

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 11: Judgment on Kings and False Shepherds; the Righteous Branch -- Jeremiah 21:1–23:40

There is a moment in every family, every business, every nation, when the people in charge stop being part of the solution and become the problem. The very ones entrusted to protect the flock begin to feed on it. That is the heartbreak running through these three chapters. King Zedekiah sends messengers to Jeremiah hoping for a miracle, a word that God will once more rescue Jerusalem the way He did in the days of Hezekiah. Instead the prophet hands back a sentence: “I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.” The kings of David’s line, men who were supposed to shepherd God’s people in justice and righteousness, have failed, and God is about to hold them to account.

Watch the parade of failed kings march by. Shallum (Jehoahaz) is carried off and will die in a foreign land, never to see his native country again. Jehoiakim builds himself a grand cedar house with unpaid labor while his eyes and heart are set “only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood.” Coniah (Jehoiachin) is held up like a signet ring torn off God’s hand and flung away. One after another, the crowns roll in the dust. And behind these kings stand the shepherds and the prophets, the spiritual leaders who should have called the nation home, instead crying “Peace, peace” where there was no peace and steering the sheep straight into the wolf’s mouth.

God is furious, but not because His mercy has run out. He is furious the way a good shepherd is furious when he finds his sheep scattered, bleeding, and abandoned on the hillside because the hired hands ran off. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” And then comes one of the most tender promises in the book: “I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more.” God will not let bad leaders have the last word over the people He loves. He will come Himself, and He will send the Shepherd of shepherds.

That is where these chapters climb. Out of the wreckage of David’s failed throne, God lifts His eyes to the horizon and speaks a promise that has been thrilling believers for twenty-six centuries: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, 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... And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” Every failed king in this passage is a dark backdrop against which this one bright Name shines. The Branch has come. His name is Jesus, and He reigns now.

Group Discussion: These chapters expose leaders who used their God-given position to serve themselves instead of the people in their care, from kings who shed innocent blood to prophets who soothed the nation with comfortable lies. Why is the misuse of spiritual leadership treated

so seriously by God, and what does it teach us about the kind of leaders, and followers, He wants us to be?

Personal Reflection: God indicted shepherds who scattered the flock and prophets who told people what they wanted to hear instead of what God had said. In the small spheres where you have influence, your home, your friendships, your church, where are you tempted to comfort people with what they want to hear rather than tell them the truth God has spoken?

Read Jeremiah 21:1–23:40

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 2 Kings 23:31–24:17, the historical record of the very kings Jeremiah names, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin; Ezekiel 34:1–24, God’s parallel woe on Israel’s shepherds and His promise to shepherd the flock Himself through “my servant David”; Luke 1:32–33, Gabriel’s promise that Jesus will receive “the throne of his father David” and reign over a kingdom with no end; Acts 2:29–36, Peter’s declaration that the risen Christ is enthroned now at God’s right hand on David’s throne; 1 Corinthians 1:30, where Christ “became to us... righteousness,” the very Name of the Branch made ours.

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