

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #7

“Corrupt Kings and a Righteous King”

Jer. 21:1-23:8

--CEFC 2/28/21; 11/26/95

Topics: Prayer; Christian living; Holiness

“Please pray for me . . .”--

Have you ever had that request?

I’m sure that many of you have,

for when it becomes known that you are a Christian,

and that you take spiritual matters seriously,

it’s not unusual to have other people come to you

in their moments of personal crisis, seeking your help.

Even if they rarely, if ever, give God a thought,

in times of desperation people will seek to tap into some higher power

any way they can.

Perhaps their child has been injured in an accident;

their wife or husband has been diagnosed with cancer;

or they have been experiencing some emotional trauma--

“Please pray for me,” they ask.

I get that request more than most, I suppose--

After all, I'm a pastor--

It's my job.

I'm a professional.

But I still appreciate that request--

and I can tell you that the Elders of our church encourage that request.

We in spiritual leadership want to pray for those in need./

But this morning we want to look at a situation described in the book of Jeremiah

where this request for prayer received a rather unusual answer.

The year was 589 B.C., when the mighty army of the Babylonian empire

under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar

had surrounded the city of Jerusalem and had demanded its surrender.

Five years before,

the Babylonians had asserted their power

over the tiny southern kingdom of Judah and her king Zedekiah.

As a form of extortion,

they had imposed a heavy tax burden on the nation as a condition of peace.

But now Zedekiah,

encouraged by the promise of support from the Egyptians to the south

and cheered on by his own noblemen,

Zedekiah had rebelled against Babylonian rule and refused to pay up.

And this was the result--

the Babylonians were knocking on the city gates
determined to make good on their threats.

So in desperation, King Zedekiah sent two of the members of his court
to Jeremiah with this request:
“Please pray for me.”

Jer. 21:2--"Inquire now of the LORD for us
because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us.
Perhaps the LORD will perform wonders for us as in times past
so that he will withdraw from us."

“Please pray for me, Jeremiah.”

You see, in the king’s mind, this was the expected role of a prophet.
They were to serve the national interests;
they were to seek the welfare of their own people.
So surely, Jeremiah would seek the Lord on behalf of the king
and those living in Jerusalem.

In the Book of Kings, we read of “court prophets”
who were called in for this very purpose.

Remember the story of King Ahab
who brought in some 400 prophets to inquire of the Lord
whether he should invade Ramoth Gilead.

And one gets the distinct impression in that story
that these prophets went out of their way to tell the king
exactly what he wanted to hear.

Such court prophets were to be loyal to the king and patriotic toward their nation--

and their message was to assure success.

I think of that scene in the movie *Patton* where the general, played by George C. Scott, is agonizing over a major battle that is to be fought the next day, and he desperately needs air cover for his tanks, but the weather forecast is for snow.

So General Patton calls in the Army chaplain--

“Soldier,” he says, “I want you to write me a prayer.”

“What sort of prayer, General?”

“A prayer for clear skies, soldier--

and make it a good one.”

The chaplain writes it, Patton prays it, and it works--

the skies are clear, and the battle is won--

and that chaplain gets a promotion!

That’s what’s going on here--

Zedekiah wants a prayer—and a good one--so he calls in Jeremiah.

Now, it is an evidence of the darkness of the situation

that the king should call on Jeremiah at all.

Jeremiah was not known as a great supporter of the palace.

And there seems to have been no shortage of court prophets

who could have been trusted to pray the right sort of prayer.

Maybe Zedekiah had tried them already,

or maybe he was just in such dire straights that he had no choice--

but Jeremiah got the call.

“Inquire of the Lord for us . . .,” he pleads.

The request has the clear presumption

that Jeremiah would pray in such a way as to seek God’s favor for the people. /

And why shouldn’t they expect God to come to their rescue?

Hadn’t he performed wonders for them in the past?

Hadn’t he rescued them by his power from other oppressors?

Why, they all knew the story of the way he had delivered Jerusalem

during the days of King Hezekiah.

A hundred years before, the Assyrian army under Sennacherib

had laid siege to the city and called for its surrender.

But Hezekiah called on the prophet Isaiah,

and when Isaiah sought the Lord,

the Lord miraculously destroyed the Assyrian army in one night.

Why couldn’t that happen again?

And hasn’t the Lord been saving his people from the very beginning?

The nation of Israel was born through an act of deliverance--

when the Lord rescued his people from the slavery of Egypt--

when he brought them out with an outstretched hand and mighty arm

and fought against their enemies

and struck down the opposing armies.

Surely the Lord will be faithful.

Hadn’t he promised that the royal line of David would be established forever?

Pity the one who would dare to touch the Lord's anointed king!
For three hundred years a descendant of David
had sat on his throne.
Surely the Lord will be faithful to his promise--
so inquire of the Lord for us, Jeremiah--
"Please pray for me," King Zedekiah asks.

Jeremiah is happy to oblige the king--
he will inquire of the Lord.
But Jeremiah is no mere court prophet—he's the real thing,
and the answer he receives from the Lord
is not at all what the King expected, or wanted.

Look at v. 3--"Jeremiah answered them, "Tell Zedekiah,

`This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says:

**I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands,
which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians
who are outside the wall besieging you.**

And I will gather them inside this city.

**I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm
in furious anger and in great wrath.**

**I will strike down those who live in this city --both man and beast --
and they will die of a terrible plague."**

Those who survive will be put to the sword.

v. 10--"I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the LORD.

It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon,

and he will destroy it with fire.”

Some answer to the king’s request for prayer!

The Lord will act in power, all right--

he will perform a wonder--

but he will act on behalf of the *Babylonians*--

they will be the instruments of his wrath,

as the Lord himself will fight *against* his people.

And they will receive no mercy, no pity, no compassion.

So much for God’s favor and protection!

It’s a harsh word—

“I have determined to do this city harm and not good.”

What are we supposed to make of this?

What are the lessons we can learn from the Lord’s word through Jeremiah?

There are three that I would like to highlight this morning--

I. The first is simply this: Beware of presumption before God.

For Zedekiah, such a judgment was unthinkable.

It was unthinkable to him

because he had misunderstood the Lord’s covenant promise to David.

He assumed that simply because he was the king in the line of David
that God was bound to be on his side.
It couldn't be otherwise.
It worked for Hezekiah, didn't it?

But the Lord, through Jeremiah, seeks to set him straight--

v. 11--"say to the royal house of Judah, `Hear the word of the LORD;

This is what the LORD says to you, house of David:

"Administer justice every morning;

rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed,
or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done--
burn with no one to quench it.

I am against you, Jerusalem,¹

you who live above this valley on the rocky plateau, declares the LORD--

you who say, "Who can come against us?

Who can enter our refuge?"

I will punish you as your deeds deserve, declares the LORD.

I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you."

Notice the emphasis here--

it is addressed to the "house of David"--

to someone of the royal line.

He thinks that because of God's promise to King David,

he is like one of those contestants on the reality show *Survivor*

who is granted "immunity" and can't get kicked off the island.

¹ or this could be addressed to the king himself—"Jerusalem" is not in the text.

Here Zedekiah thinks, because he's of the line of David,
his royal city automatically gets legal exemption from God's wrath.

Notice the pride suggested by the loftiness of their location--

"above the valley on the rocky plateau."

Notice the sense of invincibility that they had--

"Who can come against us?

Who can enter our refuge?"

They felt they were immune from the anger of God--

but they were wrong!

"I will punish you as your deeds deserve," declares the LORD." /

You see, **God's promises to us**

never give us grounds for presuming on his mercy.

God's promises to us

never relieve us of the responsibility of coming to him on his terms.

God always demands that we come to him in faith—

but it is a faith that must issue in obedience to his commands.

Yes, God is gracious;

yes, God forgives our sin.

But as the Apostle Paul writes in Romans,

"What then?

Shall we [continue in] sin because we are not under the law but under grace?

By no means!”

We have no rights before God;

he is still the potter, remember--

and if he has promised good to us

and we turn away from him,

then he has every right to bring us to judgment.

God's promises to David concerning his royal line

were conditioned on a response of faith and obedience

in those who sat on that throne.

The Lord will be faithful to his promise,

but he can keep his promise without those individuals

who mistakenly believe that God must protect and rescue them

regardless of how they live. /

As I look at our world today,

I find this kind of presumption all too common.

I think of unbelievers who misunderstand God's truth--

Like the truth that “**God is love,**”

or the truth of the Fatherhood of God.

They may take one part of the truth of who God is,

and not understand what it really means,

and then presume upon his mercy.

I think of the words of one German skeptic as he lay on his deathbed--

“God will forgive me.

That’s his job.”²

We live in a culture in which the highest value is placed on being true to myself—

allowing my inner desires to determine my true identity.

And then the culture demands that my chosen identity, whatever it may be,

must be affirmed by everyone else.

Not to affirm me is a violent assault on my dignity.

And we assume that God must affirm me also.

How can he not?—

if he is truly love

and is always on the side of the marginalized and victimized.

God is bound to bless me.

The God of the Bible abhors such presumption--

it is a gross misunderstanding of the truth.

We can’t demand that God conforms to our desires;

we must conform to his. /

But I find that this kind of presumption can be found in Christians, too.

Take God’s promise of the perseverance of the saints—

that wonderful truth that we have sung about this morning--

that is, that once a person is saved by putting their faith in Jesus,

² Attributed to Heinrich Heine.

they are saved forever.

But people can misunderstand this promise

and say that since “once saved, always saved,”

well then, I can live however I like,

and all will be OK in the end.

But that’s not true--

that kind of presumption is a gross misunderstanding of the truth.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints

means that those who are truly saved will, by God’s grace,

persevere in faith until the end.

There’s no place for presumption here--

we can’t live however we like--

we are called to live in faith--every day.

And that faith must be a living faith—

a faith that gives us a desire to follow Jesus

and please God in how we live.

And if you are not living by faith today,

you have no grounds for any assurance that you are, in fact, a believer.

Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall, Paul says.

Beware of presumption--

and one key evidence of presumption is **an ungrateful heart**.

We’ve all had that experience of someone who presumes on our hospitality

or our generosity.

We feel it when they never say “Thank yous.”

In their pride, they assume that they deserve such treatment.

Thinking of presumption,

I’m reminded of a doctor in the bygone days of house calls.

His phone rang on a cold, howling rainy night.

The caller said his wife needed urgent medical attention.

The doctor was understanding--

“I’ll be glad to come,

but my car is being repaired,” he said.

“Could you come and get me?”

An angry voice sputtered, “What, in this weather?!”

Do we ever convey that attitude toward God?

We pray to him in our time of need,

but then rebel against the smallest of demands he makes upon us.

Beware of presumption.

It arises from our pride, and it can be deadly.

A second lesson flows logically from the first--

II. A Relationship with God must include a moral response—

a concern for righteousness and justice.

This is where the word of the Lord takes us in chap. 22--

“This is what the LORD says:” in v. 1--

“Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there:

‘Hear the word of the LORD, to you king of Judah,

you who sit on David's throne –

you, your officials and your people who come through these gates.

This is what the LORD says:

Do what is just and right.

Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed.

Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow,

and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”

If you want to sit on David's throne

you must do what David was called to do—

You must “Do what is just and right.”

You must seek justice and righteousness.

The king was to stand for God's righteousness—

that right standard for how we are to live with one another—

which certainly includes honesty, kindness, compassion, sexual purity—

and all that is reflected in the law of God.

And the king was to be under that law of God;

he was to be the guardian of God's justice--

and in that role, he was to take special care to protect the rights of the weak.

Those in privileged positions of power are to use that power to protect the powerless—

those for whom the Lord himself has a special concern—

those on the margins of society--

the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow.

This is what it means to “**Do what is just and right.**”

and there could be no relationship with God

without a concern for this righteousness./

And in chap. 22 Jeremiah gives a retrospective look

at the **three previous kings of Judah** which illustrates this point.

This word of judgment upon Zedekiah

was the climax of a sad history.

First, in 22:10-12 the Lord speaks of Shallum--

Shallum was the personal name of the king whose royal name was Jehoahaz.

When his father, the good King Josiah, was killed in battle in 609 B.C.

Shallum was chosen by the people to succeed him.

But the Egyptians came into power,

And after just three months as king,

they replaced Shallum and took him into exile.

He was never to return.

The decline of the nation had begun.

2) The Egyptian Pharaoh then installed Shallum's older brother, Jehoiakim as king.

He ruled over the southern kingdom of Judah for eleven years.

And his reign epitomized the corruption of the kingship.

Jeremiah speaks of him in vv. 13-19 of chap. 22.

Instead of justice and righteousness,

Jehoiakim built **“his palace by unrighteousness**

and his upper rooms by injustice” --we read in v. 13.

He was a tyrant, intent on glorifying himself at the expense of his people.

He exploited countrymen

not paying them for their labor--

in a direct violation of the Mosaic law.

In v. 17 the Lord says, **“But your eyes and your heart**

are set only on dishonest gain,

on shedding innocent blood

and on oppression and extortion.”

This is ugly—

His reign was characterized by greed and exploitation and violence

and the abuse of power and privilege.

It is true--the moral measure of any society

is found in the way it treats its most vulnerable and needy members.

By this standard, Jehoiakim’s reign was an utter failure.

Jehoiakim was caught up with the trappings of power,

which became in God’s eyes a symbol of his corruption.

Look at v. 14—**“He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace**

with spacious upper rooms.’

So he makes large windows in it,

panels it with cedar

and decorates it in red.”

Quite impressive to look at, I'm sure.

But the word of the Lord comes to him in the form of a question in v. 15--

“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?”

Is that what royalty is all about?--

No, that kind of opulence doesn't make you a king--not a real king.

Think about your father King Josiah, the Lord says--

“Did not your father have food and drink?”

He was no monk—and he enjoyed all that he needed--

but **“He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.**

He defended the cause of the poor and needy,

and so all went well.

Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD.”

Do you see this?

“Is that not what it means to know me,” says the Lord.

The concern here is not with how well you know the Bible,

or whether you pray five times a day.

To know me, says the Lord, is to do what is right and just;

it is to defend the cause of the poor and the needy.

It is to look out for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow.

Why this emphasis on treating the weak and the vulnerable?

Because these people have nothing to offer you—

Their value is found solely in the fact that they are created in God's image—

and to care for them is to care for the God whom they represent in the world. /

A relationship with God must include a moral response--

a concern for doing what is right before God,
especially in how you treat other people.

The moral and ethical cannot be separated from the religious--

You see this earlier in chap. 22--

Look at the two justifications for the judgment of God upon Judah--

First, in v. 5 the Lord says,

“If you do not obey these commands--

(that is, if you do not do what is right and just)--

I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.”

and then a second justification in v. 8--

"People from many nations will pass by this city and will ask one another,

`Why has the LORD done such a thing to this great city?'

And the answer will be:

`Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God

and have worshiped and served other gods.'"

Which is it?

Why this judgement:

Was is “Not doing what is right and just”

or was it “forsaking the covenant of the Lord

and worshiping other gods”?

These are not two different answers--

they are the same answer viewed from two perspectives.

Social injustice is evidence of covenant unfaithfulness--
to mistreat people created in God's image
is to forsake the Lord who made them. /

True religion is not merely morality,

but it is never less than that.

A relationship with God—the knowledge of God—

must include a concern for righteousness and justice

in dealing with people,

and especially those who are most vulnerable.

We dare not say we know God if we don't share God's concerns. /

3) Finally, Jeremiah closes chap. 22, beginning in v. 24,

by referring to a third king-- Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin
who succeeded him at this death,

but who reigned only a few months.

When the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem in 597--

a full decade before they were to come again and destroy the city,

Jehoiachin was taken captive and exiled to Babylon

where he was a prisoner for the rest of his life.

He, too, was rejected by the Lord as the king of his people—

he was like broken pot, thrown out into a foreign land.

These are the three kings whose reigns led up to Zedekiah--

and it is a sorry lot, a corrupt heritage.

They had not sought righteousness and justice--

they had no moral response to God--

and so they were cut off from him.

And now their heir, King Zedekiah, faced the same fate. /

And at this point, you have to ask,

is there any hope for Israel?

Has the promise of God to King David come to an end?

Jeremiah says that Yes there is hope,

but that hope will come through an unexpected means.

21:8-- "This is what the LORD says:

See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague.

But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you

will live;

he will escape with his life."

In one sense, Jeremiah is just being pragmatic—

Look, you've got no chance—

the enemy is at the gate, and they are much stronger than you are.

Surrender is your only chance for survival.

But in another sense, Jeremiah is speaking at a much deeper level--

Israel is headed for judgment, for defeat, for exile into Babylon--

for this is what their sins deserve.

And now Israel must surrender to this verdict of God.

She must accept what God has decreed--

and only in that surrender will she find victory and new life.

Yes, there is hope for Israel--

but it is a hope only on the other side of this horrible defeat.

God will save his people,

but he will only do it after they have gone through the death of exile.

And it is this saving work of God with which our passage ends in chap. 23,

which speaks to these corrupt leaders of Israel.

23:1-- **"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering**

the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. . . .

"Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away

and have not bestowed care on them,

I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.

And then he says--

"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock

out of all the countries where I have driven them

and will bring them back to their pasture,

where they will be fruitful and increase in number.

I will place shepherds over them who will tend them,

and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,"

declares the LORD.”

After the death of Exile,

the Lord himself will bring new life--

as he gathers his people once again.

And the corrupt kings that have oppressed them will be no more--

23:5 "The days are coming," declares the LORD,

"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,

a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.

This is the name by which he will be called:

The LORD Our Righteousness

[or, our Righteous Savior.]”

“The LORD Our Righteousness.”-- Wn~q'dx hwhy

that's a play on the name of King Zedekiah--

whose name means “the Lord is righteous.”

Zedekiah's life didn't reflect that truth,

but a true king, a righteous king, is coming, the Lord says.

And in this Righteous King,

the Lord will show his righteous faithfulness to his promise

to save his people.

And when he comes, the wonderful acts of power

which the Lord performed during the Exodus from Egypt,

And if we are to have hope,
we must first despair in our own abilities to save ourselves,
and trust instead in God's power.

21:8-- "This is what the LORD says:

See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.

Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague.

But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you
will live;"

The way of life is the way of surrender—

Jesus said, "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Are you willing to surrender?

A friend told me once that a co-worker of his
knew that he was a Christian and
had come up to him and asked him to pray for him--
he was going through a tough time,
and he was very concerned for his wife and family.

You see, he'd been having an adulterous relationship,
and now he wanted to get a divorce so that he could marry his mistress,
and he wasn't sure how his wife and kids would take it.
It was a very stressful situation as you can imagine.
"Please pray for me," he said.

What presumption!--

that he should dare ask God for his blessing on this wicked act.

It would be like a KuKluxKlan leader asking me to pray for the success of his lynching.

Or even like a business man asking me to pray for the success of his business
when he is exploiting the immigrants who work for him.

What a gross misperception of the moral character of God

that that my friend's co-worker should even consider such a thing.

That man needs to die--

that's his only hope---

he needs to die to his selfish desires

which would lead him to forsake his family

and deny the commitment he has made to them

and the responsibility he has to them.

He needs to surrender his life to the death of Christ,

and despair of ever saving himself.

That's his only hope.

and that's our only hope, too.

What about you?

Are you seeking God's blessing in your life

while living in defiance of God,

or maybe just living in indifference to God?

Are you presuming on the goodness of God?

are you failing to respond to the holiness of God?

Do you understand that to “know God”

means to share in God’s desire

that we seek to do what is right and just.

Have you learned that the way to victory is by surrender;

that the way to life is by death,

and that the way to hope is by despairing in your own abilities.

He who seeks to save his life will lose it, Jesus said.

but he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Can I pray for you?

Prayer--

Lord, you are the God of great promises--

promises for our good--

may we not presume upon your goodness--

misunderstanding the nature of your promises.

Help us to see that a relationship with you

is one that must include our moral response—

you desire that we seek justice and righteousness.

And Lord, may we understand that only when we give up trusting in ourselves

and our own abilities and our own goodness

can we enjoy the life and hope that you offer us.

I pray for these people here, Lord--

I pray for those who do know you and love you--

that they might not take your love for granted,

but would be forever grateful

and commit themselves afresh to the path of righteousness you set before them.

May they know the life that flows from the cross of Christ.

I pray for those who may presume to know you, but really don't--

they live as they want to live,

your word does not instruct them or correct them --

they are their own lords.

and they have not yet surrendered to the cross of Christ--

they are still trying to save themselves on their own terms--

break their wills, Lord--

so that you might heal them.

May the Word of the Lord come home to our hearts today.

This I pray in Jesus' name.

Closing Hymn:

23:5 "The days are coming," declares the LORD,

"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,

a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.

This is the name by which he will be called:

The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

The Servant King

Benediction:

Hebr. 13:20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant
brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great Shepherd of the sheep,
equip you with everything good for doing his will,
and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #7

Feb. 28, 2021

“Corrupt Kings and a Righteous King”

Jer. 21:1-23:8

Jeremiah refused to play the role of the court prophet, for his loyalty to God exceeded his loyalty to the king. He spoke truth about the corruption of his rulers, but in so doing he pointed forward to God’s promise of a coming Ruler who would rule in righteousness. May this story point us to the gospel call to righteousness and hope.

An Unwelcomed Response to King Zedekiah’s Request for Prayer

Three Applications:

I. Beware of Presumption Before God.

II. A Relationship with God

Must Include a Moral Response.

The Example of Three Corrupt Kings:

1) Shallum (Johoahaz)

2) Johoiakim

3) Jehoiachin

III. Victory Can Only Come Through Surrender.

The Righteous King to Come (23:5)

Sermon Response:

“Corrupt Kings and a Righteous King”

Jer. 21:1-23:8

- Consider the courage it must have taken for Jeremiah to reply to the king’s request as he did. Have you faced situations where it was difficult to speak truth when you knew truth was needed? What motivated Jeremiah to do as he did?
- How can people be presumptuous when it comes to their relationship with God? What are some truths about God that can be misunderstood to justify such presumption?
- When we think of some promise of God to us, when does faith in that promise become presumption?
- How is ungratefulness an evidence of presumption?
- Why must faith in God necessarily include a desire to obey him?
- How can we separate righteousness from religion? Why is that deadly?
- How is surrender the way to victory in the gospel?

