

The Last Five Kings of Judah



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Chronicles 34, Jer. 22:1–19, 29:1–14, 2 Chron. 36:11–14, Jer. 23:2–8.*

Memory Text: “He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” (*Jeremiah 22:16, NIV*).

Famed Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky spent four years in a Siberian prison in the 1800s for subversive political activities. Later, writing about his experiences, he talked about some of his fellow prisoners' utter lack of remorse for their terrible behavior. “In the course of several years, I never saw a sign of repentance among these people; not a trace of despondent brooding over their crimes, and the majority of them inwardly considered themselves absolutely in the right.”—Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky, The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 95.

Dostoevsky could have been talking about, with the exception of Josiah, the five kings who ruled Judah during the ministry of Jeremiah. One after another, these men seemed totally unrepentant for their actions, even as it became clearer and clearer that their actions were bringing the calamities that the Lord, through Jeremiah, had warned would come.

It had never been God's intention to give Israel a king; by the end of this week's lesson, we will better understand why. We'll understand, too, the severe pressure that poor Jeremiah faced during much of his unappreciated ministry.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 17.

Under the Rule of Josiah

Josiah was the sixteenth king to rule in the Southern Kingdom; his reign spanned 640–609 B.C. He became king at the age of eight, after more than half a century of moral and spiritual decline under his father (Amon) and grandfather (Manasseh), two of the most evil kings in Judah. Josiah’s reign lasted for 31 years. Unlike his ancestors, however, Josiah “did that which was right in the sight of the LORD” (*2 Kings* 22:2), despite an environment that worked against him.

“Born of a wicked king, beset with temptations to follow in his father’s steps, and with few counselors to encourage him in the right way, Josiah nevertheless was true to the God of Israel. Warned by the errors of past generations, he chose to do right, instead of descending to the low level of sin and degradation to which his father and his grandfather had fallen. He ‘turned not aside to the right hand or to the left.’ As one who was to occupy a position of trust, he resolved to obey the instruction that had been given for the guidance of Israel’s rulers, and his obedience made it possible for God to use him as a vessel unto honor.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 384.

Read 2 Chronicles 34. What were the components of Josiah’s reform, and why would they be central to any attempt at spiritual reformation, be it corporate or personal?

Josiah’s reform consisted of two main components: First, it was getting rid, as much as possible, of anything and everything that smacked of idolatry. That is, he worked to remove the evil practices that had arisen in the nation.

But that was only the first step. An absence of evil or wrong practices doesn’t automatically mean that good will follow. Second, after hearing the Book of the Law read to him, the king made a covenant before the Lord “to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all his heart, and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant which are written in this book” (*2 Chron.* 34:31).

Read 2 Chronicles 34:32, 33. What do these verses tell us about the power of a good example, especially among people in positions of power and influence? Think long and hard: What influence do your words and actions exert on others?

Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim: Another Descent

Jehoahaz (also known as Shallum) was 23 years old when he succeeded his father, Josiah, on the throne. His reign lasted three months. Pharaoh replaced him with his brother, Jehoiakim, because Jehoahaz was not favorable toward Egyptian politics. Jehoahaz was taken to Egypt, and there he died. (*See 2 Chron. 36:4, 2 Kings 23:31–34.*)

Jehoiakim reigned 609–598 B.C. When Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, Jehoiakim was taken to Babylon along with vessels from the temple. During the time of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, Jeremiah warned the people that these kings were leading the nation down a wrong path.

Read Jeremiah 22:1–19. What were some of the issues with Jehoiakim that brought such a stern rebuke from the Lord?

The Lord, speaking through Jeremiah, had very sharp words for this corrupt and covetous ruler. Jehoiakim was an oppressive and greedy king who imposed heavy taxes in Judah (*see 2 Kings 23:35*) in order to pay the Egyptians. Worse, using forced labor, he had elaborate construction done on his own palace, in defiance of the Torah, which was clear about paying people for their work: “Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning” (*Lev. 19:13*). Also, unlike Josiah, his father, Jehoiakim permitted pagan rites to flourish again in Judah.

Jeremiah 22:16 is a powerful text. In the context of comparing the corrupt Jehoiakim to his father, Josiah, the Lord said to him: “He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” (*NIV*). In other words, the true knowledge of God comes from how one treats those who are in need; it comes when we step out of ourselves to benefit those who can really do nothing for us in return. We see here, again, as we see all through the Bible, the Lord’s concern for the poor and the helpless, as well as the obligation we have to help those who cannot help themselves.

Dwell on the idea that helping the “poor and the needy” is how we come to know the Lord. What does that mean?

The Short Reign of King Jehoiachin of Judah

The nineteenth king of Judah was Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim. He reigned on David's throne for barely three and a half months. In 598 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar brought his forces to Jerusalem and seized the 18-year-old king with his mother, his wives, and many other royal captives. In 561 B.C., in the thirty-seventh year of his captivity, Jehoiachin was given mercy by Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor. He was granted the right to dine with the king of Babylon, and he could wear his kingly robes. (See *2 Kings 25:27–30*, *Jer. 52:31–34*.) His sons were also in Babylon with him, yet Jeremiah's prophecy said they would have to give up the throne of David.

Read Jeremiah 29:1–14, the words of the Lord through Jeremiah after King Jehoiachin and his family and the court were taken captive from Jerusalem. Even amid this tragedy, how were God's love and grace revealed?

One of the most famous verses in the Bible is this: “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’ ” (*Jer. 29:11, NIV*). Here, of course, we have the immediate context: that of the Lord speaking through Jeremiah to the captives of Judah who had seen their lives completely uprooted by their Babylonian conquerors. Yet, even then, no matter how bad their situation seemed, the Lord wanted them to know that He still loved them and had only their good in mind. No doubt, considering the horrific circumstances, they must have welcomed such promising and hopeful words. Thus, even amid all dire warnings and threats, the people were still given the promise of “a future and hope.” How crucial it must have been for them, especially at that time, to have such assurance!

A future and a hope? What promises can you claim from the Lord for “a future and a hope” even right now, regardless of your circumstances?

At the End of the Dead End

Read 2 Chronicles 36:11–14. What do these verses tell us about the last king of Judah before the final destruction of the nation? What spiritual principles of apostasy are revealed in these texts?

Zedekiah (also known as Mattaniah) took the throne at the age of 21, placed there by Nebuchadnezzar as a puppet king. Unfortunately, as the texts say, he hadn't learned many lessons from what had gone before with previous kings, and as a result he brought even greater ruin to the nation.

Second Chronicles 36:14 states something very profound, a point that in many ways went to the heart of their apostasy. Amid the list of all the evil done under the reign of Zedekiah, it is said that Judah was following “all the abominations of the nations” (*NKJV*).

There they were, hundreds of years after the Exodus, hundreds of years as the covenant people who were to be a light and a beacon to the nations (*Deut. 4:5–8*), and yet they were still so caught up in the prevailing culture, so caught up in the cultural and religious environment of their neighbors, that they were doing “all the abominations” of the pagans.

Might there be a message there for us?

Read Jeremiah 38:14–18. What did the king ask him, and why?

The Lord had made it clear on numerous occasions that the nation was to submit to the rule of Babylon, that this conquest was punishment for their iniquity. Zedekiah, however, refused to listen, and he formed a military alliance against Nebuchadnezzar. The nation relied heavily on the hope of an Egyptian military victory. But Nebuchadnezzar was victorious over Pharaoh's army in 597 B.C. This defeat permanently sealed the fate of Jerusalem and the nation. Despite so many opportunities to repent, to reform, to be revived, Judah refused.

We as a church have been raised up to proclaim a message to the world that no one else in the world is proclaiming. In many ways that is very similar to what Judah was to do. What lessons can and should we learn for ourselves from their mistakes?

The Dark Years

What became of Israel and Jerusalem after rejecting God's message?

Jer. 39:8, 9.

Everything that God had warned them would happen to them is exactly what happened. However much they didn't want to believe the warnings, they certainly did believe them after they all came to pass. Who hasn't, even on a personal level, experienced something similar? We're warned by the Lord not to do something or else this will happen, but we do it anyway and, sure enough, what we were told would happen happens.

What message is found in Jeremiah 23:2–8? What hope was given the people there?

From a human perspective, all seemed lost: their nation lay in ruins, their temple was destroyed, their rulers were exiled and held captive, and the city of Jerusalem was a pile of stones. The Jewish nation and the Jewish people should have at that time disappeared from history, as had so many other nations that had undergone what they just had.

The Lord, though, had other plans, and in the verses above (and in many others) He gave them the hope that all was not lost but that a remnant would return and through them the promises would be fulfilled. That is, amid all the warnings of doom and destruction, the prophets also gave the people their only hope.

“The dark years of destruction and death marking the end of the kingdom of Judah would have brought despair to the stoutest heart had it not been for the encouragements in the prophetic utterances of God's messengers. Through Jeremiah in Jerusalem, through Daniel in the court of Babylon, through Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar, the Lord in mercy made clear His eternal purpose and gave assurance of His willingness to fulfill to His chosen people the promises recorded in the writings of Moses. That which He had said He would do for those who should prove true to Him, He would surely bring to pass. ‘The word of God . . . liveth and abideth forever.’ 1 Peter 1:23.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 464.

Further Thought: “In the closing years of Judah’s apostasy the exhortations of the prophets were seemingly of but little avail; and as the armies of the Chaldeans came for the third and last time to besiege Jerusalem, hope fled from every heart. Jeremiah predicted utter ruin; and it was because of his insistence on surrender that he had finally been thrown into prison. But God left not to hopeless despair the faithful remnant who were still in the city. Even while Jeremiah was kept under close surveillance by those who scorned his messages, there came to him fresh revelations concerning Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save, which have been an unfailing source of comfort to the church of God from that day to this.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 466.

Look at the phrase, “Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save.” Think about all the ways that we have been shown “Heaven’s willingness” to forgive and save. After all, the Cross alone should tell us about this willingness. We have the Word of God, which reveals to us the plan of salvation. We have been given the Spirit of Prophecy, a wonderful gift. What are other ways we have been shown “Heaven’s willingness to forgive and to save”?

Discussion Questions:

- ① “[The people approached] Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, ‘Please hear our petition and pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left’ ” (*Jer. 42:2, NIV*). What does this verse and what we read in Jeremiah 23:3 have to say about the remnant theme in Jeremiah?
- ② It’s so easy from our perspective to look back at sacred history and see all the faults and shortcomings and spiritual deficiencies of God’s people of antiquity. And we should, because we have been told that these stories were written as examples for us (*1 Cor. 10:11*). The sad thing is, many of these people at the time, in their own context and culture, thought that they were doing the right thing, that they were just fine with the Lord. What warning should that give us about just how blind we can be to our true spiritual state? What are ways we can come to grips with our true spiritual condition? Why must we keep the Cross central to that process? What would happen to us if we didn’t keep it central to our spiritual lives?

The Unexpected Answer

A small group of Seventh-day Adventists in Malawi planned to hold evangelistic meetings. On the first night of the meetings, we were disappointed when only a few people came. We prayed, but attendance hovered around thirty people. Some suggested that we cancel the meetings, but the speaker refused. “If we pray earnestly,” he said, “God will make something happen.”

The next evening, the meeting opened with the same 30 people. We sang and prayed, then the speaker stood up. Suddenly, a commotion of clapping and cheering drowned out the speaker.

The commotion increased as a crowd of people following a *Nyau* [*nee-ow*—a spirit worshiper dressed in swishing grass skirts and rags and wearing an ornate headdress and mask—approached the meeting place. The *Nyau* probably was on his way to a graveyard.

When the *Nyau* came nearer, he stopped dancing and turned toward the speaker. The crowd following him stopped, and the *Nyau* didn’t move. Instead, he leaned against a wall, apparently planning to listen to the evangelist. The crowd following him stopped clapping and listened as the speaker quickly resumed his message.

The *Nyau* listened quietly to the rest of the sermon. (Someone estimated that two hundred people who had been following the *Nyau* listened as well.) The speaker was nervous, but he continued with his presentation about Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 2. After the closing prayer, the *Nyau* and his followers continued toward the cemetery.

The next evening the meeting started with the same 30 people; but as the program progressed, more came. Even the *Nyau*, dressed in his mask and swishing skirts, came with his followers. He didn’t stand outside the meeting place this time but entered the tent and sat down. His followers sat down too. The speaker couldn’t be sure that the *Nyau* was the same one who came previously, but he recognized many of the *Nyau*’s followers. Other visitors came, curious to know what was being preached in their neighborhood that could possibly interest a *Nyau*. That night almost eighty people attended the meeting.

Attendance at the meetings continued increasing. A few nights later, the speaker invited listeners to accept Jesus as their Savior. That evening 95 people accepted Jesus and asked for further Bible studies.

The next night nearly two hundred people came, including two more *Nyaus*, dressed in torn clothes and wearing leafy branches to cover their faces. That night an additional 50 answered the call to accept Jesus.

The meetings continued for 21 nights, and baptismal classes followed. On the day of the baptism, 145 were baptized. Among them was a man who identified himself as the *Nyau* who had interrupted the meeting when he stopped to listen that first night. This former *Nyau* continues to be faithful to Jesus.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *2 Chronicles 34:1, 2; Jeremiah 22:11, 12, 18, 19; 29:1, 2; 2 Chronicles 36:11–14; Jeremiah 23:3*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review the tragic history of the last kings of Judah and how, after the death of Josiah—the last good king—things went from bad to worse.

Feel: Experience a glimpse of the utter frustration that Jeremiah (and God) must have felt when these last kings continuously disregarded God’s warnings.

Do: Seek to be part of God’s remnant that Jeremiah prophesied about in his time and that is also prophesied for the end times.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: History Lessons

A Why was there such a sharp contrast between Josiah and the last four kings of Judah? What did Josiah do right, and what did the others do wrong?

B Zedekiah tried to sit on the fence between Egypt and Babylon. Are there moments in life when one should try to play it safe with both parties? Explain your answer.

II. Feel: Utter Frustration

A How do you react when things seem to go from bad to worse in your life?

B Should we keep on sharing Christ with others around us, even if they consistently ridicule us?

III. Do: Being Part of God’s Remnant

A God preserved a remnant in Jeremiah’s time. How can one be part of God’s remnant in our times?

B How does it feel to be part of the last remnant church in history?

► **Summary:** There is a stark contrast between the last good king, Josiah, and the last four evil kings of Judah. Political maneuvering, idolatry, and social injustice led to the destruction of Jerusalem, in 587–586 B.C. Yet, God promised to preserve a remnant, a message of hope to us in these end times.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jeremiah 34:6, 7, 21, 22*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: There comes a moment when God acts and when we harvest the results of wrong decisions, accumulated over long periods of time. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is a good case in point of what happens if we consistently ignore the warning messages that God sends us.

Just for Teachers: Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon comes three times to Jerusalem: first in 605 B.C., when he takes Daniel and his friends hostage; the second time, in 598–597 B.C., after Jehoiakim has rebelled against Babylon and forms an alliance with Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem, but Jehoiakim dies before the Babylonians take the city. His son Jehoiachin rules only for three months and is then deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, who then installs Judah's last king, Zedekiah. And then the same scenario happens once again: Zedekiah makes an alliance with Egypt (*Jer. 37:6–10, Jer. 38:14–28*) against Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar marches against Judah and destroys all its cities along the way (*34:7*), finally laying siege to Jerusalem. But this time his patience has been exhausted. He completely destroys the city and the temple, whose destruction is graphically described in Psalm 74:1–8. The discussion in class should touch on the tragedy of the repeated bad decisions of Jerusalem's rulers and move to the personal aspect of how often we ourselves have rebelled against God.

Opening Discussion: Lachish was the second most important city in Judah after Jerusalem during much of the Old Testament history. It was surrounded by vineyards and towered over one of the valleys that provided access to Jerusalem from southern Judah (and Egypt). Archaeology has provided a rare glimpse into the last days of the kingdom of Judah when Nebuchadnezzar marched on Jerusalem in order to destroy it. In 1935, John Starkey excavated the destruction layer caused by Nebuchadnezzar's armies in Jerusalem, and, among the debris that covered the floor of a guardroom in a monumental gate that provided access to the city, a number of inscribed pieces of pottery (ostraca) were found, which became known as the Lachish Letters. They dramatically describe the final moments of the Southern Kingdom as Nebuchadnezzar systematically destroyed all important cities until only Jerusalem was left. In Letter IV

we read: “And may [my lord] know that we keep on the lookout for the fire signals of Lachish.” The letter was possibly sent from Jerusalem by a watchman who was frantically looking for a sign of life coming from Lachish, which would have been communicated by fire signals during the night. It is likely that there was no response to the letter, as it was found in between burned ash layers, toppled over storage jars, and Babylonian arrowheads. God was executing judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, with its temple to be destroyed next. How do we understand a loving God sending the Babylonians to judge His people?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The contrast between the last good king of Judah, Josiah, and the four evil kings that followed him is astonishing. The big question is: How was it possible for Judah, within such a short time, to descend from religious reforms and the reading of the Law, in 621 B.C., under Josiah (see *2 Chronicles 34*) to the depths of idolatry and political maneuvering of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah that sealed Judah’s fate and brought on the divine judgment executed by the Babylonians?

Bible Commentary

There are a number of important theological concepts that run through this week’s lesson: divine judgment, human rebellion, and God’s remnant.

I. From Josiah to Judgment (Review *2 Chronicles 34:30–33* and *Daniel 1:2* with your class.)

Josiah’s religious reforms were motivated by the chance finding of the Law during the renovations of the temple, in 621 B.C., five years after Jeremiah had been called to be a prophet. The “Book of the Law” (*2 Chron. 34:15, NKJV*) could refer to the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch; but *torah* is a much broader concept than just a reference to the Ten Commandments. Torah, rather, is the story of God’s gracious actions in the human sphere, which are communicated through history and instruction (see *Psalms 1, 19, 119*). Thus, the reading of the “Book of the Law” brought the painful realization to Josiah that Judah was very far removed from what God had intended it to be and that judgment was impending.

However, the impending divine judgment was delayed because of Josiah’s reforms and only executed in the time of his successors (see *2 Chron. 34:23–28*). When Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem for the first time, in 605 B.C., the book of Daniel describes his conquest as an act of God’s judgment: “And

the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand” (*Dan. 1:2, NKJV*). From a biblical perspective, God is actively involved in executing judgment on Judah using the Babylonians as an instrument of His wrath.

Consider This: For many people, the biblical image of God being actively involved in executing judgment is not a comfortable one. How can we understand it and integrate it into an image of a loving God?

II. Repeated Rebellion (*Review Jeremiah 22:1–19 with your class.*)

Both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah rebelled repeatedly against Nebuchadnezzar, the instruments of God’s judgment, by forming alliances with Egypt after breaking the oath of loyalty that they had sworn to the Babylonians. But this political maneuvering only illustrated their continuous rebellion against God.

It is interesting to study the symptoms of their rebellion. There was social injustice through oppressing the needy and through the exploitation of the poor, while the rich lived in luxury themselves, as well as idolatry through instituting pagan rites in the temple. It is interesting to note that these were the two major areas of rebellion—social injustice and idolatry—that the prophets of the Old Testament addressed again and again. These two sins eventually led to the exile.

Consider This: What is the importance of social justice and engagement in the life of the Christian today, and what about modern idolatry? How are these two areas still representative of humanity’s rebellion against God today?

III. The Remnant (*Review Jeremiah 23:1–8 with your class.*)

Even when, after centuries of extended grace and prophetic warnings, God executes judgment, He mixes it with a message of grace and hope. This is the message of the *remnant*, a motif that runs through the books of the Bible. From the Flood to the final church of history, there has always been a remnant.

In stark contrast to the remnant motif, the metaphor of the wicked shepherds, in Jeremiah 23:1–4, demonstrates how far Judah’s leadership had drifted away from God’s ideal. Instead of shepherding, they “scattered” the flock, indicating that the imminent exile came as the result of their abuse of power.

Interestingly, the second verb, in verse 2, which is translated as “[you have] driven them away” (*NKJV*), has connotations of “leading somebody astray” or “religiously seducing somebody” and is used in this way in Deuteronomy 13:13. However, in Jeremiah 23:3, there is a beautiful reversal from judgment to salvation as God, as divine Shepherd, will preserve and gather a remnant and “bring them back to their folds” (*NKJV*). But remnant Israel, after the return from exile, will be led by a new form of government—the Shepherd-King, the “Branch of righteousness” (*vs. 5*). This beautiful Messianic promise

finds its eschatological fulfillment (note the eschatological marker “the days are coming” in *vss. 5 and 7, NKJV*) in Jesus Christ, who will lead His remnant church safely through the end of time. The remnant is centered upon Christ.

Consider This: What are the characteristics of the biblical remnant? How can these be reflected in our modern lives?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Rebellion (often expressed through ethical misconduct and idolatry) against God is still as much of a sad reality in the twenty-first century as it was in Jeremiah’s time, even if God’s judgments are not as tangible and immediate as during biblical times. It is important to contextualize these issues with the class so that they become applicable to our lives. However, the hopeful message of the remnant needs to remain foremost in the minds of the class.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ How are the symptoms of Judah’s rebellion (ethical misconduct and idolatry) reflected in our culture and society?
- ❷ What does it mean for you to belong to God’s remnant—the last church of history?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: So much of the prophetic message of the Old Testament denounces social injustice, and ethical misconduct often serves as a barometer of true spirituality. The class activity should provide an opportunity for the class to nurture social outreach.

Class Activities:

- ❶ As a class, think of a social outreach project that meets the needs of one of the socially vulnerable groups that Jeremiah talks about: poor, needy, widow(er)s, foreigners, and orphans. One could easily add to this list (for example, single mothers, prison inmates, or drug addicts). Ideally, this should not be a one-time project but something that becomes part of the regular class activities.
- ❷ Report on your activities to the rest of the church and encourage other classes to take up similar challenges. Observe how this type of outreach impacts church evangelism and baptisms.