

The Destruction of Jerusalem



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ezekiel 8, Rom. 1:22–25, Jer. 37:1–10, 38:1–6, Jer. 29:1–14, Dan. 9:2.*

Memory Text: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (*Jeremiah 29:7, NIV*).

Within a few short years the king of Babylon was to be used as the instrument of God's wrath upon impenitent Judah. Again and again Jerusalem was to be invested [surrounded] and entered by the besieging armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Company after company—at first a few only, but later on thousands and tens of thousands—were to be taken captive to the land of Shinar, there to dwell in enforced exile. Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah—all these Jewish kings were in turn to become vassals of the Babylonian ruler, and all in turn were to rebel. Severer and yet more severe chastisements were to be inflicted upon the rebellious nation, until at last the entire land was to become a desolation, Jerusalem was to be laid waste and burned with fire, the temple that Solomon had built was to be destroyed, and the kingdom of Judah was to fall, never again to occupy its former position among the nations of earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 422, 423.

As we have seen, and will see, none of this came upon them without plenty of warnings and pleadings by the prophets, especially Jeremiah. Their refusal to obey brought only ruin. May we learn from their mistakes!

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 5.

Weeping for Tammuz

Though Jeremiah might have felt very much alone at times, he wasn't. God had raised up Ezekiel, a contemporary, among the captives in Babylon, in order to comfort and to warn the exiles as well as to confirm what the Lord had been speaking through Jeremiah all these long and hard years. Through his ministry, Ezekiel was to warn the captives against the folly of believing the false predictions of an early return from Babylon. He was also to foretell, by various symbols and messages, the devastating siege that would eventually befall Jerusalem because of the people's refusal to repent and turn away from their sin and apostasy.

Read Ezekiel 8. What was the prophet shown? What does this tell us about how powerful the prevailing culture can be, and how it can impact even the most sacred things? What warnings should be here for us?

No matter how often, and clearly, the writings of Moses and the prophets warned against idolatry and worshiping other gods, these verses show that this is exactly what was being done, even within the sacred precincts of the temple. "Weeping for Tammuz" was a lamentation ritual for a Mesopotamian god. No wonder 2 Chronicles said: "Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem" (*2 Chron. 36:14*).

Look carefully at Ezekiel 8:12. The translation about the chambers of their own "imagery" is a little ambiguous. It could mean the chambers where they stored their own idols, or it could mean the chambers of their own imagination, their own hearts. Either way, the elders, the leaders, had fallen so far that they said the Lord didn't see what they were doing, that the Lord had abandoned them. It is another way of saying, "The Lord doesn't care about these things; they aren't important." Right there, in the sacred precincts of God's temple, these people engaged in the grossest idolatry, doing everything that they had specifically been forbidden by God's word to do. Even worse, in their own minds they justified their deeds. Here we see again what Paul meant when he talked about those who worshiped the creation instead of the Creator (*see Rom. 1:22–25*).

The Unhappy Reign of King Zedekiah

Zedekiah, whose name means “righteousness of Yahweh,” was the last king on the throne of Judah before its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. At first he seemed to have been willing to obey the words of Jeremiah and submit to the Babylonians. However, this attitude did not last.

Read Jeremiah 37:1–10. What was Jeremiah’s warning to King Zedekiah?

Under pressure from his subjects, most likely the nobility, Zedekiah ignored the warnings of Jeremiah and made a military alliance with the Egyptians instead, in hopes of staving off the Babylonian threat. (*See Ezek. 17:15–18.*) As he had been duly warned, salvation didn’t come from the Egyptians after all.

Read Jeremiah 38:1–6. What happened to Jeremiah (again) because he proclaimed the word of God to the people?

As Jesus said, “A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (*Mark 6:4*). Poor Jeremiah again faced the wrath of his own countrymen. Like the rest of the nation, though, Jeremiah couldn’t say that he hadn’t been warned. In this case though, the warning was about the trials that he would face if he stayed faithful, which he did!

How difficult it must have been for Jeremiah, too, because he was accused of weakening the morale of the nation. After all, when the people were facing an enemy from without, whom they wanted to fight against, and Jeremiah had been going around for years and years saying it’s a lost cause, that they couldn’t win, and that even the Lord was against them—it’s understandable that you would want to shut him up. So hardened in sin, they didn’t hear the voice of the Lord talking to them; indeed, they thought it was the voice of an enemy instead.

However difficult the pit was, think about how much harder it was for Jeremiah to hear the charge against him that he was seeking the hurt, not the welfare, of his own people. What’s it like to be accused of hurting the very ones you are trying to help?

The Fall of Jerusalem

The siege of Jerusalem began in earnest in January, 588 B.C., and lasted until the late summer of 586 B.C. Jerusalem had been able to hold out for more than two years before Jeremiah's prophetic words were fulfilled, and the Babylonian troops broke through the wall and destroyed the city. Starvation was so bad inside the walls that the defenders lost all strength and couldn't resist any longer. King Zedekiah fled with his family, but in vain. He was captured and taken to Nebuchadnezzar, who had his sons executed before his eyes. We can read much of this sad story in Jeremiah 39:1–10.

Read Jeremiah 40:1–6. What is the significance of the words of Nebuzaradan to Jeremiah?

How fascinating that this pagan commander understood the situation so much better than did Jeremiah's own people! Obviously the Babylonians knew something about Jeremiah and his work, and they were treating him differently from the way they did the others, such as Zedekiah (*see Jer. 39:11, 12*). Just why this pagan leader attributed the demise of Jerusalem to the Lord as a punishment for the sins of the people rather than to the superiority of his own gods over Judah's, the text doesn't say. Whatever the reason, it's a startling testimony to how, even amid such unnecessary calamity, the Lord had revealed something about Himself to the pagans.

What choice would Jeremiah make—go with the captives to Babylon or stay behind with those remaining? Neither prospect would be particularly appealing, considering the circumstances for them all. Certainly, though, the spiritual needs of both groups would have been great, and Jeremiah could minister wherever he went. Jeremiah decided to stay among the group that remained behind in the land, with the poor people who no doubt were going to need all the encouragement and help that they could get (*see Jer. 40:6, 7*).

How can you learn to minister to others, regardless of the situation you are in? Why is it important, even for yourself, that you minister in whatever way you can?

All Your Heart

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (*Jer. 29:13, NIV*). What has been your own experience with this promise? What does “with all your heart” mean?

The Lord knows the beginning from the end. Even while people in Jerusalem were still fighting the Babylonians, still hoping that the words of the false prophets were true, the Lord was using Jeremiah to speak to the future, to speak to those who were already in Babylon and to those who would eventually be there. And what words he spoke!

Read Jeremiah 29:1–14. How are the love and mercy of God revealed in these texts?

Here was a true message of grace, unlike the false message of “grace” that the people had heard from the prophets who told them that their exile would be over in short order, even just two years. That was not God’s plan, and it was not going to happen. Instead, based on the clear teachings of Moses, they had to accept that this was their fate, at least for now; but just as Moses had said, if they repented, they would be restored to the land.

Read Deuteronomy 30:1–4. How do these texts reflect what Jeremiah said to the people? (*See also Deut. 4:29.*)

We have been given the prophetic gift in the wonderful ministry of Ellen G. White. How can we be sure that we don’t show the same attitude toward her today that many (but not all) had toward Jeremiah?

The Seventy Years

Jeremiah's prophecies should have had a double effect on the thinking of the captives: on the one hand they should not believe what the false prophets were saying, and on the other hand they should not be dispirited. He asked his captive countrymen to pray for Babylon. This request might have surprised those who had been deported. What Jeremiah was asking from the captives was unheard of in the earlier history of Israel. It had been absolutely unknown to pray for an enemy who had done what the Babylonians had done to them, God's chosen nation. The prophet broke all their understandings regarding the temple and Jerusalem; they could pray in a pagan country, and the Everlasting God would listen to them.

Notice, too, what Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 29:7: that the prosperity of their "host" nation will mean their prosperity too. As aliens and strangers in the land, they were especially vulnerable if things went badly in the nation in general. All through history, we have seen sad examples of intolerance becoming especially bad when a nation faces hard times; people look for scapegoats, those whom they can blame, and minorities, or aliens, often become easy targets. It is an unfortunate reality.

What wonderful hope is given to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:10? (*See also Jer. 25:11, 12; 2 Chron. 36:21; Dan. 9:2.*)

Everything the Lord had said would happen had happened; so, they had every reason to trust that He would fulfill this prophecy as well (*Jer. 29:10*). Why 70 years would be the exact time of their exile we don't know, though it clearly is linked to the idea of Sabbath rest for the land (*see Lev. 25:4, 26:34, 43*). What's so important about this prophecy is that, if they had taken in the concepts of faith and submission, it would have given the captives great hope and assurance of the Lord's complete sovereignty. Despite appearances, despite the terrible calamity that befell them, they could know that all was not lost, and the Lord had not left them. They were still the covenant people, and the Lord wasn't through with them or the nation of Israel. Redemption was available there for all of those ready to meet the conditions.

What prophecies give you great hope for the future? Which ones strengthen your faith and help you learn to trust the Lord for whatever will come?

Further Thought: “We are in continual danger of getting above the simplicity of the gospel. There is an intense desire on the part of many to startle the world with something original, that shall lift the people into a state of spiritual ecstasy, and change the present order of experience. There is certainly great need of a change in the present order of experience; for the sacredness of present truth is not realized as it should be, but the change we need is a change of heart, and can only be obtained by seeking God individually for His blessing, by pleading with Him for His power, by fervently praying that His grace may come upon us, and that our characters may be transformed. This is the change we need today, and for the attainment of this experience we should exercise persevering energy and manifest heartfelt earnestness. We should ask with true sincerity, ‘What shall I do to be saved?’ We should know just what steps we are taking heavenward.” —Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 187, 188.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As we saw, Jeremiah told the people to “seek the Lord.” How do we do that? What if someone were to say to you, “I want to know God for myself; how do I find Him?” How would you reply?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of why, historically, the prophets had been so mistreated and misunderstood in their own time. What should and could this teach us about how we relate to the ministry of Ellen G. White? Think about her in the context of what Jesus said here: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets” (*Matt. 23:29–31, NIV*).
- 3 Dwell more on the final question at the end of Thursday’s study. Many Bible prophecies have been fulfilled in the past, and from our perspective today we can see that they were fulfilled. In what way can these fulfillments help us to trust that the ones yet future to us will be fulfilled as well?

Cry of the Kalahari: Part 1

Waves of heat danced above the burning sands. A tiny, black Bushman strode purposefully eastward across the vast Kalahari Desert, glancing frequently at a small gray cloud in the sky ahead. Sekoba was obeying instructions given to him in a dream. An angel had directed him to look for a man named William, who would teach him about the true God.

As the wise men once followed a star, so Sekoba followed the cloud until it stopped over a village. But when he told the inhabitants of the village about his dream, they mocked and laughed at him. That night the angel appeared again and told him to continue his eastward journey. After traveling across the desert for nearly a month, Sekoba found Pastor William Moyo, who had been prepared for his coming through a dream.

For several weeks, Pastor William taught Sekoba about God. In turn the Bushman told a marvelous story of God's guidance. As a young man he had felt a strong impression that he must learn to read and write. He did and now he was able to read Pastor William's Bible for himself. Several years earlier when hungry lions were killing many cattle, he felt impressed that a higher power controlled the lions. When he prayed to this power, the lions left the area. When he heard of Christianity and began seeking God in earnest, an angel in a dream had led him to Pastor William.

After Sekoba had learned the good news of the gospel, he took Pastor William back with him to tell the rest of his family and prepare them for baptism. And that is how, at a camp meeting in 1948, the first converts among the Bushmen were baptized.

The Bushmen are a short race, averaging about five feet in height, who traditionally wander in small groups, gathering wild fruit and hunting. They are a nomadic people who have learned to survive in the harsh desert region of Botswana.

Botswana's climate is generally arid; the Kalahari Desert, which covers the southwestern part of the country, receives less than nine inches of rain a year.

For many years, these Bushmen have had contact with Seventh-day Adventists through the dedicated doctors at Kanye Hospital. In the next Inside Story, Dr. K. Seligman tells of one encounter.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Jeremiah 29:1–14, Daniel 9:2*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Study the reign of Zedekiah, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem, and understand how this fits within the prophecy of the 70 years of exile.

Feel: Sense God’s mercy in the midst of disaster as He reached out via a letter to the exiles in Babylon, encouraging them to remain faithful.

Do: Pray for the good of the nation and seek its peace, even if the circumstances under which he or she lives are far from being in line with God’s will.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Zedekiah and the End of Jerusalem

A Where did Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, go seeking for political security? How did he deal with Jeremiah?

B What was the connection between Jeremiah’s 70-years prophecy (605–535 B.C.) and the prophet Daniel?

II. Feel: Letter to Babylon

A How can we understand Jeremiah’s message of hope to the exiles within the context of his usual messages of doom?

B How do you feel about living as a Christian in a world that is thoroughly corrupted? In what ways do you sometimes feel like an exile?

III. Do: Life in Babylon

A What type of life did God encourage Israel to lead in Babylon?

B How could the Jews have avoided getting too comfortable with life in Babylon so that they would remain ready to return to Jerusalem?

► **Summary:** Once the exile was certain, God’s message also included important prophecies of hope. Even while disaster was still playing out in Judah under rebellious King Zedekiah, God foretold the end of the exile and encouraged His people to remain faithful.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Ezekiel 8:1–18*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We are great at rationalizing our sins away and eclipsing the reality that God sees everything we do. But the deepest motives of our hearts are as an open book before Him.

Just for Teachers: God sent a prophet not only to Judah but also one to Babylon, and both Jeremiah and Ezekiel contemporaneously proclaimed a divine message that was directed at their specific audiences. Interestingly, their messages coincided in a number of places. Ezekiel, under divine inspiration, was given a candid vision of what was taking place in God’s temple in Jerusalem, exposing the same type of idolatry that Jeremiah was preaching against at home in Judah. God, however, is not Big Brother watching us but the Redeemer who wants to save us from our sins.

Opening Discussion: Social media has changed the face of culture on a worldwide basis. Facebook, Twitter, and a variety of other social gadgets invite people to self-broadcast every single move they make. Updating your Facebook status on your smartphone is more important than talking with the friend across from you in the restaurant where the two of you have gone out to eat. Besides, the other person is probably also busy updating his or her own status.

But it gets more serious than that. Recent revelations from national and international security agencies about the extent of data mining that goes on have demonstrated that it’s not only what we’d like to share that is visible but also what we wouldn’t. Webcam images can be intercepted, and the camera can even be hijacked and used to collect images from inside our homes. Personal privacy is a notion that, according to some sociologists, is a thing of the past.

Ezekiel received a vision in Babylon in which God showed him what was going on in the temple in Jerusalem: there was idolatry (*Ezek. 8:1–4*), jealousy (*vss. 5, 6*), worship of animals (*vss. 7–13*), weeping for Tammuz (a Babylonian god of vegetation like mother earth in other cultures, *vss. 14, 15*), and worship of the sun (*vss. 16–18*). This was syncretism at its worst, right in the middle of Jerusalem at the center of Yahwistic worship, and the vision exposed the secret sins that propelled the Jews into exile.

What difference is there between the invasion of privacy in modern

society and the exposure of secret sins as revealed to Ezekiel?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The destruction of Jerusalem is well attested in the archaeological record. After systematically destroying all cities in Judah, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, in 588 B.C., beginning a two-year siege that ended in the complete destruction of the city and the temple. The famous house of Ahiel, found in the excavations of the City of David, attests to the destruction. The interior rooms are partially burned, abandoned household ware is scattered on the floor, and Babylonian arrowheads have been found throughout the area. We need to realize that this incredible suffering, which the Jewish people experienced over a period of two years, was largely self-inflicted.

Bible Commentary

Josiah was the last good king of Judah, and after him things went rapidly downhill. Kings tried to sit politically on the fence and throw in their lot with whomever seemed to be a more promising option; they rebelled against Babylon in spite of Jeremiah's warnings; they tried to silence God's prophet who preached an uncomfortable message; but most of all, they continuously rebelled against God.

I. Playing Both Sides (*Review Jeremiah 37:1–10 with your class.*)

Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah on the throne, in 597 B.C., and changed his name from Mattaniah ("gift of Yahweh") to Zedekiah ("justice of Yahweh"). In his fourth year (594–593 B.C.), Zedekiah traveled to Babylon (*Jer. 51:59*), which could have coincided with the account of Daniel 3, except that he was not found among the ones standing! He was trying to ally with Egypt (*Jer. 37:6–10, 38:14–28*) against Babylon, which caused the final Babylonian onslaught that destroyed Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 37 begins in a promising way. Zedekiah actually sends a delegation to Jeremiah to ask him to pray for the nation. Some have suggested that it was intended to taunt Jeremiah, but it appears that Zedekiah was trying to play both sides of the game. He did not want to alienate God completely. The sincerity of the delegation seems questionable, as at least one of them, Jehucal (*Jer. 37:3*—spelled Jucal in 38:1), was among those who asked for Jeremiah's death in the next chapter. Pharaoh Hophra came in 588 B.C. to support Judah against the Babylonians, and the Babylonians temporarily lifted the siege of Jerusalem. However, Jeremiah's reply to King Zedekiah was contrary to what seemed to be happening outside the

city gates: the Babylonians would return soon to burn the city. With dramatic hyperbole, Jeremiah drove home the point that there was just no escape and that Egypt was a false hope.

Consider This: Although Zedekiah had sworn allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, he made an alliance with the Egyptians. Why is it dangerous to try to play both sides?

II. Silencing God’s Messenger *(Review Jeremiah 38:1–6 with your class.)*

At the end of the previous chapter, there is an account that describes Jeremiah’s arrest (*Jer. 37:11–15*) and his secret conversation with King Zedekiah (*vss. 16–21*). The prophet had been beaten, imprisoned, and eventually transferred to the courtyard of the guard, but he was still preaching on. His message was demanding the unconditional surrender to the Babylonian army that was encamped outside the city walls. That would preserve the life of many as a “prize” (literally, “spoil”). It was the only hope that was left. However, this message led to a request by some prominent leaders (“princes”) to put Jeremiah to death (*38:1–4*), because he was demoralizing the people. Zedekiah demonstrated once more his weak character and handed Jeremiah over to them.

The cistern into which Jeremiah was put was probably cut into the limestone rock on which Jerusalem is built. It had a narrow opening that could be closed with a rock and expanded toward the bottom. Jeremiah was lowered on ropes down into it. The water was most probably already used up, and what remained was mire into which the prophet sank. It was an easy way to get rid of Jeremiah, avoiding the shedding of possibly innocent blood (*compare Deut. 19:10–13*). This method of disposal might indicate that the accusers did not really believe in their own accusations as they knew that they would shed innocent blood by directly killing the prophet. Either way, it was a desperate situation for Jeremiah, and death seemed inevitable. But God’s messenger still had more messages to deliver, and help from the most unlikely place was soon to come.

Consider This: To what length did people go to silence or drown out the voice of God that spoke through Jeremiah? Why can’t God really be silenced?

III. Words of Hope *(Review Jeremiah 29:1–14 with your class.)*

As Ezekiel’s ministry extended to Jerusalem, Jeremiah’s also had a message to the Jews in Babylon.

The letter to the exiles, in Jeremiah 29, can be dated to the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, and it is interesting to note that once more God’s message

goes contrary to popular opinion. False prophets in Babylon were prophesying that the return from exile was imminent, but under divine inspiration Jeremiah reissued the 70-years prophecy, given initially in 605 B.C. (*compare Jer. 25:11, 12*). Scholars have debated the extent of the prophecy, but if one realizes the chain of events at the end of the Babylonian Empire and the beginning of the Medo-Persian Empire (Cyrus's decree in 538 B.C., the slow reaction from the Jews, the long journey back to Jerusalem, etc.), then the dates of 605–535 B.C. become the chronological time frame for the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Jeremiah's message to the Jews in exile seemed to be a shocking one: they should settle down, build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, and generally get on with life. It was wise counsel. There were still years and years of exile ahead, and God called them to repentance and to be a testimony in Babylon.

Consider This: How can we strike a balance between settling down in this world and, at the same time, retaining our expectation of the soon return of Christ?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: **There is a very practical and relevant issue here: the relationship between the Christian and the world.**

Thought/Application Questions:

- ① Political correctness seems to be so important these days. Why is it often impossible for a Christian to be politically correct and be true to the Bible at the same time?
- ② How do you deal with the tension of being in but not of this world?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: **God's messages sometimes seem anachronistic: when things go too well by worldly standards, He urges us to reform; when things are really bad, He speaks of future glory. But this is exactly the power of the gospel, to reform our worldliness and to bring light into our darkness.**

Class/Individual Activities:

Look for a place where hope is difficult to find (maybe a hospice, a prison, a poor neighborhood, etc.). Plan an individual or group visit that would share some hope in this place.