

Practice Justice

Bible Background • JEREMIAH 21

Printed Text • JEREMIAH 21:8–14 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 86:1–13

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **DISCOVER** divine justice described by Jeremiah, **EXPRESS** gratitude that God is a God of justice, and **ENDEAVOR** to be just and advocate for justice.

In Focus

The judge pounded her gavel after sentencing John to five years in prison. John couldn't believe this. He had turned his life around and volunteered with the youth in the church and the community. Yet the judge said that he made the mistake of trusting someone who really meant him harm. John thought it was okay to hang with his old friends this one time. Little did he know what they were planning. Had he realized they were serious about stealing the boxes off the delivery truck, he would have stayed in the store or returned to his car. John realized God had given him a chance to walk away before things happened, but John stayed, trying to convince his friends not to steal the packages. By the time he was ready to leave, the police were already there and it was too late.

After a year and a half in prison, two of his friends put in writing that John was not a part of the plan and that they had proof. The Community Criminal Defense Fund took up John's case. After three years in prison, John was released and his record expunged. John was ready for a new beginning and new friends.

Identify a time when you decided not to listen to the Lord. What were the results? Describe a time when someone asked you for your advice. Was your advice received or was it rejected?

Keep in Mind

“This is what the LORD says to the dynasty of David: Give justice each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Otherwise, my anger will burn like an unquenchable fire because of all your sins” (Jeremiah 21:12, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Prey (v. 9) shalal (Heb.)—Spoils, booty, goods captured in war

B. Evil (v. 10) ra'ah (Heb.)—Moral evil and wickedness; misfortune, trouble, disaster

Say It Correctly

Chaldeans. kal-DEE-uhns.

Hinnom. HIH-nom.

Kidron. KID-ron.

Anathoth. AH-nath-oth.

KJV

Jeremiah 21:8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

9 He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

11 And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the LORD;

12 O house of David, thus saith the LORD; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

13 Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the LORD; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?

14 But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the LORD: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.

NLT

Jeremiah 21:8 “Tell all the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: Take your choice of life or death!

9 Everyone who stays in Jerusalem will die from war, famine, or disease, but those who go out and surrender to the Babylonians will live. Their reward will be life!

10 For I have decided to bring disaster and not good upon this city, says the LORD. It will be handed over to the king of Babylon, and he will reduce it to ashes.’

11 Say to the royal family of Judah, ‘Listen to this message from the LORD!

12 This is what the LORD says to the dynasty of David: Give justice each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Otherwise, my anger will burn like an unquenchable fire because of all your sins.

13 I will personally fight against the people in Jerusalem, that mighty fortress—the people who boast, “No one can touch us here. No one can break in here.”

14 And I myself will punish you for your sinfulness, says the LORD. I will light a fire in your forests that will burn up everything around you.”

The People, Places, and Times

Jerusalem During the Time of the Prophets (750–586 BC). Jerusalem was a walled city during the time of the prophets. Located between the Hinnom and Kidron Valleys, Jerusalem was surrounded by the Mount of Olives. Refugees arrived in Jerusalem about the time of the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BC). Settlement spread to the western hill, and a new wall was added for protection. Hezekiah carved an underground aqueduct out of solid rock to bring an ample water supply inside the city walls, enabling Jerusalem to survive the siege of Sennacherib in 701 BC.

Jeremiah. Jeremiah is one of the giants of Old Testament prophecy. The son of a priest, he was born in Anathoth, a village three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jeremiah received his calling as a prophet in 626 BC during the thirteenth year of King Josiah’s reign. The book of Jeremiah reveals a lot about the inner turmoil and conflict out of which Jeremiah delivered his prophetic burden. Jeremiah’s life demonstrates the hardships that sometime accompany the task of bringing God’s word to His people. Perhaps anticipating the difficulties of being a prophet, Jeremiah resisted his call to prophetic ministry, citing his youth as an obstacle (Jeremiah 1:6–9). But God’s will cannot be resisted. Jeremiah followed his calling faithfully, but the road was hard. He was rejected by his people (Jeremiah 15:10). He was frustrated by their hardheartedness (Jeremiah 5:3). He was cut off from the normal joys and pleasures of life (Jeremiah 16:9). In spite of all of the difficulties that Jeremiah experienced, he found that he could not resist God’s call to prophesy. He had to declare the word of the LORD

as the LORD had directed him. It was a compulsion. It was a dynamic, powerful inner motivation that made him prophesy. “Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jeremiah 20:9).

Background

Jeremiah first began to prophesy under King Josiah (639–609). Jeremiah witnessed a great spiritual revival and awakening in Jerusalem that took place when Josiah was in office. Then Josiah was killed attempting to stop an Egyptian Pharaoh from marching through Judah. For a brief period, Judah was under the control of Egypt. This event marked the beginning of a terrible time for Judah. Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took control of countries north of Judah, leaving them sandwiched in between these two powerful nations. At various times both threatened to wipe out God’s chosen nation. God spoke through Jeremiah during these alarming, turbulent times. He attempted to persuade them to repentance and faithfulness to Yahweh and laid before them the consequences of their rebellion against Yahweh. Unfortunately, the people chose to listen to false prophets who spoke comfort and peace to them in the midst of their unfaithfulness. Jeremiah to them was a nuisance. They rejected the word of the Lord from the mouth of Jeremiah. It is a stern cautionary tale to people who claim to be in a relationship with the just God but prioritize oppression and selfcenteredness. God does not prioritize oppressors even if they consider themselves to be His chosen people. God’s chosen people are the weak and vulnerable. This could seem contradictory since the Babylonians are more corrupt people; however, the prophet frames the Babylonians’ destruction of Jerusalem as a prime example of God’s zero tolerance for exploitation. In the same way that Judah receives its punishment, the Babylonians’ turn is coming too. Jeremiah calls us to remember that we must consistently consider whose side we are on, because God will not stand by us if we are wrong and wronging others.

We should consider the following: Where are we standing against God? And how can we move to God’s side before its too late?

At-A-Glance

1. The Paradox of the Malpractice of Justice (Jeremiah 21:8–10)
2. The Priority of the Practice of Justice (vv.11–12)
3. The Price of the Malpractice of Justice (vv.13–14)

In Depth

1. The Paradox of the Malpractice of Justice (Jeremiah 21:8–10)

Because the people of Judah had practiced evil, they were given only two bleak options: Submit to Babylonian domination or fight unsuccessfully. The prophet frames their dire condition as a result of their own lack of concern for the lowly. Neither of their options is desirable, but their lack of options is directly correlated to their not providing options to the most vulnerable. The people of Judah that would be taken away as captives would have been the elite who had benefited from exploiting others. The land that would be burned with fire would be the land that had produced an abundance, but the fruit of the land had been marked up, overpriced, and placed outside of the reach of the poor who worked the land so that the wealthy could live even more luxuriously. Although it looks like they have no options, they do. They had chosen the wrong ones, which led to their current collision with Babylonia.

It is important to consider whose oppression we benefit from. Whose exploitation, low wages, or immigration status secures us a more stable life?

2. The Priority of the Practice of Justice (vv. 11–12)

God's command is for justice to be the priority that is taken up as the first order of business. It cannot be secondary or ignored. God cares about the lived experiences of people who are trapped by hands that steal from them, devalue them, and benefit from their powerlessness. Since these are God's priorities, they should also be the priorities of God's people, especially leaders. That is why Jeremiah directs his prophecy to the house of David. The work of leaders demands a commitment to equity. Equity is not the same as equality. The passage does not only express that leaders should treat everyone the same, which is equality. It compels them to right the wrongs and do more for those who have been mistreated. That is equity. Making this type of justice a priority aligns with God's values and prevents God's wrath from breaking out on behalf of the marginalized.

How can we prioritize justice? Why is it important to distinguish between equity and equality?

3. The Price of the Malpractice of Justice (vv. 13–14)

We should never become desensitized to the harshness of the language in these verses. The prophet raises the tone and allows for the audience to hear God testifying against and declaring war on people that God no longer calls by God's name or their name. They are referred to only as "inhabitant of the valley." God declares that He will allocate their punishment by their actions. Unfortunately for them, their actions are highly flammable, and their punishment is a kindled fire. These verses highlight the significance of one's actions, especially when he or she thinks that they can get away with wrongdoing. Even if those who are weak cannot defend themselves against the strong, they have an advocate who will remember their cause and fight for them. This passage should serve as an impetus to make sure that one's actions are geared to seeking and pursuing justice, because if they are not, you may find yourself fighting against God.

What does God's anger about injustice communicate to us about how we should view oppression?

Search the Scriptures

1. What are the two options that the Lord sets before the people of Judah? What do these options indicate to us about the Lord's tolerance for evil, oppression, and marginalization? What option would you choose?
2. To whom is the word of the Lord addressed, and why is this specifically significant to the Lord's concern for practicing justice?

Discuss the Meaning

The Lord stands squarely against those who oppress. However, the Babylonians are also oppressive and employ imperial domination. What does the Lord's use of the Babylonians indicate to us about the Lord's commitment to justice? In what way is the Babylonian destruction of Judah a part of the same system of violence that the Jerusalem elite perpetuated against the poor and marginalized? How does violent imagery function to compel God's people to actively resist injustice?

Liberating Lesson

This lesson compels us to take stock of the ways in which we have been an active or complicit participant in the oppression of others. It is important that we regularly examine how the corporate elite benefit from low wages to workers and the suppression of unions. We should not forget how global capitalism leaves many people around the world in poverty in order to provide inexpensive clothing and technology for us. We also have to be conscious of how our tax dollars go to fund a military whose destructive capacity makes Babylon's imperial force look like child's play. This should cause us to repent and resist so that we can find ourselves on God's side and not on the side of making excuses for oppression.

Application for Activation

What people's pain do you feel the most? Is it children, the elderly, the homeless, immigrants, the poor, victims of racial or gender discrimination, the falsely incarcerated, the over-policed, those affected directly by climate change? Find one way to stand on their side, which is to stand on God's side. Perhaps it can be through

donating to an organization that deals with those issues. Perhaps it is volunteering. Perhaps it is to boycott a restaurant that uses discriminatory hiring practices. Perhaps it is to protest a store that uses problematic images in its marketing materials. Take an issue that is close to you and choose to stand with those people and God.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Jeremiah 21:8–14

8 And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has come against Jerusalem to destroy it, and King Zedekiah of Judah is hopeful that the Lord will deliver them. After all, he has saved them so many times in the past (see Jeremiah 21:2). But this time will be different. Not only will he not save them, but the Lord himself is against his own people because of their constant sin and rejection of his kingship over them. So the prophet Jeremiah first addresses Zedekiah and dashes his hopes by declaring that the Lord will ensure that Jerusalem and its people are captured by Nebuchadnezzar (see vv. 4–7).

Now, he turns to address the people of the city (v. 8). God had already been patient with His people for centuries as they worshiped other gods and disregarded His laws, and now the time for judgment has finally arrived. Yet even now, God graciously provides a way of escape. He could have simply destroyed them, which would have been entirely justified, since “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23). Instead, He tells them that there still remains a “way of life.” For Israel this way of life involves obedience to God’s commands, loving Him, fearing Him, and serving Him. Their failure in this task causes them to now face God’s judgment, yet God sets before them the way of life one more time.

9 He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.

God now describes “the way of life” and “the way of death” for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Those who choose to remain in the city and hide behind its walls during the Babylonian siege will face death. Jeremiah often refers to sword, famine, and pestilence to summarize the various ways in which God will judge His people for their unfaithfulness to Him and the covenant. All three bring about death, but from different sources: “sword” refers to war, “famine” to the lack of food due to the lack of rain, and “pestilence” to diseases or plagues. All three are among the covenant curses that God had promised to bring upon the people in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 if they did not remain loyal to Him.

While those who stay in the city will eventually die, those who leave the city will save their lives. The people are encouraged to “fall to the Chaldeans” (“Chaldeans” being another name for the Babylonians). Although the Hebrew word *nafal* (naw-FALL) often refers to “falling” in battle (in other words, “dying”), in this case, it refers to falling to the ground before the enemy in an act of submission and surrender. They will not survive by fighting but by giving themselves up. The Hebrew word *shalal* (shaw-LALL), translated as “prey” by the KJV, typically refers to the spoil or captured goods won through battle. In this case, even though Jerusalem will lose the battle, those who leave the city will at least “win” their own lives. This option may not be the best-case scenario that the people may have hoped for, but it is at least better than dying.

It would not be easy to follow “the way of life” in this case. Even though the Babylonians possess a powerful and superior army, it would be natural to find security behind the walls of Jerusalem and to hope that they could hold out against the siege. Those who are more religious may trust in the invincibility of the Temple in their city and assume that remaining would surely be the path that God would bless. Surrendering to the enemy would be unpopular, treasonous, and dangerous. It would take faith to believe that their lives will be spared if they leave the city. God’s ways are sometimes quite different from what we would think. God is calling the people to trust Him for a way of escape, even as He is bringing judgment.

10 For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.

It is certain that Jerusalem will fall to Babylon. But this is not because Babylon is more powerful than Jerusalem, although this is true in terms of human strength. Jerusalem is certain to fall because God Himself is against the city and is directing these events for His own purposes. Nebuchadnezzar is simply God’s “servant” (cf. Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6), God’s instrument of judgment. Babylon does not “take” Jerusalem. Rather, Jerusalem is “given” into their hand.

Since God is good and not evil, it may be difficult to understand how he has determined to bring “evil” against Jerusalem, as we read in the KJV. The Hebrew word *ra’ah* (ra-AH) often refers to moral evil or wickedness, but can also refer to misfortune, trouble, or “disaster” (NLT). In this case, “disaster” serves as a better translation since God is bringing a deserved and just form of judgment against the people for their sin.

11 And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the LORD; 12 O house of David, thus saith the LORD; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.

God provides one last opportunity for the people to escape with their lives (vv. 8–10). Now, He turns back to address the Davidic kings. There is no specific king named here, but we might assume Zedekiah is in mind since he was the recipient of the prior message, but this new message is the first of a number of short messages addressed to various kings during Jeremiah’s ministry that run through the next chapter. Also, in Hebrew the commands to “execute judgment” and “deliver him” are plural, so multiple kings are addressed here. In light of this, these verses appear to address the kings of Judah in general and summarize the expectations placed upon them and the consequences if they fail.

God’s message for the kings begins with a command to judge with *mishpat* (Heb. *meesh-* POT), the most common word in the Old Testament for “justice.” Although this justice is to be dispensed literally “in the morning,” the NLT translation “each morning” better communicates the intended meaning that justice is to be a continual and top priority for the king. The following line explains the kind of justice that God has in mind: kings ought to come to the defense of those who have been robbed by “delivering” them from those who have oppressed them. It is clear from as early as the eighth century from the prophets Hosea and Amos that the abuse of the poor at the hands of the rich was a significant problem in Israel’s society. Two hundred years later, the situation remains unchanged as the wealthy and powerful continue to take advantage of the lower classes.

It is one of the primary responsibilities of the king in Israel to perform “justice and righteousness” throughout the land by maintaining God’s laws and promoting the economic and social welfare of the entire population. Sadly, it becomes clear from the next two chapters of Jeremiah that the Davidic kings had failed miserably in their responsibility toward the lower class. The penalty is severe if the kings fail in their duty. They may not have thought of these matters as all that important. But turning a blind eye to the plight of the poor is such a great evil in God’s eyes that He will unleash his just wrath on them, wrath so great that it is like a raging fire that cannot be put out.

13 Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the LORD; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations? 14 But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the LORD: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.

Here God continues to describe the judgment He will bring against the kings of Judah and on the whole city. In the previous verse God had given them a strong warning, encouraging them to change their ways to avoid judgment. Here it becomes clear that the verdict is already in: they have failed, and God’s judgment is certain. God has often intervened as the divine warrior on behalf of His people, as in the Exodus deliverance when He fought for them (Exodus 15). But this time He is against them.

God here addresses the “inhabitant of the valley” and “rock of the plain,” both unusual descriptions. These are references to Jerusalem, which is surrounded on three sides by valleys and was a relatively strong, rock-like fortress. The kings are still in view here, but now the broader population of the city is addressed as well.

It appears that the people were quite confident that they were safe and secure. Nebuchadnezzar led the most powerful army in the world at that time. The small and powerless nation of Judah had little chance against them from a human point of view. Although the people are described as wicked, they were still pious and religious. Many believed that God would protect them and that He would never allow His Temple, His city, and His king to be taken (cf. Jeremiah 7:4–15). This is a kind of faith in God, but it is a faith that assumes that righteous living does not really matter.

In response to their boastful claim that no one can enter the city, God says that He will do so Himself to punish “the fruit of your doings.” This could refer to many violations of God’s laws, but it likely mainly refers to the one issue described at the beginning of God’s message in verse 12: the failure of kings and people to deal justly with the needy in the land. As before (vv. 10–12), God’s judgment will take the form of fire, a fire that will “devour” and consume everything around them. The whole city will be destroyed.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Seeking Divine Help in Troubled Times
(Psalm 86:1–13)

TUESDAY

Land Now Belongs to Babylon
(Jeremiah 27:1–11)

WEDNESDAY

Choose to Love and Obey the Lord
(Deuteronomy 30:15–20)

THURSDAY

Surrender and the People Will Live
(Jeremiah 38:14–18)

FRIDAY

Jerusalem Will Fall
(Jeremiah 21:1–7)

SATURDAY

Jerusalem Defeated and Zedekiah Exiled
(2 Kings 24:20–25:7)

SUNDAY

Choose the Life of Justice
(Jeremiah 21:8–14)