

Manasseh's grandson Josiah tried to reverse the wrongs his family had done. His reforms affected many, including the towns of the northern tribes. But the changes proved to be only outward for most people. After Josiah died, the people quickly left God and returned to their old ways. Things got so bad that some asked why God allowed this evil to go on so long.²¹⁸

Meanwhile, during Josiah's reign, the Babylonians had broken free from Assyria's rule. Not long after, Babylon conquered Assyria. The Assyrian Empire was over—the Neo-Babylonian Empire quickly expanded.

The last page of this chapter has a timeline of Judah's final years. Take a look at it before going to the next question.

3. In the passage we just looked at (2 Chronicles 33:10–13), how was Manasseh's life symbolic of what happened to Judah?

Ezekiel

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Ezekiel had spent 30 years preparing for the priesthood, and he was finally at the age in which he could serve. Then life suddenly changed.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had put Judah under his empire's control eight years earlier, while allowing it to remain a nation.²¹⁹ He'd taken royalty, military, and craftsmen as captives to Babylon. One of the exiles, Daniel, was now well known for his righteousness and ability to interpret dreams.²²⁰

Then Judah's king rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Judah, replaced the king, and took more captives, including Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's profession was useless in his new country. But God gave him a new purpose: proclaiming God's words as a prophet.

4. (a) How did God describe the people to whom he was sending Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:3–4)? (b) What did God tell Ezekiel not to fear (2:6)?

²¹⁷ Jeremiah 7:5–9.

²¹⁸ Jeremiah 12:1; Habakkuk 1:2–4. When God told Habakkuk that he was about to send Babylon as punishment, Habakkuk initially argued passionately against this, but then came to trust God's bigger plan to stop wickedness.

²¹⁹ Judah's kings became vassals of Nebuchadnezzar, paying tribute and sending troops.

²²⁰ Ezekiel 14:14, Daniel 2. We'll read more about Daniel next week.

5. Check the box that best describes Ezekiel's responsibility, according to Ezekiel 2:7:
- Speak in such a way that no one gets angry or hurt
 - Hint at what God says so you can deny your meaning if someone gets mad
 - Speak such persuasive words that everyone listens and repents
 - Speak only to those who want to listen
 - Speak what God says no matter what the reaction

Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."²²¹ Our motivation should be love. But having loving intentions doesn't mean our hearers will always respond well. Jesus' words were motivated by love, yet some of his hearers were so angered they killed him.

6. (a) Which of the responsibilities above do you usually feel most burdened by when you need to talk to someone who has done something wrong? Why? (b) According to God's instruction, should Ezekiel feel bad about himself if people responded angrily, cried, didn't listen, or didn't do what he said? Why or why not? (c) Should you feel bad about yourself if you've spoken to someone truthfully and in love, but they become angry? Is this hard for you?

Jeremiah

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More than any other prophet, Jeremiah recorded his feelings, shortcomings, and personal conversations with God, giving us an intimate look into what it was like to be a prophet during difficult times.

7. (a) When did God first know Jeremiah and appoint him as a prophet (Jeremiah 1:5)? (b) How did Jeremiah respond to God's call (1:6)? (c) What did God then tell Jeremiah (1:7)?

²²¹ Matthew 18:15.

8. (a) Do you believe God equips those he calls? How should that belief affect your actions? (b) When God is calling you to do something, do you tend to hesitate? Why? (c) In what ways do God's words to Jeremiah apply to you? How can you move forward where God wants you to go?

Jeremiah began prophesying shortly after the godly King Josiah began his reforms. Through Jeremiah God told the people that they needed to change their ways if they wanted to stay in the land. They were breaking God's laws and then going to the temple with sacrifices, thinking that kept them safe from God's punishment. That, God said, was treating the temple as if it were a robbers' den—a place to go to escape consequences so they could continue their wrongdoing. They were trusting lies.²²²

Josiah listened to God's prophets and responded well to them. It was a good way for Jeremiah to begin his ministry and gain confidence and courage.

9. (a) How did God describe the strength he would give Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:18)? Why did God equip Jeremiah in this way? (b) What did God warn was going to happen (1:19)? (c) What did God promise to do (1:19)? (d) Describe a way God has strengthened you for serving in your family, profession, or ministry.

The End Comes

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Josiah's reforms died with him. The people had outwardly conformed, but their hearts were unchanged.

Many people didn't like the true prophets' unpopular messages and listened only to false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear: that they would have peace.²²³ They persecuted and even killed prophets to shut them up.²²⁴ God had promised Jeremiah that no one would kill him.²²⁵ Even so, Jeremiah

²²² Jeremiah 7:3–11.

²²³ Jeremiah 5:31; 6:13–15; 14:14–15; 23:14–17; 27:9:10; 29:8–9; Ezekiel 13:1–23.

²²⁴ Jeremiah 26:20–23.

²²⁵ Jeremiah 1:8.

was mocked, cursed, threatened, beaten, put in stocks, imprisoned, thrown into a dungeon, and dropped into a muddy cistern where he was left to die.²²⁶

10. Sometimes we think if we encounter difficulties in ministry, we must be out of God's will. What can we learn from the hardships Jeremiah endured?

After the people rejected the prophets' call, Ezekiel saw another amazing vision. This time he saw the glory of the Lord depart from the temple.²²⁷

Judah's last king, Zedekiah, was young, weak, and uncertain. His officials had told him Jeremiah deserved death because he was "not seeking the good of these people but their ruin."²²⁸ Zedekiah asked Jeremiah for advice, but didn't follow it because he feared his officials, even though Jeremiah assured him that God promised to protect him—if he would just obey.²²⁹

11. (a) What happened to the temple (2 Kings 25: 9)? (b) What happened to the walls that protected Jerusalem (25:10)? (c) What happened to the people (25:11)? (d) Who was left (25:12)?

12. (a) Explain why Zedekiah's officials were wrong about Jeremiah. (b) Prayerfully consider if there are any commands in the Bible you may be ignoring because you think obeying them would harm rather than help you (for example, the Bible tells us not to lie, but sometimes people think being truthful will get them in hot water).

²²⁶ Jeremiah 11:18–23; 15:10; 20:2; 20:7–8; 26:8; 33:1; 37:15–16; 38:4–6.

²²⁷ Ezekiel 10:18.

²²⁸ Jeremiah 38:4.

²²⁹ Jeremiah 38:14–27.

Jeremiah stayed in Jerusalem to help the few who remained. Despite having been mocked and persecuted, Jeremiah loved God's people and wrote lamentations²³⁰ to help them grieve.

13. (a) How did Jeremiah weep with his people (Lamentations 1:1–2)? (b) The New Testament tells us to “mourn with those who mourn.”²³¹ Why is it important to acknowledge pain and sorrow before offering advice? (c) What can we learn from Jeremiah about loving those who have mistreated us?

Jeremiah knew what it was like to suffer. He shared what he had learned with those he sought to comfort.

14. (a) Jeremiah said he called to mind what he knew about God. Doing that gave him hope. What did Jeremiah call to mind (Lamentations 3:22–26)? (b) When we're caught in times of sorrow and pain, why is it important to actively call to mind what we know about God? (c) What do you most need to call to mind today?

²³⁰ Think of a country Western song describing a hurting heart to listeners experiencing similar hurts.

²³¹ Romans 12:15.

Hope

Pages 245–247

After Jerusalem fell, God comforted the people through Ezekiel.

15. (a) What message of hope did Ezekiel bring (Ezekiel 36:33)? (b) What would the nations then know (36:36)? (c) Describe how God has used a loss or “exile” in your life to purify you and develop godly character so that those who know you can see God’s hand in your life.

God punished the Israelites to purify them, not to destroy them. After the second deportation—the one that included Ezekiel—Jeremiah wrote a letter to encourage the exiles. He told them they would be exiled seventy years and then would return. He gave them this assurance from God: “‘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.’”²³²

16. Is there an area of life in which you now feel desolate? Or do you feel as if you’re in an “exile” right now? What words of hope can you take from the Israelites’ experience? What hope can you remember for future times of difficulty?

²³² Jeremiah 29:11.

Timeline: The Kingdoms' Fall (655–570 BC)

