



The Great Fall of Jerusalem

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God patiently pursues sinners, but His patience will one day come to an end.

Do you have a long commute home from work? If so, then you know the routine. You leave the workplace and begin the fight with traffic to go home. At first, you're thinking about what you left behind—a to-do list that only seemed to grow, responsibilities that will be there in the morning, boxes to be checked, meetings to be had, and calls to be made. You're thinking about these things as the miles start to click by on the odometer, and then, at some point, your focus changes from where you've left to where you're going. You're going home.



What makes your home truly “home” for you? What aspects most strongly communicate that your home is yours and not anyone else's?

Take everything that just came to mind—that glorious familiarity with your home—and imagine it all being ripped apart. You are forced to leave. Your neighborhood is destroyed, and your home is gone. Home is no more, and everyone is disoriented and confused. This was the situation the remaining people of Israel found themselves in when, at long last, the patience of God ran out.

In this session, we will study one of the most important events in the Old Testament era—the fall of Jerusalem and the capture of God’s people. Due to the hard-heartedness of the people and their leaders, including the despising of His Word, God displayed His justice and wrath through His punishment of His people. Yet even here, in this display of God’s justice, we see how God preserves a remnant of people who will carry the hope of His promise to make all things new through a Messiah.

1. Spiritual downfall begins with hardened hearts (2 Chron. 36:11-14).

¹¹ Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. ¹² He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. ¹³ He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem.

The last downfall of Judah had been set in motion through the hardened heart of their ruler, which was a reflection of the hardened hearts of the people. This text tells us the true source of Zedekiah’s actions: He was not acting out of a sense of national pride or noble desire for independence; instead, he was living out the natural way of his hardened heart.



What, in your own words, is *hardness of heart*?



Voices from Church History

“The prophets had to speak against the spirit of their times, against popular opinion, against all the political powers—and to bear the consequences. [They] were able to interpret the disasters which befall God’s people not as a defeat for God but as the manifestation of God’s righteous judgment.”¹

—Lesslie Newbigin
(1909-1998)

All spiritual downfalls begin as a progression rather than a free fall. And the first step of descent is hardness of heart to the will of God. In the hardness of Zedekiah's heart, we can see some of the warning signs that might alert us—and should have alerted him—to our own hearts potentially growing hard to God's will.

One of the sure signs of a hardening of one's heart is **pride**. In this text we see Zedekiah's pride running out of control, symptomatic of his hardness of heart. In retrospect, we can look at the situation he found himself in. He was a puppet king installed by the Babylonians. His army was not large enough to counter the Egyptians, much less the Babylonians. Despite these clear signs, Zedekiah's pride spoke the lie that's so detrimental to anyone whose heart is beginning to harden: "It can't happen to me."

As Zedekiah found out, it actually could happen to him. Anyone with a hardened heart will find the same. Beware the kind of attitude that makes you think highly of yourself, that you are immune to consequence and judgment! Such an attitude is symptomatic of a heart that has begun to petrify.



Why do you think pride comes along with hardness of heart?

Lack of repentance walks hand in hand with pride. Zedekiah had every opportunity to "return to the Lord," the definition of *repentance*. He could have listened to the counsel of Jeremiah, humbly acknowledged the word of the Lord, and demonstrated that acknowledgment by turning away from his own wisdom and coming back to the Lord. But Zedekiah was convinced his way was right, so he had no need to turn away from it.

In repentance, we must turn from our own way, from our own sense of self-lordship, and place ourselves under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

36. Sin as Transgression

The word *transgression* means "to cross over" or "to pass by" and is often used in reference to transgressing God's explicit commands. When God gives a specific command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is disobeyed, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is law-breaking.

We see one other sign of hardness of heart in Zedekiah—it was his **lack of distinction** between his people and the rest of the nations. From its very inception, God planned that the people of Israel would be a people of distinction on the earth. They alone would shine forth His glory as a kingdom of priests set apart specifically for the Lord. But in the days of Zedekiah, “All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations.” In other words, they abandoned their distinction as God’s people and instead began to follow the ways of everyone around them.

As Christians, we should take a good look at our lives. Does your life look any different than people who don’t claim the name of Jesus Christ? Is there anything distinct in your own behavior that marks you as one of the people of God? If not, then beware. Take the temperature of your heart, for it might be growing dangerously cold.

 Why is our behavior a checkpoint for hardness of heart?

2. Spiritual downfall leads to despising God’s Word (Jer. 38:14-18,24-28).

¹⁴ *King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me.”*¹⁵ *Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me.”*¹⁶ *Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, “As the LORD lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life.”*

¹⁷ *Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live.*

¹⁸ *But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.”*

In this passage, we see God’s righteous judgment coming to bear on His own people. We also see His great mercy, for even here God was offering Zedekiah a way to prevent even greater judgment and destruction. In that, we see God’s incredible patience, for He had offered opportunity after opportunity for the rulers and the people to return to Him.

Still, there is another characteristic of God that we see displayed in these verses—His absolute honesty. God will tell us the truth in His Word. And He will tell us the truth even if we don’t want to hear it. The honesty of God is a mercy to us because we have an amazing aptitude for self-deception. We cannot trust our own hearts apart from the Spirit’s work within us.

When we come to the Word of God today, then, we must come not assuming we know what God has to say to us. Rather, we must assume that we come with blinders on. We must assume we are blinded by our own feelings, our own opinions, and our own presuppositions, humbly asking God to show us what is actually true. We must trust that God will move past our own self-deluded attempts to comfort ourselves, knowing that the truth, no matter how uncomfortable, is better than lies.



Voices from Church History

“If [we] do not correct our impressions by the Word of God, the human heart is prone to fall into fanaticisms, and idiosyncrasies, and foolishness.”²

—W. A. Criswell (1909–2002)



What is the most difficult part to you about trusting God to tell you the truth?



When has God confronted you with some uncomfortable truth through His Word? What was your response, and why?

Zedekiah thought he wanted to know the truth, and so he asked Jeremiah to hold nothing back from him. Jeremiah did as he was asked, and in so doing, he gave Zedekiah a better gift than comfort. He gave him honesty. Just as Jeremiah served Zedekiah in this way, so we can serve each other in the church by reminding each other of the truth of God.

In His grace, God has given us the medicine for the disease of self-deception, and that medicine is the church grounded on the Word of God. It's in the church where we are meant to live so closely with each other that we can actually pull each other aside and speak good, hard truth to one another. It's no wonder that Proverbs 27:6 tells us that "faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy."

How, then, do we know who our true friends are? How can we cut through the fluff and know whom to trust? We look to those people in our lives who are willing, even when it's difficult, to be honest with us. Similarly, we have a responsibility to do what Jeremiah did for Zedekiah. We must love each other enough to be honest with each other, even when that honesty causes a wound.



Why is honesty one of the measures of love?

Jeremiah told the king the truth, but the question remained: How would Zedekiah respond to God's truth? Would he persist in his hard-heartedness, or would he return humbly to the Lord, accepting the word of God from the prophet?

If spiritual downfall begins with hard-heartedness, then the next step on this downward spiral involves our reaction to God's Word. When God's Word calls us to repentance, we can either humbly accept this word or ignore it and continue on our own path. Zedekiah chose the latter for both himself and the nation under his care:

²⁴ Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. ²⁵ If the officials hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, 'Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,' ²⁶ then you shall say to them, 'I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.'"
²⁷ Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. ²⁸ And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

3. Spiritual downfall brings God's wrath (2 Chron. 36:15-21).

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. 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 burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

The spiritual downfall of the people had brought about the wrath of God. Even so, Jeremiah's tears stand as a reminder that God takes no pleasure in exercising His righteous judgment; rather, He wants all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8-9).



How does it motivate us to know that God desires none to perish?



How does it change the way we see the judgment of God?

The people of Judah never thought the end would come. Day after day, life went on as normal. The voices of the prophets, constantly warning about the judgment of God, faded into the background. Similarly, people during Peter's day looked around at their lives and failed to see evidence of God's judgment.

So today, Christians herald the consummation of the new kingdom along with the new heaven and new earth. We warn that eventually the end will come, and we live in light of the inevitable return of Jesus. And yet, there are still those who, based on circumstantial evidence, claim there is no God and certainly no grand plan to judge the earth in righteousness. But God's judgment did come upon Israel. And Jesus will return. And God will judge the earth.



In what ways should believers today be like Jeremiah, weeping over the state of our world while delivering God's message to the people?



In what ways are believers today different than Jeremiah?

Conclusion

In this session, we have seen that God is patient with His people, persistently calling them to repentance. We have also seen why we must not mistake God's patience for indifference. In our daily routines, it is easy to lose sight of the truth that God's Word reveals to us—there is a day of judgment coming, and we should be prepared. The long-awaited return of Jesus, like the long-promised judgment of Judah, highlights God's patience, not His indifference. God desires all to come to repentance, then as now, and every day that life continues as we know it is a tangible example of this gracious patience. It's an opportunity for one more to hear and believe the gospel of Jesus and flee to Him to escape the wrath that's coming.

CHRIST CONNECTION: God righteously punished His people for their sin, but He remained faithful to them and kept the promise He made to David to preserve a remnant and provide a king. Ultimately, God punished our sin through His Son, Jesus, and made Him our King forever.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to listen to His Word and proclaim His patience and righteousness to others while there is still time.

1. What are some specific ways we can help one another resist the temptation toward hardness of heart (pride, lack of repentance, lack of distinction)?

2. How can we give honor to the Word of God in our lives? In our group? In our church? In our families? In our community? In our world?

3. Write a prayer asking God to stir up in your heart His same desire that none would perish but all would come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.
