

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

August 1-15



NORTH FORT WORTH
BAPTIST CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

August 1

2 Kings 23:1-28; 2 Chronicles 34:29-35:19; Nahum 1-3

Then the king summoned all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up to the Temple of the LORD with all the people of Judah and Jerusalem, along with the priests and the Levites—all the people from the greatest to the least. There the king read to them the entire Book of the Covenant that had been found in the LORD's Temple. The king took his place of authority beside the pillar and renewed the covenant in the LORD's presence. He pledged to obey the LORD by keeping all his commands, laws, and decrees with all his heart and soul. He promised to obey all the terms of the covenant that were written in the scroll. And he required everyone in Jerusalem and the people of Benjamin to make a similar pledge. The people of Jerusalem did so, renewing their covenant with God, the God of their ancestors. So Josiah removed all detestable idols from the entire land of Israel and required everyone to worship the LORD their God. And throughout the rest of his lifetime, they did not turn away from the LORD, the God of their ancestors. (2 Chronicles 34:29–33)

Josiah is a person to admire. He moves humbly and consistently toward the LORD and attempts to influence others to do the same. With the discovery of the Book of the Covenant (the first five books of the Old Testament), Judah's king repents over the nation's sin, which delays God's pending judgment (2 Chronicles 34:28). Josiah also publicly renews God's covenant and requires the people to do the same. He is doing everything within his power to sway the people back toward the LORD.

Of course, spiritual conditions in the land had reached a disturbingly low level. Today's reading describes the situation as Josiah directs the priests to cleanse and restore God's place of meeting. They removed articles used to worship Baal, Asherah, and all the powers of the heavens. The people had brought their defiling practices inside the Temple. They even constructed accommodations for male and female prostitutes within the Temple to facilitate their unholy practices. These details explain Josiah's horror and prompt reaction to reading the Book of the Covenant.

Judah's king does everything within his power to lead the nation back to the LORD—the public reading of God's Word, the restoration of God's Temple, and the re-establishment of the LORD's Passover. With the Book of the Covenant to guide him, Josiah leads by example and command, and the effects are favorable. His faith and devotion will make an impact. The people will relate appropriately to the LORD throughout his lifetime.

Again, Josiah is a person to admire—even more, a person to emulate. How can we influence those around us toward the LORD? Admittedly, we do not sit on a throne with all its power and authority. We can, however, influence others through our words and actions. With the Bible as our guide, we can move people toward the LORD in personal ways. We can lead people by our example to discover the benefit and blessings of God's wisdom. We can lead them to the LORD. Will we do so? Perhaps we perceive the present circumstances as too challenging. More challenging than Josiah's day? Let's follow the pious king's example. May we humble ourselves before the LORD and follow His lead. It will make a difference!

August 2

Habakkuk 1:1-3; Zephaniah 1:1-2:1-7

Stand in silence in the presence of the Sovereign LORD, for the awesome day of the LORD's judgment is near. The LORD has prepared His people for a great slaughter and has chosen their executioners. (Zephaniah 1:7)

The prophecies of Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah announce a disturbing future for the nation of Judah. God's people will pay a devastating price for their sins and idolatry. The Babylonians are coming, and they will serve as God's instrument of judgment. Though Josiah's efforts delay the timing of Judah's destruction, the Day of the LORD is drawing near. The prophet Zephaniah announces, *"That terrible day of the LORD is near. Swiftly it comes— a day of bitter tears, a day when even strong men will cry out. It will be a day when the LORD's anger is poured out— a day of terrible distress and anguish, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet calls and battle cries. Down go the walled cities and the strongest battlements!" (Zephaniah 1:14–16)*

Whether we read Jeremiah, Habakkuk, or Zephaniah, the message is the same—God's judgment is coming! How would you respond to such an unsettling news? The prophet Habakkuk laments before the LORD, trying to make sense of everything. He also intercedes on behalf of the people. He prays, *"I have heard all about You, LORD. I am filled with awe by Your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, help us again as You did in years gone by. And in Your anger, remember Your mercy." (Habakkuk 3:2)*

Habakkuk's prayer is two-fold. He seeks God's intervening power (as in the days of old) but pleads for God's action to be accompanied by mercy. The prophet recognizes that the LORD's anger is justified. He hopes, however, that God's mercy might prevail. I like how the Contemporary English Version expresses the same prayer: *"I know Your reputation, LORD, and I am amazed at what You have done. Please turn from Your anger and be merciful; do for us what You did for our ancestors."*

Yet, Habakkuk does more than pray. He also rejoices in the LORD. The prophet declares, *"Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights." (Habakkuk 3:17–19)*

Habakkuk's response may be more instructive than his prayer. Even if God's judgment is not averted, the prophet's faith will not wane. He will still rejoice in God's ultimate salvation. He will trust in the actions of his Sovereign LORD—drawing the necessary strength. Can we do the same? The natural response is to plead for mercy to avoid life's troubles. Rejoicing in the LORD amid life's hardships is a greater example of faith and trust. Let's seek to follow Habakkuk's example as we face the challenges before us.

August 3
Zephaniah 2:8-3:20; 2 Chronicles 35:20-27;
2 Kings 23:29-30; Jeremiah 47-48

While Josiah was king, Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, went to the Euphrates River to help the king of Assyria. King Josiah and his army marched out to fight him, but King Neco killed him when they met at Megiddo. Josiah's officers took his body back in a chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb. Then the people of the land anointed Josiah's son Jehoahaz and made him the next king. (2 Kings 23:29-30)

Pride and presumption can be a dangerous combination. Sadly, it appears that both may have ensnared Judah's noble king. I have noted Josiah's commendable qualities in previous devotions. Convicted by God's Word, he humbly repents and cries to the LORD in prayer. Afterward, Josiah seeks to lead the nation back into a right relationship with God—cleansing and restoring the Temple, reestablishing the Passover, and publicly leading the people to renew their covenant with the LORD their God. Yes! There's much about his example that should inspire us.

For that reason, the report of Josiah's death may catch us by surprise. As 2 Kings describes: Judah's king faces off against the king of Egypt and subsequently dies. It appears all matter of fact. Yet, there's more to the story. The writer of 2 Chronicles informs us that God warns Josiah to stay out of the way. Indeed, king Neco sends the following message, *"What do you want with me, king of Judah? I have no quarrel with you today! I am on my way to fight another nation, and God has told me to hurry! Do not interfere with God, who is with me, or He will destroy you."* (2 Chronicles 35:21)

And his response? *"But Josiah refused to listen to Neco, to whom God had indeed spoken, and he would not turn back."* (2 Chronicles 35:22) Why the refusal? Did Josiah doubt the message was truthful? If so, why didn't he seek the LORD's counsel himself? There's no indication that he attempts to do so. Instead, Josiah ignores the warning, disguises himself, and leads his army into battle. Tragically, Judah's king is mortally wounded during a barrage of enemy arrows. It all seems so senseless, unnecessary.

Why did Josiah ignore the warning? Again, I would say, "Pride and presumption are a dangerous combination." Josiah determines that he knows what is best. Perhaps the king presumes that his past religious zeal would guarantee his victory. God will undoubtedly side with the king who restored Jerusalem's Temple. Right? So, without seeking the LORD, Josiah leads his army into battle and dies. Just like that, the story of a good and noble king abruptly ends. It seems anticlimactic, such a waste.

And the lesson? Pride and presumption are a dangerous combination. We never graduate from our dependence on the LORD, for He alone is our victory. We are fool-hearted to think otherwise. Consequently, we should consistently seek God's counsel, follow His wisdom, and entrust our situation to the One who sits upon the throne—which is not you. I'm saddened by the end of Josiah's story, but I am also instructed. May you be as well.

August 4

2 Chronicles 36:1-5; 2 Kings 23:31-24:4 Jeremiah 22:1-23;

Jeremiah 25:1-14; Jeremiah 26:1-24

This is what the LORD says: “If you will not listen to Me and obey My word I have given you, and if you will not listen to My servants, the prophets—for I sent them again and again to warn you, but you would not listen to them—then I will destroy this Temple as I destroyed Shiloh, the place where the Tabernacle was located. And I will make Jerusalem an object of cursing in every nation on earth.” (Jeremiah 26:4–6)

Upon Josiah’s death, the nation of Judah is thrown into a difficult transition period. Josiah’s son Jehoahaz is placed upon the throne for only three months. Egypt’s ruler, Neco, asserts his dominance over the region by replacing Jehoahaz with his step-brother, Eliakim. Neco not only changes who would sit upon Judah’s throne; he also changes Eliakim’s name to Jehoiakim. The consequence of Josiah’s misguided opposition continues.

Change, however, is also occurring spiritually within the nation. Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim promptly lead the people away from the LORD (2 Kings 23:32, 37). They reintroduce the idolatrous practices that had previously provoked the LORD’s anger. The effects of Josiah’s godly influence disappear. So much so God sends His prophet Jeremiah to confront the nation and announce His coming judgment—Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed.

How do the people respond to Jeremiah’s declaration of doom? Instead of humbling themselves before the LORD, they lash out against God’s prophet. He’s accused of treason, and many demand his death. Jeremiah defends himself by explaining, *“The LORD sent me to prophesy against this Temple and this city.”* He adds, *“The LORD gave me every word that I have spoken. But if you stop your sinning and begin to obey the LORD your God, He will change His mind about this disaster that He has announced against you.”* (Jeremiah 26:12–13) Jeremiah’s defense includes an appeal for the people to repent. The prophet also warns, *“If you kill me, rest assured that you will be killing an innocent man! The responsibility for such a deed will lie on you, on this city, and on every person living in it. For it is absolutely true that the LORD sent me to speak every word you have heard.”* (Jeremiah 26:15)

The leaders are swayed by Jeremiah, along with the testimony of others, to release the prophet. Jeremiah’s call for repentance, however, is unheeded. The nation remains on the path of self-destruction. God’s judgment is coming.

And what might we learn from today’s reading? Once again, we’re reminded of the impact of godly or ungodly leadership upon a nation. Josiah’s death had immediate and far-reaching implications. We’re also reminded that it’s not easy being God’s messenger in a time of spiritual rebellion. Courage is required to speak the truth to a population that rejects God’s revelation. To Jeremiah’s credit, he steps up and delivers God’s message. Will we do the same? Are we willing to share the truth of God’s Word with a culture that refuses to listen? Are we ready to face the consequences? May our actions demonstrate our answer.

August 5
Jeremiah 25:15-38; Jeremiah 36:1-32; Jeremiah 45:1-5;
Jeremiah 46:1-28

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from My hand this cup filled to the brim with My anger, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink from it. When they drink from it, they will stagger, crazed by the warfare I will send against them." (Jeremiah 25:15-16)

Jeremiah dictates a series of messages to be delivered by his scribal assistant, Baruch. The pronouncements further sound the alarm of God's approaching judgment against Judah but also against the surrounding nations.

The prophet hopes the people will turn away from their sins and seek the LORD's forgiveness. Baruch carefully records Jeremiah's words and carries the scroll to Jerusalem. He then publicly reads Jeremiah's messages to the people gathered in the Temple, which attracts the attention of the local administrative officials. They seek a private reading by Baruch and are immediately disturbed by what it reveals. They recommend that Jeremiah and his assistant go into hiding because of the nature of God's pronouncements.

Jehoiakim, Judah's king, hears about the scroll and requests it be brought to the palace. He listens as his servant, Jehudi, reads the prophet's messages. Instead of taking God's warning to heart, the king defies the LORD. He cuts up the scroll and casts the fragments into the fire. Destroying the scroll, however, does not nullify the message. The threat of God's judgment remains. Indeed, in response to Jehoiakim's actions, the LORD directs Jeremiah to rewrite the scroll. This time, God adds to the prophet's revelation. The LORD announces that Judah's king would die shamefully without an heir to assume his throne.

Do we see the relevance of this account to our lives? Ignoring or even destroying God's Word does not alter the truth. God's message remains. As Isaiah describes, *"The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever."* (Isaiah 40:8,) Or, as Jesus states, *"Heaven and earth will disappear, but My words will never disappear."* (Matthew 24:35)

Jehoiakim thought his actions would somehow leave God's Word null and void. By cutting out what he didn't want to hear or systematically burning the scroll, the king hoped to escape the truth of God's revelation. But it didn't work. The power and authority of God's Word are not connected to a scroll or page. They are derived from the God who speaks. To discard the Bible, or to cut out uncomfortable portions of the Bible, will not negate the truth or the ramifications of what is revealed. God's Word remains.

We would prove wise to humble ourselves before the LORD and take His message to heart. Let's do so today!

August 6 Jeremiah 19-20; Daniel 1

Why was I ever born? My entire life has been filled with trouble, sorrow, and shame. (Jeremiah 20:18)

Jeremiah lived a difficult life. God called him to deliver a message of judgment for a prolonged period. People did not welcome or respect God's prophet or his message. Instead, they lashed out against him. Jeremiah suffered physically and emotionally at the hands of God's people. His life was characterized by hardship and loss. Would you have obeyed the LORD if assigned Jeremiah's task?

The prophet confesses that he was left with little option. God's revelation weighed so heavily upon Jeremiah's heart that he could not remain silent. *"If I say I'll never mention the LORD or speak in His name,"* he confesses, *"His Word burns in my heart like a fire. It's like a fire in my bones! I am worn out trying to hold it in! I can't do it."* (Jeremiah 20:9)

Can we imagine the internal struggle? The prophet is between a rock and a hard place. If he refuses to proclaim God's message, it consumes him within. If he delivers God's pronouncements, he suffers rejection and even violence. As previously noted, a prophet's path is difficult to walk. Yet, Jeremiah yields himself to God's call. He bears the responsibility, and God accomplishes His purposes through His weeping prophet.

Do note that God doesn't correct or punish Jeremiah for his honest expressions of emotion. It is similar to Job and the psalmists. God permits His servants to voice their sadness and discontent. Our human emotions will not push God away. The LORD seeks to strengthen and sustain His own. Down deep, Jeremiah knew that, for he also declared, *"But the LORD stands beside me like a great warrior. Before Him my persecutors will stumble."* And he exclaims, *"Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For though I was poor and needy, He rescued me from my oppressors."* (Jeremiah 20: 11, 13) Of course, that doesn't keep the prophet from venting in his weaker moments. Nor should it prevent us.

Let's find comfort in Jeremiah's lament. First, be comforted knowing that we can be honest before the LORD. Don't hold your emotions within during times of confusion and sadness. The LORD will not disown you. God gives His children space to admit their hurt and disappointment. He wants us to confide in Him during such moments, not turn away. Be honest about what you are feeling and draw near.

Yet, like Jeremiah, we should also yield to His continuing work. Despite all that Jeremiah endures, he continues to press forward with the LORD. And his example beckons us to do the same. Jeremiah would call for us to trust the ONE we follow. Though our paths may be challenging, God's faithfulness remains.

May we choose to yield to God's continuing work, starting today.

August 7

Daniel 2-3, Jeremiah 7:1-8:3

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land. But don't be fooled by those who promise you safety simply because the LORD's Temple is here. They chant, 'The LORD's Temple is here! The LORD's Temple is here!' But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever." (Jeremiah 7:3-7)

Judah suffers a resounding defeat at the hands of the Babylonians in 605 BC. The LORD gives Nebuchadnezzar the victory (Daniel 1:2). God's people begin to suffer the consequences of their disobedience. As a result, an initial group of exiles is carried off to Babylon—including four young Jewish men: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They are forced to live far from God's land of promise and are assigned new names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Following Judah's humiliation and defeat, subsequent waves of exiles will travel to Babylon in 597 BC and 586 BC. In 586, Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed.

Today's reading provides an instructive historical contrast. We observe the faith and devotion of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as they adapt to their Babylonian surroundings. The goal of Nebuchadnezzar is to assimilate the men into his emerging kingdom. He and his leaders seek to indoctrinate each of them into a new way of life. It would have been easy to bend to the pressure and accommodate the foreign culture. The young men choose otherwise. The four, led by Daniel, display remarkable faith in God and a determination to keep themselves pure before the LORD. Their actions are unexpected when considering the widespread moral and spiritual compromise so prevalent in Judah. It's comforting to observe at least a remnant of faithful individuals.

Their actions, however, are also ironic. If the remaining population in Judah had chosen to relate to God like Daniel and his associates, the nation could have averted further judgment. Indeed, the LORD appeals through His prophet, *"Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land."* Will they repent and heed God's warning?

No, they will not. Again, think about the contrast. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are already suffering due to the nation's disobedience, but they remain faithful to the LORD in a foreign land. In comparison, the leaders in Judah (who could avoid future suffering by turning to the Lord) refuse to do so. They reject God's appeal, resulting in future exiles being carried to Babylon. Consider how different the story could have been if Jehoiakim had behaved like Daniel.

Let's step back and marvel at the uncompromising faith of the four young men. May they remind us how to stand firm in our faith and devotion. They distinguish themselves in ways that God could bless. Will we allow the same? Who knows? If we relate to God appropriately (like Judah is unwilling to do), we may avoid some future challenges altogether. That's worth some prayerful thought.

August 8

Jeremiah 8:4-11:23

This is what the LORD says: “When people fall down, don’t they get up again? When they discover they’re on the wrong road, don’t they turn back? Then why do these people stay on their self-destructive path? Why do the people of Jerusalem refuse to turn back?” (Jeremiah 8:4–5)

The people of Judah persist in their sins, and God expresses His bewilderment. Why do the people not turn back? Why remain on a self-destructive path? It makes no sense. There’s sadness in God’s words as He exposes the people’s defiance. The LORD longs for His people to return. Why do they not turn back? Could the LORD say the same about us? Are we moving in the right direction?

Jeremiah is also burdened over Judah’s defiance and coming judgment. He exclaims, *“My grief is beyond healing; my heart is broken.” (Jeremiah 8:18)* Jeremiah sees the devastation that is coming. He pleads for the people to repent but to no avail. The prophet is like a heartbroken parent unable to influence his children away from harm. He urgently cries out, but they refuse to listen. Jeremiah adds, *“I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of My people?” (Jeremiah 8:21–22)* Can we identify with Jeremiah’s pain? Perhaps, we’re not the ones moving in the wrong direction, but we’re unable to prevent those we love from doing so. Can we feel his desperation and sadness?

Amid the disappointment and sadness, God still calls out. He seeks to lead His people to the place where they should be. In a helpful, clarifying way, the LORD appeals. *“Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know Me and understand that I am the LORD who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!” (Jeremiah 9:23–24)*

The people are placing their trust and confidence in all the wrong things—earthly wisdom, power, and riches. God redeemed His people so they might discover a fullness of life in Him. He wants His people to know Him, to experience His unfailing love, justice, and righteousness in ways that will bless and enrich their lives—but they turn away.

One more time, what about us? Where do we place our trust and confidence? What is the source of our boasting? May Paul’s words to the Corinthians influence our response.

“The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God . . . Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; He made us pure and holy, and He freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, ‘If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.’” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 26–31)

August 9

Jeremiah 12-15

How long must this land mourn? Even the grass in the fields has withered. The wild animals and birds have disappeared because of the evil in the land. For the people have said, “The LORD doesn’t see what’s ahead for us!” (Jeremiah 12:4)

Jeremiah finds himself again troubled and perplexed. With increasing suffering around him, God’s prophet hopes it might soon end. Who wouldn’t feel that way? Whenever we come face to face with severe anguish and pain, the human heart should be troubled. God fashioned our hearts to sympathize with the afflicted. Tragically, sin often hardens the heart, so we become less sensitive or responsive. That was not the case with Jeremiah. God’s servant remains tenderhearted concerning Judah’s plight. He keeps looking for a solution, hoping for a reprieve.

No solution, however, will come. Even more, God forbids Jeremiah to intercede. The LORD states, *“Do not pray for these people anymore.” (Jeremiah 14:11)* It isn’t the first time God asks Jeremiah to stop praying. The LORD instructed the prophet to cease intercession on two previous occasions (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14). Why the constraint? Because God’s people fail to display genuine sorrow or repentance. Their religious activity lacks sincerity, and consequently, God is unmoved.

Jeremiah, however, ignores God’s restrictions and prays, *“LORD, have you completely rejected Judah? Do you really hate Jerusalem? Why have you wounded us past all hope of healing? We hoped for peace, but no peace came. We hoped for a time of healing, but found only terror. LORD, we confess our wickedness and that of our ancestors, too. We all have sinned against You. For the sake of Your reputation, LORD, do not abandon us. Do not disgrace Your own glorious throne. Please remember us, and do not break Your covenant with us.” (Jeremiah 14:19–21)*

I admire the prophet’s determination. Tenacity is a good quality within those who serve the LORD. And if you look at Jeremiah’s prayer, he says the right things. He identifies with the people—confessing their sins. He appeals to God based on His name and honor. Most importantly, Jeremiah asks the LORD to respond with His covenant in view. But that was the problem. God’s people had long since violated and abandoned their covenant relationship. And God’s response?

“Then the LORD said to me, ‘Even if Moses and Samuel stood before me pleading for these people, I wouldn’t help them. Away with them! Get them out of my sight!’” (Jeremiah 15:1) God’s answer is “No.” The people’s persistent pride and defiance have moved them beyond the intercession of God’s most significant leaders, including Moses and Samuel. In other words, “Jeremiah, this is not about you. It is about the continuing rebellion of the people and the consequences that will follow.”

What stands out from today’s reading? First, I want to be like Jeremiah. May God grant us hearts that remain tender to the hurts and struggles of those around us—even if self-inflicted. Second, I want to pray like Jeremiah. May God observe in me a determination that will not take “no” for an answer. I acknowledge that God sees what I do not see and knows what I do not know, and I am confident that His actions are righteous and just. That said, I still want to be an intercessor like God’s weeping prophet. And you? May God help us care deeply enough to press toward His throne consistently in prayer. Will you seek the same?

August 10

Jeremiah 16-18, 35

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD. They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land. But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.” (Jeremiah 17:5–8)

Are we stunted shrubs or fruitful trees? What’s the difference? Spiritually speaking, stunted shrubs represent those who trust in themselves instead of the LORD. They pretend they are self-sufficient or turn to gods of their own making. From their perspective, the One True God is irrelevant. They ignore His wisdom and defy His commands. Life is what they make it, so why trust in the LORD? Do you know anyone like this?

Sadly, the nation of Judah became a spiritual desert overrun with stunted shrubs. God’s people turned away from the LORD and refused to hear His appeals. They forfeited what could have been. What did they reject? They could have been a thriving grove of fruitful trees instead of unproductive bushes. That was God’s desire all along. If they had trusted in Him—fixing their hope and confidence in who God is—everything would have been different. The LORD would have sustained them like a life-giving river. Not even drought conditions would have jeopardized their fruitfulness if they only had trusted in Him. They chose to be stunted shrubs instead.

And what about us? Are we stunted shrubs or fruitful trees? Are we positioning ourselves to experience God’s blessing or judgment? Are we planting ourselves by God’s life-giving river or making the best of things in a dry and arid land? The answer is directly tied to our response to the LORD or lack thereof. Will we trust in Him or not? Consider the similar testimony of Psalm 1.

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do. But not the wicked! They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment. Sinners will have no place among the godly. For the LORD watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction. (Psalm 1)

The people of Judah chose to be stunted shrubs/worthless chaff, and they suffered the consequences. Who are we choosing to be? Do we trust in the LORD? Will we allow God to guide our steps so we might experience even more of His mercy and grace? Withering shrubs or abounding trees, what will we be?

August 11

2 Kings 24:5-9; 2 Chronicles 36:6-9; Jeremiah 22:24-23:32; 49:1-33

“As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “I will abandon you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. Even if you were the signet ring on My right hand, I would pull you off. I will hand you over to those who seek to kill you, those you so desperately fear—to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the mighty Babylonian army.” (Jeremiah 22:24-25)

Jeremiah, God’s prophet, continues to announce the advancement of God’s judgment. Judah, however, would not be alone in experiencing the effects of His displeasure. Ammon (Jeremiah 40:1-6), Edom (Jeremiah 49:7-22), and Damascus (Jeremiah 49:23-27) would also face the consequences of their actions. The great nations and the small would soon experience God’s judgment, and the impact will be devastating.

In addition, God’s displeasure would be notably directed toward Judah’s wayward spiritual leadership. They will be held personally responsible for contributing to the nation’s demise. God declares, *“Instead of caring for My flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them.” (Jeremiah 23:2)* God will hold the spiritual pretenders responsible.

And, of course, God’s judgment will impact Judah’s king. Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, will also be removed. 2 Chronicles reports, *“Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months and ten days. Jehoiachin did what was evil in the LORD’s sight. In the spring of the year King Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon.” (2 Chronicles 36:9-10, NLT).* God’s people are discovering that His past pronouncements are not idle threats. They are experiencing the consequence of their actions.

And a lesson for us? Some today suggest that God’s future judgment is not real and that people have nothing to fear. Like false prophets of old, they say what the people want to hear—filling their pockets with gain. May today’s reading cause us to take God’s warnings to heart. But is there no hope?

Thankfully, the LORD also points to a future provision for Judah and us. Consider His words. *“For the time is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. And this will be his name: ‘The LORD Is Our Righteousness.’ In that day Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety.” (Jeremiah 23:5-6)*

Be aware! God’s judgment is coming against sin, but God has provided a way of salvation for all who believe (John 3:16-18). The LORD is Our Righteousness, and His name is Jesus. Let’s not be like Judah, ignoring God’s message. Let’s turn to the One who saves and experience His power to restore.

August 12
Jeremiah 23:33-24:10; Jeremiah 29:1-31:14

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

Jeremiah 29:11 may be one of the most familiar verses in all of Jeremiah’s writings. It’s a refrigerator magnet kind of verse. One that many people claim for themselves because they think it promises a life of comfort and prosperity. They potentially make the mistake of taking God’s words out of context. And what is the context?

The verse is directed at people who find themselves in exile. A portion of Judah’s population has been forced to dwell in a land far from the familiar surroundings of Judea. They are strangers in a foreign land, disillusioned and discouraged. Jeremiah writes to reassure them. God’s message is that His work on their behalf is not yet done. Yes, they are suffering the consequences of the nation’s sin, but God’s intentions remain good. After a lifetime (70 years), the LORD will return His covenant people to the land of promise. The LORD extends hope to a people that may have lost hope. *“My plans,”* the LORD declares, *“are for good and not for disaster.”* He seeks to open their eyes to the promise of what would still be. Hope lives, even for exiled people. And how should the exiles respond?

Jeremiah urges them to get on with life—to build houses, plant gardens, and start their families. Instead of regretting or ignoring the current realities, they are to allow God to work through their lives in personal ways. They are to contribute toward the good of Babylon, praying on the nation’s behalf (Jeremiah 29:5-7). More significantly, they are to renew their faith and confidence in the LORD and toward their future. As the people seek Him wholeheartedly, God promises He will be found (Jeremiah 29:13). The hardships of the exile are what they are, but God is still present. God is still working.

And the lesson for us? Jeremiah 29:11 doesn’t promise that God’s people will never experience difficulty or loss. It’s quite the opposite. Through the verse, God reassures His people that He can work despite their self-inflicted hardships. He is a God who seeks to redeem and restore. Did He hold Judah responsible for their prolonged rebellion and sin? Yes, and they are forced to deal with the far-reaching consequences. Is God committed to bringing them through their suffering? The answer is a resounding “Yes.” That should bolster our hearts, for God consistently works to redeem and restore.

Jeremiah 29:11 is more than a refrigerator magnet verse. It reminds us to trust the LORD despite our current challenges—to relate to Him as God. Our future and hope are in Him. Will we trust Him?

August 13
Jeremiah 31:15-40; Jeremiah 49:34-51:14

“The day is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:31-32)

Through His prophet, Jeremiah, the LORD promises to make a “new covenant” with the people of Israel and Judah. The mention of that possibility must have astounded God’s rebellious people. They had utterly violated the covenant established by God at Sinai and were now suffering the consequences of their disobedience. Nevertheless, God’s love endures so much that the LORD promises a future covenant that will exceed the old. He points to a better day.

It should be noted that Jeremiah is the prophet whom God affords the privilege of introducing the phrase—“new covenant.” Though others will speak of the coming blessing, Jeremiah uses the important language of covenant. He announces that God will join Himself again with His people in an even more intimate and dynamic way. It seems only appropriate for the “weeping prophet” to announce this extraordinary news. How will the “new covenant” be different from the old?

With both, God enters into a relationship with His people—like a loving husband to a wife. However, the “new covenant” will include a change of heart within the people themselves. The LORD explains, *“I will put My instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31: 33)* The old covenant required adherence to a set of commands chiseled in stone, and the people struggled to keep God’s standard. The LORD’s new arrangement will spiritually affect the heart’s inner workings. God will empower His people toward obedience rather than simply pointing the way. God explains further through His prophet Ezekiel. He declares, *“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put My Spirit in you so that you will follow My decrees and be careful to obey My regulations.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27)* Will action on their part still be required? Yes, their decisions will still be their own. The difference is that God works within them.

Yet, there’s more. God’s people will also discover a greater intimacy with God. *“I will be their God,”* the LORD announces, *“and they will be My people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know Me already.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34)* In the “new covenant,” God’s people will know the LORD in ways they could not have imagined, from the least of them to the greatest. The verb, “know,” suggests a close, personal knowledge. He will be their God, and they will be His people. How is that possible due to their past failures and sins? God promises, *“I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.” (Jeremiah 31:34)*

If you haven’t figured it out, God ushers the “new covenant” forward through the actions of His beloved Son (Hebrews 8). Indeed, Jesus’ actions (His death, resurrection, ascension) make the promised heart change possible within everyone who believes in Him—from the least to the greatest. Does that include you? If not, why not? And if the answer is “yes,” don’t step short of what God’s “new covenant” provides. Let’s know the LORD our God and discover the transforming difference He desires to make!

August 14

Jeremiah 51:15-58; 2 Kings 24:10-17; 1 Chronicles 3:10-16;

2 Chronicles 36:10-14

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. But Zedekiah did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God, and he refused to humble himself when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to him directly from the LORD. (2 Chronicles 36:11-12)

The final four kings of Judah are disappointing on every level. Ascending to the throne following king Josiah's death, his three sons (Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah) and his grandson (Jehoiachin) display none of the virtuous qualities that commended their predecessor. Each of them does what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking God's anger and moving the nation closer to God's culminating judgment. Our reading today summarizes Zedekiah's unsuccessful reign. He follows his nephew Jehoiachin's brief (3 months and ten days) ungodly rule. Zedekiah's actions reveal a darkened heart, and his refusal to listen to God's prophet says all we need to know. He is on a self-destructive path and will take the nation with him. Tragically, that is often the case. The failings of a national leader will have far-reaching consequences.

What went wrong with Judah's final king? Plainly stated, *"Zedekiah was a hard and stubborn man, refusing to turn to the LORD, the God of Israel."* (2 Chronicles 36:13) His defiant spirit is surprising when you consider that his older brother (Jehoiakim) and younger nephew (Jehoiachin) are forced into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's ruler. Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin leave Jerusalem humiliated and defeated. Does that cause Zedekiah to adopt a different approach? Certainly not. He mirrors the mistakes of his older brother. Judah's young king refuses to turn to the LORD, influencing the nation's leaders to do the same (2 Chronicles 36:14).

How does Zedekiah's story end? He rebels against Babylon even though he swore loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar in God's name (2 Chronicles 36:13). Judah's king is defiant toward the LORD and displays the same insubordination toward Babylon's ruler. He fails to understand that God will use Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument of judgment against him and the nation. Ironically, as Zedekiah fears his future defeat at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, he appeals to Jeremiah to pray on the nation's behalf (Jeremiah 37:3). If the stubborn king had only listened to the prophet's earlier messages, he would already have his answer. Even so, Jeremiah sends word that Jerusalem's defeat is assured. He writes, *"Even if you were to destroy the entire Babylonian army, leaving only a handful of wounded survivors, they would still stagger from their tents and burn this city to the ground!"* (Jeremiah 37:10) God's patience has long since ended, and God will hold Judah and their king accountable.

And a lesson for us? Defiance toward God is never a good idea. How often have we discovered that to be the case in our chronological readings? Time and time again, we have observed the foolishness of this approach. Zedekiah serves as one more example. May we choose instead to humble ourselves before the LORD and to walk in His ways. It may not prevent us from experiencing hardship along the way (with Daniel's exile in mind). It will, however, position us to experience God's presence and help as we face the challenges around us. The choice each day is ours. I choose to humble myself. And you?

August 15

Jeremiah 37:11-38:28; Ezekiel 1:1–3:15

On July 31 of my thirtieth year, while I was with the Judean exiles beside the Kebar River in Babylon, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. (Ezekiel 1:1)

As Jeremiah suffers in Jerusalem, we are introduced to another of God's prophets—Ezekiel, son of Buzi. Ezekiel, a Judean priest, was carried into exile in 597 BC along with king Jehoiachin. He is forced to live far from his home and the land of promise. Ezekiel's life would dramatically change because of the nation's sins. God, however, was not done with His people. In distant Babylon, God calls His servant to deliver His message.

How does God commission an exiled priest and prophet? The LORD does so first by opening Ezekiel's eyes to the greatness and glory of who He is. He is granted a vision of four mysterious beings. As Ezekiel describes, *"Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back. Each had two pairs of outstretched wings—one pair stretched out to touch the wings of the living beings on either side of it, and the other pair covered its body."* (Ezekiel 1:10–12)

The mystery surrounding their appearance is exceeded by the heavenly beings' function or role. They accompany a chariot throne and are strangely attached to four sparkling wheels. Indeed, the spirit of the living beings is in the wheels themselves and facilitates the throne's movements—up, down, or in whatever direction. Their movement reverberates like waves crashing upon the shore or, even more, like the voice of the Almighty.

However, a greater vision is revealed. God's prophet beholds the ONE who sits upon the throne. He writes, *"And on this throne high above was a figure whose appearance resembled a man. From what appeared to be His waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from His waist down, he looked like a burning flame, shining with splendor. All around Him was a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the LORD looked like to me."* And Ezekiel's response? He falls face down before the glory of this ONE and listens to His voice. Ezekiel hears the voice of the LORD.

How does God call a prophet who will spend the entirety of his ministry in a foreign land? He opens his eyes to His greatness and power. We will learn some of the significance of the chariot throne later in Ezekiel's writings. For now, marvel over the "otherness" of the ONE sitting on the throne. The LORD is far more than a better version of us. He is mysteriously great, gloriously powerful. There are aspects of who God is that we will never comprehend. Like Ezekiel, we should humble ourselves before the ONE sits upon the chariot throne.

It's worth noting that it is after Ezekiel humbles himself before the throne that he hears God speak. There's a correlation in that. God ultimately shares His message with those who humble themselves before Him. With Ezekiel, God stands His prophet up and calls His servant to the task before Him. Admittedly, much about Ezekiel's vision is beyond our imagination. Maybe that's good. When we reduce God to easily explained statements or ideas, we diminish the truth of who God is. He is far more than what our minds may comprehend. Let's allow that thought to carry us into the day ahead and be encouraged. May we, like Ezekiel, humbly bow ourselves before Him and allow the LORD to call us to His service. Let us do so today!

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
All references unless noted: New Living Translation