



**Sunday School Lesson for November 19, 2006
Released on November 15, 2006**

"The People Went into Exile"

Printed Text: 2 Chronicles 36:15–21; Psalm 137:1–6.

Background Scripture: 2 Chronicles 36:15–21; Psalm 137.

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 1:20–33.

2 Chronicles 36:15–21

15 And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place:

16 But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy.

17 Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand.

18 And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king, and of his princes; all these he brought to Babylon.

19 And they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof.

20 And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon; where they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia:

21 To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.

Psalm 137:1–6

1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Retell the events leading up to and following the destruction of Jerusalem.
2. Review how God continues to warn humanity of the consequences of sin.
3. Write a personal "psalm" confessing one specific area of spiritual need.

Introduction - One Unforgettable Day

Some older Americans will remember where they were and what they were doing on December 7, 1941—the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. The memory of the events of such a tragic day is impossible to erase. A more current example of an unforgettable day would certainly be September 11, 2001. Who can forget what he or she was doing or the emptiness that was felt upon hearing and seeing the Twin Towers in New York City being attacked?

Whatever you feel inside when such events occur, it may be quite similar to how the people of Jerusalem felt as they witnessed the Babylonians ravaging their holy city and setting Solomon's magnificent temple on fire. We should not miss what the religious implications of this action were at the time it took place. The Babylonians' destruction of the temple of the God of Judah implied that their pagan gods were mightier than Judah's God. After all, so the thinking went, if the Lord were stronger, wouldn't He have intervened to protect His sacred dwelling place? If He failed to do so, then it must be because the Babylonian gods were superior.

Of course, that was not at all the case. Prophets such as Jeremiah repeatedly emphasized that the Babylonians were not conquering Jerusalem through their own might; the Lord was giving Jerusalem into their hands as punishment for the sins of His people (Jeremiah 27:5–7; 34:2). Even some Babylonians (Chaldeans) recognized this truth (see Jeremiah 40:2, 3).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of God's people did not signal the absence of the Lord; on the contrary, these events provided evidence of His control. The events validated His prophets as authoritative messengers who conveyed His truth.

Lesson Background

Conditions in Judah deteriorated rapidly following the death of Josiah in about 609 B.C., the last godly king in that country. Here is a summary of the reigns of Judah's last four kings:

Jehoahaz, also called Shallum, was a son of Josiah. He reigned over Judah only three months. He was taken captive to Egypt, where he died (2 Kings 23:31–34; Jeremiah 22:11, 12).

Jehoiakim was put on the throne by the Egyptians after they had removed Jehoahaz from power. This was another son of Josiah. He ruled for 11 years (609–598 B.C.). He was a striking contrast to his father. Jehoiakim lived in personal extravagance (Jeremiah 22:13–15), pursued dishonest gain, and set his eyes and his heart “to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence” (22:17). As noted in last week’s lesson, Jehoiakim cut up into pieces a scroll from Jeremiah and cast the pieces into a fire (36:22–24).

During Jehoiakim’s reign, King Nebuchadnezzar came to power in Babylon as Egypt declined in influence. Jehoiakim switched his loyalty to Babylon in an attempt to keep up with the times, but rebelled after three years (2 Kings 24:1). The Scriptures do not indicate how Jehoiakim died; possibly he was assassinated.

Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim’s son, ruled for only three months. He was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. His later release from prison and elevation to a position of honor in Babylon is mentioned in 2 Kings 25:27–30 and Jeremiah 52:31–34.

Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was another son of Josiah. Zedekiah reigned for 11 years until Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Weak and unstable, he refused to heed the counsel of Jeremiah to surrender to the Babylonians (Jeremiah 27:12–15; 38:17, 18). When the Babylonians finally overtook Jerusalem, Zedekiah watched as they slaughtered his own sons. The Babylonians then put out his eyes and took him to Babylon (Jeremiah 39:5–7), where he most likely was at the time of his death.

The two printed texts for today examine the fall of Jerusalem from two perspectives. The first, from 2 Chronicles, summarizes why this tragedy occurred. It also provides a somber description of the Babylonians’ destruction of the city and the exile of its residents.

The second passage is taken from Psalm 137. Though the author of this psalm is not named, the contents clearly reflect the perspective of someone experiencing the anguish of living as a captive in a foreign land. However, the psalm also conveys the dogged determination not to forget the beloved city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem may have been out of sight, but it was certainly not out of mind.

Compassion (2 Chron. 36:15-16)

1. What messengers did God send to warn His people?

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began his eleven-year reign in Jerusalem. He did evil in the sight of the Lord (v. 12). He refused to humble himself before the Prophet Jeremiah, who was God's spokesman. He rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king to whom he had sworn allegiance. All of his chief priests and people in general became involved in pagan abominations and polluted the hallowed house of God in Jerusalem (v. 13-14). God's cup of wrath was filling up and ready to boil over.

2. Why did God have compassion on the nation of Judah?

God continued to have compassion on Judah, his chosen people. In their sins, he kept sending prophets to the nation so that they would have opportunities to repent. Judah didn't deserve this mercy, but God wanted the nation to give up their evil ways and turn back to him. He did this because he had compassion on His chosen people and on His dwelling place among them, the temple in Jerusalem.

Christians should be thankful for God's compassion. God gives us multiple chances to repent from our sins and obey Him. Failure to repent from sin will ensure God's wrath on a person.

3. How did the Jews treat the messengers God sent to them? (v. 16)

Verse 16 tells us that the people "mocked" (ridiculed, derided, or treated them with contempt) God's messengers. They "despised" the words of God and "misused," or scoffed at, His prophets. This continued for such a long time that the Lord's wrath was poured out on His people. There was no "remedy" to stop it, no healing to cure it, and no way to escape it.

Today's world is very similar to the situation in today's text. God sends His words out to warn people about their sins. He uses personal exhortation by the true believers. He uses churches, parachurch organizations, schools, literature, radio, and television broadcasts, and various other means. Yet, often the same thing happens as took place in ancient Israel. People still mock His messengers and make themselves vulnerable to divine judgment. Satan is still hard at work.

Conquest (2 Chron. 36:17-21)

4. What pagans did God use to chastise His people? (v. 17)

God used the Chaldeans (Babylonians), led by King Nebuchadnezzar, to chastise His people. The Lord had led Abraham out of the paganism in "Ur of the Chaldees" (Gen. 11:31) to go to the promised Land of Canaan. After his descendants settled in Canaan, after they went to Egypt in Jacob's time, after they made the exodus from bondage there, and after they took Canaan back from the heathen, they were now at the mercy of Babylon and headed back as captives. It is ironic that God chooses to use the nation that He delivered Abraham from to put Israel in captivity.

It is very important to remember that God is in control at all times. God is merciful, but like a loving father, He will chastise His children if necessary. God will always have the final word in all situations, and those who choose to defy Him will pay a hefty price.

5. What was the attack on Jerusalem like? (v. 17-18)

Nebuchadnezzar was intent on destroying what the Jews had built up in Judah. He sent His soldiers to slay young men, even in the sanctuary of the sacred temple. No compassion was shown to men or women, young or old. It was a violent conquest and a bloody massacre.

The Babylonians had held the city of Jerusalem under siege for a long time. The book of Lamentations, written by Jeremiah, describes the horror of that period. When the enemies finally broke through the city's defenses, they were in no mood to be merciful. What made it even worse was that the Lord sanctioned it as a means of divine discipline, and "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

In ancient times, conquering armies made a habit of spoiling the vanquished. In later times, defeated nations were forced to make reparations to their conquerors. Nebuchadnezzar saw to it that the precious vessels of the house of God and its treasures, along with those of the king and his princes, were carted off to Babylon. This was not just robbery, it was humiliating and sacrilegious to the Jews.

6. Why should it have been no surprise that Jerusalem was sacked and taken captive? (v. 19)

It was common practice for a conquering army to sack a community, plundering, looting, and destroying buildings, walls, and equipment. Jerusalem was subjected to this horrifying action. The beautiful

temple was burned, the stones in the city's walls were thrown down, and the palatial homes of the nobles were set afire. Jerusalem was essentially left with nothing. Even the temple of God was not spared.

Churches typically have the greatest attendance during hard times. People flooded churches after September 11, 2001, and a lot of churches were filled during Katrina. Today's text shows that even the House of God was not spared from the attacks. The nation of Israel could've avoided all this trouble had they kept a right relationship with God. Flooding the churches will not bring about a right relationship with God, rather only by trusting and believing that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior can anyone gain a right relationship with God.

7. How long were the Jewish captives made to serve in Babylon? (v. 20-21)

In cases where individuals or groups were able to escape the carnage brought on Jerusalem and the outlying area of Judah, the Babylonians rounded them up and led them away to Babylon, where they became servants to the king and his sons. They remained there until Persia superseded Babylon.

Jews serving in Babylon apparently were not treated as harshly as the Israelites had been treated by their Egyptian taskmasters. They are not referred to as slaves. It is interesting to note that the Jews were governed quite mildly in Babylon. Many remained there after captivity was lifted seventy years later, while others returned to rebuild Judah.

Leviticus 25:1-7 shows that God's law required the land to lie fallow every seventh year as a Sabbath rest. Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10 state that the Holy Land would remain desolate during the seventy years to make up for five centuries the Sabbath rests had not been observed every seven years.

We should note that even though God was chastising the Israelites, that He still had mercy on them. God could have made their captivity a lot harder than they experienced. In fact, God could have wiped out Israel all together, so the fact that God chastises His children shows us that He loves us, and He desires a relationship with each and every person in this world.

Complaint (Ps. 137:1-6)

8. What did the Jewish exiles do when they remembered Zion? (v.2)

Note that this psalm has no composer ascribed to it. It has been called the Song of the Exiles. The grief expressed may be somewhat tied to how the Jews were treated in Babylon, but it is primarily concerned with what they had been forced to leave behind when they were taken out of their beloved land and taken to the east.

It was by the rivers of Babylon that they sat down and wept as they remembered Zion. Zion was originally a hill held by the Jebusites until David took it from them. It became the temple area and eventually a synonym for the city of Jerusalem itself. It was the core location in Jewish life, and to lose it was very difficult indeed.

Verse 2 says that the captives hung their harps on the willows. The harps mentioned here were the Hebrew *kinnorat*, stringed instruments played by plucking. A more common name is "lyre," for this instrument did not resonate like a big harp. The Jews evidently kept them up off the ground when not in use by hanging them on tree branches. The sadness of the exiles is reflected in the fact that their musical instruments were not in use.

Most people do not know the value of something until it is gone. It took captivity for the Israelites to realize what they had lost. They lost the temple of God, and they are mourning that they cannot worship like they used to. But more importantly, the Israelites lost their relation with God temporarily.

9. What did the Babylonians want the Jewish captives to do, and why did they want this? (v. 3)

The psalm now explains that their captors required the Jews to sing and to at least pretend that they were happy to do this. They would say, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

We do not know why the Babylonians wanted the Jews to sing, but the Jews made it clear that they found it difficult to "sing the Lord's song in a strange land" (v. 4). Their grief overpowered their desire to enjoy the pleasure of singing.

Two questions are raised. First, what should we do if we are ever under the dominion of enemies, who demand that we do something we do not want to do? Should we try to accommodate them and gain

their favor and the good treatment it may provide? Perhaps. But if anything requires us to go against God and His Word, we must refuse and be ready to accept the consequences. We must act on the principle that "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Then we must trust God to give us sustaining grace and eventual deliverance.

The second question we might consider is, How can we use our enemies' demand as an opportunity to witness to them? When Paul and Silas were jailed in Philippi, they prayed and sang songs to God until midnight, and all the prisoners heard them. A divinely sent earthquake freed Paul and Silas, and as a result of their testimony, the jailer and his household became converts (Acts 16:25-34). We should never place limits on where or how we can make our testimonies effective.

10. How strongly did the Jewish exiles feel about Jerusalem? (v. 5-6)

The psalmist declared that if he ever forgot Jerusalem, his right hand should lose its cunning, or skill. That would make it impossible to play the lyre. This was the instrumental component in the ability to play music.

He also said that if he ever failed to remember Jerusalem, his tongue should stick to the roof of his mouth. He wanted this to happen if at any time he did not find the thought of Jerusalem superior to the most joyful thing that could be imagined. Such an impediment would make it impossible to sing, which is the vocal component in the ability to play music.

Verse 7 calls on God to remember the Edomites who, on the day Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians, called for the city to be razed (torn down to the ground). Verse 8 addresses Babylon as a nation to be destroyed. Happiness is ascribed to whoever does to it what it had done to Judah. Verse 9 says that happiness will belong to whoever takes Babylon's little children and dashes them to death against stones.

Conclusion -Look in the Mirror

The story is told of a minister who began serving a church in a small town. After he arrived, he spent a few days visiting the homes of the

members and urging them to attend his first service that coming Sunday. But only a few people came.

After several Sundays like this, the minister placed a notice in the newspaper announcing that the congregation appeared to be dead, thus it was his duty to give it a decent burial. The funeral was to be held the following Sunday afternoon.

The next Sunday the building was filled nearly to capacity. (Many had come simply out of curiosity.) In front of the pulpit was an open casket. The minister read an obituary and delivered a eulogy. He then invited those present to step forward and pay their respects to the deceased.

Each mourner who filed by peered into the casket and then turned away with a sheepish look. In the casket, tilted at just the correct angle, was a mirror. Each person saw himself or herself as the reason for the death of the congregation.

Prayer

Father, help us to see that we are not immune to the problems that led to Judah's downfall. Let us realize that judgment must begin with the house of God. May each of us do whatever "housecleaning" needs to be done. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Let God's judgment sound a warning yet today.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In the last lesson of the quarter, we will see how God offers return and restoration to anyone who will turn back to Him.

Lesson Summarized By

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