

Punishment Pronounced

Key Verse: “*Unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the Lord; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death.*”
—*Jeremiah 21:8*

Selected Scripture:
Jeremiah 21:1-14

TODAY’S LESSON IS ONE of the severity of God’s dealings with his covenant people when they willfully pursued a course in violation of their national vows. Israel had entered into a solemn covenant with God. Obedience to their covenant would bring great blessings from God, while disobedience would bring corresponding judgment and punishment.

It was in fulfillment of this covenant on God’s part that the events of today’s lesson came to pass. The ten-tribe kingdom of Israel was first to feel the judgment of the Lord after worshipping heathen idols and gods, including Baal. As a result of their grave sins against their covenant with God, he allowed Israel to be defeated by the king of Assyria and be carried off as captives.—II Kings 17:6-24

Despite seeing what happened to the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel, Judah, the two-tribe kingdom, followed the same course of corruption. (Jer. 3:8) As King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made war against Judah, King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray to the Lord for deliverance “according to all his wondrous works.” (Jer. 21:1,2) The answer relayed through the prophet was not the response Zedekiah was hoping for. Instead of fighting for Judah, the message was

that the Lord would fight against Judah, due to their grave disobedience.

In our Key Verse, God sets forth a grim choice the people must make—a way of life or a way of death. The next verse states the details of that choice. Those who choose to stay in Judah and Jerusalem “shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence.” Those who leave, and become captives in Babylon “shall live,” having escaped in safety. (vs. 9) Here, the “way of life” is no longer the way of righteousness, because the people of Judah had already forsaken that path. God had rendered his judgment, and the only way now to maintain life would be unconditional surrender to the kingdom of Babylon.

As pointed out in our previous lesson, after seventy years of captivity in Babylon, God overruled that the Israelites could return to their homeland. Although there was a temporary renewal of faithfulness on the part of some, the nation generally continued in many of their sinful ways and, later on, rejected Jesus, their Messiah of promise. It is important to note, however, that God did not cast off his people forever. As stated by the Apostle Paul, God has restoration and blessings yet in store for his people.—Rom. 11:25-32

The name Babylon means “confusion,” and we can see how this applies to both natural Israel and spiritual Israel. Babylon, a heathen nation, literally held the Israelites in confusion during their captivity as a result of their seeking after other gods in violation of their covenant. Symbolic Babylon of the present age is shown to represent the various church systems which have been overtaken with doctrinal errors, bringing confusion and misunderstanding to the people in general. However, like the Israelites of old who remained dedicated to God, faithful followers of the Lord now have heard and obeyed the words, “Come out of her [Babylon], my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins.” (Rev. 18:4) How blessed are all of spiritual Israel who have heeded this instruction! ■