Lesson: Jeremiah 21:8-14; Time of Action: probably between 597 and 586 B.C.; Place of Action: Jerusalem

Golden Text: “O house of David, thus saith the Lord; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings” (Jeremiah 21:12).

I. INTRODUCTION. Like many good parents do when their children disobey, we have often spanked them, and disciplined our children. They learn early that disobedience leads to some form of punishment. Our loving God does the same with us because He loves us so much. It hurts Him when we stray from what He wants us to do, and His punishment is designed to bring us back into a right relationship with Him. In this week’s lesson, we will see what happens to a people who disobey God.

II. THE BACKGROUND FOR THE LESSON. After Jehoiakin, also called Coniah and Jeconiah (compare II Kings 24:5-6 with Jeremiah 22:24 and 24:1) became king of Judah in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon came against Jerusalem and besieged the city. Fearing the worst, Jehoiakin
and his royal court surrendered to the king of Babylon (see II Kings 24:8-11). At this time, Nebuchadnezzar carried Jehoiakim, his family, all his princes, at least ten thousand other captives, seven thousand men of might and a thousand craftsmen and metal workers to Babylon (see II Kings 24:12-16). This was the first of three deportations of Jews to Babylon. However, the captain of the Babylonian guard left many poor people behind to farm the land (see II Kings 25:12). After Jehoiakim was taken captive, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, appointed Mattaniah king in Jerusalem and changed his name to Zedekiah, and he was an evil king (see II Kings 24:17-19). As a puppet king for Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah was made to swear an oath that he would remain loyal to Babylon (see II Chronicles 36:13). In Zedekiah’s ninth year as king in Jerusalem, he rebelled against Babylon (see II Kings 24:20; II Chronicles 36:11-13), and Nebuchadnezzar again laid siege around Jerusalem for two years (see II Kings 25:1-3). Our lesson takes place during those two years. King Zedekiah, fearing what would happen to Jerusalem as a result of the Babylonian siege around the city, sent two of his representatives to beg Jeremiah to petition the LORD for help (see Jeremiah 21:1-2). The LORD had protected Jerusalem earlier (see Jeremiah 37:3-5), so Zedekiah undoubtedly thought that God would do it again. But Jeremiah sent word back to the king declaring that no help from the LORD was forthcoming (see Jeremiah 32:6-8). In fact, God told Jeremiah to tell Zedekiah that instead of helping, He Himself would fight against Jerusalem, using Babylon as His weapon. As a result, Zedekiah and many others would be carried off in captivity to Babylon (see Jeremiah 21:3-7). This is where our lesson begins.
III. THE LORD’S MESSAGE TO HIS PEOPLE (Jeremiah 21:8-10)

A. God gives the people a choice (Jeremiah 21:8). Our first verse says “And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.” After Jeremiah replied to king Zedekiah’s two emissaries advising that God would not help them but would fight against them, God also said to the prophet “And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.” When the LORD said “I set before you,” He was giving His people a choice. In Jeremiah 21:7, the prophet had already told them that God was going to deliver the king and the people into the hands of the Babylonians. But before that would happen, God demonstrates His grace by giving the king and the people a choice “of life” or “of death.” Moses used almost the same words when the Israelites sat on the borders of Canaan and he said to them, “See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil...” (see Deuteronomy 30:15). This choice between “life” and “death” is also given to mankind today, both collectively and individually. This reveals that God made man with a free will, meaning that the LORD doesn’t make people do anything. Men and women are free to make life changing choices. In His sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke about man having the choice between “life” and “death” when He described it as a choice between a wide gate which leads to destruction, and a strait or narrow gate
that leads to “life” (see Matthew 7:13-14). Everyone of us is given that same choice, but instead of choosing “life” that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ, for some reason too many people choose the path to “death” by trusting in their own wisdom (see Jeremiah 44:15-17; Proverbs 3:5-7).

**B. What the people must consider when making their choice (Jeremiah 21:9-10).**

1. (vs. 9). This verse says “He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.” Here Jeremiah presents the two choices God’s people had. First, the prophet said “He that abideth in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence.” Whoever chose to “abideth” or remain in the city of Jerusalem trusting that they would be safe there would suffer death, either “by the sword,” or “by famine,” or “by the pestilence.” Although God is the one who would bring these disasters on His people, all three of them are normal results of a long siege (see Jeremiah 14:12-18). A siege was when an attacking nation would surround a city preventing anyone from going out or coming in, usually resulting in starvation, sickness and/or surrender (see II Kings 25:1-3). The Babylonians had already started the siege, so it was just a matter of time before people would die “by the sword,” or “by famine,” or “by the pestilence.” The term “famine” refers to starvation and the word “pestilence” refers to plagues or diseases. Even though Jerusalem was at that time
surrounded by the Babylonians, the people believed false prophets who told them that nothing would happen to them as long as God’s temple was there (see Jeremiah 7:4,8; Micah 3:11). So, there were many people who felt safe in Jerusalem. But in an earlier message from the LORD to Jeremiah, God said that if the people believed there was safety in the temple, they were terribly wrong, for all they had to do was see what He had done to Shiloh (see Jeremiah 7:9-12). God then presented a second choice saying “but he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.” When the LORD said, “he that goeth out, and falleth to the Chaldeans,” He was advising the people to surrender to the “Chaldeans” (Babylonians). Whoever surrendered to the Babylonians “shall live, and his life shall be unto him for a prey.” In other words, surrendering was the only way the people could save their lives. The phrase “his life shall be unto him for a prey” means that surrendering one’s “life” would be like a prize to that person. Just like the joy a predator feels when it has caught its “prey,” the Israelites would also feel joy at saving their own lives by surrendering to the enemy. It may appear to some that being taken captive was just as bad as dying, but in God’s mind that’s not the case. Death was final, but saving one’s life regardless of what captivity would be like was, as the saying goes, “the lesser of two evils.” One would think that this advice from a prophet, in God’s name, should have been universally followed by all; but there were few if any who took God’s advice that would save their lives. Unfortunately, the people’s hearts were so wretchedly hardened that their destruction was inevitable (see II Kings

2. (vs. 10). This verse says “For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.” Since it was God who the Israelites had offended with their disobedience and transgressions, He would be the One to bring judgment upon them. God said “For I have set my face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord.” The phrase “set my face” is a Hebrew expression meaning “determination” or “single-mindedness.” In other words, God was determined to work “against this city (Jerusalem) for evil, and not for good.” The Hebrew word for “evil” is “ra’a.” It can mean “to behave wickedly” or “to do harm.” When speaking of humans in the Old Testament, the word “evil” means “to act wickedly,” identifying actions that violate God’s intentions for human beings. However, when speaking of God, “evil” means “to do harm.” Therefore, when the LORD declares that “I have set my face against this city for evil” He means that He has determined “to do harm” to the people in Judah, especially in Jerusalem, for their “evil” or their wicked behavior (see Jeremiah 20:4; 32:28). When the scriptures say that God will do “evil,” it means that He is responsible for initiating the consequences of men and women who behave wickedly. The “evil” or harm that God said He would bring upon Jerusalem and her inhabitants was “it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.” God’s action would be in response to Israel’s wickedness (see II Chronicles 36:14-16). He would give the city over to
Nebuchadnezzar, “the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.” And God, being true to His word, did exactly that; the city went up in flames (see II Kings 25:8-10; II Chronicles 36:17-19). Note: Undoubtedly Israel would see what God was going to do in Jerusalem as punishment for their sins, but in a larger sense God’s actions were designed to correct Judah’s behavior rather than punish them. Whenever God has to punish His people for their sinful behavior, He does it to correct their behavior like parents do for their children (see Deuteronomy 8:5; Proverbs 13:24; Hebrews 12:6-7).

IV. THE LORD’S MESSAGE TO THE KING’S HOUSE (Jeremiah 21:11-14)

A. Practice justice or be judged (Jeremiah 21:11-12).

1. (vs. 11). This verse says “And touching the house of the king of Judah, say, Hear ye the word of the Lord.” The part of God’s message to Jeremiah in verses 8-10 was designed for the people in general, but included the royal family. Now in the remaining verses, God’s message focuses on “the house of the king of Judah” or the royal family, but also included the general population. At this time, Zedekiah was “the king of Judah” (see II Kings 24:17-20; 25:4-7). Jeremiah was to speak specifically to “the house of the king of Judah,” and “say, Hear ye the word of
the Lord.” In other words, what Jeremiah was about to say was a direct message from “the Lord” to “the king” and his “house” which included his royal court, and all those who were responsible for handling the king’s affairs. Since it was King Zedekiah who sent messengers to Jeremiah to speak to God on their behalf, it made sense that God’s reply would be particularly for “the house of the king of Judah.” They all needed to listen and pay close attention to God’s message.

2. (vs. 12). This verse says “O house of David, thus saith the Lord; Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.” The phrase “O house of David” was a reference to King Zedekiah and his royal family who were descendants of King David (compare II Kings 22:1-2 with Jeremiah 37:1). In Jeremiah’s message, God advises the king and his princes to reform or change their behavior, and be conscious of the duty of their positions. First, “the LORD” told the king to “Execute judgment in the morning.” In other words, they were to administer justice “in the morning.” The word “judgment” can be translated as “justice.” The phrase “in the morning” was a Hebrew expression meaning “daily” or “regularly.” “The LORD” was commanding the king and his princes to judge people justly or fairly every day. In addition, they were to “deliver him that is spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor.” The word “spoiled” has the idea of robbing someone. So the message here was to rescue those who had been robbed from “the hand” of his or her “oppressor” meaning those who seek to take what is not
“The LORD” said that the rulers and judges were required to do those things, “lest my fury go out like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings.” This means that if the rulers and judges in Israel failed to end injustices, God’s “fury” or anger would be as hot as “fire” and would “burn” so hotly that no one could “quench” or extinguish it. Often in Scripture when God’s anger is compared to “fire” it is not literal (see Psalms 79:5; 89:46). But here, when God uses Nebuchadnezzar as His instrument of correction for His people, His anger will literally “burn” down Jerusalem (see II Kings 25:8-10; II Chronicles 36:17-21; Jeremiah 39:6-8; 52:10-13). God then said that this destruction that He would bring upon Jerusalem was “because of the evil of your doings.” This implies that the desolation that God would bring upon the people was the result of the failure of the leaders to do their duty to make sure to “execute judgment in the morning” to everyone. It was the “evil of their doings” that kindled the “fire” of God’s wrath. **Note:** God plainly deals with the “house of the king” because those who expect to have the benefit of a prophet’s prayers (see Jeremiah 21:1-2) must also be ready for a prophet’s reproofs.

God directs Judah’s leaders to do the right things to cause a national reformation. The king and his princes must first set a good example, and then invite the people to change their behaviors. They must use their power to punish all wrong, and then the people will want to change their behavior. This is true today for all leaders whom God has placed over His people both religious and civil. Jeremiah reminds the king that he represents the “the house of David,” and therefore he
should walk in his (David’s) ways” (see II Kings 18: 1-3; 22:1-2) who executed judgment and justice to his people. Unfortunately, God’s words fell on deaf ears.

B. The LORD will punish His people (Jeremiah 21:13-14).

1. (vs. 13). This verse says “Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the Lord; which say, Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?” It was one thing for the people to know that a foreign nation, Babylon, was a major threat, but think how much worse it was to hear God say through Jeremiah, “Behold, I am against thee, O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain, saith the Lord.” This was God’s answer to the inhabitants of Jerusalem who were asking “Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?” These two questions reveal just how much confidence the people had in the location of Jerusalem to protect them. God acknowledged the people’s confidence in Jerusalem when He described the city as “O inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain.” The phrase “inhabitant of the valley,” refers to the city of Jerusalem being built on a plateau with valleys on three sides which often served as natural fortifications, making it difficult for an army to approach them. Because of its strategic location, the inhabitants of Jerusalem thought they were safe. God also called Jerusalem a “rock of the plain.” They trusted more in Jerusalem as a defensive stronghold than in the power and promise of God, thinking that their city
could never be entered by its enemies. This confidence in Jerusalem fueled the people’s defiance of God’s laws causing them to ask, “Who shall come down against us?
Undoubtedly, the people believed that none of their enemies would dare to “come down against” them. It even appeared that many of their enemies also felt that no one could force their way into Jerusalem (see Lamentations 4:12).
But God shows the vanity of the people’s question, “Who shall come down against us? or who shall enter into our habitations?” when He says “Behold, I am against thee.”
Yes, by their wickedness they had driven God out of their city when He would have dwelt among them as a friend. But there was no way to keep God out of their city when He came “against” them as an enemy. It is true that “if God be for us, who can be “against” us?” (see Romans 8:31). But, it is even more true that if He is “against” us, who can be for us, to stand “against” Him? God wasn’t coming “against” His people like an enemy that they could resist, but instead He was coming “against” them as a Judge that they could not resist.

2. (vs. 14). Our final verse says “But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, saith the Lord: and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it shall devour all things round about it.” When “the LORD” comes against His people He said “I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings.” This means that God’s people would get the punishment they deserve for the sins they have committed against Him (see Proverbs 1:25-31; Isaiah 3:10-11). In addition, “the LORD” said, “and I will kindle a fire in the forest thereof, and it
shall devour all things round about it."  God promised that He would start "a fire" in their "forests" that will completely burn everything around them. God will not only come against His people with the anger of an enemy and the justice of a judge, but also with the force of a consuming "fire," which has no compassion like a judge sometimes has. The lesson is clear; our God Himself is "a consuming fire" (see Hebrews 12:29), and "who shall be able to stand" (see Revelation 6:17) in His sight when He becomes angry?

Note: There is some disagreement among Bible scholars as to what the phrase "the forest thereof" means since there are no "forests" in the immediate area of Jerusalem. Some scholars see this as a reference to the royal palace since it is referred to as "the house of the forests of Lebanon" (see I Kings 7:1-2). This was the way that the royal palace built by Solomon, was referred to because of the large amount of cedar wood that was used to build the palace. In addition, since many homes were also constructed of wood, some may have seen Jerusalem as a kind of city "forest." However, we cannot overlook the reference the LORD made to Ezekiel regarding the "forests" of the south field that He would devour with "fire" (see Ezekiel 20:45-48). It seems more likely that this is what the LORD was referring to by the phrase "the forest thereof."

V. Conclusion. God will tolerate sin only so long and then He will act. Because of her sinful disobedience, the northern
kingdom of Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Our lesson this week takes place about 135 years later. One would think that the southern kingdom of Judah would’ve learned a lesson from what happened to the northern tribes. But they didn’t. They continued to live ungodly lives, being led by many of their ungodly leaders. Even after numerous warnings from God’s prophets, God’s people failed to listen. As a result, time ran out on them and the LORD prophesied through Jeremiah that their punishment was on the horizon in the form of the Babylonians. It was too late to make any changes, for God had pronounced the consequences of their repeated disobedience—removal from their own land (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 49-52). The lesson for us is that we must be obedient to God’s will, His Word and His way. Anything less will result in His judgment, and trust me that won’t be fun!