

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL PROPHETS AND KINGS GOD THE PURSUER *The Great Fall of Jerusalem*

Jerusalem has been involved in wars throughout history. According to GotQuestions.org, when archaeologists first began excavating in the city, they were surprised to discover layer after layer of rubble, indicating that parts of Jerusalem had been destroyed at least 40 times. The layers of rubble in some places are more than 60 feet deep! When I think of the fall of Jerusalem, I think of its fall in 70 A.D. a short while after the earthly ministry of Jesus. However, our study today concerns the fall of Jerusalem around 586 B.C. during the reign of its last king, Zedekiah.

Nations come and nations go. During the lifetime of the prophet Jeremiah, Assyria's power was declining and Babylon's was rising. Assyria aligned with Egypt against Babylon. Egyptian armies (under Neco) passed through territory north of Judah and Judah's godly king Josiah chose to fight Neco as a personal political decision. He did not have a command from the LORD and paid for that choice with his life. After his death, the Kingdom of Judah went into a downward spiral. The captivity of Judah would occur in four phases as described by Halley's Handbook:

1. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, defeated Josiah's wicked son, Jehoiakim, who had thrown Jeremiah's handwritten prophecies into the fire. They took the temple treasures and sons of prominent families including Daniel to Babylon.
2. In 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem took the remaining treasures, their King Jehoiachin and 10,000 people to Babylon, including the prophet Ezekiel.
3. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians came again. They burned Jerusalem, tore down its walls, put out the eyes of Judah's last king, Zedekiah, and carried him in chains to Babylon along with 832 captives. All that was left in the land was a remnant of the poorest class of people.
4. In 581 B.C., five years after the burning of Jerusalem, the Babylonians returned and took 745 captives. Jeremiah was not there. A group had forced him to flee with them to Egypt.

A spiritual downfall begins with hardened hearts.

**Read 2 Chronicles 36:11-14 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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.*

By this time, Zedekiah was only a puppet king with Babylon pulling his strings. He pretended to submit to Babylon while courting Egypt. He did not humble himself before the LORD's prophet and he did not keep his oath to Nebuchadnezzar that he had sworn in the name of the LORD.

He was a man with a hardened heart. Most often when we think of hardened hearts, we think of Pharaoh right before the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. A hardened heart is a stubborn attitude that leads a person to reject God's will. Anyone can have one and the hardening of our hearts is something even Christians need to guard against. Let's look at the causes of a hardened heart in Zedekiah for the purpose of avoiding a hardened heart in our own lives as mentioned in our lesson material.

- **Pride** – Zedekiah was a 'puppet king' and he still thought he was in control! He refused to listen to the warnings of God through His servant Jeremiah. Zedekiah kept thinking, 'it can't happen to me.' Similarly, we can continue in a pattern of behavior that disregards God and His will for extended periods of time convincing ourselves that our sin will have no consequences. **Proverbs 16:18 (ESV)** <sup>18</sup> *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*
- **Lack of Repentance** – Zedekiah was so convinced that his way was right that he felt no need to return to the LORD. That is what repentance is – returning to the LORD. There was a time in King David's life when he hardened his heart to his own sin but it did not sit well with him. He described his distress in **Psalms 32:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.* Zedekiah could have chosen repentance but he did not. David did. He said in **Psalms 32:5 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup> *I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*
- **Lack of Distinction** – From the beginning God designed that His people were to be a people distinct from other nations. Under his father Josiah's leadership, the people had been led to serve the LORD. Under Zedekiah's leadership, the priests and the people were unfaithful witnesses living in sin. Today, we are called to be different. **1 John 2:15-16 (ESV)** <sup>15</sup> *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* <sup>16</sup> *For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

The Bible makes it clear that humans can resist God who respects the free human will. One of the most important ways of resisting God is for a person to "harden his heart." The analogy is to a rock or a millstone so that the individual has no feeling and is like a piece of stone.

Spiritual downfall leads to despising God's Word.

**Read Jeremiah 38:14-18 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> 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.” <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.”

Over a period of about 25 years, the Northern Kingdom of Judah existed under the Babylonian threat with its citizens being deported to Babylon in waves. During a lull in the siege, Jeremiah tried to leave Jerusalem and go home. A guard at the gate arrested him under the pretense he was defecting to the enemy since Jeremiah had preached the need for Judah to surrender to Babylon. Jeremiah was never a traitor and yet he was imprisoned. Because of the negative nature of the words he was given by the LORD, Jeremiah was considered a prophet of doom. Most people don't want to hear the truth.

However, even with his hardened heart, Zedekiah still wanted to know what Jeremiah had to say. And true to His nature, God Almighty gave Zedekiah a second chance – not to continue running his kingdom. That opportunity was now lost. However, the LORD gave Zedekiah a chance to save his life – his family's life – and to keep the city of Jerusalem from being destroyed by fire. The Chaldeans in verse 18 were a dominant people group of Babylonia. We read of Zedekiah's fear in **Jeremiah 38:19 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup> King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.” We should always remember to fear God more than man. **Psalms 56:11 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?

**Read Jeremiah 38:24-28 (ESV)** <sup>24</sup> Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die ...” <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

Zedekiah was the 'king' and yet he was fearful for anyone in the palace to know what Jeremiah had said. Jeremiah kept Zedekiah's confidence. I don't think that Jeremiah lied about their conversation. By the grace of God, he just managed to keep the conversation private.

Jeremiah suffered much abuse for remaining true to God's mission for his life including imprisonment. He even found himself in a dungeon/cistern. A cistern is a place of artificial storage of water underground. Jeremiah had been lowered by hand into a muddy cistern. He remained there for an extended time until an Ethiopian eunuch in the king's house petitioned Zedekiah to remove him. Jeremiah was mired so deep in mud it took 30 men to pull him out. After the conversation between the king and the prophet, he remained in the palace prison until the downfall of Jerusalem.

The writer of 2 Chronicles details the downfall of Jerusalem. A spiritual downfall brings God's wrath.

**Read 2 Chronicles 36:15-21 (ESV)** <sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *But they kept mocking the messengers of God, ...* <sup>17</sup> *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....* <sup>18</sup> *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.* <sup>19</sup> *And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem....* <sup>20</sup> *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,* <sup>21</sup> *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.*

Let's focus on verse 21. The sabbatical year was to be observed every seventh year. Farmers were commanded to rest their land from bearing crops to renew the land and the people. Mosaic law directed that every seventh year the land would not be planted in crops; food would come from what grew wild. It was to be a matter of trust in the LORD's provision for His people. The people had not observed the LORD's Sabbath and instead gave the fruits of their land to the false god of Baal. The LORD would make certain that the land would enjoy its Sabbaths – God's people would be gone from it for 70 years – 70 years picturing all the past Sabbaths they had failed to observe.

God's promises are faithful and true. **Deuteronomy 7:9-10 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> *Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,* <sup>10</sup> *and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face.*

King Zedekiah took a chance. He thought he could get away with ignoring God. He could not. None of us can. **John 3:16 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Let's take the Lord at His word and trust in Him!