



Zedekiah: A People Pleaser who Paid the Price

Lesson 22

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Matthew 10:28

Many people would do what is right if more people got behind them. The power of peer pressure isn't just for teenagers in high school, it's a real pull that all of us face throughout our lives. Often this problem is called being a people pleaser, based in part on Paul's words in Galatians 1:10 "...or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." Paul was adamant in his ministry that he sought to serve Christ in such a way that the thoughts and opinions of others did not drive his actions, because if he lived for the approval of man he would not serve Christ as he should.

Being a people pleaser is a serious problem. Christ warned not fear man, who can only kill the body. Rather, we ought to fear God more than anyone, for God has much more authority. The fear of man has sadly cost many their soul, too afraid of what other people thought to accept Christ. It has cost others eternal rewards as they failed to do what God has called them to do lest they offend someone, or lose a friend, or become unpopular.

In our lesson today, we will be looking at the last king of Judah. He was a fickle man, what James would call “doubleminded.” Zedekiah believed God’s prophet, to an extent, but wasn’t ready to commit to do the right thing. His fear of what others might think and do to him kept him from having the courage to do what God had commanded him to do, and he paid a terrible price for it. As we study his life, it will be hard not to shake our heads and think to ourselves, “How could he have been so foolish?” Yet if we are honest, we all feel that pull of approval and we must constantly check to make sure that we are living for the approval of God and God alone.

What are some other examples in Scripture of those who made poor decisions because they were afraid of what others thought?

I. An overview of Zedekiah’s reign (2 Kings 24:17-20).

Brief details about Zedekiah’s reign are given at the very beginning of his reign, as is typical. Zedekiah begins his reign at 21 years old, and he is a son of Josiah, the uncle of Jehoiachin, the previous king. He reigns for 11 short years, and does evil in God’s eyes like that of Jehoiakim. Like Jehoiakim, Zedekiah will treat God’s prophet terribly, and like Jehoiakim he will rebel against God’s chastening hand in bringing Babylon.

II. Zedekiah is established by Babylon (2 Kings 24:17; 2 Chronicles 36:13; Ezekiel 17:11-14).

As set up this story it is important to understand that Zedekiah was established by Babylon. This helps us understand why God is upset with the treachery of Zedekiah in breaking his word and rebelling against the pagan king.

A. Zedekiah took an oath of loyalty (2 Chronicles 36:13; Ezekiel 17:11-21).

It was fairly common during this for rulers to make their new subjects swear an oath of loyalty to them. 2 Chronicles specifies that Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah swear by God to be loyal. These oaths were a big deal, and violating a covenant like this was not acceptable in the eyes of the Lord as Ezekiel makes clear.

Why does God expect Zedekiah to be faithful to a covenant that was taken under duress (i.e., so he wouldn't be killed)? What does this teach us today about matters of integrity and honest?

B. Jeremiah calls for submission to Babylon (Jeremiah 27-28).

God instructs Jeremiah to make a yoke and use it as an object lesson. The point? God is putting the yoke of Babylon on the nation of Judah and her neighbors. They must serve this new ruler because ultimately God has appointed him over them, and this will last for 70 years.

A false prophet named Hananiah comes along and argues with Jeremiah, breaking the yoke and proclaiming that God will give victory over Babylon. Jeremiah returns with an iron yoke and predicts that because Hananiah is a false prophet speaking on behalf of God, he will die before the end of the year. Chapter 28 ends by relating to us that Hananiah did in fact die, confirming that Jeremiah was the prophet who spoke for God.

III. Zedekiah rebels against Babylon.

Kings and Chronicles are rather matter of fact at this point. Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon, that's all we're given. But when we turn to the book of Jeremiah, we find a lot of details about how this happened filled in for us. By piecing together the details in the book of Jeremiah (which are not always chronological) we discover that Zedekiah is a man who is pretty cowardly, wavering between listening to the prophet and listening to the nobles who surrounded him.

A. Judah is given false hope by Egypt (Jeremiah 37:1-10).

After Zedekiah rebels Babylon comes to lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. However, Egypt immediately comes and chases Babylon off. This is what Zedekiah and his leadership had been planning on, and so they rejoice that Babylon has backed off. Jeremiah warns everyone that this is only temporary and that Babylon will in fact be back. Zedekiah and the rest of the nation put too much stock in their current circumstances, rather than listening to and fearing God's Word.

B. Jeremiah is imprisoned and released (Jeremiah 37:11-21).

Jeremiah innocently goes to take care of some business and is wrongly accused of defecting to Babylon. He's thrown into prison and physically beat him. Zedekiah brings him out secretly to ask him what he thinks about the current situation, as it appears by now that Babylon is back. Jeremiah tells him again what he told him earlier, God is going to judge the nation and hand them over to Babylon. Then Jeremiah perceptively asks where all the

prophets are who claimed that Egypt would chase Babylon away for good. Jeremiah pleads not to be sent back to his prison cell, and Zedekiah grants him his wish and keeps him a better prison and makes sure he is fed.

How would you describe Zedekiah throughout this encounter? Does he believe Jeremiah?

C. Jeremiah is imprisoned again (Jeremiah 38:1-13).

Some wicked men hear Jeremiah warning Judah to surrender to Babylon and accept God's chastening, and so they ask the king if they can kill Jeremiah. His response? "Of course! I couldn't stop you if I wanted to." The men throw Jeremiah into an empty cistern so that he will die there. A righteous man named Ebed-melech goes to the king and asks to bring Jeremiah out, and is given permission to rescue him.

Why do you think Zedekiah switches back and forth so wildly in this passage?

D. Jeremiah counsels Zedekiah to surrender (Jeremiah 38:14-28).

After Jeremiah was rescued, Zedekiah sent for him (again) and asked him what he should do.

Why does Zedekiah keep asking about the same issue over and over? How is that like us today?

Jeremiah cautiously repeats the same message he has given before: God is sending Babylon. Zedekiah must

surrender. If he surrenders, Babylon will show mercy. If not, Babylon will capture him and be unrelenting and brutal. Zedekiah asks Jeremiah to keep the conversation private from the rest of the nobles, which Jeremiah does.

E. Zedekiah ignores Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 40:1-5).

Zedekiah never submits to Babylon. When Babylon finally breaks through the walls, Zedekiah makes a run for it. Despite the many warning of Jeremiah, Zedekiah and several of the leaders with him fled for their lives, but unsuccessfully. Babylon captured the king and brought him back to the city where he would have to answer for his rebellion against the king he swore allegiance to, and the God whose prophet he imprisoned and ignored.

IV. The end of Zedekiah.

Zedekiah was willing to listen to God's man and even by the end to show him some dignity and respect, but he wasn't willing to listen to him. Up until the very end God gave Zedekiah a chance to obey and save himself some misery, but Zedekiah was too afraid of what his nobles thought to trust God. The results were disastrous.

A. Zedekiah rejects Jeremiah's counsel (Jeremiah 39:1-5).

Zedekiah believed that Jeremiah was a prophet, at least to some extent. His actions show a fear of Jeremiah and a desire to show him courtesy, but also a cowardice that doesn't want to accept Jeremiah's solutions as best. He ends his last speech with the prophet by saying "Don't

tell anyone what you told me.” Rather than following Jeremiah’s advice, the king told Jeremiah to keep God’s Word to himself.

Why would Zedekiah not want Jeremiah sharing with others what he shared with the king?

What has happened in the story by this point that should have convinced Zedekiah to take Jeremiah seriously?

B. Zedekiah comes to a horrible end (Jeremiah 40:5-10).

Zedekiah refuses over and over again to listen to God’s prophet. God gives him opportunities to back off, to walk away with his life and the life of those around him, but he refuses. So God brings a terrible punishment on him and those he loves. Zedekiah’s rebellion affected not only him, but those around him.

How can ignoring God’s Word and resisting his chastening affect others around us today?

C. Jerusalem comes to a horrible end (2 Kings 25:8-21).

But it wasn’t just Zedekiah and those close to him who paid the price. Babylon comes in and destroys the Jerusalem. They destroy the palace, the walls, the temple, the housing of the wealthy. They show no mercy to the consistently rebellious people. This is the third time that they have had to take conquer the city, and in their anger they make sure there isn’t a city left conquering when they are done.

It can be tempting for us as readers so far removed from this story to be baffled by the absolute cowardice of Zedekiah. Here is someone who recognized that Jeremiah was a prophet and yet ignored him, probably at least in part out of fear of what others would think or do. The results, as we have seen, were disastrous. How foolish! How easy to see so long as we are safely removed from the situation and reading the story in our Bible. How different when we are the ones being asked to do what is right even when it is unpopular!

What are some instances where people have a difficult time trusting God and not being a people pleaser?

What are some ways you are tempted to be a people pleaser?

How can we overcome being a people pleaser?