

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WHEN GOD'S AXE FALLS

2 Chronicles 36

By

Steven J. Cole

December 11, 1994

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Kings of Judah Lesson 15

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C. S. Lewis once heard a young British pastor, fresh out of seminary, who ended his sermon by telling people of the need to receive Jesus Christ. He said, "If you receive Jesus Christ you will have eternal life, but if you do not it will drastically alter your eschatological destiny." Lewis pulled the preacher aside afterwards and said, "Young man, do you mean that they will go to hell?" "Well, yes," he said hesitantly. "Then tell them that that is what will happen. Say it!"

The hesitancy of that young preacher to speak plainly about hell is probably shared by many American evangelical Christians. With the exception of a few "hellfire and damnation" preachers from the Bible belt, the subject of God's judgment is strangely missing from Bible-believing churches in our day. I say *strangely* because God's judgment is a prominent theme from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus Himself spoke often about hell and judgment, so much so that we cannot rightly call ourselves Christians if we deny the topic. Yet if the truth were known, the theme of God's judgment embarrasses many of us. It's too out of step with our tolerant culture. But the Bible is clear:

Although God is patient and compassionate, when people continue to reject His Word, judgment is certain.

Our text makes this point as it narrates the end of the line for the kingdom of Judah. The godly king Josiah was killed in battle by Pharaoh Neco. His son Joahaz took the throne and lasted three months before Pharaoh deposed him and took him captive to Egypt. Pharaoh then installed Joahaz's older brother Jehoiakim on the throne. He lasted for eleven years, first subject to Pharaoh and then to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He did evil (36:5) and committed "abominations" (36:8). After his death, his 18 year-old son Jehoiachin took over for three months and ten days before Nebuchadnezzar took him to Babylon, where he spent the next 37 years

in prison. Even so he managed, in three months, to do evil in the sight of the Lord (36:9).

Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Zedekiah (son of Josiah), who also did evil (36:12). Finally he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, who in turn besieged Jerusalem, which fell and was sacked in the summer of 586 B.C. (36:19). Those who escaped the sword were taken captive to Babylon. The 70 years (36:21) probably refers to the time from the first deportation (605 B.C.; 36:6-7) to the return of the exiles (536 B.C.). All this happened, not by chance, but "to fulfill the word of the Lord" (36:21). It's a dreadful thing when God's axe falls upon a nation! But before we look at God's judgment, note that:

1. God is patient and compassionate toward sinful people.

There had been a number of high and low points during the almost 400 years since Solomon had begun his idolatry. Some of the lows were so bad that you would think that God's judgment would have fallen, but He stayed His hand. Over those years, He patiently waited and entreated. Note 36:15: "And the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place." Instead of "again and again," the Kings James Version reads, "He rose up early," a graphic picture of God's earnestness in seeking to bring the rebellious nation to repentance.

God is more patient and compassionate toward sinners than we are (see the story of Jonah). Because of modern news media, we see and hear more horrible things going on all over the world than any previous generation--murders, wars, child abuse, sexual perversity, and other atrocities. It disgusts us and we cry out, "Lord, how long before You judge the world?" But remember, God sees every evil deed, even those committed in secret; and not only that but He knows all the evil thoughts that never are carried out in deed (Gen. 6:5). But we forget that if He were as swift in judging sinners as we desire, we ourselves might never have come to repentance!

After delivering one his defiant speeches the nineteenth century atheist, Robert Ingersoll, pulled his watch from his pocket and said, "According to the Bible, God has struck men dead for blas-

phemy. I will blaspheme Him and give Him five minutes to strike me dead and damn my soul."

The crowd was silent while one minute ticked by; two minutes passed, and you could feel the nervousness in the audience; three minutes, and a woman fainted; four minutes and Ingersoll curled his lip. At five minutes, he snapped shut his watch, put it in his pocket, and said: "You see, there is no God, or He would have taken me at my word."

The story was told later to British preacher Joseph Parker, who said, "And did the American gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?" God is patient toward sinners. But in spite of His great patience, ...

2. People continue to reject God's Word.

In spite of God's repeated appeals, the people of Israel continued to reject His word through the prophets (36:15-16). Why would people reject God's gracious offer of forgiveness? Our text reveals four reasons:

A. People reject God's Word because of pride (36:12).

Zedekiah "did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the Lord." God's word requires sinners to respond with humility, because it confronts our wicked ways and brings us to the cross, where no one can boast. Because of our pride, three of the most difficult words to say are, "I was wrong." But no one can come to God who will not humble himself and admit his sin.

B. People reject God's Word because of hard hearts (36:13).

George Orwell wryly observed, "On the whole, human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time." The problem is human depravity. In our day of positive Christianity we minimize the doctrine of depravity. We don't like to think about it or to use the term, unless it is to describe the worst of criminals: "Terrorists and murderers are depraved; but me? I'm not such a bad guy!"

But the Bible teaches that every human heart is depraved. This does not mean that every person is as bad as he possibly could be. If that were so, the human race would have self-destructed centu-

ries ago! Through common grace and the restraining ministry of the Holy Spirit there are a number of decent, law-abiding, "good" people in the world who do not know Christ. But depravity means that because of the fall, every person has an inborn bent toward sin, a rebellious nature that says, "I do not want to submit to God." God's Word is clear: "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10).

Even the British infidel playwright George Bernard Shaw reluctantly concluded (in response to the German concentration camps), "There is only one empirically verifiable doctrine of theology--original sin." Pride, hard hearts ...

- C. People reject God's Word because of worldly influence (36:14).

"Following all the abominations of the nations..." Because all have sinned and we ourselves have a bent toward sin, we are prone to the influence of other sinners. We see people engaging in sin who seem to be enjoying life. So we're drawn to try it for ourselves. This generation is bombarded with more solicitations to sin than any other in history. Even when I was growing up, as the first generation with TV, about the most racy thing on the tube was "77 Sunset Strip"! Today you can bring the worst filth into your living room. Even many commercials are lewd. Pornography is readily available at the local video store or over on-line computer networks. Worldly influence combined with our self-gratifying sinful nature is a powerful force!

Thus, people reject God's Word because of pride, hard hearts, and worldly influence.

- D. People reject God's Word because they don't take God's warnings seriously (36:16).

"They mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, ..." People have always mocked the idea of God's judgment because they mistake God's delay to mean that it won't ever happen. Or, they compare themselves with those who are more flagrantly sinful and surmise that if and when judgment ever does come (which they doubt, but if it does), they will fare well. But they flatter themselves!

We neglect God's warnings to our own destruction! There used to be a sign on the river above Niagara Falls that read, "POINT OF NO RETURN." If a boat drifted beyond that point, there was no escape from the strong current that would suck the boat and its passengers to certain doom. God's warnings are like that. Although He is patient, ...

3. If people ignore God's Word, judgment is certain.

"Until there was no remedy" (36:16)--frightening words! Both nations and individuals can reach the point of being so hardened in sin that there is no remedy! Just because God is patient and hesitant to judge is no reason to doubt that He *will* judge. We need to understand two things about God's certain judgment: *How is it expressed?* and, *How do we know it is certain?*

How is God's judgment expressed?

A. God's judgment is expressed temporally and eternally.

(1) *Temporal judgment.* This is what we see in 2 Chronicles 36: God's judgment upon a particular person or group at a particular point in history. It can be lifted, as we see at the end of the chapter when Cyrus issued an edict for the Jews to return to their land.

When God's temporal judgment falls on a nation, it's a frightening thing, as we have recently witnessed in Rwanda! The society is ripped apart. In Judah, families were uprooted from their homes and deported to Babylon. Many were killed by the sword. The survivors became slaves in Babylon. There was political oppression and the loss of religious freedom. The Temple was destroyed. In Babylon (as we read in Daniel), the king tried to force them to bow down to his image. Israel was no longer a testimony for the Lord to the nations.

We need to understand that when God's temporal judgment falls on a nation, the godly suffer along with the ungodly. Children suffer for their parents' sins. While God had compassion before judgment (36:15), the Babylonians (the instrument of His judgment) had no compassion (36:17). Girls were raped; the elderly and sick were slaughtered; pregnant mothers were ripped open with the sword; babies were dashed against the rocks. It was an awful thing not only for those who had thumbed their noses at God, but also

for those who had sought to obey Him. The good and wicked alike are afflicted when God's axe falls.

This means that we cannot be complacent against the sins of our nation. We're sadly mistaken if we think that because we know Christ and obey God we're immune from God's judgment on our land. God could remove the lampstand of American Christianity as He has done in other cultures. It's sobering to think of Turkey, which was the cradle for Gentile Christianity. Many of Paul's letters were written to churches there. Today there are more believers in our small city than in all of Turkey!

You ask, "What can I do about national sin?" In the first place we must make sure that we walk uprightly. We would be hypocrites to call others to repentance if we live with secret sin. We must pray, even as Abraham pled with the Lord about judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. We must do all we can to call others to repentance. We dare not be complacent about the violence or moral degradation in our land. The life you save may be your own! Temporal judgment is a real danger; if America comes under judgment, we will not escape just because we know the Lord.

(2) *Eternal judgment.* Whereas temporal judgment may be lifted, eternal judgment is fixed, final and ultimate. Hebrews 9:27 declares, "... it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment."

All sin will be judged. God will not shrug it off. You may not like the idea of God judging sin. You may think that the notion of God punishing "good" people in the flames of hell for all eternity is sadistic and cruel. You may think, "I don't believe in a God like that. I believe in a God of love, who forgives everyone." But your believing it doesn't make it true! The question you have to come to grips with is, "*Was Jesus Christ a liar and charlatan, or is He the living Word who revealed the Father to us as He claimed?*" If you shrug Him off, you'll still have to face Him someday, when He comes "from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

If you believe the witness that Christ is Savior and Lord, then you must believe and submit to His witness about the terrors of hell. Jesus used the most frightening word pictures to describe it: a place where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48); a place of outer darkness, of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30); a place of eternal fire (Matt. 25:41). It's not a user-friendly sort of place!

Perhaps you're thinking, But I thought that God is a God of love. Won't He forgive everyone's sin?

How do we know that God's judgment is certain?

B. God's judgment is certain because of His character.

If you think about it for a moment, for God to be God, He must be holy. An unrighteous supreme being would not be God, but a devil. To be righteous and to resolve the problem of evil, He must judge all sin. If any sin goes unpunished, God is not just. God's love and grace never negate His holiness and justice. While His patience is great, it never negates His righteousness.

And God always keeps His Word. God had told Moses that every seventh year was to be a year of rest for the land of Israel (Lev. 25:1-7). That year the people were to let the ground lie fallow; God promised to make it up to them with a bountiful crop. But that took some faith to obey! What if God didn't come through? God also said (Lev. 26:33-35) that if the people did not obey, He would scatter them from the land until the land enjoyed its sabbaths.

Would God expect His people to abide by some obscure passage in Leviticus? Note verse 21. God's Word is true! "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7). God's Word is like the law of gravity: if you break it, it turns around and breaks you! As a God of justice, holiness, and truth, He will judge sin. He will judge it *temporally* when people continue to reject His Word. And He will judge it *eternally* if a person rejects Christ in this lifetime. Just because His judgment isn't quick does not mean that it isn't certain.

Conclusion

Neither you nor I can guarantee that God's judgment will not fall on our nation. We can live, pray, and work toward the end that He will spare us. But we can't be certain.

But every person here can be certain about escaping God's eternal judgment on a personal level. Scripture says that "Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). That righteousness comes to us not by our good deeds, but only through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:22, 26). If you will trust in Him, your sins will be charged to His account and you will escape God's coming wrath. Jesus Himself promised, "He who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

You have up to the point of death, but no later, to put your trust in Christ and escape God's eternal judgment. Maybe you're thinking, "I'm young; I want to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a while. I'll wait." That's foolish! You may be hardened beyond remedy! You could die today! Christ could return at any moment and you'd be lost. You're gambling against eternity!

In 1982, "ABC Evening News" reported on an unusual work of modern art--a chair affixed to a shotgun. It was to be viewed by sitting in the chair and looking directly into the gun barrel. The gun was loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment within the next one hundred years.

The amazing thing was that people waited in line to sit and stare into that gun barrel! They all knew it could go off at point-blank range at any moment, but they were gambling that the fatal blast wouldn't happen during their minute in the chair.

I wonder, could you be sitting in that chair today, betting that the gun will not go off in your face? Unless you have put your trust in Christ, you're playing with your eternal destiny. God is patient, but if you continue to reject His Word, judgment is certain! Flee to Christ now!

Discussion Questions

1. Should we bring up the subject of hell when we witness? If so, when and how?
2. We often hear that God's love is unconditional. Is it? What does that mean?
3. How would you answer the charge that God is unfair if good people suffer along with the wicked in His temporal judgment?
4. What would you say to a person who said, "I believe in a God of love, not a God of vengeance and punishment"?

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