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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“TORN DOWN”

Jeremiah 39:1-14; 52:1-30; Romans 6:23

□ Please turn to Jeremiah 39.

■ Verse 1: **“This is how Jerusalem was taken.”** It is a simple phrase, but ominous and pregnant with meaning.

“This is how Jerusalem was taken.” This is how the nation of Judah was terminated. This is how the Holy City was ground to dust. This is how life as we knew it came to a violent end.

■ Verses 1-2 sketch out the military action in bare-bones terms: **“In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah’s eleventh year,”** – that is, 18 months later – **“the city wall was broken through.”**

Jerusalem’s massive wall was the last line of defense. When it crumbled, so did Judah’s hope of survival.

■ Verses 3-7: A worthy monarch would have surrendered, taking responsibility for Judah’s resistance and beseeching the Babylonian officials not to punish his subjects. But Zedekiah displayed neither courage nor nobility: he and his soldiers **“fled; they left the city”** and its people **“at night...and headed toward the Arabah”** (the deep valley that runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Red Sea in the south).

Alas for him, he was caught and taken to Nebuchadnezzar, who **“slaughtered”** Zedekiah’s sons and **“all the nobles of Judah”** **“before his eyes.”** It was the last sight Zedekiah ever saw, for without further ado Nebuchadnezzar put out his eyes. Then he bound the broken king in heavy bronze shackles and deported him to Babylon.

That **“is how Jerusalem was taken.”**

■ Verses 8-10 report the aftermath. The Babylonians burned the city, leaving a smoking heap of ash and rubble. They deported everyone who was anyone, leaving **“some of the poor people, who owned nothing,”** to tend fields and vineyards for the Babylonian garrison that was left to hold the land.

□ Chapter 52 covers the same events. We will skip over the parts that are the same as in chapter 39, and zero in on the verses that add greater detail.

■ Verses 1-3 explain *why* Jerusalem was taken: King Zedekiah, the son of Josiah and Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah (not the prophet, a different man) **“did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as Jehoiakim had done. It was because of the LORD’s anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.”**

“It was because of the LORD’s anger.” That is a hard and heavy truth!

Some of us are bound by a false image of God as a perpetually angry fiend who is waiting for us to

mess up so he can punish us. Nothing could be further from the truth! {Ps 103:8-10} **“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”**

Yes, the Living God does get angry. But Scripture reveals that his anger is not like ours.

★ Human anger is often (not always) an impulsive, reckless reaction. YHWH’s anger is always thoughtful.

★ Human anger is often (not always) a response of wounded pride or thwarted ambition. YHWH’s anger is always a rejection of immorality, injustice, and evil.

★ Human anger is often (not always) out of proportion to the offense. YHWH’s anger never exceeds the offense, it is always fair.

★ Human anger is often (not always) tenacious, lingering after the original episode is over and done, sometimes even after justice has been served. YHWH’s anger is never needlessly prolonged.

Human anger often (not always) spawns sins of an unforgiving spirit, bitterness, verbal abuse, slander, libel, even physical violence and murder. YHWH’s anger always leads to righteous action, never to sin.

Jeremiah 52:3: **“It was because of the LORD’s anger that all this happened.”**

Why was he angry? In a nutshell, it was because (Jeremiah 2:13) his people “[forsook him], **the spring of living water, and ...dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that [could not] hold water.**”

The Living God gave Judah his truth that set them free. They abandoned it for the bondage of half-truths and outright lies.

The Living God gave Judah his Law as the foundation of moral decency, social, economic, and legal justice, and holistic peace. They misused it as a tool for greed, immorality, and oppression.

The Living God gave Judah his temple as a sacred place of worship and prayer. They turned it into a nationalist icon and talisman, a kind of good luck charm that they expected to guarantee their safety by its mere physical existence.

The Living God gave Judah his protection against stronger enemies. They doubted him, and formed alliances with pagan nations against his will. (The leaned especially hard on Egypt, which had enslaved them for 400 years!)

The Living God gave Judah himself in covenant relationship. But they worshiped false mental images of the LORD and, sometimes, actual idols.

For 40 years Jeremiah urged Judah to repent, return to YHWH, and live. They repeatedly rejected him, his words and, by extension, the One who put those words in his mouth. That is why the LORD was angry – and that is why **“all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah.”**

■ Jeremiah 52:4-5 is virtually identical to 39:1-2, but verse 6 adds this crucial detail: **“By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat.”** It got so bad that they resorted to

cannibalism. Lamentations (which might have been written by Jeremiah) speaks a great deal about the famine.

Lamentations 4:10 states: **“With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food...”**

- Jeremiah 52:17-23 are new. They depict at length how the plundered and desecration of the temple.

- And verses 24-27a reports the execution of 74 priests, military officers, and royal advisers. Of course, thousands had already been slain willy-nilly; but these men were specifically chosen for death. Their execution was either a punishment for earlier defiance, or a pre-emptive strike against future resistance, or both.

- Verse 27b is enormously poignant: **“So Judah went into captivity, away from her land.”** So the people were taken from their homes. So they were ripped out of the Land of Promise. So Judah ended.

- Verses 28-30 report **“the number of...people ...carried into exile”** in three separate deportations. The total is only 4,600. It probably includes only adult men. 2nd Kings {24:14, 16} gives much larger numbers, 18,000 in the first deportation alone.

Regardless, tens of thousands of Judahites died by the sword, at least as many perished of famine and plague, almost every survivor who was anybody was marched 1,000 miles east to Babylon, never to return, and many of the poor were taken as well. Jerusalem was demolished, and every other fortified city was destroyed. Fields and vineyards were pillaged. **“So Judah went into captivity, away from her land,”** so the kingdom of Judah passed into extinction.

Jeremiah 39 and 52 were not written *to* us, but they were written *for* us. So ***what do we do with this*** dark and difficult text?

- A verse from the New Testament is really helpful here. Romans 6:23 declares: **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

This has always been so. Even in the Old Testament era, before Christ took on flesh and the people were not yet able to be saved by his death and resurrection, real life was a **“gift of God.”**

But we often get it backwards, don't we?

- ⊗ We tend to assume that God owes us health, opportunity, prosperity, and salvation because of who we (as a birthright) or for what we have done (as a reward). That is one reason so many people are unappreciative even when the Lord inundates them with blessings – and disappointed when he does not.

Not only does this make us ungrateful, it puffs us up with pride and spiritual self-reliance. Pride and self-reliance separate us from the Living God. And the further

we move from the Living God, the less able we are to receive his free gift of life.

Worst-case scenario: we become so confident of our worthiness – or so persuaded of our need to make ourselves worthy – that we do not rely upon God's grace, thereby forfeiting salvation. That is what happened with Judah in the days of Jeremiah.

☠ The irony is, the more we think of life as something to be earned, the less of it we get! I know. I have been there.

“The gift of God is eternal life” but “the wages of sin is death.”

In this verse, “**death**” is not limited to the moment our hearts stop pumping. It involves sickness, disability, the progressive breakdown of tissues, the whole process of dying.

It is also spiritual. The Creator breathed spirit into us, and our spirits are full of life when we are in fellowship with him. But unrepented sin alienates us from God. Apart from him our spirits wither and weaken. Reject the Lord forever, and your spirit will never be with him. That is hell.

☹ We tend to assume that our sins won’t harm us, much less end in death. After all, we aren’t as bad as some people, right? And we can list 1,000 extenuating circumstances for every slip-up. That helps to explain why many people get angry when God does not spare them the consequences of their sins.

Here’s the problem: until we confess that we have sinned and deserve death, we will not cast ourselves on God’s mercy, seek his forgiveness, and receive his gift of life. That is what happened with Judah in the days of Jeremiah – they did not receive it, channeled through God’s covenant and God’s law. That is what happens today – many do not receive it, channeled through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

☠ The more we insist that we have not earned the consequences of sin, the more we are subject to them! I know. I have been there.

The question is: *Will we be torn down like Jerusalem?* Will we pass into extinction like Judah? If so, it will be because **“the wages of sin is death.”**

Or *will we stand?* Will we have life abundant and eternal? If so, it will be because **“the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!