

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Judgment on Kings and False Shepherds; the Righteous Branch

Jeremiah 21:1–23:40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these chapters set the failure of David's earthly kings against the perfection of the coming King. The teacher should help students feel the weight of the indictment: God holds leaders accountable, attaches real conditions to covenant blessing (22:4–5), and judges the misuse of power, the shedding of innocent blood, the scattering of the flock, and the comfortable lies of false prophets. God is holy and just, and no office, not even David's throne, exempts a man from obedience.

The climax is the Righteous Branch of 23:5–6, and this demands special care. The teacher must present Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of this promise: the Son of David who reigns now, having been raised and seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:29–36; Luke 1:32–33). The kingdom is not a future, earthly, political realm awaiting a rebuilt temple and a literal throne in Jerusalem; it is the spiritual kingdom, the church, established at Pentecost, over which Christ reigns at this moment (Daniel 2:44; Colossians 1:13). Close the door gently but firmly on the dispensational expectation of a coming earthly Davidic king, and lift up the present reign of Christ. His Name, "The LORD is our righteousness," is fulfilled as His righteousness is credited to those baptized into Him (1 Corinthians 1:30; Romans 6:3–4).

Beyond doctrine, the lesson aims at formation. Most students lead someone, even if only a child or a friend, and all of us are tempted to want God's rescue without God's rule, or to comfort people with lies rather than love them with truth. The teacher's goal is that students leave both humbled in how they use influence and steadied by the reign of the true King, learning to follow the Shepherd who never scatters His sheep and to rest their hope on the throne that will never fall.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 21:1–10. Zedekiah hopes God will rescue Jerusalem as in the past, but God answers, "I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death." What does this reveal about God's holiness and the limits of presuming on His mercy while clinging to sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by setting the scene. Babylon is at the gate, and King Zedekiah, desperate, sends priests to Jeremiah hoping for a Hezekiah-style miracle (compare 2 Kings 19). He wants the God of past deliverances to repeat the rescue. But God's answer is devastating: He Himself will fight against

Jerusalem “with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath” (21:5). The God who once fought for them will now fight against them, because their sin has not changed.

Here is the heart of the doctrine: God’s mercy is real, but it is not a blank check that can be cashed while clinging to rebellion. “I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death” (21:8). Mercy is still offered, even now, but only along the road of surrender and repentance, not as a reward for stubbornness. Presuming on grace while refusing to turn is not faith; it is the very thing God judges.

Teach God’s holiness without softening it. A God who rescued the impenitent regardless of their sin would be indifferent to the evil destroying His people. His refusal here is not the failure of His love but its integrity. He will not bless what He must oppose.

Land the warning warmly. Even in this dark word there is a door: those who go out and surrender “shall live” (21:9). Judgment announced is still judgment that leaves room to turn. God’s severity and His mercy meet in the offer of a way of life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s holiness and the justice of His judgment against persistent sin (21:5).
- The danger of presuming on God’s mercy while refusing to repent.
- Mercy genuinely offered along the way of surrender, even in judgment (21:8–9).
- The God who once fought for His people now fighting against them because of unchanged sin.
- The difference between faith that turns to God and a demand for rescue on our own terms.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it dangerous to want God’s past kind of rescue while holding on to present sin?
- How does God’s holiness show in His refusal to bless what He must oppose?
- Where do you see God still leaving a door open even in this hard word?

Question 2

Student Question:

Zedekiah wanted God to act on his terms, a last-minute deliverance with no repentance attached. Where in your life are you tempted to want God’s rescue without God’s rule, His help without His holiness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question presses Zedekiah’s mistake into our own hearts. The king wanted God’s power without God’s lordship, deliverance without discipleship. We do the same when we cry to God in crisis but quietly intend to keep running our lives our own way once the danger passes.

Help students name the pattern. We pray for the marriage to be saved but resist the changes God requires. We ask God to fix the consequences of a sin we have no intention of leaving. We want the comfort of His presence without the cost of His commands. It is the way of death dressed up as a prayer for life.

Be gentle and honest. This is not about earning rescue by perfect performance; it is about the posture of the heart. God delights to save, but He saves people who are willing to be ruled, not merely relieved.

Move toward something concrete. Invite each person to name one area where they have wanted God's help but resisted His rule, and to bring it to Him today as a matter of surrender, not just request.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wanting God's rescue without submitting to His rule.
- The difference between crisis prayers and genuine repentance.
- The temptation to keep control of life while asking God to fix its consequences.
- Surrender, not mere relief, as the posture God blesses.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you asked for God's help but resisted His authority?
- What does it look like to want God's rule, not just His rescue, in that area?
- How is a willingness to be ruled different from trying to earn God's help?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 22:1-9. God tells the king to "do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed," warning that the throne itself depends on it. What does this teach about the responsibilities God attaches to power and the conditions woven into His covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God sends Jeremiah down to the king's house with a clear charge: "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed" (22:3). The covenant with David was never an unconditional license to reign however a king pleased. Verses 4 and 5 lay out the alternatives plainly: obey, and the throne endures; refuse, and "this house shall become a desolation."

Teach the conditional shape of covenant blessing. God's promises are sure, but the participation of any given generation in those blessings is tied to obedience. This guards against two errors: the presumption that being God's chosen people guarantees safety no matter how one lives,

and the despair that God's purposes can be permanently defeated by human failure. God's larger purpose marches on, even as unfaithful individuals forfeit their place in it.

Notice what God measures a king by. Not military glory, not architecture, not wealth, but justice for the robbed, the resident foreigner, the orphan, and the widow (22:3). The fingerprints of God on a ruler are seen in how he treats the people who cannot defend or repay themselves.

Apply it carefully. We are not under Old Covenant national law, but the principle that God attaches responsibility to authority runs straight through Scripture to Christ and His church (Luke 12:48; James 3:1). To whom much is given, much is required.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The responsibilities God attaches to power and position (22:3).
- The conditional dimension of covenant blessing: obedience and its alternatives (22:4–5).
- Justice for the vulnerable as the true measure of a godly leader.
- God's purposes advancing even as the unfaithful forfeit their place.
- The enduring principle that authority carries accountability before God (Luke 12:48).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God tie the king's throne to how he treats the vulnerable?
- What does the conditional 'if you will... but if you will not' teach us about covenant blessing?
- How does authority of any kind carry accountability before God?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think about whatever measure of influence God has placed in your hands, however small. How are you using it to "deliver the oppressed," and where might God be asking you to act justly toward someone who cannot repay you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes God's standard for kings and scales it to ordinary life. Few of us sit on thrones, but all of us have some influence: over a child, an employee, a younger believer, a neighbor in need. God's question to power is always, "How are you treating those who cannot repay you?"

Help students see influence they may not count as power. A parent's word shapes a child for decades. An employer's fairness can rescue a struggling family. A patient ear given to the lonely is an exercise of real influence. The kingdom measures greatness by service (Mark 10:42–45).

Press toward the overlooked. Jeremiah names the robbed, the resident foreigner, the orphan, the widow, exactly the people the powerful find easiest to ignore. Ask, “Who in your orbit cannot repay you, and how are you treating them?”

Move to one concrete act of justice or mercy this week toward someone who can give nothing back, the truest test that we have learned the King’s heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing the everyday influence God has entrusted to us.
- Greatness measured by service in Christ’s kingdom (Mark 10:42–45).
- Justice and mercy toward those who cannot repay.
- The temptation to ignore the vulnerable precisely because they have no leverage.

Discussion Prompts

- What influence has God placed in your hands that you tend to overlook?
- Who around you cannot repay you, and how are you treating them?
- What is one act of justice or mercy you could do this week with no payback?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 22:13–17. Jehoiakim builds a splendid cedar palace through unpaid labor, and God asks, “Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar?” contrasting him with his father who “judged the cause of the poor and needy.” What does God say truly defines a life that knows Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God turns to Jehoiakim, who is building himself a luxurious cedar palace on the backs of unpaid laborers (22:13–14). The Lord’s sarcasm is sharp: “Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar?” (22:15). The king mistook grandeur for greatness, square footage for significance.

Then comes the contrast that defines the whole lesson. Jehoiakim’s father Josiah “did justice and righteousness... He judged the cause of the poor and needy.” And God adds the stunning line: “Is not this to know me? declares the LORD” (22:16). To know God is not a private mystical feeling; it shows up in how we treat the poor and needy. Knowing God and doing justice are not two separate things.

Expose the idolatry beneath Jehoiakim’s building project. His “eyes and heart are set only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence” (22:17). Acquisition had become his god, and people had become expendable. Comfort built on injustice is the way of death.

Teach the timeless lesson gently. We do not compete in cedar, but we compete in houses, cars, titles, and the approval that comes with them. God still asks what our eyes and hearts are set on, and He still defines the life that knows Him by its justice and mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mistaking grandeur and acquisition for true greatness (22:15).
- Knowing God as inseparable from doing justice for the poor and needy (22:16).
- The idolatry of dishonest gain that treats people as expendable (22:17).
- Comfort built on injustice as the way of death.
- God's definition of a life that knows Him versus the world's definition of success.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God link 'judging the cause of the poor and needy' with knowing Him?
- What are the modern versions of 'competing in cedar' in our own hearts?
- How would you describe the difference between worldly success and a life that knows God?

Question 6

Student Question:

God says of righteous Josiah, "Is not this to know me?" (22:16). Examine your own definition of the good life. How closely does it match God's, where knowing Him shows up in justice and care for the needy rather than in comfort and acquisition?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question turns God's verdict on Josiah and Jehoiakim into a mirror. Most of us have absorbed a definition of the good life from the culture around us: comfort, security, possessions, status. God quietly offers a different one, "he judged the cause of the poor and needy... Is not this to know me?"

Invite honest self-examination. Ask students to picture their imagined 'good life,' the life they daydream about, and to notice how much of it is about acquisition and ease and how little is about justice, mercy, and knowing God. The gap is revealing.

Resist guilt-tripping. The point is not that comfort is sin, but that comfort makes a poor god and a poor measure of a life. Josiah was a king with wealth; the difference was where his eyes and heart were set.

Move toward realignment. Ask each person to name one way they could reshape their definition of success this season so that 'knowing God' shows up in actual care for the needy, not just in private devotion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining the inherited cultural definition of the good life.
- Comfort as a poor god and a poor measure of a life.
- Knowing God expressed in justice and mercy, not only private devotion.
- Realigning our sense of success around what God values.

Discussion Prompts

- When you picture 'the good life,' how much of it is comfort and how much is justice and mercy?
- Where has the culture's definition of success quietly become yours?
- What is one way to let 'knowing God' show up in care for the needy this season?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 23:1-4. God pronounces woe on the shepherds who "destroy and scatter the sheep," then promises, "I will set shepherds over them who will care for them." What does this reveal about God's heart for His scattered people and His commitment to provide true leadership?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God turns from individual kings to the whole class of leaders: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" (23:1). The image is devastating. Shepherds exist to protect and gather; these have done the opposite, driving the flock away and abandoning them to danger. God takes it personally, calling them "the sheep of my pasture."

Notice the turn from indictment to promise. God does not merely fire the bad shepherds; He says, "I will attend to you for your evil deeds" and then, "I will gather the remnant of my flock... and I will bring them back to their fold" (23:2-3). His response to failed leadership is not to abandon the sheep but to come for them Himself.

Then the tender promise: "I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing" (23:4). God's heart is for a flock that is safe, unafraid, and complete, with not one sheep lost. This longing reaches its fulfillment in the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep and loses none the Father gives Him (John 10:11; 17:12).

Apply it to the church. Christ still gives shepherds, elders, to care for His flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4), and they will answer to Him for how they tend it. God's commitment to His scattered people is not a distant memory; it is the living concern of the reigning Shepherd-King.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's woe on leaders who scatter rather than gather His flock (23:1).
- God taking the failure of shepherds personally, as harm to 'my pasture.'

- God's promise to gather, restore, and provide true shepherds (23:3-4).
- The longing for a flock that is safe and complete, fulfilled in the Good Shepherd (John 10:11).
- Christ's gift of caring elders to His church and their accountability to Him (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell us about God that He calls them 'the sheep of my pasture'?
- How does God respond to bad leadership, and what does that reveal about His heart?
- How is this promise of true shepherds fulfilled in Christ and His church?

Question 8

Student Question:

God promises that His sheep "shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing." Where do you feel scattered, fearful, or like one who has gone missing, and how does the promise of a Shepherd who gathers speak to you there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question takes God's promise to gather the scattered and brings it close. Almost everyone in the room carries some experience of being scattered: hurt by a leader, drifted from God, isolated by grief, or quietly feeling like the one sheep no one would notice was missing.

Let the promise speak directly. "They shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing" (23:4). The God of this passage counts His sheep and goes after the missing one. Whatever scattered them, His commitment is to gather them.

Help students locate their place in the picture. Are you fearful? Dismayed? Feeling overlooked or far off? Name it honestly before the Shepherd who specializes in seeking and gathering (Luke 15:4-7).

Move toward trust and return. Invite each person to take one step back toward the fold this week, a prayer, a return to worship, a word to a fellow believer, resting in a Shepherd who does not want any of His sheep to stay missing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The experience of being scattered, fearful, or feeling overlooked.
- God's commitment that none of His sheep stay missing (23:4).
- The Shepherd who seeks and gathers the one who has wandered (Luke 15:4-7).
- Taking a concrete step back toward the fold.

Discussion Prompts

- In what way do you feel scattered, fearful, or like the missing one right now?
- How does it comfort you that God counts His sheep and seeks the missing?
- What is one step back toward the fold you could take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 23:5–6. God promises “a righteous Branch” for David who “shall reign as king and deal wisely,” called “The LORD is our righteousness.” In light of the failed kings of this passage, how is this promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who reigns now at God’s right hand over His spiritual kingdom, the church, rather than as a future earthly king in a rebuilt Jerusalem?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the towering promise of the lesson, and it deserves the heaviest, most careful handling. Against the whole grim parade of failed kings, Shallum carried off, Jehoiakim buried like a donkey, Coniah flung away like a discarded ring, God lifts His eyes and promises something new: “Behold, the days are coming... when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (23:5). Where every earthly king failed, this King will succeed perfectly. He will be the righteous Branch growing out of the seemingly dead stump of David’s dynasty.

Then comes the Name: “And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’” (23:6). Notice the deliberate contrast with the last king, Zedekiah, whose name meant ‘the LORD is my righteousness’ but whose reign was a lie. The Branch will actually be what Zedekiah only pretended to be. And the Name claims more than human kingship; it joins the covenant Name of God Himself to this coming King, hinting at the deity of the One who is to come.

Now declare the fulfillment plainly: this is Jesus Christ. Gabriel told Mary that her son would receive “the throne of his father David,” and “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32–33). At Pentecost Peter announced that God had raised Jesus and seated Him on David’s throne at His own right hand, “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:29–36). The Branch is not waiting in the wings of history; He has come, died, risen, and been enthroned. He reigns now. The kingdom of God, foretold to arrive “in the days of those kings” and never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44), came with Jesus and was established at Pentecost (Mark 9:1; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13).

Here the teacher must close a door gently but firmly. Some popular schemes (dispensational premillennialism) read this promise as awaiting a future, earthly, political reign of Christ from a literally rebuilt Jerusalem, with a restored temple and animal sacrifices, after a regathering of national Israel. Scripture does not allow it. The throne the Branch sits on is the throne at God’s right hand, not an earthly capital (Acts 2:34–36; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1). The temple is now His body and His church (John 2:19–21; Ephesians 2:19–22). The true Israel is everyone in Christ, “the

Israel of God,” for “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8). The Branch is reigning, and His kingdom is spiritual, present, and unshakable, not a political program postponed to the future.

Finally, let the Name become personal. He is called “The LORD is our righteousness.” His righteousness is not only His own perfection; it is given to those who are joined to Him. As Paul says, Christ “became to us... righteousness” (1 Corinthians 1:30). We receive that righteousness not by a bare ‘faith only’ decision but by the obedient faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized into Christ, putting Him on (Galatians 3:26–27; Romans 6:3–4). The failed kings could not give the people righteousness; the Branch is our righteousness, and He shares His very Name with all who belong to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The righteous Branch (23:5) as Jesus Christ, the perfect King out of David’s failed line.
- The Name ‘The LORD is our righteousness’ contrasted with Zedekiah’s empty name and pointing to Christ’s deity (23:6).
- Christ reigning now on David’s throne at God’s right hand, established at Pentecost (Luke 1:32–33; Acts 2:29–36; Daniel 2:44).
- Closing the door on a future, earthly, political Davidic kingdom in a rebuilt Jerusalem with a literal temple and sacrifices (Hebrews 8:1; John 2:19–21).
- The true Israel as all who are in Christ, the church, not a regathered national Israel (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8).
- Christ ‘became to us righteousness,’ received through obedient faith and baptism into Him (1 Corinthians 1:30; Galatians 3:26–27; Romans 6:3–4).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the perfect King of 23:5–6 stand in contrast to every failed king in this passage?
- What does the New Testament say about where and when the Branch reigns, and why does that rule out a future earthly throne in Jerusalem?
- What does it mean for you personally that His Name is ‘The LORD is our righteousness’?

Question 10

Student Question:

Read back over all three chapters, the toppled crowns, the scattered flock, the lying prophets, and the one shining promise of the Branch. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus, the true and reigning King, is reshaping how you follow, lead, or hope this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the whole sweep of the lesson, the toppled crowns, the scattered flock, the lying prophets crying ‘Peace, peace,’ and the one bright promise of the

Branch, and asks the student to respond. Study must become surrender. The reigning King is not merely to be admired; He is to be followed.

Resist letting this stay abstract. Press for one specific way Christ is reshaping them through this passage. Perhaps it is repentance for wanting rescue without rule. Perhaps it is a new tenderness in how they use influence over the vulnerable. Perhaps it is courage to tell the truth instead of soothing people with comfortable lies. Perhaps it is fresh hope, knowing the throne over their lives will never topple like Judah's did.

Tie it explicitly to Christ. Every failed king in these chapters makes us long for the One who never fails, and that One has come. We are formed not by trying harder but by following the Shepherd-King who gathers, leads, and reigns over us now.

Invite each person to name their 'one thing' aloud or on paper and carry it into the week as a matter of prayer and obedience to the King who is our righteousness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from study to surrender under the reigning King (James 1:22).
- Christ as the King who never fails where every earthly king did.
- Formation as following the Shepherd-King, not mere self-effort.
- Naming one concrete step of trust, repentance, or courage.

Discussion Prompts

- Which theme of these chapters is the Lord pressing on you most this week?
- How does the reign of the true King change the way you lead, follow, or hope?
- What is the one specific step of obedience you will take in response to the Branch who reigns?