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“But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy” (II Chronicles 36:16).

Inevitable Consequences

Central Truth: When people shirk their responsibilities, they invite God's judgment upon them.

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“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). That principle applies to the individual and also to the nation. “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” (Psalm 9:17). “If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it” (Isaiah 1:19, 20).

At no point in human history is that biblical principle so clearly manifest as in the history of the ancient Hebrew kingdom. Though the nation was the “chosen people” by whom God was giving the revelation of himself to the world, she seemed set on a course of rebellion against Him. His laws were disobeyed. His prophets were ignored or abused. His purpose was thwarted. God remained patient and kept on ministering to His people by His prophets, because He had compassion on the people. But when His messengers were mocked, and His words despised, and His prophets misused, there came a day of reckoning. The inevitable consequences of the Hebrews' rebellion against God was their deportation into captivity. That is the theme of this week's study. The aim of the lesson is to create awareness of the consequences of sin in the life of your nation.

I. THE CAUSE

Spiritual apostasy among the ancient Hebrews was the cause of their suffering in political, social, economic, and spiritual captivity. Decline of the spiritual commitment of a nation always brings suffering and loss.

A. Wicked political leaders bring divine judgment. Judah was plagued by a series of spiritually weak rulers. Such leadership brought her to divine judgment.

Of the last nine kings to rule Judah, only two were men of God. King Ahaz I (735-715 B.C.) reigned during the ministries of the prophets Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. But he followed grossest idolatry and was exceptionally wicked. King Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.) was a prince of God who led his nation in revival of spiritual religion. He was assisted by the prophets Micah and Isaiah. King Manasseh (695-642 B.C.), though ruling ten years as co-regent with his good father, was one of the most wicked kings the nation ever endured. King Amon (642-640 B.C.) followed the footsteps of his father Manasseh. He ignored the message of the prophets as his father had. King Josiah (640-609 B.C.) was a friend of the prophets Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. He led Judah in her last great spiritual awakening. King Jehoahaz (609 B.C.) was an impious and impure man who reigned only three months. He was followed by a series of wicked kings. King Jehoiakim (609-597 B.C.) was a treacherous, revengeful, and bloodthirsty person who put Jeremiah in prison for his preaching. He witnessed the first deportation of Hebrews into Babylonian captivity (among whom was Daniel), and did not repent. King Jehoiachin (597 B.C.) saw a second deportation end his three-month reign of wickedness. King Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.) continued in the evil of the monarchs before him. His reign ended with the overthrow of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the third deportation to Babylon.

The last nine kings of Judah reigned for a total of about 150 years. Two godly men ruled 60 years of that time. The other ninety years saw wicked and idolatrous kings sit on the throne. It sealed the doom of the nation. Corrupt political leaders corrupt a nation. Citizens who live in a country where they are permitted to elect their leaders must vote for individuals of moral and spiritual integrity.

B. Wicked religious leaders bring divine judgment. God sent His messengers, the prophets, to speak to the nation in the name of the Lord their God. But there were false prophets in the land who contradicted and opposed the messengers God had sent. Since both groups claimed they spoke in the name of the Lord God, the people had to make a choice between them.

Generally, the people listened to the false prophets whose message was more pleasant than the condemnation of sin by true prophets.

Hananiah was one of the false prophets. At the time Jeremiah was announcing that Judah would go into Babylonian captivity as punishment for her sins, Hananiah was declaring that God had broken the power of Babylon and Judah would be spared. Jeremiah made a wooden yoke and wore it on his neck to dramatize the warning he issued. Hananiah took it off his neck and broke it to illustrate how God would fulfill his prediction of breaking the power of Babylon. (See Jeremiah 28.)

Many of the priests and the prophets opposed Jeremiah's warnings and calls to repentance. They called for the death penalty against Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26). He was put into a dungeon where he remained for many days (Jeremiah 37-38) on a trumped-up charge of treason against King Zedekiah.

No wonder Jeremiah is called "the weeping prophet." He had a message from God which was ignored; He was opposed by men who professed to be prophets of God as he was. He saw a depraved clergy who engaged in adultery, walked in lies, and were as Sodom and Gomorrah before God (Jeremiah 23:1-40).

Christians have a great advantage today. They have the Holy Bible by which to judge the message of men who say they speak for God. There is no excuse for any person to be led astray by false religious teachers today.

C. Rebellious citizens bring divine judgment. Where was God during those critical days? Was He active in Judah! Indeed, He was active in the person of His true prophets. But the populace rejected the message of God because it made them face the truth about their sin and its consequences. They "heaped to themselves teachers having itching ears" (II Timothy 4:3). They said to their prophets, "*Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits*" (Isaiah 30:10). They rejected the word of the Lord.

"Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy" (II Chronicles 36:14-16).

II. THE CONSEQUENCE

Severe judgment fell upon ancient Judah because of her rebellion against God. She suffered for seventy years under political bondage because she refused to hear the word of the Lord as spoken by His messengers the prophets.

God speaks to a people in such a way as to make them hear. He speaks kindly and in love through the words of His messengers. If the people ignore or reject His message, He speaks through the stronger terms of physical sufferings. A people who hear and respond to His words will not have to endure His sufferings. But God will keep on dealing with people until they hear what He is saying.

Jerusalem and the land of Judah lived under the threat of war for many years. The nation was the political vessel of some stronger country for most of the time covered by her last nine kings. One vain king after another tried to revolt against his master, only to bring more suffering to the distressed nation. At last, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon decided to bring it to an end. He resolved to overthrow the city of Jerusalem, destroy the power of the little Hebrew kingdom to resist, and stop their rebellion by deportation.

The account of the last great battle for Jerusalem is recorded in II Kings 24—25. Famine, fright, sorrow, flight, destruction, deportation, and death became the lot of the people. What a useless tragedy! It would not have been so if Judah had heard the words of the Lord and walked in His ways. How much suffering would have been avoided by a life of righteousness.

Long before, God had given these words through His prophet Isaiah: *“O that thou hast hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea”* (Isaiah 48:18). *“And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever”* (Isaiah 32:17). God permits a person or a nation to choose to live in obedience or disobedience. He prefers to give the blessing of righteousness rather than the discipline for disobedience. God's word through Isaiah is still true; *“If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it”* (Isaiah 1:19, 20).

There is a special word of warning for today spoken through the events in ancient Israel. Many people in the Hebrew nation thought they would never have to suffer what they did. They reasoned like this. (1) Israel is the “chosen people” of God. He chose her out of all the nations of the earth to be His own special treasure. (2) Jerusalem is the holy city of God. He chose that as the place to set His name forever. (3) The temple was the holy house of God. He was so zealous that His house not be profaned by what was

impure that He would never let a heathen set foot in the temple or in the city where the temple was located. (4) God had protected the city by a great miracle when Sennacherib had laid siege against her during the days of Hezekiah. Yes, God would surely protect His own.

People of every generation must learn that God is holy. He will not at all tolerate sin and rebellion, for they are no less than blasphemy against Him.

There are no people who are so special with God that He will permit them to run unchecked in sin. Special privileges do not bring license to sin, but require the more nearly perfect obedience and holiness. Hear this word of the Lord: *“You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities”* (Amos 3:2). Special privilege is always accomplished by special obligation. The New Testament principle is stated in these words of Jesus: *“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more”* (Luke 12:48). Special revelation carries obligation for a closer walk with God.

Now a moment of review is in order. The Hebrew people were a chosen people of God. He did not choose them for their own benefit, but to bless the nations of the earth through them (Genesis 12:1-3). They were given a revelation of God which was to be the pattern of their personal lives and passed on to all other people.

The ancient Hebrew nation did not live up to their opportunity. They perverted the religion of the Lord, mixing it with idolatry. They ignored the message of God, thinking that their privileges gave them license to sin. They rejected and persecuted the prophets of God, refusing to hear their message. Responsibilities shirked became judgment invited.

The result was that God permitted the kingdom of Israel to be taken captive by the Assyrians and the kingdom of Judah to be taken captive by the Babylonians. Suffering followed sin. It was so then; it is no now; it will ever be.

1. What is the historical setting of today's study?
2. How is it an illustration of Galatians 6:7?
3. How can your nation protect herself against corrupt political leaders?
4. How can you be protected against wicked religious leaders?
5. How can you determine the true from the false in religion?

6. Why does physical suffering come as punishment for sin?
7. How does Isaiah 48:18 relate to the lesson?
8. What does Isaiah 1:19, 20 mean for today?
9. How does Amos 3:2 show God's attitude toward His chosen people?
10. How can the study help make your nation more secure?