unclear.

Maybe it's blurred. Maybe it's partial. But this is what it's going to be like. So let's look for a moment or two then at what Josiah's reign exemplify.

[31 : 23] First of all, he ate and drank. Verse 18. You may think, oh, so what? Everyone eats and drinks. I don't think that's what this phrase means. This is a metaphor of the feast of the kingdom.

The plenty and abundance that will come during the reign of the Messiah. Reminds us of great David showing hospitality to Mephibosheth, the descendant of Saul, sitting him at his table.

The great days of Solomon in 1 Kings 4 where people ate and drank and sat under their fig trees. A glimpse of the kingdom that's to come. The party to which wisdom invites us in chapter 9 of our book.

Come and eat and drink. Come and be filled. And of course the parables in the Gospels of the great banquet. Josiah rejoiced and was thankful in God's good gifts and thus he anticipated the joy of the new creation.

Josiah's days were days of plenty not days of famine. So there's peace and prosperity anticipating the kingdom. There is justice and mercy anticipating the kingdom as well.

[32 : 40] Verse 16 he judged the cause of the poor and the needy. That psalm that I read from earlier on we'll sing a version of it in a few moments.

The king delivers the needy when he calls the poor and him who has no helper. Do you see why Jeremiah has placed this in the Jehoiakim portrait in the middle of it.

Jehoiakim was a man who despised the needy when they called. Jehoiakim was a man who oppressed the poor. Jehoiakim was a man of blood a tyrant a monster of a man really.

And here in the middle of this shining like a brilliant star against a dark back cloth is this king who cared who did justice who loved mercy who walked humbly and you remember the inspiration for this was the discovery of the book of the law the words of Moses which Josiah then started to carry out in his it failed because the nation was already doomed but it was right for Josiah to do this.

And in the earthly life of the Lord himself we see the kingdom coming we see the kingdom coming in deeds of delivering the needy opening the eyes of the blind raising the poor and so on.

[34 : 08] Not the final triumph but a trailer of it. Peace and prosperity justice and mercy but the most important thing of all the end of verse 16 is not this to know me declares the Lord he knew the Lord that was a deep relationship and a personal commitment which overflowed to others just as Jehoiakim's selfishness and his bloodshed verse 17 you have eyes and heart only for this honest gain for shedding innocent blood and for practicing oppression and violence.

Josiah by contrast knows Yahweh rather like what Willie was talking about this morning knowing God is a personal thing my help Josiah would have said with great gusto my help is in the name of Yahweh who made heaven and earth this is still true as the Lord Jesus Christ himself pray for his disciples not just for his disciples but for all who would come after that they might know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent this is what choosing life means this is life not just life in this world symbolized by eating and drinking not just like deeds of mercy in this world but the whole glorious prospect of the new creation here is the true son of David pointing to a yet greater son who would do what Josiah could not do and save his people from their sins so you see it's a striking object lesson of choosing life and death we are not

Josiah and as we know we have Josiah's God and therefore we have the same choice choice that Moses set out long ago I set before you life and death blessing and cursing therefore choose life the message is that the one who offers life the one who died and grows again the one who will reign over all creation is great David's greater son David's line may be down but he's most certainly not out let's pray God our father we realize that like those ancient kings we are faced with the choice of life and death help us like godly Josiah to choose life in all our imperfections and vulnerabilities to walk the path that will lead through the troubled darkness of this world to the light of the eternal day we ask this in the name of him who is to come and reign our lord

Jesus Christ great David's greater son amen amen amen to the in the name share