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## SESSION TWELVE

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# The Fall of Jerusalem

### SESSION SUMMARY

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In this session, we will study one of the most important events in the Old Testament era—the fall of Jerusalem and the capture of God’s people. Due to the hard-heartedness of the people and their leaders, including the despising of God’s Word, God displayed His justice and wrath through His punishment of His people. Even in this display of God’s justice, we see how God preserves a remnant of people who will carry the hope of His promise to make all things new through a Messiah.

### SCRIPTURE

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2 Chronicles 36:11-21; Jeremiah 38:14-18,24-28

# THE POINT

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**God patiently pursues sinners, but those who harden their hearts will one day face judgment.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

The word *pursue* is commonly used to describe the desire to go after something like a college degree, a significant other, or true happiness. So, we have to shift our thinking concerning pursuit as it pertains God—He persistently seeks after the wayward heart. This is what it means that God pursues us. God is patient with sinners (2 Pet. 3:9), but that does not mean He is inactive in their lives.

With Israel, God’s pursuit involved forgiveness, rescue, faithfulness, provision, warning, and judgment. He pursues us out of His love, grace, and mercy. He is faithful to keep His promise to forgive us, and provided salvation through His Son, Jesus. However, like Israel, many in our day also harden their hearts to God’s pursuit. Those who fail to heed His warnings will face judgement.

- **How encouraging is it to know that God doesn’t leave us to ourselves but pursues us with His love and salvation?**

### Option 2

Did you ever play with Play-doh® as a child? When you open a new container of the doh, it is soft and you can form it into almost any shape. There are even molds that allow you to shape your Play-doh like a hamburger, or even ice cream. Unfortunately, if you leave the doh outside of the container for an extended period of time, it will dry up and become hard and breakable. When this happens, you can no longer shape the Play-doh into anything specific—it’s just there, hardened into whatever shape you left it in as it dried.

King Zedekiah and his people’s hearts were much like the dried up version of Play-doh. God sent prophet after prophet to warn them of what would happen if they failed to turn from their wicked ways and turn back to God. Still, they did not listen. And their hearts were hardened, left out of God’s influence for far too long. God finally pronounced His judgement on Israel’s dried up state: They would be captured and enslaved—the walls of their city broken.

- **Have you ever felt spiritually “dried up”? What changed? What steps can you take to prevent this from happening in the future?**
- **Think of a situation in which you knew God was calling you to turn away from sin and turn back to Him, but you did not listen. What happened? How did that situation affect your relationship with God?**

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**God patiently pursues sinners, but those who harden their hearts will one day face judgment.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Jeremiah** - prophet who constantly proclaimed God's judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem, and yet he was also a prophet of hope
- **Zedekiah** - last king of Judah before its destruction by Babylon

## PLOT

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We reach a point in the Old Testament story that happens to be one of the most important events in the Old Testament era—the fall of Jerusalem and the capture of God's people. Due to the hard-heartedness of the people and their leaders, including the despising of God's Word, God displayed His justice and wrath through His punishment of His people. Even in this display of God's justice, we see how God preserved a remnant of people who would carry the hope of His promise to make all things new through a Messiah.

## TIMELINE

### THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

*The hardness of heart and the fall of God's people.*

### EZEKIEL'S VISION

*God is capable of raising the dead.*

*Beginning Winter 2016-17*

### FAITHFUL IN EXILE

*When God's people pursue holiness, others take notice.*

## ZEDEKIAH RULED WITH A HARDENED HEART

King Josiah is the one bright spot in the final kings of Israel. He was the last ruler who dedicated himself to the rule and reign of God, and he tried every way he knew to encourage the people to return to their spiritual heritage. Unfortunately, after his death came a string of kings marked by war and exile. Eventually, the death blow fell on the nation of Israel.

Power shifted for several years between Egypt and Babylon, and as it did, the various kings of Judah shifted their allegiance between each of those foreign kingdoms. Kings came and went, none reigning with any integrity or longevity until Zedekiah was installed on the throne by the Babylonians. He was intended to be a puppet ruler, but he was weak-willed. Eventually Zedekiah succumbed to the nationalism of Judah and listened to the nobles and advisors around him who told him he could rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of mighty Babylon.

**Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 36:11-14)**

The final downfall of Israel had been set in motion through the hardened heart of their ruler, which was a reflection of the hardened hearts of the people. This text tells us the true source of Zedekiah's actions: He was not acting out of a sense of national pride or noble desire for independence. Instead, he was living out the natural way of his hardened heart.

All spiritual downfalls begin this way. Our decline is a progression rather than a free-fall. And the first step of descent is a heart that is hardened to the will of God. In the hardness of Zedekiah's heart, we can see some of the warning signs that should have alerted him to the impending downfall. If we watch for these kinds of signs in our own lives, they might alert us to our own hearts potentially growing hard to God's will.

One of the sure signs of the hardening of one's heart is pride. In this text we see Zedekiah's pride running out of control, symptomatic of his hardness of heart. In retrospect, we can look at the situation he found himself in. He was a puppet king installed by the Babylonians. His army was not large enough to counter the Egyptians, much less the Babylonians.

- Have you ever witnessed someone who had hardened their heart toward the will of God? What happened? (*p. 78, PSG*)
- Have you ever noticed yourself taking this same path? How can you guard yourself from this in the future? (*p. 78, PSG*)

## ZEDEKIAH REJECTED THE WORD OF THE LORD

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Despite his hardness of heart, Zedekiah still had the sense to speak to Jeremiah the prophet of God. At this point, he evidently realized God might have something to say about the trajectory of the nation. But when he approached God's prophet, he received a message of judgment.

**King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD. The king said to Jeremiah, "I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me." Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me." Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, "As the LORD lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life." Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand." (Jer. 38:14-18)**

In this passage, we see God's righteous judgment coming to bear on His own people. We also see His great mercy, because even here God offered Zedekiah a way to prevent even greater judgment and destruction. In that, we see God's incredible patience. God had offered opportunity after opportunity for the rulers and the people to return to Him. There is another characteristic of God that we see displayed in these verses though—His absolute honesty.

God tells us the truth in His Word. And He will tell us the truth even if we don't want to hear it. The honesty of God is a mercy to us because we have an amazing aptitude for self-deception. We cannot trust our own hearts.

Jeremiah told the king the truth, but the question remained: How would Zedekiah respond to God's truth? Would he persist in his hard-heartedness, or would he return humbly to the Lord, accepting the word of God from the prophet? The response to God's Word is the next progression in spiritual downfall. If spiritual downfall begins with hard-heartedness, the next step on this downward spiral is our reaction to God's Word. When God's Word calls us to repentance, we can either humbly accept what He says or ignore His Word and continue on our own path. The latter was the path that Zedekiah chose both for himself and the nation under his care.

Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. If the officials hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,’ then you shall say to them, ‘I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’” Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken. (Jer. 38:24-28)

The end had finally come. Jeremiah had been a faithful prophet though the word of the Lord was despised. This prophet, who often spoke God’s Word through tears, bore witness to the siege of the city and the eventual destruction. The text makes it clear—Jeremiah was there when it finally happened. He saw the judgment of God come to pass.

## JUDGMENT CAME AGAINST THE PEOPLE'S HARDENED HEARTS

No doubt the weeping prophet’s reaction was different than Jonah. Jonah, who so earnestly desired God’s judgment to come on Ninevah that he said he would rather die than see the Ninevites come to repentance, shed no tears over God’s judgment. But Jeremiah embodied the heart of the Lord. Time and time again, even up to the end with Zedekiah, Jeremiah offered a way to postpone the wrath of God. He called out for the people to return to the Lord up to the end.

**The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. (2 Chron. 36:15-21)**

## TIMELINE

### TESTED BY FIRE

*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trust God for protection.*

### WALL OF HANDWRITING

*Warning of God's judgment and the need to repent.*

### A FUTURE KING

*Isaiah tells of a future king coming from the line of David.*

The people of Judah never thought the end would come. Day after day, the sun kept coming up and going down, and life went on as normal. The voices of the prophets, constantly warning about the judgment of God, faded to the background. Similarly, people during Peter's day looked around at their lives and failed to see evidence of God's judgment. Though Peter promised Jesus would return, the people of the day saw no evidence of that second coming and continued to live as if it would never happen.

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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The spiritual downfall of the people brought about the wrath of God. Even so, Jeremiah's tears stand as a reminder that God takes no pleasure in exercising His righteous judgment. In the New Testament, Peter reminded us: "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

There is a day of judgment coming, and we should be prepared. The long awaited return of Jesus, like the long promised judgment of Judah, is because of God's patience. Not His indifference. God desires all to come to repentance, then as now, and every day that continues on in life as we know it is a tangible example of that gracious patience. It's an opportunity for one more to hear and believe the gospel of Jesus and flee to Him to escape the coming wrath.

Let us, then, take seriously the warning from the Book of Hebrews which reminds us of the reality of spiritual downfall and emphasizes the urgency before us: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13).

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

### Sin as Transgression

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*The word transgression means to cross over or to pass by, and is often used in reference to transgressing God's explicit commands. When God gives a specific command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is disobeyed, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is law-breaking.*

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In your own words, what is hardness of heart? What are some of the ways you can identify if your heart is becoming hardened?** *To the second question, answers might include: lack of conviction over sin, desensitized to the ongoing presence of sin, and so forth.*
- **How does our response to God's Word serve as an indicator to the condition of our hearts?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what ways does it motivate you to know God desires none to perish? How does it change the way we see the judgment of God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what ways should believers today be like Jeremiah—weeping over the state of our world while delivering God's message to people? In what ways are believers today different from Jeremiah?** *Answers will vary.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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Lack of repentance walks hand in hand with pride. Zedekiah had every opportunity to *repent*, or *return to the Lord*. He could have listened to the council of Jeremiah, humbly acknowledged the Word of the Lord, and demonstrated that acknowledgment by turning away from his own wisdom and coming back to the Lord. However, Zedekiah was convinced his way was right, and he felt no need to turn away from it.

- **Why do you think pride comes along with hardness of heart?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some of the active ways we can help each other fight against pride?** *One way is to lovingly call out instances of where we see pride surface in each other's lives.*



## HEART

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In both the previous session and this one, we clearly see that the heart is deceitful. Because of this, diagnosing what's truly happening inside you is an incredibly difficult thing. For this reason, David prayed and asked the Lord to diagnose his heart for him: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24).

- **When has God revealed to you some uncomfortable truth through His Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How did you respond? What do you think your response communicated about the condition of your heart?** *Answers will vary.*



## HANDS

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Another sign of hardness of heart in these verses is the lack of distinction between God's people and the rest of the nations. From the beginning God planned for the people of Israel be a people of distinction on the earth. They alone would shine forth His glory as a kingdom of priests set apart specifically for the Lord. But in the days of Zedekiah, "All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful" (2 Chron. 36:14a). In other words, they abandoned their distinction as God's people and began to follow the ways of everyone around them instead.

- **Why do you think God desires His people to be distinct and set apart from the world in the way that they live?** *One reason is because living differently (part of what it means to be holy) from the world reflects the character of the God we serve.*
- **What are some ways God has called us to be distinct from the world around us?** *Answers will vary.*

## ▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

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### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPFAL16Chron](http://lifeway.com/TGPFAL16Chron))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**