

## Chapter 17 – The Kingdoms' Fall

Hezekiah's son was Manasseh. He had a long reign in Jerusalem and managed to undo all the religious reform that Hezekiah had initiated. The Kingdom of Judah, which had so far had fairly stable, if idolatrous, governments now experienced a violent coup and counter-coup. This brought Josiah to the throne. With the help of the prophetess Huldah, Josiah instituted even more radical religious reforms than Hezekiah had done but like Hezekiah's Josiah's reforms lasted only as long as he did.

By the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. international warfare had come to Judah's doorstep. The Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians (southern Iraq) and Judah came under Babylonian control. The pattern of idolatry and misrule continued. When the rulers of Judah rebelled against Babylon, the Babylonian ruler captured Jerusalem, took the royal family, officials and trained artisans into exile, and left a puppet ruler on the throne. In Babylon the prophet Ezekiel ministered among the exiles.

In Jerusalem, the Babylonian puppet ruler Zedekiah came under the influence of prophets who began to remind him of God's promise to Hezekiah when the Assyrians were the world power. Hezekiah had rebelled against Assyria and with Isaiah's encouragement had held firmly to God's promise to protect the holy city and the temple "where God had made the divine name to dwell." God had come through and delivered Jerusalem. Now, a century later, most of the prophets were telling King Zedekiah, "God will do it again!" Only one prophet, Jeremiah, kept urging the king to obey Babylon and kept encouraging the people of Jerusalem to defect, give up, stop expecting God to save them.

**All the prophets except Jeremiah were clinging to THE STORY as they had heard it: "God is powerful; God is faithful; God will not allow the pagan empire to overcome us." Why were they wrong and Jeremiah's prophecies of doom right on target?**

**What does this tell us about the way the Biblical story can and cannot be used to guide decisions today?**

The king followed the advice of the majority of prophets. The Babylonians captured Jerusalem a second time and this time they slaughtered the royal family, tore down the city walls and burned Solomon's temple to the ground. Meanwhile, in Babylon, God gave the prophet Ezekiel a word of promise to the exiles: God had not forgotten them; they would again live in the land promised to their ancestors.

## Chapter 18 – Daniel in Exile

The stories about Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were, like Ruth, written long after the events they describe. They serve to encourage God's people to be faithful, even when the demands of the culture in which they find themselves exert a strong pull away from faithfulness. The four friends were promoted to positions of influence in the Babylonian bureaucracy where they did their jobs well, except when it came to worship. There they wouldn't compromise. They'd rather die.

So far it's pretty clear that false worship (idolatry) is the primary temptation that causes trouble for God's people. It took a lot of courage for Daniel and his friends to face death rather than worship the false gods of Babylon. It took a lot of courage, but it didn't take much discernment to recognize when they were encountering idolatry. There's the statue; they can bow down or not bow down. It's crystal clear. If there's no statue, it's not so clear.

**How do you discern when you are being encouraged to engage in false worship (remembering that “worship” does not necessarily involve obviously religious activity. Worship happens when we orient our lives around something. If that something is not the God in whose story we are called to live, then we are idolators.)**

### Thoughts on Christian maturity

David committed adultery and murder, but when he admitted that he had done wrong, God forgave him and even allowed the second son of his adulterous relationship to succeed him as king (Solomon). Manasseh committed idolatry and “shed much innocent blood,” but when he turned away from sin, God forgave him and delivered him out of captivity (page 192).

**Since God forgives those who own up to their sin and ask for forgiveness, wouldn't it have been smarter for Daniel and his friends to grit their teeth, bow down to the idol, and then seek God's forgiveness? What do you think you would have done?**

David is celebrated as the model king “after God's own heart” but Manasseh's sins were so heinous that even the reforms of Josiah were not enough to save Judah from God's judgment. David admitted his sin and asked for

forgiveness as soon as he was confronted by Nathan, but Manasseh repented only after terrible personal suffering at the hands of the Babylonians.

This contrast suggests that even though God will forgive the individual sinner who admits wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness, there are consequences for idolatry that affect other people as well. People were looking to Manasseh for leadership and his idolatry influenced the whole people of God.

**Let's pray that God's Spirit will make our hearts sensitive to correction so that we seek forgiveness and transformation BEFORE we and others experience the painful consequences of our sin.**