

CHAPTER 17, THE KINGDOM'S FALL

TIMELESS TRUTH: LISTEN AND LIVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Legacies are fragile things. Hezekiah had been King of Judah for nearly three decades. His reforms were sweeping, his achievements notable, his accolades many. He is listed among the few who “*did what was right before the LORD His God.*” After his death, his son Manasseh ascended to the throne and unraveled his father’s spiritual heritage. Manasseh’s reign marked a spiritual relapse from which the kingdom of Judah would not recover. He made a mockery of Hezekiah’s faithful reign and did more evil than any of his predecessors.

King Manasseh set up altars in the LORD’s temple where worshipping the stars accompanied worship of Jehovah. He filled Jerusalem with the blood of innocents and turned his own heart and his people’s hearts away from God. Manasseh was eventually captured by the Assyrian king and led off to Babylon in utter humiliation. At last, he turned to the LORD who had compassion on him and eventually allowed him to return to Jerusalem. God re-enters the story to give ultimate forgiveness even to the worst of kings.

But God’s people would not return to Him. They ignored the prophet’s warnings. So God did what He said He would do—He sent foreign armies to raid Judah. Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar laid three sieges against Judah and Jerusalem. The first came against King Jehoiakim and the second against King Jehoiachin. Nearly 10,000 Judeans were captured and taken away to Babylon. The king and the prophet Ezekiel were among their prisoners.

Ezekiel’s visions are some of the most colorful in all ancient literature and foretold of Jerusalem’s certain doom. God commissioned Ezekiel to speak truth to the exiles who disregarded their guilt, even when faced with such stern judgment. He refused to give up. He called Jeremiah to alert the adulterous people that they must own up to their reckless sin. And God also sent word that the worst was yet to come.

Zedekiah was Judah’s last and most pitiful king. His government was controlled by Babylon and he and the people rejected God, broke His Law, and defiled His temple. The time for judgment had come, so God arranged the final battle: King Nebuchadnezzar vs. King Zedekiah. The outcome was certain. An 18-month blockade left Jerusalem’s inhabitants weakened by famine. Zedekiah made a last ditch plea for help from the prophet Jeremiah, but no one much cared for Jeremiah’s response. He reported that Jerusalem would not be saved and he urged surrender as their only hope of survival. Most regarded his claims as treasonous.

In 586 BC, the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They demolished the city, looted the temple, and led the people away to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who were left behind. He grieved the loss of his beloved city and mourned the sin of God’s people. He knew that Judah could have been saved, but even in his sorrow, this weeping prophet stood firm on the sure promises of God. He trusted that God would have compassion on the remnant who remained in Jerusalem.

It had been eight centuries since God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. Now they were exiles in Babylon. Hope vanished. But God told Ezekiel that all was not lost. He reminded His people that He would one day cleanse and restore them. He assured their return to the homeland. And He promised that He would be their God.

To illustrate His point, God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones and asked, “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel spoke God’s message to the bones, they came to life and stood like a vast army. This astonishing demonstration confirmed that even exile in Babylon would not hinder God’s great Upper Story and foretold a future resurrection for the faithful. Life would return to Israel’s dried up bones. God would make them a nation again. He would bring them back to their land. Only He could.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What is the most memorable destruction or disaster that you have seen first-hand?

1. List the evil things that King Manasseh did to arouse the anger of the LORD (p. 231-232). How did Judah compare to the pagan nations that the LORD had driven out of the Promised Land? (See the first full paragraph on p. 86 for insight.)
2. What are the “starry hosts” (p.231)? What are the implications for astrology, horoscopes, and other “harmless” and “fun” fortune tellers?
3. Who is most culpable for the sins of Judah—the people or their king? How can believers today avoid being led astray?
4. What happened to King Manasseh? What do you think led him to change his ways?
5. Review Isaiah’s prophecy made over one hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar’s attacks (p. 225-226). Compare Isaiah’s predictions with the events during the reigns of Kings Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.
6. During the exile, God gave Ezekiel the mission of sharing his word with the Jews living in a foreign land. How does the Christian mission today resemble this situation?
7. Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem after the first two sieges. According to his prophecy (p. 238-240), what single condition must be met for God to forgive the city? Are you as forgiving as God? Why or why not?
8. Nebuchadnezzar’s final siege lasted eighteen months ending in 586 BC. How did King Zedekiah regard the LORD? What was God’s final word to him?
9. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah grieved for his beloved city (p. 243-245). What did Jeremiah believe about the Upper Story of God? What specifically can we apply to our own lives from Jeremiah’s lament and praise?
10. What did God promise He would do for Israel in spite of their great sin, their Babylonian exile, and their stone hearts (p. 245-246)? What does this teach you about God’s heart for His chosen nation?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 18, DANIEL IN EXILE

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Carefully observe how the chapter describes Daniel (p. 249, 257-258, 259). Do other characters in the chapter confirm or deny such attributes?
2. How does your prayer life compare to that of Daniel? Is it difficult for you to set aside time for regular prayer?
3. Although they might have only been teenagers, Daniel and his friends stand out for their choices to observe a strict diet and only worship their God. How can you help the young people you know to be more like Daniel and his friends?

DAY 2

1. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were punished for their faithfulness to God. How would you answer the question, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to people of faith?"
2. Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God, although they were given leadership positions in a pagan government. What can you learn from their leadership? What can you learn from their relationships with their boss and co-workers?

DAY 3

1. Did God promise Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego deliverance from the fiery furnace? What consequences are you willing to accept in order to stand firm in your faith?
2. Daniel's integrity was so consistent and above reproach that even his enemies could find no grounds to accuse him (p. 257-258). Examine your own life. Do any inconsistencies exist between your public life and your private life?