

Repent of Injustice

Bible Background • JEREMIAH 22

Printed Text • JEREMIAH 22:1–10 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 72:1–17

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: RECOGNIZE that the covenant relationship between God and His people requires justice, REPENT for injustice and seek to deliver the oppressed, and BECOME active agents of deliverance for the oppressed.

In Focus

The Quency Farm was a beautiful place. There were horses to ride, chickens to feed, and a wonderful petting zoo with a few exotic animals. The groundskeeper and the farm manager were excellent to work for, and the staff was friendly and fun. Schoolchildren and tourists would visit the farm. People enjoyed the sweet corn grown on the Quency Farm, and everyone purchased some before they left the farm.

Mr. Quency loved his farm more than anything. His family would try to have him slow down and just enjoy the farm, but he would not. If he wasn't walking, talking, or coming up with a new plan for the visitors to enjoy the farm, then things weren't going right. His best friends warned him that one day it could be taken away, and he needed to relax and thank the Lord for his blessings. Mr. Quency told them to stop talking such foolishness. God would never take his farm away. Even after he died, he knew the family would maintain the farm just fine.

One day, strong winds and heavy rains came and the forecast looked bad. Mr. Quency knew he could keep the farm afloat for about three days, but if it lasted longer than that, he would lose the farm. After a week of torrential downpours, Mr. Quency's beloved farm was ruined. Mrs. Quency saw her husband shed a tear as he looked up to the sky.

What do you hold onto so dearly? How would you react if you lost something you deeply cherished?

Keep in Mind

“This is what the LORD says: Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows. Stop murdering the innocent!” (Jeremiah 22:3, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Stranger (v. 3) ger (Heb.)—A person who has journeyed to Israel from another country, living there with the purpose of becoming an Israelite in culture and religion

B. Nations (v. 8) goyim (Heb.)—Foreign powers, non-Israelites, those who do not follow God

Say It Correctly

Shallum. sha-LOOM.

Jehoahaz. jeh-HOE-ah-HAZZ.

KJV

Jeremiah 22:1

Thus saith the LORD; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word,

2 And say, Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates:

3 Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place.

4 For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people.

5 But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.

6 For thus saith the LORD unto the king's house of Judah; Thou art Gilead unto me, and the head of Lebanon: yet surely I will make thee a wilderness, and cities which are not inhabited.

7 And I will prepare destroyers against thee, every one with his weapons: and they shall cut down thy choice cedars, and cast them into the fire.

8 And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbour, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this great city?

9 Then they shall answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them.

10 Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country.

NLT

Jeremiah 22:1 This is what the LORD said to me: "Go over and speak directly to the king of Judah. Say to him,

2 'Listen to this message from the LORD, you king of Judah, sitting on David's throne. Let your attendants and your people listen, too.

3 This is what the LORD says: Be fairminded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows. Stop murdering the innocent!

4 If you obey me, there will always be a descendant of David sitting on the throne here in Jerusalem. The king will ride through the palace gates in chariots and on horses, with his parade of attendants and subjects.

5 But if you refuse to pay attention to this warning, I swear by my own name, says the LORD, that this palace will become a pile of rubble."

6 Now this is what the LORD says concerning Judah's royal palace: "I love you as much as fruitful Gilead and the green forests of Lebanon. But I will turn you into a desert, with no one living within your walls.

7 I will call for wreckers, who will bring out their tools to dismantle you. They will tear out all your fine cedar beams and throw them on the fire.

8 People from many nations will pass by the ruins of this city and say to one another, 'Why did the LORD destroy such a great city?'

9 And the answer will be, 'Because they violated their covenant with the LORD their God by worshiping other gods.'"

10 Do not weep for the dead king or mourn his loss. Instead, weep for the captive king being led away! For he will never return to see his native land again.

The People, Places, and Times

Throne of David. When David offered to build the Temple for God in Jerusalem, the prophet Samuel delivered God's response that David would not build God a house, but that God would build David a house, a line of kings to reign forever, as long as they remained faithful to the Lord (2 Samuel 7:12). In His covenant with

David, God promised that a descendant from David's family line would be the eternal king who would rule over God's people and all nations of the world (Isaiah 9:6–37; Micah 5:2, 4). Such stability in the royal line would have allowed the nation to prosper in peace, without infighting among princes vying for the throne. Unfortunately, since not even David's son managed to remain faithful to God throughout his reign, God allowed the kingdom to split, and the throne of David was not as powerful. When His people and their kings continued in sin, God allowed Babylonia to conquer them and overthrow the king on David's throne. The Lord would not fail in keeping His covenant, though. Through the royal line of David, the King of kings was born, and He will reign forever.

Background

This passage is particularly powerful because this chapter is nestled between two chapters that express that the destruction and exile of Judah are inevitable. This chapter finds the prophet Jeremiah expressing the grounds for the Babylonians leading the people of Judah away from their land, and those grounds are the people of Judah's blatant disregard for the covenant. However, their dismissal is not permanent. God always provides an opportunity to return home. No matter how far away they go and even if they cannot immediately return physically, they can return to the "hometown" values, which are epitomized by the covenant.

From what places is God calling us? What are the values that God is calling us to return to?

At-A-Glance

1. Responding to God's Call to the Powerful (22:1–5)
2. Remembering God's Covenant with God's People (vv. 6–10)

In Depth

1. Responding to God's Call to the Powerful (22:1–5)

The message that God has the prophet speak to the king of Judah and his entourage is a simple set of imperatives. These instructions are not difficult to understand: Make decisions based on fairness; look out for those who have not been given an adequate opportunity because an individual or institution has robbed them; do not add any extra burden to people who already have a hard time whether they are immigrants, children, or disenfranchised women; don't harm people just because you can. These capture what God wants from the government of Judah.

The message is addressed to the leadership, because if they respond to God's call, then the people whom they lead will be affected by their decisions. It is important to note that people suffer because of bad leadership at a national level. We should not swiftly move past the addressees in the passage and apply this message to everyone. Although these are values that all of God's people should espouse, it is important that those with power use their power appropriately and model justice. Any government that shows favoritism to certain groups of people or further pushes down the downtrodden or increases obstacles for the already dispossessed is a government that has chosen to refuse to heed the call of God. Instead of siding with consolation, they choose to side with desolation.

In what ways do our nation and its leaders refuse to answer God's call?

2. Remembering God's Covenant with God's People (vv. 6–10)

The prophet imagines the nation in ruins. When people from other places inquire about how Jerusalem arrived at this point of despair, their answer will contain three actions that were committed: (1) abandoning the

covenant, (2) worshipping other gods, and (3) serving other gods. From the earlier passage, it would seem that the cause of the destruction is rooted in not properly valuing humans, but the charge of idolatry is about incorrectly prioritizing God. The leadership's and the people's actions toward other humans are fundamentally connected to an improper view of God. If the people of Judah believed that they could be in good standing with God and God's covenant while being in bad standing with vulnerable people, then they neither understood the terms of the covenant nor the divine party with whom they were in the covenant. They should not expect God to execute the covenant while they exploit those created in God's image. Furthermore, not understanding how a person or nation's actions are related to their relationship with God leads that person or nation to actually worship a god that is not the true God. Such a mistake in thinking can lead people to overestimate their value in God's eyes. Verse 6 gives a glimpse into this. Although the house of the king of Judah is precious to God as prime real estate, God will leave it vacant and dilapidated if they use their privilege for pushing others down rather than helping them up. Lebanon was known for its valuable cedars, which could represent the value of God's chosen people to God. However, God does not mind destroying what we consider important if our importance is rooted in the marginalization of other people. Not only has the house of Judah improperly valued God and worshiped an idol, they actually serve or enslave themselves to this image. This is a god with whom they did not make a covenant, and this is a god who allows for the people to mistreat others without consequence. This is the god to whom the house of Judah enslaves itself. They choose to serve this non-god and become participants in a noncovenant, abandoning God and God's covenant. This in one way leaves them in a position worse than death (v. 10). However, in another way this puts into relief the gravity of the consequences of injustice and reminds the audience that they should return, repent, and go home before they are in a place of no return. Rather than forsake the covenant, they should forsake their pursuit of a god of greed, self-centeredness, pride, and lust that leads to destruction.

What are some things that we consider more important than God considers them? What have we sold ourselves to that contributes to the growth of injustice?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is it important that the prophet mentions David in his utterance against the house of David (Jeremiah 22:2)? What does David represent?
2. Whom does Jeremiah directly address in this prophecy? Who all can hear his words (v. 2)? Why is it important that more hear that are addressed?

Discuss the Meaning

God calls His people to respond to His simple call to execute justice in their lives and in the lives of the people over whom they have decision-making authority. These are the values that the leadership and people of Judah have left behind. God is calling for them to repent and return to Him. With Him, their covenant a relationship is intact. With Him, the God of justice reigns and not the god of self-centeredness. With Him, treating people right is a prerequisite to being in relationship with God. These calls to respond and remember are urgent, because the further away one goes, the longer and more difficult it is to return.

In what ways do we and our nation need to return to God? What have we forgotten about God and our covenant that allows us to mistreat others?

Liberating Lesson

Some Americans consistently have difficulty recognizing the humanity of immigrants, especially those who are Black and brown. Atrocities have happened at our borders where we mistreat children. Many people have to hide under the radar and become invisible for their own survival. The way we treat these people is how God determines our faithfulness to the covenant. God wants us to remind them that He sees them, even though their safety may be in jeopardy if certain government officials see them. Although people ignore the hateful words of politicians that make whole populations feel forsaken, the Lord wants us to fully integrate those populations into the family of God. This should compel us not only to sympathize with our brothers and sisters but also to repent for when we did not prioritize their safety, salvation, and vindication.

Application for Activation

In our prayer life, it is important to have a correct image of the God to whom we are praying. We indeed do pray to a gracious God, but it is also needful to remember that we are praying to a God who loves justice. Let that guide what we pray for and whom we pray for. Let us not only pray for but actively seek people whom we come across that need to be covered with justice and salvation. Whether it is providing money or volunteering or organizing, let us be moved to help set people free. We should remember our covenant values and remember people's humanity, act with justice, and not add any extra obstacle to people who are already burdened. We should actually work to alleviate those very burdens.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Jeremiah 22:1–10

1 Thus saith the LORD; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, 2 And say, Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates:

Jeremiah 22:1–10 continues a series of messages from the Lord to the kings of Judah. In general, these messages “indict” or criticize them for their sins and then declare God’s judgment against them for their wrongdoing. The first message in Jeremiah 21:11–14 had commanded the kings to practice justice or else they would meet God’s fiery wrath—not only the king but all of Jerusalem with them.

Now Jeremiah addresses a specific king of Judah, though he is not named here and his identity is unknown. We are told that this king “sits on the throne of David.” This reminds us of the covenant that God had made with David four hundred years earlier, as described in 2 Samuel 7. God had promised that his descendants would maintain his throne and that he would have an everlasting kingdom. However, this did not mean that the Davidic king could do whatever he pleased without consequences. This long-term commitment to David did not mean that individual kings would not receive God’s discipline for their actions (Psalm 89:30–33). After Babylonia destroyed Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah, there was to be no Davidic king reigning over Israel for hundreds of years to follow. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, God fulfilled His promises to David. The Son of David will now reign over the kingdom of David and the kingdom of God for all eternity.

The present message is primarily for the king as the ruler and representative of the people, but His servants and all inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem are addressed here as well.

3 Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place.

In the initial message to the kings, they were commanded to “execute judgment” (see Jeremiah 21:12). Now this unnamed king and his people are told to “execute judgment and righteousness.” The Hebrew word for “judgment” is mishpat (meesh-POT), usually translated “justice” in modern English versions. The word for “righteousness,” tsedaqah (Heb. tse-daw-KAW), is used in a number of ways in the Bible. Although we often think of the righteous person as someone who is morally upright and to be contrasted with the wicked person, in this case, it refers specifically to treating others rightly and fairly according to God’s holy standards. Justice and righteousness, then, are not two completely different ideas, but two words that together express one concept, something similar to what we mean today by “social justice.”

The rest of the third verse makes it very clear what kind of justice God has in mind. First, as in Jeremiah 21:12, this means to come to the defense of those who have been robbed by “delivering” them from those who have oppressed them. He then lists three categories of people in society who tend to be marginalized, forgotten, or in need of special care: the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. The first word, ger (Heb. GAIR), refers to foreigners, or non-Israelites, who have come to join the people of God. Today it would include immigrants, expatriates, and refugees living in foreign lands. The second term, yatom (Heb. ya-TOME), often translated “orphan,” refers to a child who has lost their father, though not necessarily their mother. Such individuals lack the basic provision that a father was meant to provide. The third term, ’almanah (Heb. al-ma- NAH), refers to widows, women who have lost their husbands, and thus, like orphans, have lost their primary provider. To do justice and righteousness means to maintain God’s laws for all and treat everyone rightly in society, but it especially means to care for those who cannot care for themselves.

There are three ways in which the king and his people must not treat such people. First, they must not wrong, oppress, or cheat them. Second, they must not act violently toward them, which may even include physical violence. Third, they must not shed their “innocent blood,” which indicates that such people have done no wrong but are simply being abused since they are defenseless. This may be a figure of speech referring to extreme abuse and does not necessarily mean that they are literally killing them, but in some cases such abuse may lead to death.

Elsewhere it is clear that not only were they not to abuse the foreigner, orphan, and widow, but they were to actively care for them (Deuteronomy 15:4, 7–8). It is also the responsibility of all of the people to extend justice to the poor. James reminds Christians, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (from James 1:27).

The situation is not much different in our own day. Around the world, many, especially those of African descent, find themselves among the foreigners, the refugees, the poor, and the oppressed. Sometimes the leaders are responsible for this oppression and abuse, and sometimes the general population is equally responsible. Regardless, it is clear from the beginning to the end of the Bible that one of the most basic ways in which God’s people should “love their neighbor as themselves” is to care for those who lack care and defend the defenseless.

Although few of us may be in a position to care for and defend thousands, we can all look for opportunities to help some who are around us. As Christians, we should strive to see justice done for others, but we must also adopt an eternal perspective. In the present fallen world, we do not expect justice to be done at all times, but we are promised that in the end, the Judge of the world will ensure that all wrongs will be made right.

4 For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. 5 But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.

If the king and the people turn from their wicked oppression of the defenseless, God will respond by extending grace toward them. He will withhold his just punishment and allow the king, his servants, and the people of the city to remain in their homes. He will ensure political stability, and they will continue to thrive.

But there is, of course, another option. The king and the people could decide to ignore God's messenger Jeremiah and continue to live the way they have been living, overpowering the helpless for the sake of their own gain. If they choose this path, God swears emphatically that He will bring judgment. Specifically, "this house," probably a reference to the royal palace, will become a ruinous waste. If they obey, kings will continue to live in the palace. But if they disobey, the palace will be empty, which is representative of broader destruction across the city as well.

Although the word is not used here, it is clear that God is looking for repentance. Repentance in the Bible is more than simply admitting that we have sinned or just feeling bad for our sin. Repentance includes turning from our sin and acting differently. Consistently throughout the Bible God delights in responding to repentance with mercy, compassion, grace, and forgiveness of sin. This is true under the old covenant that God had with Israel, and it is true under the new covenant today. When we turn from our sins and turn to Christ in faith, we receive an abundance of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins through Christ.

6 For thus saith the LORD unto the king's house of Judah; Thou art Gilead unto me, and the head of Lebanon: yet surely I will make thee a wilderness, and cities which are not inhabited. 7 And I will prepare destroyers against thee, every one with his weapons: and they shall cut down thy choice cedars, and cast them into the fire.

Jeremiah continues to describe the coming judgment if the people will not repent of their wickedness. Here he addresses the king more directly. He first compares the king's house to Gilead and to the "head" or summit of Lebanon. Gilead is a hilly region within the territory of Israel, belonging to the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh. It is east of the Jordan River in what is today northwest Jordan. Lebanon is a mountainous area to the north of Israel and famous for its tall cedars. Both are fertile regions that represent strength, beauty, stability, and prosperity. Comparing these places to the palace reminds us that for centuries God has brought blessing and prosperity to David, his family, and his people.

But no more. What was once fertile and forested God will now make like a desert. What was once richly inhabited will now be like empty, forgotten cities. God himself will send warriors against them to destroy them. They will cut down their best cedars, and they will not even be put to good use. They will simply be burned. "Cedars" reminds us of Lebanon, but this is probably also a reference to the palace in particular. When Solomon built the palace of the king centuries earlier, he made use of the famous cedars of Lebanon. As a result, "one of Solomon's buildings was called the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon ... There were four rows of cedar pillars, and great cedar beams rested on the pillars" (1 Kings 7:2, NLT). These powerful images of cutting down these pillars indicate that nothing of the former glory will remain. All will be destroyed.

8 And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbour, Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this great city? 9 Then they shall answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them.

These verses further explain why God is planning to destroy them. The prophet envisions travelers along the road near Jerusalem turning to the side and catching a glimpse of the ruins of the empty city. As they remember Jerusalem's former days of glory, one traveler turns to another in amazement and can't help but ask how this could have happened. Yet the traveler does not assume that this was random misfortune or chance. He rightly recognizes that Israel's God, Yahweh, is directly responsible for destroying His own city, the city that once contained His own Temple.

One traveler has a divinely inspired answer to his friend's question: God destroyed His own people because they abandoned their covenant with Him and worshiped and served other gods. This refers to the covenant relationship the nation had agreed to at Mount Sinai. God had graciously freed Israel from their bondage in Egypt, given them the land of Canaan, and showered them with blessings within the land. In light of these incredible gifts from God, Israel was to respond with absolute loyalty and allegiance to God. This loyalty to God included following many laws that reflect God's own holy character, but above all, it meant following the

first two of the “Ten Commandments”: they must not worship other gods or create idols. The Israelites of Jeremiah’s day, like the many generations before them, had broken the very heart of the covenant agreement.

It had been clear that the cause of the coming destruction was their oppression of the helpless (v. 3), but now it appears that quite a different reason is given. But there is certainly no contradiction here. The causes for their punishment were many and interrelated (see 2 Kings 17:6–20). Jesus Himself tells us that the two greatest commands are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28–31). Verse three highlights their failure to love their neighbor, and verse nine emphasizes that they

have also failed to love God. As John teaches, the two cannot be separated: “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20, NLT).

It is both shocking and shameful that “many nations” will witness this destruction. The Hebrew word, *goyim* (go-YEEM), is the word typically used to refer to nations other than Israel, later referred to as Gentiles. God’s design for Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, was that “all nations will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3, NLT). After God had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai to create a covenant agreement with them, He tells them that it is their responsibility to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). In other words, like a priest, all Israelites had a responsibility to mediate knowledge of God to the surrounding nations so that they might come to acknowledge Him as the one true God and join Israel in worshiping Him alone. There were some small success stories like Ruth and Rahab, but in general Israel failed in this mission throughout her history. Instead of living holy lives distinct from the nations in order to be a light and witness to them, they both despised those nations and lived just like them. Now travelers from these same nations they were meant to reach with blessing shake their heads as they see how Israel has been cursed by her own God.

10 Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country.

The final verse of this message from Jeremiah appears to be a reflection on how one ought to respond to this message of judgment from the Lord. The judgment will be so severe that it is better to be dead than to be alive in exile as a refugee. As in most cultures today, it was customary to weep and mourn for the dead at a funeral, but it makes more sense to save one’s tears for the living who will never see their home again and will be buried in a foreign land.

Some believe that this verse is the beginning of the next message concerning Shallum, another name for King Jehoahaz. If so, “the dead” would refer specifically to King Josiah, and “him that goes away” would refer to his son and successor, Jehoahaz, who was carried off to Egypt, where he died (2 Kings 23:29–34). Since we see this same theme in verses 11–12 this may be the case, but it would be just as fitting to apply verse 10 to all of the dead and the exiled in light of the prior judgment (vv. 5–9).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Justice for Aliens, Orphans, and Widows
(Deuteronomy 24:17–22)

TUESDAY

God Requires Godly Rule by Kings
(Deuteronomy 17:18–20)

WEDNESDAY

Who May Enter God's Holy Presence?
(Psalm 15)

THURSDAY

God's Justice for the Unjust King
(Jeremiah 22:11–19)

FRIDAY

The City Suffers for Its Disobedience
(Jeremiah 22:20–23)

SATURDAY

Injustice Ends the Line of David
(Jeremiah 22:24–30)

SUNDAY

Repent of Misdeeds and Unjust Actions
(Jeremiah 22:1–10)