

The Reunited Kingdom, part 18 (2 Chronicles 29:1–36:23)

by Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Final Events, part 2: Zedekiah; Release from Exile (2 Chronicles 36:11-23)

Zedekiah (36:11-21)

At last the Chronicler reached the final king of Judah, Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.). This account follows patterns similar to those of other kings in this chapter, but the record of Zedekiah is unique in several important ways.

Summary of Zedekiah's Reign (36:11-14)

The Chronicler began with very basic information about the king. Zedekiah rose to power when he was **twenty-one years old** and his rule lasted for **eleven years** (36:11). As the other kings in this final series, Zedekiah **did evil in the eyes of the Lord** (36:12a; see 36:5,9; for the Chronicler's use of this evaluative terminology see comments on 24:2).

Up to this point, Zedekiah's record is very similar to 2 Kgs 24:18-19 as well as the overarching patterns of this chapter. As noted above, however, the Chronicler expanded the summary of Zedekiah's reign beyond the account of 2 Kgs 24:19-20. Perhaps he derived this information from the record of Zedekiah's life in Jeremiah (see Jer 27:1-28:17; 34:1-22; 37:1-38:28). Zedekiah was the king whose sins sealed the final destruction of Jerusalem. For this reason, the Chronicler gave special attention to the evil he did.

The Chronicler added that Zedekiah not only **did evil**, but also **did not humble himself** (36:12b). The Chronicler focused on humility on a number of occasions in his history (see *Introduction: 18 Humility*). Humility averted disaster (see 7:14; 12:7,12; 33:12-13; 32:26) and pride brought tragedy (see 25:19; 26:16; 32:25,26). In addition, the Chronicler added that Zedekiah did not yield himself **before Jeremiah the prophet** (36:12). Throughout the Chronicler's history blessings came to those who responded properly to prophets; disaster came to those who did not submit themselves to the prophetic word (see *Introduction: 15 Prophets*). To stress the severity of the king's sin, the Chronicler also noted that Jeremiah **spoke the word of the Lord** (36:12). To refuse humility before the prophet was to resist God himself.

Zedekiah's failure to give proper regard to the prophet warranted his punishment, but the Chronicler went further into the king's sin. Zedekiah **also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar** (36:13). Jeremiah had urged Zedekiah to submit to the Babylonian emperor (see Jer 27:1-28:17; 34:1-38:28), but the king of Judah refused. To explain why this act ranked among Zedekiah's great sins, the Chronicler noted that Nebuchadnezzar **had made him take an oath in God's name** (36:12). This oath is not mentioned in Kings or Jeremiah, but Ezekiel noted it (see Ezk 17:12-17). By rebelling against the Babylonian king, Zedekiah not only rejected the prophet, but also broke his sacred vow in the Name of God (see *Introduction: 11) Name of God*). As a result, Zedekiah became **stiff-necked** (see 30:8); he **hardened his heart** against God rather than serving him wholeheartedly (see *Introduction: 16) Motivations*); he also refused to **turn to the Lord** in repentance (see *Introduction: 22) Repentance*). By describing the king in this manner, the Chronicler specified the severity of the monarchy's failures.

In addition to describing the corruption of the king, the Chronicler also noted the failure of temple worship. He pointed out that **all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful** (36:14). The Chronicler used the term "unfaithful" on a number of occasions to describe disloyalty to the Law of God (see *Introduction: 21) Unfaithfulness*). Here the focus is on worship. Not only did the Chronicler specify that the priesthood had failed to be faithful, he also noted that their infidelity reached the point that they imitated the **detestable practices of the nations** (36:14; for the Chronicler's use of this comparison see comments on 33:2-9.). These practices probably included idols in the temple as well as pagan ceremonies. By describing Judah's sins in this manner, the Chronicler made it plain that the distinctive holiness of Judah had vanished. The priests had gone so far astray that they were **defiling the temple which he had consecrated** (36:14).

By adding these priestly sins to those of Zedekiah, the Chronicler repeated a theme that occurs throughout this chapter. The throne and temple in Jerusalem shared the same fate. As kings were exiled, the temple treasuries were depleted (see 36:7,10,18; see also *Introduction: 4-9) King and Temple*). Now the Chronicler made it clear that the corruption of the monarch was paralleled by the corruption of temple worship. The two central institutions of Israel had fallen into utter ruin during the reign of Zedekiah.

Trouble and Exile (36:15-21)

Having established that the monarchy and the temple were severely corrupted, the Chronicler moved toward God's reaction. This portion of the account abbreviates 2 Kgs 25:1-30. It amounts to the Chronicler's own summary of events leading to the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile, and the Cyrus Edict.

Structure of 36:15-21

This material divides into a four step narrative (see figure 64). Throughout this material the Chronicler made God the principle character. The story begins with God sending prophets because he

had pity on his people and the temple (36:15). It ends with God showing mercy to Israel once again (36:21-23). The rising action involves the people stirring God's anger by rejecting his prophets (36:16). God responded to this rejection in the falling action by sending Nebuchadnezzar to destroy them (36:17-21).

God Has Pity toward Israel (36:15)

The preceding passage established that Zedekiah and the priests were in serious violation of the Law of God. Nevertheless, contrary to his normal way of describing God's acts as immediate retribution (see *Introduction: 10-27 Divine Blessing and Judgment*), the Chronicler pointed out that God displayed great patience. God first sent **word to them through his messengers** (36:15). Instead of immediately destroying Israel, God sent his prophets to instruct and warn the nation. In fact, he sent them **again and again** (36:15). The book of Kings does not note these events, but this scenario looks much like the course of events in Kings' account of Manasseh. Manasseh sealed the fate of Judah because he refused to listen to the many prophets God sent to him (see 2 Kgs 21:11-15; 23:26-27; 24:3). A similar series of events took place in Zedekiah's reign. This material illustrates the Chronicler's repeated emphasis on the role prophets played in Israel's blessing and judgment (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*).

The book of Jeremiah records many of the prophecies given by Jeremiah during the reign of Zedekiah. In fact, the language of this passage echoes Jer 26:5; 29:19. The Chronicler mentioned Jeremiah in this passage three times (36:12,21,22) and certainly had him in mind as he spoke of these **messengers** (36:15). It is not clear, however, what other prophets he may have counted along with Jeremiah.

The Chronicler also noted the reason why God sent prophets to Zedekiah. It was **because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place** (36:15). The purpose of these prophetic warnings was to stir repentance so that the people and the temple could be spared from divine wrath. This mercy balances with the final portion of this narrative where mercy is shown once again to **his people** and the **temple** (36:23).

God's Anger Stirred against Israel (36:16)

Unfortunately, Judah did not respond properly to the prophets whom God had sent. Instead they **mocked ... despised ... and scoffed** (36:16). As a result, the **pity** of God (36:15) turned to **wrath** (36:16). Throughout his history, the Chronicler pointed to the dire consequences of rejecting the prophetic word (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*). Here God's anger was so **aroused** that **there was no remedy** (36:16; see Prov 29:1; Jer 7:26; 20:8; 25:4; 30:12). Although the prophets spoke to bring repentance, the repeated rejection of prophetic warnings eventually led to a course of events that could not be averted. God became so angry that no annulments, mollifications, or postponements were possible. The judgment of God was coming against his people.

God Sends Punishment against Israel (36:17-20)

The Chronicler turned next to spell out the manner in which God's wrath came against Israel. God **brought up against them the King of the Babylonians** (36:17a). The Chronicler's readers knew the disaster that Nebuchadnezzar brought to Judah. They lived in its aftermath. But the Chronicler emphasized that it had not been a mere human affair. God himself moved the King of Babylon to attack (36:17a). God's active involvement in these events is stressed here as well as in two other places in this material (36:17c,21-22).

The Chronicler spelled out four specific ways in which God punished Israel through Nebuchadnezzar. First, he engaged in much killing. Nebuchadnezzar **killed young men in the sanctuary** (36:17b). Presumably, these young men were levitical soldiers who sought to protect the temple. On a number of occasions the Old Testament describes a military function for some Levites (see 23:27). The fact that these killings took place **in the sanctuary** (i.e. the main hall; see *Introduction: Appendix B - The Structures, Furnishings and Decorations of Solomon's Temple*) of the temple indicates that God had already begun to desert the temple.

Moreover, the Chronicler pointed to the severity of Nebuchadnezzar's killings by noting that he **spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged** (36:17). Whereas the Chronicler considered increases of the population of Judah a divine blessing, the judgment of God meant the death of many. To draw attention to the fact that this event resulted from divine wrath, the Chronicler noted that **God handed all of them over** (36:17; see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*).

Second, Nebuchadnezzar depleted Jerusalem of her riches **from the treasuries of the Lord's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials** (36:18). Once again, the Chronicler tied the fate of the temple and king together (see 36:7,10,14,19). To depict the extent of this plundering, the Chronicler noted that the Babylonian King took **all the articles from the temple ... large and small** (36:18). Just as Nebuchadnezzar showed no restraint in his killings, he robbed the temple of all it had. The accumulation of riches and wealth was the blessing of God, but the judgment of God reversed this blessing.

Third, the Chronicler reported that the Babylonians also destroyed the buildings and fortifications of Jerusalem (36:19). Elsewhere in Chronicles success in building and fortification was a sign of God's favor (see *Introduction: 24) Building and Destruction*). Here the destruction of buildings indicates his curse. The Babylonians **set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem** (36:19). They also set fire to **all the palaces** (36:19). To emphasize once again the extent of the damage, the Chronicler noted that the Babylonians actually **destroyed everything of value there** (36:18; see 36:7,10,17).

Fourth, the Chronicler reported that **the remnant was carried into exile to Babylon** (36:20a). The term **remnant** has both negative and positive connotations in this passage. On the one hand, it indicates that which is left over after severe destruction. These are the people of Israel who barely survived (see Isa 10:22; 16:14; Jer 8:3). On the other hand, the remnant of Israel is positive because it is that source out of which renewal may come (see Isa 11:16; 37:31-32; Ez 6:8; Mic 2:12). Both connotations apply in this context. These people are **those who escaped from the sword** (36:20), a relatively small group of survivors. Yet, the Chronicler will point out in the next section that these

same people are the beginning of a great restoration as well. In fact, the Chronicler had already pointed in this direction in his list of those who had returned from exile (see 1 Chr 9:2-21). They were descendants of those who had been spared and represented all Israel (see *Introduction: 1) All Israel*). The Chronicler closed this section with the note that the **remnant** remained **servants** (i.e. subjects) of Nebuchadnezzar **until the kingdom of Persia came to power** (36:20). The exile to Babylon continued as long as the kingdom of Babylon endured.

God Has Pity toward Israel (36:21-23)

At this point, the Chronicler closed his entire history with a record of God's mercy toward Israel. He noted the benefit of the exile for the land (36:21) and the commission of Cyrus that Israel should rebuild the temple (36:22-23). This positive material balances with the opening scene of God's pity toward the people and temple (36:15).

The NIV obscures the paragraph break between 36:20 and 36:21. The thematic shift is evident; the Chronicler moved from divine curse to blessing. This break is supported by the grammar of the Hebrew text. Literally, the Hebrew of 36:21 begins, "to fulfill the word of the Lord ..." This clause may refer to what has gone before (i.e. the exile in Babylon [see NAS]), or it may refer to the sentences that follow (i.e. the land's Sabbath rest [see NIV]). If we read this clause as connected to the following sentences (as NIV), the text states that **the land enjoyed its Sabbath rests** to fulfill the word of the Lord ... (36:21). This understanding is preferred.

In all events, the Chronicler's main idea is plain enough. The exile had a positive benefit: **the land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested** (36:21). This understanding of the purpose of the exile stems from Lev 26:34-35 which states that "the land will enjoy its Sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate ... the land will have the rest it did not have during the Sabbaths you lived in it." Mosaic Law required that the land not be worked for crops every seventh year (see Lev 25:1-7). These years were to give the land rest and to demonstrate Israel's reliance on God. The Chronicler interpreted the exile as a time for the land to enjoy the years of rest it had not received in the past. By means of the exile, the land was refreshed and prepared for new occupants, those who returned from Babylon.

The Chronicler mentioned that these years of rest for the land were in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction (see Jer 25:11; 29:10) that the exile would last **until seventy years** (36:21). The Chronicler associated the end of Jeremiah's seventy years with the Cyrus edict of 539/8 (36:22). This association has led to several attempts to calculate when the Chronicler believed the seventy year period began. At least three lines of interpretation deserve consideration. 1) Some interpreters calculate the seventy years from the Babylonian victory at Carchemish (605 B.C. see Jer 46:2ff) to the Cyrus Edict (539 B.C.), a period of approximately 67 years. 2) Other interpreters note that Zechariah still looked for the fulfillment of the seventy years after the Cyrus Edict (see Zech 1:12). Apparently, he connected the prophecy more directly with the building of the temple. The period from the destruction of the temple (586 B.C.) to the completion of the temple (516/5) is precisely seventy years. It is possible that the Chronicler had this chronology in mind as well, and simply treated the Cyrus edict and temple reconstruction as one complex event. 3) Some extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern texts suggest that

the number "seventy" was a symbolic designation of a time when kingdoms would suffer under the wrath of their gods. This period of time could be shortened or lengthened depending on the actions of the king and nation. This symbolic understanding would explain how the Chronicler could connect the seventy years to Cyrus and Zechariah to the completion of the temple. It would also explain how Daniel's prophecy could extend Jeremiah's seventy years to 490 years (see Dan 9:1-27).

In all events, the Chronicler turned his post-exilic readers' attention to the positive benefits of the exile. From his perspective, the time of desolation for the land was a time of rest and preparation for a new day. That new day began with the return of his readers, the remnant, to the land of Judah in 538 B.C.

The final scene of the Chronicler's history reminded the post-exilic community of its origins and goal (36:22-23). First, the edict originated with **Cyrus king of Persia** who made a **proclamation throughout his realm** (36:22). The Chronicler explained the importance of this edict by emphasizing God's role in the matter. In three ways, he stressed that God was actually behind the Cyrus edict (see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*). 1) It occurred **in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah** (36:22). 2) **The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus** to give his edict; it was not the king's initiative (36:22). 3) Cyrus himself acknowledged **the Lord, the God of heaven** as the source of his authority (36:23). The divine authorization of the Cyrus edict showed the proclamation to be more than a mere human event. God himself gave the decree binding authority.

Second, the importance of this divine authorization becomes clear when we note the goal of the Cyrus edict. 1) The Persian King announced that God had ordained him **to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah** (36:23). Throughout his history the Chronicler had made it clear that the post-exilic community was to reinstitute proper worship in the Jerusalem temple (see *Introduction: 4-9) King and Temple*). Without the completion of this project the Chronicler's readers could have no hope for divine blessings. To resist or neglect this effort was to insure divine judgment because God had decreed it through Cyrus.

2) The emperor invited **anyone of his people** to go to Jerusalem to build (36:22). The invitation was open to all Israelites throughout **all the kingdoms of the earth** (36:22). In every portion of his history, the Chronicler emphasized the need for all Israelites to be involved in the restoration program. Here the emperor's words reinforced the Chronicler's call that those outside the land should return and join those who had already returned (see *Introduction: 1) All Israel*).

3) Cyrus also blessed those who returned saying, **may the Lord his God be with him** (36:23). These words reminded the Chronicler's readers of a theme that appeared time and again in his history. Success in the post-exilic temple project could come only with the help of God. God must be "with" the post-exilic community, protecting them from enemies and giving them success in all their efforts (see 13:12; see also *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*).

The Chronicler closed his history on this positive note to leave his readers with a clear understanding of their privileges and responsibilities. They had received tremendous grace from God through the Cyrus edict. Yet, this same edict required all Israel to join in the restoration of the temple to its proper place in order to bring the abundant blessings of God to the people of God.