

The Last Five Kings of Judah



SABBATH—OCTOBER 10

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 2 Chronicles 34; Jeremiah 22:1–19; Jeremiah 29:1–14; 2 Chronicles 36:11–14; Jeremiah 23:2–8.

MEMORY VERSE: “‘He [Josiah] stood up for those who were poor and needy. So everything went well with him. That is what it means to know me,’ announces the LORD” (Jeremiah 22:16, NIrV).

FAMOUS RUSSIAN WRITER FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY SPENT FOUR YEARS IN A SIBERIAN PRISON IN THE 1800s FOR REBELLIOUS¹ POLITICAL ACTIONS. Later, writing about his experiences, he talked about some of his fellow prisoners who were not sorry about their terrible past behavior. “Over several years, I never saw a sign of repentance [change of heart] among these prisoners. There was no sign of sadness among them for their crimes. Most of them thought that they were right in having done their crimes.”—Adapted from Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky, The Years of Ordeal [Harsh Trial], 1850–1859* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), page 95.

Dostoevsky could have been talking about four of the last five kings of Judah. They ruled Judah during the ministry (work done for God) of Jeremiah. Except for Josiah, the last five kings did not seem to be sorry about their actions.

It had never been God's plan to give Israel a king. By the end of this week's lesson, we will better understand why. We also will understand the severe pressure that poor Jeremiah faced during much of his thankless ministry.

DEFINITIONS

1. rebellious—having to do with actions that rise against authority or power.

UNDER THE RULE OF JOSIAH (2 Chronicles 34)

Josiah was the sixteenth king to rule in the Southern Kingdom. The dates of his rule were 640–609 B.C. He became king at the age of eight, after the kingdom of Judah had fallen into serious sin under his father (Amon) and grandfather (Manasseh). They were two of the most evil kings in Judah. Josiah's rule lasted for 31 years. He was not like his grandfather or his father. Josiah "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:2, NIV). But he ruled in an environment that worked against him.

"Born of a wicked king, Josiah was surrounded with temptations to follow in his father's steps. But even with few advisers to encourage him in the right way, Josiah was true to the God of Israel. Warned by the errors of past generations, he chose to do right. He refused to fall to the low level of sin to which his father and his grandfather had fallen. Josiah 'turned not aside to the right hand or to the left.' As one who held a position of trust, Josiah was determined to obey the instruction that God had given to guide Israel's rulers. He chose to obey God, and God decided to use Josiah as His honorable servant."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets [Special Messengers] and Kings*, page 384.

Read 2 Chronicles 34. What was involved in Josiah's reform (changes)? Why would these things be important in improving Judah's spiritual condition?

Josiah's reform involved two important parts. First, it involved getting rid of idol worship. Josiah worked hard to remove the evil practices that had arisen in the nation.

But that was only the first step. Just because Josiah had gotten rid of evil or wrong practices did not mean that only good would follow. Josiah took an important second step. After hearing the Book of the Law read to him, Josiah made a covenant (promise) before the Lord "to follow him and obey his commands, directions and rules. He promised to obey them with all his heart and with all his soul. So he promised to obey the terms [rules] of the covenant that were written down in that scroll" (2 Chronicles 34:31, NIV).

Read 2 Chronicles 34:32, 33. What do these verses tell us about the power of a good leader? Think long and hard: What influence do your words and actions have on others?



Josiah's reform involved getting rid of idol worship.

JEHOAHAZ AND JEHOIAKIM (Jeremiah 22:1–19)

Jehoahaz (also known as Shallum) was 23 years old when he succeeded his father Josiah on the throne. His rule lasted only three months. Pharaoh replaced him with his brother Jehoiakim because Jehoahaz did not support Egyptian politics. Jehoahaz was taken to Egypt, and there he died. (Read 2 Chronicles 36:4; 2 Kings 23:31–34.)

Jehoiakim ruled from 609 to 598 B.C. When Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, Jehoiakim was taken to Babylon along with valuable things from the temple. During the rule of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, Jeremiah had warned the people that these kings were leading the nation down a wrong path.

Read Jeremiah 22:1–19. What were some of the problems with Jehoiakim that did not please the Lord?



The true knowledge of God is shown when we help those who can do nothing for us in return.

DEFINITIONS

2. torah—the first five books of Moses.

Through Jeremiah, the Lord had very sharp words for this evil ruler. Jehoiakim was a greedy king who ordered heavy taxes in Judah (read 2 Kings 23:35) in order to pay the Egyptians. Worse, using slaves, Jehoiakim had a fancy palace built for himself. He did not follow the torah,² which was clear about paying people for their work. “Do not cheat your neighbor. Do not rob him. Do not hold back the pay of a hired worker until morning” (Leviticus 19:13, NIV). Also, unlike his father, Josiah, Jehoiakim permitted idol worship to become popular again in Judah.

Jeremiah 22:16 also is a powerful verse. In comparing the evil Jehoiakim to his father, Josiah, the Lord said to Jehoiakim: “He [Josiah] stood up for those who were poor or needy. So everything went well with him. That is what it means to know me” (NIV). The true knowledge of God comes from how one treats those who are in need. It comes when we step out of ourselves to help those who can really do nothing for us in return. The Bible shows us the Lord’s concern for the poor and the helpless. It also teaches us that we have to help those who cannot help themselves.

Think deeply about the idea that helping the “poor and the needy” is how we come to know the Lord. What does that mean?

THE SHORT RULE OF KING JEHOIACHIN OF JUDAH (Jeremiah 29:1–14)

The nineteenth king of Judah was Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim. He ruled on David's throne for only three and a half months. In 598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar brought his army to Jerusalem and seized the 18-year-old king, along with his mother, his wives, and many other royal slaves. In 561 B.C., after being in prison for 36 years, Jehoiachin was shown mercy by Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor. Jehoiachin was given the right to dine with the king of Babylon. And he could wear his kingly robes. (Read 2 Kings 25:27–30; Jeremiah 52:31–34.) His sons were also in Babylon with him. But Jeremiah's prophecy (message from God) said they would have to give up the throne of David.

Read Jeremiah 29:1–14, the words of the Lord through Jeremiah after King Jehoiachin and his family and the court were taken as prisoners to Babylon. Even during this terrible time, how is God's love and grace (forgiveness and mercy) shown?

One of the most famous verses in the Bible is this: " 'I know the plans I have for you,' announces the LORD, 'I want you to enjoy success. I do not plan to harm you. I will give you hope for the years to come' " (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV). So, now we can understand what was happening when God gave those words to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was to give that message to the Jewish prisoners whose lives had been upset by the victorious Babylonian soldiers. No matter how bad their situation seemed, the Lord wanted them to know that He still loved them and was working for their good. No doubt the Jewish prisoners must have welcomed such promising and hopeful words. Even with all warnings and threats, God still gave the people the promise of "a future and a hope" (verse 11, ESV). How important it must have been for them to have such an encouraging promise!

A future and a hope? What promises can you claim from the Lord for "a future and a hope" even right now, no matter what your situation is?



No matter how bad their situation seemed, the Lord wanted His people to know that He still loved them and worked for their good.

AT THE END OF THE DEAD END (2 Chronicles 36:11–14)

Read 2 Chronicles 36:11–14. What do these verses tell us about the last king of Judah before the final destruction of the nation? What spiritual lessons about backsliding are taught in these verses?

Zedekiah (also known as Mattaniah) took the throne at the age of 21. He was placed there by Nebuchadnezzar as a puppet king. Unfortunately, as the verses say, Zedekiah had not learned many lessons from what had happened with the kings before him. So, as a result, he brought even greater ruin to the nation.

Second Chronicles 36:14 brings up a point that goes deep to the heart of the people's backsliding. On the list of all the evil done under the rule of Zedekiah, Judah was following "all the practices [sins] of the nations" (NirV).

There they were, hundreds of years after the Exodus, even hundreds of years after God chose them as a people who were to be a lighthouse to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). But they were still trapped by the cultural and religious environment of their neighbors. So, they were doing "all the practices [sins]" of the pagans (idol worshipers).

Might there be a message there for us?

Read Jeremiah 38:14–18. What did the king ask Jeremiah, and why?

The Lord had made it clear many times that the nation was to surrender to the rule of Babylon. This was supposed to be punishment for their sins. But Zedekiah refused to listen. And he asked for Egypt's help in fighting against Nebuchadnezzar. The nation depended heavily on the hope of an Egyptian military victory. But Nebuchadnezzar was victorious over Pharaoh's army in 597 B.C. This defeat permanently sealed the future of Jerusalem and the nation. The Lord had given Judah many opportunities to repent (change their hearts), but Judah refused.

We as a church have been raised up to preach a message to the world that no one else in the world is preaching. In many ways that is what Judah was asked to do. What lessons can and should we learn for ourselves from their mistakes?

THE DARK YEARS (Jeremiah 39:8, 9)

What became of Israel and Jerusalem after they refused God’s message? Read Jeremiah 39:8, 9.

Everything that God had warned the people of Judah would happen to them is exactly what happened. They did not want to believe the warnings. But they certainly did believe them after it all came to pass. Who has not had a similar experience? We are warned by the Lord not to do something or else something bad will happen. But we do it anyway, and sure enough, what we were told would happen does happen.

What message is found in Jeremiah 23:2–8? What hope was given to the people?

All seemed lost. Their nation lay in ruins. Their temple was destroyed. Their rulers had been taken away as prisoners. And the city of Jerusalem was a pile of stones. The Jewish nation and the Jewish people should have at that time disappeared from history, as so many other nations had.

But the Lord had other plans. In the verses above (and in many others) He gave them the hope that all was not lost. He gave them hope that a remnant (small group) would return. And through them the promises would be fulfilled. All the warnings of doom and destruction had been given. But prophets also gave the people their only hope.

“The dark years of destruction and death causing the end of the kingdom of Judah would have made the strongest people feel hopeless. But the encouraging messages of God’s prophets gave them hope. Through Jeremiah in Jerusalem, through Daniel in the court of Babylon, through Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar River, the Lord in mercy made clear His eternal purpose. He gave positive signs of His willingness to keep His promises written by Moses. The Lord also said He would do so for those who should prove true to Him. ‘His word lasts forever.’ 1 Peter 1:23, NIV.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 464.



God is willing to keep His promises to those who prove true to Him.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “In the closing years of Judah’s backsliding, the warnings of the prophets seemed to be unsuccessful. And as the armies of the Babylonians came for the third and last time to besiege [surround] Jerusalem, hope fled from every heart. Jeremiah prophesied [foretold] total ruin. Because Jeremiah encouraged surrender to the Babylonians, he was thrown into prison. But God did not fail to give hope to the faithful remnant who were still in the city. Even while Jeremiah was kept under close watch by those who refused to accept his messages, there came to him fresh prophecies [special messages from God] about Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save. These prophecies have been an unfailing source of comfort to the church of God from that day to this.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 466.

Read the words, “Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save.” Think about all the ways that we have been shown “Heaven’s willingness” to forgive and save. After all, the Cross alone should tell us about this willingness. We have the Word of God, which teaches the plan of salvation to us. We have been given the Spirit of Prophecy, a wonderful gift. What other ways have we been shown “Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save”?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① The people met Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, “Please listen to our appeal [requests]. Pray to the LORD your God. Pray for all of us who are left here. Once there were many of us. But as you can see, only a few of us are left now” (Jeremiah 42:2, NIV). What does this verse, and what we read in Jeremiah 23:3, have to say about the remnant theme (idea) in Jeremiah?

② It is so easy for us to study Bible history and understand all the faults and weaknesses of God’s people a long time ago. And we should because we have been told that these stories were written as examples for us (1 Corinthians 10:11). The sad thing is that many of these people at the time, in their own culture, thought that they were doing the right thing. They also thought that they were just fine with the Lord. What warning should that give us about just how blind we can be to our true spiritual condition? What are ways we can deal with our true spiritual condition? Why must we keep the Cross important in our spiritual lives? What would happen to us if we did not keep it important in our spiritual lives?