



## *The Fall of Judah*

A narrative about the stubbornness of the human heart, and God's promise to those who seek Him wholeheartedly.

## **THE BIBLE**

2 Kings 24:18-25:21  
Jeremiah 21,27-29, 32, 37-38, 52  
Ezekiel 2-3, 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 36:13-21

*Prepare for the Story*

## **ICEBREAKER**

- What is the best advice you've ever received?

*Rewind the Story*

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Manasseh -Judah's worst king
- Reform – Josiah, the boy king
- Exile – The people of Jerusalem taken to Babylon
- King of Babylon – Nebuchadnezzar's wild pride

*Hear the Story*

### **Scene One: The Yoke of Babylon**

Zedekiah was placed on the throne in Jerusalem by the Babylonians when he was twenty-one years old. He swore fidelity to them, but the arrangement was not one made from mutual interest, but out of self-preservation, so Zedekiah was tempted by promises of other nations.

In the fourth year of his reign, Zedekiah gathered the rulers of the surrounding lands. He was interested to see if there was a way to get out of his arrangement with the Babylonians. While they were gathered, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah and said, *"Make a yoke and fasten it on your neck with leather straps. Then, send messages to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, who have come to see King Zedekiah in Jerusalem. Share with them this message: With my great strength and powerful arm, I made the earth and all its people. I can give all of it to anyone I choose."*

*"And I have chosen King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He is my servant, serving My purposes. All the nations will serve him, his son, and his grandson until their time is up. So, submit to Babylon's king and serve him; put your neck under Babylon's yoke! I will punish any nation that refuses to do so; I will send war, famine, and disease on any nation who rebels against My chosen servant."*

Jeremiah did as the LORD commanded, sending this message to the foreign kings. He also went to Zedekiah with the yoke around his neck and pleaded with him, *"Why do you insist on dying? Why do you want to choose war, famine, and disease? The people of the nations that submit to the King of Babylon will be allowed to stay in their own country, to farm the land, and make a living from it."*

### **Scene Two: A Broken Yoke**

After Jeremiah had addressed the King, a man named Hananiah confronted him publicly in the Temple. He saw Jeremiah with the yoke draped over his neck, and He claimed to speak for the LORD, saying, *"Here's what the LORD said to me, 'I will remove the yoke of the king of Babylon from your necks. Within two years, I will bring back all the Temple Treasures that Nebuchadnezzar carried off to Babylon. I will bring back Jehoiachin and all the other captives from Babylon, and I will break the yoke that Nebuchadnezzar has put around your necks.'*

With everyone watching, Jeremiah responded by saying, *"Amen! I hope the LORD does everything you say! But listen to me closely. The old prophets, the ones before our time, preached judgment against many countries and kingdoms, warning of war, disease, and disaster. So, any prophet who preaches that everything is fine and that there's nothing to worry about would stand out like a sore thumb. We'll wait and see. If it happens, it happens – that's when we will know that God sent you."*

Offended by the remarks, Hananiah grabbed the yoke from Jeremiah's shoulders and smashed it to pieces. Then He yelled for everyone to hear, *"This is God's message; in the same way, I will smash the yoke of the king of Babylon and return my people within two years."* After this display, Jeremiah left the Temple.

Sometime later, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, and he was sent with a message to Hananiah. *"Go and tell Hananiah that the wooden yoke he broke has been replaced with a yoke of iron. I have put the King of Babylon in control of all the nations. Because you claim to speak for me, but I did not send you, you must pay for your lies. Because you rebelled against the LORD, your life will end this very year."* And what the LORD spoke through Jeremiah came to pass; two months later, Hananiah died.

### **Scene Three: Jeremiah and Ezekiel**

Jeremiah focused his energy on sharing the LORD's messages with those who remained in Judah, but he did not forget about those who had been exiled to Babylon. He wrote them and shared a message from the LORD, which said, *"Build homes and plan to stay. Plant gardens and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then, find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I have sent you. Even in exile, pray to the LORD for the good of your families and, yes, even the prosperity of Babylon."*

*"You will be there for seventy years. But then I will come and do all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you. They are plans for good and not for disaster. My plans are for your future, and My plans give you hope. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. And when the time is right, I will gather you out of the nation where I sent you, and I will bring you home again, back to your homeland."*

Jeremiah's message wasn't the only encouragement the LORD provided. He also gave those exiled in Babylon a prophet to encourage them and remind them of God's plans for them. This new prophet's name was Ezekiel, and when the LORD called him, he had an incredible vision.

Ezekiel saw a hand reaching out to him, and in the hand was a scroll, which the hand then unrolled. Both sides of the scroll were covered with funeral songs, words of sorrow, and pronouncements of doom.

Then a voice said to Ezekiel, “Son of man, eat what I am giving you – eat this scroll! Then go and give its message to My people.” So, Ezekiel opened his mouth and consumed the scroll. The voice said, “Fill your stomach with this!” And it tasted as sweet as honey.

Then the voice said, “I am sending you to speak to people who are hard-hearted and stubborn but look, I have made you as persistent and determined as they are. I have made your forehead as hard as the hardest rock! You are the man for the job. Let my words sink deep into your heart first so that you can deliver my message. I have appointed you as a watchman for My people. Whenever you receive a message from Me, warn the people immediately.” So, Ezekiel became God’s prophet for His exiled people in Babylon.

#### **Scene Four: Zedekiah’s Rebellion**

Despite Jeremiah’s warnings, Zedekiah did what was evil in the LORD’s sight and refused to humble himself. In the ninth year of his reign, Zedekiah, King of Judah, ignored God’s clear direction and rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In response, the Babylonians brought their army against Jerusalem, surrounded the city, and put it under siege.

Nothing could come into the city, and nothing could go out. The people remaining in Jerusalem had to try and survive on only what remained inside the city. This went on for over two years, and the people of Jerusalem suffered greatly.

#### **Scene Five: Under Siege**

As the situation inside the walls of Jerusalem grew more and more tense, Zedekiah sent his priests to Jeremiah. They begged him to speak to the LORD on their behalf, “Speak to the LORD and ask Him to help us. King Nebuchadnezzar is breaking our spirits; we don’t know how long we can take this. If you ask the LORD, maybe he will extend His grace to us and do another mighty miracle - like the ones He has done in the past.”

“Go back and tell King Zedekiah everything I tell you. This is what the LORD says: ‘I will make your weapons useless against the Babylonians, and I will bring your enemies into the heart of the city. I Myself will fight against you with a mighty hand; I will use My anger against you because you have made me furious! I will send a plague upon this city, one like you have never seen.

*And after that, I will hand Zedekiah, his staff, and anyone else who survives over to Nebuchadnezzar, and he will not show them an ounce of mercy, pity, or compassion."*

Zedekiah didn't care for Jeremiah's response, and he grew more and more frustrated as the days under siege dragged on, but the King did not listen to Jeremiah's instructions, and He did not change his ways.

As the situation in the city grew to a breaking point, King Zedekiah found reason for hope. He looked for help from neighboring nations, and after nearly two years under siege, help came from Egypt. The Egyptian army appeared at the southern border of Judah, and when the Babylonian army heard about it, they withdrew from their siege of the city.

The LORD gave this message to Jeremiah, *"Tell the King of Judah that Pharaoh's army is about to turn and run back to Egypt, and when the Babylonians return, they will capture this city and burn it to the ground. Do not fool yourselves into thinking that the Babylonians are gone for good. They aren't! I promise you, even if you whittled the Babylonian army down to a handful of wounded survivors, they would stagger from their tents and burn this city to the ground!"*

After delivering this message, Jeremiah tried to leave the city and return to his home in the territory of Benjamin, but Zedekiah had him detained and then arrested. Zedekiah wanted Jeremiah to change his message and give the people a false sense of hope. He wanted Jeremiah to publicly back him and say that they would overcome the Babylonians. But Jeremiah refused. He would only speak what the LORD told him to, so Zedekiah kept him as a prisoner in the courtyard palace.

In those days, this is what the LORD said to Jeremiah. *"I am the LORD, the God of all the people of the world. Is there anything too hard for me? Listen to me. I will hand this city over to the Babylonians and to Nebuchadnezzar. Those who are waiting outside your walls will come in and set this city on fire. They will burn down all these houses where the people have lit incense to Baal on their rooftops and poured out offerings to other gods."*

*"The sins of Israel and Judah – the sins of the people of Jerusalem, the kings, the officials, the priests, and the prophets – have stirred up my anger. Even though I have done everything to teach them and guide them, they will not obey. They had done the unthinkable and the unimaginable."*

*"They have built shrines in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, and they have sacrificed their sons and daughters to Molech. The people turned their backs on me and refused to return, and I can no longer turn a blind eye to their sins. So, this city will fall to the King of Babylon, but I have one more thing I want to say."*

*"I will certainly bring My people back again from all the countries where I have scattered them. I will bring them back to this very city and let them live in peace and safety. They will be My people, and I will be their God. And I will give them a new heart and a new purpose: to worship Me forever, for their own good and for the good of all their descendants. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good for them, and I will find joy in doing this, and I will faithfully and wholeheartedly replant them in this land."*

When the king's officials heard the messages that Jeremiah shared, they went to the king and said, *"My Lord, this man must die! That kind of talk will undermine the morale of the few fighting men we have left, as well as that of all the people. This man is a traitor!"* Zedekiah agreed and told the men to do with Jeremiah whatever they wished.

So, the officials took Jeremiah and lowered him by ropes into an empty cistern in the prison yard. There was no water in the cistern, but there was a thick layer of mud at the bottom, and Jeremiah sank down into it. When one of the court officials heard what had been done to the prophet, he ran into the palace and confronted the King. *"These men have done an evil thing; Jeremiah will soon die of hunger, for the bread in the city is almost gone,"* and he convinced the king to have Jeremiah removed from the cistern and returned to the courtyard where he remained under house arrest.

### **Scene Six: The Fall of Jerusalem**

One day, King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah. He said, *"I want to ask you something, and don't keep the truth from me."* Jeremiah said, *"If I tell you the truth, you will kill me. And if I give you advice, you won't listen to me."* Zedekiah promised, *"As surely as the LORD lives, I will not kill you or hand you over to the men who want you dead."*

So Jeremiah shared with Zedekiah the message from the LORD: *"If you surrender to the Babylonian officers, you and your family will live, and the city will not be burned down. But if you refuse to surrender, you will not escape! This city will be handed over to the Babylonians, and they will burn it to the ground."* Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, *"Don't tell anyone you told me this, or you will die!"*

After dealing with the Egyptian Army, the Babylonians returned just as Jeremiah had promised. The famine had become very severe, and the last of the food was entirely gone. When the Babylonians managed to breach a portion of the wall, King Zedekiah escaped, slipping through the gate behind the King's Garden and fleeing toward the Jordan Valley. But the Babylonian troops captured him.

Then, the Babylonian army entered the city of Jerusalem after nearly two and a half years. They filled the streets hunting and killing Judah's young men, even chasing them into the Temple. They showed no mercy to those living in the city. They killed without deference. Young and old, men and women, even those too sick to fight back, they killed them all.

The army had instructions to take back to Babylon everything of value, large and small, from the Temple of the LORD and from the royal palace. They destroyed every important building in the city. Then they burned down the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the homes in Jerusalem. Then, brick by brick and stone by stone, the Babylonian army dismantled the wall around the city, tearing down the walls of Jerusalem on every side. Not one stone remained on top of another.

Those who survived were taken as exiles, including the high priest and all of Zedekiah's remaining officers and advisors. The only people who remained had become defectors, declaring their allegiance to the king of Babylon and the poorest of the poor, who were allowed to stay behind to care for the fields and vineyards.

Zedekiah was brought before King Nebuchadnezzar, where he pronounced judgment on him. For his rebellion, the King made Zedekiah watch as he slaughtered his sons. Then he gouged out his eyes and bound him in chains. Then, he was led away as a prisoner back to Babylon, where Zedekiah remained for the rest of his days.

#### *Retell the Story*

- How did Zedekiah become King? How old was He?
- How did Zedekiah feel about his arrangement with Babylon?
- What message did Jeremiah have for Zedekiah & the other kings?
- Who challenged this message?
- What message did Jeremiah have for those in exile?

- Who did God give as a prophet to those living in exile?
- What did Zedekiah decide to do with Babylon?
- How did Nebuchadnezzar respond to Zedekiah's rebellion?
- What was life like inside Jerusalem during the two-year siege?
- What message did Jeremiah have for the King?
- How did Jerusalem fall?
- What happened to Zedekiah and those inside the city?

### *Discuss the Story*

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What were some things from this story that made you wonder?
- Why do you think Zedekiah pursued treaties with other nations?
- When Jeremiah shared that Nebuchadnezzar was God's chosen servant, how did that strike you? Could God use those who don't follow Him for His purposes?
- While the image of a yoke isn't common in our day, it would have been very familiar to Jeremiah's audience. How is this picture helpful?
- What do you make of Jeremiah's message to those in exile? What dangers were there for those who were taken to Babylon?

- What do you think it might have been like for those living in the city during a two-year siege?
- Why do you think Zedekiah continued to ignore Jeremiah's warnings? Why did he place his hope and trust in other alliances instead of trusting in God?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of previous stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- What else are you noticing about God from this story?

### *Join the Story*

#### **1) Chosen Servant**

In Jeremiah's message to the Kings and rulers gathered in Jerusalem, God refers to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, as his 'chosen servant'. The reality is Nebuchadnezzar wasn't the 'godliest' man. Why would God choose to use him instead of one of His own people? Does God use difficult situations and circumstances for our good? What do you make of Paul's thoughts in Romans 8:28 on this topic?

#### **2) Silver Lining**

While Jeremiah's messages are often filled with doom and gloom, there is a consistent thread included – a message of hope. Why do you think it's important for God to remind people of His promises while not removing the punishment? What role does punishment (or consequences) play in God's purposes? How important is the promise?

### 3) Under Siege

The military strategy of putting a city under siege was a successful one. In fact, the city of Jerusalem, which was attacked 52 times in its history, was besieged 23 of those times. The strategy of surrounding the city, cutting off supplies, and waiting it out was found to be extremely efficient and saved the lives of many soldiers. Do you think there may be any spiritual correlation? Does God surround our hearts and wait us out when we are being stubborn and refuse to do things His way? What are the positives of this spiritual strategy, and what are the negatives, in your opinion?

Pray

God,

*Just when I think I have a handle on Your will and work in my life, unexpected outcomes come my way. Who but You can know what tomorrow will bring? Give me the wisdom of Your eternal perspective. Help me see that even when the days are the darkest, that Your story isn't over. Give me a heart to pursue You and not just the things I want from You. I know You go before me and prepare the way. Give me courage to trust You and listen for your voice instead of the other voices that come my way. Amen.*