



THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

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 Jeremiah 21:1-23.8
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Many seek to be leaders and people of influence because the world puts great significance on titles and authority. Leaders in government, community, church and the workplace are highly respected due to the positions they occupy. We may not realize it, but most of us are influential to some degree, whether we are managers, heads of committees, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, coaches, Bible study leaders or Sunday School teachers.

What makes a man or woman a leader, and what is the most important quality for leadership? What is it that enables people to have influence in the role in which God has placed them? We will find the answer to this question in our text from the book of Jeremiah. These verses focus on the kings and leaders of Judah in the last days before the destruction of Jerusalem.

King Josiah began his reign over Judah in 640 BC, when he was only eight years old. His rule ended in 609 BC, following his death in a battle with the Egyptians. During this great king's reign the Torah was found in the temple, and Josiah led a reform movement to encourage his people to turn back to God. Josiah and Jeremiah, partners in this endeavor, sought to restore true worship in Judah.

Following the death of Josiah things quickly deteriorated. Prior to the fall of Jerusalem, Josiah was succeeded by four kings, three sons and one grandson, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. None of these kings sought the LORD with all their heart, however. Our text addresses each king and pronounces the judgment each would suffer because of their ungodly rule. Today we will look at God's oracles on these men (from sections of chapters Jeremiah 21, 22 and 23), and in the process discover the most important quality for leadership.

Chapter 22 begins with a general poetic unit concerning the royal house of David.

Thus says the LORD, "Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and there speak this word and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, who sits on David's throne, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates. 'Thus says the LORD, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of *his* oppressor. Also do not mistreat *or* do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you men will indeed perform this thing, then kings will enter the

gates of this house, sitting in David's place on his throne, riding in chariots and on horses, *even the king himself and his servants and his people. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself," declares the LORD, "that this house will become a desolation."'"* (Jer 22:1-5, NASB)

The king's primary social responsibilities were to dispense justice and righteousness, and care for the socially weak and powerless. How the king conducted himself was decisive for the weal and woe of the entire social system. If he acted according to God's command, then his royal power would be guaranteed. If he failed to do so, the house of David would be terminated.

But the royal house did forsake the covenant of the LORD. That is why a description of the judgment to come follows in the text. The first king to succeed Josiah was his son Jehoahaz. We have a word about this man in verses 10-12 of chapter 22.

**Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him,
 But weep continually for the one who goes away;
 For he will never return
 Or see his native land.**

For thus says the LORD in regard to Shallum (another name for Jehoahaz) the son of Josiah, king of Judah, who became king in the place of Josiah his father, who went forth from this place, "He will never return there; but in the place where they led him captive, there he will die and not see this land again. (Jer 10:10-12)

Following the death of Josiah, Jehoahaz succeeded to the throne by popular acclaim. But his reign lasted only three months. He was deposed by the Egyptians and carried off to exile in Egypt, where he died. Josiah was the dead king; Jehoahaz was the one who went into exile. The judgment was that he would never return to the land; thus Judah was to weep for him and not Josiah.

The second king following Josiah was Jehoiakim, another of his sons.

**"Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness
 And his upper rooms without justice,
 Who uses his neighbor's services without pay
 And does not give him his wages,
 Who says, 'I will build myself a roomy house
 With spacious upper rooms,
 And cut out its windows,
 Paneling *it* with cedar and painting *it* bright red.'**

"Do you become a king because you are competing in cedar?

**Did not your father eat and drink
And do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.**

**"He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy;
Then it was well.**

**Is not that what it means to know Me?"
Declares the LORD.**

**"But your eyes and your heart
Are intent only upon your own dishonest gain,
And on shedding innocent blood
And on practicing oppression and extortion."
Therefore thus says the LORD in regard to Jehoiakim
the son of Josiah, king of Judah,**

**"They will not lament for him:
'Alas, my brother!' or, 'Alas, sister!'
They will not lament for him:
'Alas for the master!' or, 'Alas for his splendor!'
"He will be buried with a donkey's burial,
Dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem. (Jer 22:13-19)**

Jehoiakim fought against Babylon and entered into a dangerous political exploitation that evoked the anger of that nation. His sin was that he built his house without justice and righteousness. He used people and exploited the poor to exalt himself into a life of comfort and luxury. He is contrasted with his father Josiah, who was just and righteous. A luxurious house does not make a man a king. After his death Jehoiakim would be treated like a donkey because of his sin. There would be no funeral and no expression of grief or lament.

The third king to follow Josiah was Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, grandson of Josiah.

"As I live," declares the LORD, "even though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were a signet ring on My right hand, yet I would pull you off; and I will give you over into the hand of those who are seeking your life, yes, into the hand of those whom you dread, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of the Chaldeans. I will hurl you and your mother who bore you into another country where you were not born, and there you will die. But as for the land to which they desire to return, they will not return to it.

**"Is this man Coniah a despised, shattered jar?
Or is he an undesirable vessel?
Why have he and his descendants been hurled out
And cast into a land that they had not known?
O land, land, land,
Hear the word of the LORD!
Thus says the LORD,
'Write this man down childless,
A man who will not prosper in his days;
For no man of his descendants will prosper
Sitting on the throne of David
Or ruling again in Judah.'" (Jer 22:24-30)**

Jehoiachin began his rule in 598 BC, but he was whisked away to Bablylon, in 597. He reaped the results of his father's deadly politics. The signet ring was torn off God's hand, marking the end of the marriage between God and the house of David. So the royal line came to an end and the land was forfeited: "O land, land, land." Jehoiachin was to be considered childless as none of his descendants would succeed him as king. He bore the hopes of Judah but did not have a chance to act on them. Jehoiachin was to be pitied. He never returned to the land, but by God's mercy he was released and given hospitality at the palace in Babylon. By a greater grace, a future descendant of his would rule. Jehoiachin's name is listed in the genealogy of Jesus, in Matthew 1:12.

The fourth and last king of Judah was Zedekiah, another of Josiah's sons. Zedekiah was installed as a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar, in 597. His name means "Yahweh is righteous," but he was anything but righteous. He continually tried to overthrow the rule of Babylon, and this led to the destruction of Jerusalem, in 587. Chapter 21 has a word about this man:

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur the son of Malchijah, and Zephaniah the priest, the son of Maaseiah, saying, "Please inquire of the LORD on our behalf, for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is warring against us; perhaps the LORD will deal with us according to all His wonderful acts, so that *the enemy will withdraw from us.*" (Jer 21:1,2)

With Babylon threatening, Zedekiah sought a word from the Lord that would give him assurance and confidence against Nebuchadnezzar, but instead, he got a word of judgment, which follows in the text in chapter 21. The God who did wonderful things for Israel in the Exodus would now stand against the nation. Following the word of judgment there is an exhortation for the king, in verse 11:

**"Then say to the household of the king of Judah,
'Hear the word of the LORD,
O house of David, thus says the LORD:
"Administer justice every morning;
And deliver the person who has been robbed from
the power of his oppressor,
That My wrath may not go forth like fire
And burn with none to extinguish it,
Because of the evil of their deeds. (Jer 21:11-12)**

Notice the recurring theme in these oracles. The king was supposed to uphold justice and righteousness and the rights of the poor, the needy and afflicted. He was to uphold the integrity of the court system so that innocent blood would not be shed. But these four kings not only forsook the Lord, they were guilty of not doing the things they were supposed to do. These leaders of Judah were exalting themselves and exploiting their people for their own personal gain. This was clearly wrong. The king was to care for his people, as is highlighted in chapter 23, where God calls the king a shepherd:

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD. (Jer 23:1-2)

Here then is the most important quality necessary to be a godly king: the monarch must uphold justice and righteousness. These two terms, which often appear together in Scripture, are often applied to godly rule. Justice encompasses the notion of maintaining proper order according to God’s word. Righteousness means conforming to a moral or ethical standard – doing what is right, in other words. These are parallel ideas. Justice and righteousness are seen in the care of the flock, especially in the care of those who were weak, powerless and afflicted. The king was to see to it that such people were not oppressed and exploited, and he was to maintain the integrity of the judicial system. As a result of his shepherding, the community would be gathered and built up in peace and wholeness. Such is the work of kings.

I suggest that these characteristics of a godly king apply to leadership at any level today — a leader of a nation, a school principal, teacher, elder, pastor, Bible study teacher, husband, mother, or coach. These are the most important qualities for leadership. A leader shepherds people. He or she is ruthless to do the right thing morally and ethically. A leader never compromises. Leaders are not worried about their status, title or popularity with influential people. Leaders do not look up to see where they are going; they look down to see whom they can love and help.

Godly leaders care for the afflicted, the weak, the orphan and the widow. Leaders strive to protect the rights of those of whom society takes advantage. They do not use people for their own selfish ends. A godly leader is characterized by moral and ethical purity, by grace and compassion. His or her effect on the community, whether home, school, neighborhood or church, can be remarkably effective. Under godly leadership people are gathered and healed; they experience grace and love and forgiveness. On the other hand, the lack of godly leadership can have a devastating effect on a community. People become isolated, fearful, angry and skeptical.

The main character in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, Valjean, portrays beautiful, godly leadership. He acts with humility and grace. He continually promotes justice, and is always lifting up the poor and afflicted. His leadership is set in stark contrast to the ruthless Javert.

When I look back on my baseball coaching experience, I recognize that I did not always act in line with Jeremiah’s word, although there were some bright spots. In one championship game we had the lead and

in the late innings I had to play a younger child who was not a very good player. I decided to play him at third base, because I doubted that anyone could pull the ball down the third baseline. Well, several batters hit the ball to third base and we lost the game. At the team party following the game the boy’s mother hugged me and thanked me for playing her son. I knew that I done the right thing, even though we didn’t win the trophy. Jeremiah’s word on leadership applies at many levels.

This text is a primer on servant leadership. Title, position or possessions do not qualify a man or woman for leadership. An office does not make one a leader or magically confer influence. Leadership is more a function of who one is, not what one appears to be. The kings of Judah got this all wrong — and we get it wrong, too. We tend to see leadership in terms of the corporate model – actions like bossing, commanding, controlling. We see leadership as a means to make us fulfilled and significant, as a way of getting more for ourselves. This is the model of leadership we find not only in the world, but in the church, too. But that is not God’s view of leadership.

Let’s look at the New Testament model, set out in the words of Jesus.

Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Leaders must seek the good of everyone, not just those who can help and further their careers. Leadership is lifting up the spiritually, physically and emotionally poor. God said through Jeremiah, “Is not that what it means to know Me?” God cares deeply for the bruised reeds and the dimly lit wicks. Listen to the words of James: “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

When Mother Teresa was asked, “What is God’s greatest gift to you?” she replied, “The poor people.” Mother Teresa and Princess Diana died in the same week. Princess Diana received far more media coverage, but who had the greater influence? Which of these two women reflected God’s way of leadership?

This is a great word for our nation’s leaders. Political leaders are agents and ministers of God, whether they are Christians or not. They have a responsibility to God to maintain and uphold justice and to take care that the truly poor of society are not oppressed and exploited. Woe to any political leader who uses his office for his own gain!

This is an excellent word for Christians to consider as we lead on any level in our jobs, schools, communities and homes. Let me take a moment to speak to fathers on this Father's Day. God has given you the task of being leaders in your home. This is perhaps the most difficult thing that God could ask you to do. You probably feel inadequate to carry it out. Yet, God calls you to be a servant to your wife and children. He calls you to be morally and ethically pure and above reproach, to seek justice and righteousness, to show grace and compassion, to lift up the one who is weak, gathering your family as a shepherd does his flock. Your leadership does not derive from being authoritative, demanding or controlling. It springs from your being a Christ-like servant. Just as a king sets the tone for a nation, so you husbands set the tone for your families. And wives, you can help your husbands by showing them appreciation today and encouraging them to be the kind of men who manifest godly leadership.

Our text has an epilogue. We have seen much failure and judgment in this book of Jeremiah. Did Judah have any hope for the future following the failure of these four kings? In chapter 23 there is an amazing contrast between the four kings discussed here and a future King:

**"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD,
"When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;
And He will reign as king and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land.
In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell securely;
And this is His name by which He will be called,
'The LORD our righteousness.'** (Jer 23:5-6)

In the midst of failure the Lord makes a promise to Judah: God is not done with them yet. One was coming who would sit on the throne of David. He would do justice and righteousness. Zedekiah's name means "the Lord is righteous." The name of this coming king would be "the Lord our righteousness." Jesus would be the very fulfillment of God's kingly rule. Jesus is not only righteous, he is our righteousness. Human failure does not derail God's plans and programs at any level, whether it involves nations, governments, corporations, individuals, or the redemption of mankind.

If we want a model of what a true leader looks like we need only look at the life of our King who now sits on his throne at the right hand of God. The wonderful news is that in Christ we have been raised with him and seated with him. So we too are kings and queens, reigning with him, and our duty is to do justice and righteousness, to care for the needy and the afflicted. Is this not what it means to know him?

God has given us an impossible task if we are left to do this on our own. But, God not only calls us to be kings, he empowers us through his Spirit to be all that he wants us to be as his representatives on earth. And we do this the way he did it — by dying to self and serving others. This is what it means to "know Him and the power of his resurrection."

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