

KING ZEDEKIAH – A MAN WHO LACKED COURAGE

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INTRODUCTION:

- A. Edmund Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”
1. **Illustration:** A 26 year old woman named Maria was raped in a Queens, NY subway about two years ago. A booth worker and transit worker both watched the rape and hit the panic button, but, nothing more was done... No 911 call, no shouting, no PA announcement
 2. James lays out the spiritual principle that doing nothing is not an option for God’s people! – “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” **(James 4:7)**
 3. Whatever the circumstance we find ourselves in, choosing to actively do what is right & good over doing nothing takes courage, strength, faith, & character... Doing nothing is the easy way out!
- B. Today let’s take a look at the last real king of Judah – Zedekiah. He was a man who had the opportunity to be a great leader, but failed because of a lack of courage. He leaves us many lessons to learn!

LESSONS ABOUT COURAGE FROM THE LIFE OF KING ZEDEKIAH

- A. Since Zedekiah is one of the more obscure Bible characters, let’s start by getting a good background of his life:
1. Zedekiah was the last of a long line of kings for the nation of Judah... many of whom were wicked men!
 - a. He was the third son of King Josiah, who was the last good king of Judah. After Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin each ruled. But they all did what was wicked in the sight of God.
 - b. Then Zedekiah is placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. At this point Babylon basically controlled Judah, but it had not officially fully taken it over yet **(2 Chron 36:10-12)**
 - c. Originally, his name was Mattaniah in Hebrew (means gift from Jehovah), but his name was later changed to Zedekiah (righteousness of Jehovah). Sadly, he did not live up to either name!
 2. He was the final king because God was punishing His people by sending them into Babylonian captivity:
 - a. God had sent prophet after prophet to the nation of Judah and they consistently rejected their message & continued to disobey God’s law – God even warned them of punishment to come
 - b. Now through Jeremiah, God tells them they’d be spending seventy years in captivity **(Jer 25:11-12)** and because of this they needed to settle down and make themselves a life there **(Jer 29:4-7)**
 - c. Once the Jewish people returned from captivity, they were never the same again. They were always subject to another world power & never regained their former glory or independence
 3. Zedekiah was a man placed in an important position during a very critical time for God’s people:
 - a. Courageous & godly leadership may not have prevented the captivity at this point, but it would’ve helped the people’s transition into Babylon, spared much ruin, and avoided much sorrow
 - b. On the flip side, cowardly and ungodly leadership would only make what was already a difficult time for God’s people be even harder. It would bring added sorrow and destruction!
 - c. As Jeremiah spoke to Zedekiah, he warned Zedekiah of these possibilities very often!
- B. While Zedekiah had the opportunity to do great things and be a great leader, but he lacked the courage to stand up and do what was right!
1. When the officials mistreat Jeremiah, what does Zedekiah do about it? NOTHING! **(Jeremiah 37:15-16)**

- a. The officials could not stand Jeremiah's message from God. He kept telling them, "If you don't surrender to the forces of Babylon you will be destroyed, if you do surrender, you will live"
 - b. For a man who keeps calling for Jeremiah to come speak God's word to him and pray for the nation, Zedekiah sure does allow his officials to treat Jeremiah in a horrible & unjust way!
 - c. Notice how Jeremiah has to stay in the "dungeon cells" for many days – These certainly aren't you typical modern jail cells. These would be dark miserable places where torture was normal!
 - d. Certainly Zedekiah might be able to plead ignorance in this matter at first, but once Jeremiah brings it to his attention why doesn't he do anything about it? Why does he seek secrecy?
2. Next the officials accuse Jeremiah of treason and cast him into a cistern filled with mud. Zedekiah clearly knows of this but tries to take an indifferent approach to the situation **(Jeremiah 38:4-6)**
 - a. What's amazing about this is that Zedekiah doesn't hate Jeremiah like these men do. In fact, just a little bit earlier he had been asking for his prayers and his prophecies! **(Jeremiah 37:3, 17)**
 - b. Zedekiah's response doesn't make sense – He is the KING over Judah, these officials are supposed to be serving him, and yet he says he can do thing against them? Sounds like the words of a man who has lost control... Instead of ruling over his people, his people are ruling over him!
 - c. He won't personally do any harm to Jeremiah and by turning him over to the hands of the officials he may feel like he's free from any responsibility or guilt, but a neutral response is a negative response! By doing nothing when he had the power to do everything he was full of guilt!
 - d. Zedekiah's response to Jeremiah seems eerily similar to Pilate's response to Jesus **(Matt 27:21-26)**
 3. When Jeremiah spoke a message of surrender, instead of standing beside him & obeying God, Zedekiah chose to do what pleased his peers and rejected Jeremiah's words **(Jeremiah 38:14-18, 24-26)**
 - a. You have to love Jeremiah's boldness and candidness – He lays it on the line to Zedekiah and gets to the heart of the matter. It didn't matter what Jeremiah said, Zedekiah wouldn't listen!
 - b. Twice in this text we see Zedekiah's desire for secrecy – Why? He is fearful of his own officials!
 - c. It seemed that whatever Jeremiah told Zedekiah to do, his officials would tell him to do the opposite thing. They were angered by Jeremiah's message of surrender and applied great pressure to the king to get him to reject Jeremiah. Sadly, the king listened to his officials!
 - d. We can ask, "Just who is ruling whom?" It's clear that although he is the king over Judah, he's not the one who is in charge! He has become a puppet in the hands of his own officials
 - e. **Quote:** "A weak and vacillating person, Zedekiah was appointed to rule, we suspect, because the Babylonians knew that he had no will of his own and would submit to what was commanded. What they failed to anticipate was that he would do what he was told by anyone who was in the room with him." Although a king, Zedekiah has become nothing more than a pawn!
 - f. The truth comes out as Jeremiah gives Zedekiah this final warning. Zedekiah says, "I am afraid" – It was fear that had been motivating his decisions or lack of decision making! **(Jeremiah 38:19)**
 4. Because Zedekiah reacted out of fear and refused to obey God's commands, both himself and the people he ruled over became subjected to incredible tragedy **(Jeremiah 39:6-10)**
 - a. For a moment imagine what it would be like to go blind in the middle of your life. You'd remember things you had seen, but what image would stand out the most? The last thing you saw! The last thing Zedekiah saw before his eyes were gouged out was his own sons being executed!
 - b. Remember how Jeremiah was put into a cistern and he sank into the mud? Well, at the end of the story it is Zedekiah who was stuck sinking in mud because of his lack of courage! **(Jer 38:22)**
 - c. But notice that he wasn't the only one who suffered – The people whom he ruled over saw their own houses burned and many of them were carried off into captivity... A heartbreaking day!

- d. What's more tragic is that this was avoidable! Jeremiah had always told Zedekiah that if he would just surrender, they would be spared and allowed to continue to live in their land!
5. By chronicling the responses of Zedekiah's, we can see just how highly fickle his decisions were:
 - a. He calls for Jeremiah and says, "Pray for us to the Lord our God" (**Jeremiah 37:3**)
 - b. Jeremiah gets false accused in a kangaroo court type setting, he gets beat, and Zedekiah seems to do nothing. Then Zedekiah allows Jeremiah to stay in prison many days (**Jer. 37:11-16**)
 - c. He questions Jeremiah, but secretly, to see if there was any word from the Lord (**Jeremiah 37:17**)
 - d. He improves Jeremiah's condition, but leaves him in the court of the guard (**Jeremiah 37:21**)
 - e. He washes his hands of the responsibility of Jeremiah so he just sits idly by while the officials cast Jeremiah into a cistern that had a bunch of mud in it (**Jeremiah 38:5-6**)
 - f. Then he rescues Jeremiah, but he does not do it until prompted by another man and he does not take any action about it himself. He distances himself from the matter (**Jeremiah 38:7-13**)
 - g. He sends for Jeremiah, asks for God's message, and asks Jeremiah to hold nothing back (**Jer 38:14**)
 - h. He makes an oath to Jeremiah to protect him from those officials who sought his life; however, he makes this oath in secret. Why would he not do such a thing openly? (**Jeremiah 38:16**)
 - i. He does not want to surrender like Jeremiah says because he says he is afraid (**Jeremiah 38:19**)
 - j. He pleads with Jeremiah to keep his prophecies a secret because he is afraid of how the people he rules over would react to the message (**Jeremiah 38:24**)
 - k. He rejects Jeremiah's instructions and refuses to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar. When the army of Babylon comes, he runs away, but ultimately is captured anyway (**Jeremiah 39:4**)
 6. Throughout this story, one person stands tall in great contrast to Zedekiah. It is Jeremiah who consistently displays courage and strength in holding fast to God's word regardless of its popularity or consequences!
 - a. God did not pull the wool over Jeremiah's eyes but was very candid with him from the start about the fact that the people would not listen to him and he'd be mistreated (**Jeremiah 1:17-19**)
 - b. It took great courage and faith to keep preaching the same message after having been rejected, put in prison, beat, and even cast into that cistern. They had even sought to kill him for it!
 - c. He is a great example of doing what is right regardless of the consequences – He is a man of faith!

C. Now, let's look at some lessons we can learn from the life of King Zedekiah:

1. Why is fear such a major problem? Fear is one of the greatest enemies of faith and our service to God!
 - a. Think of the many times in the Bible fear paralyzed people: Fear caused Abraham to lie about Sarah being his sister, fear caused the Israelites to not go ahead and conquer Canaan, fear caused Pilate to bend to the Jews, and fear caused Elijah to run away and get depressed
 - b. Fear destroys our faith, fear paralyzes our service to the Lord, fear keeps us from standing up for what's right, fear keeps us from teaching others, fear keeps us from changing our lives!
 - c. It was fear which caused the one talent man to hide his talent & do nothing with it! (**Matt 25:25**)
 - d. It was fear which caused Peter to shrink in faith as he walked on the water to Jesus (**Matt 14:30**)
 - e. And it is fear which destroys our faith and paralyzes our service to God, but real faith conquers our fears, gives us courage to stand, & strength to serve God! (**Hebrews 13:5-6**)
2. Being a leader sometimes means doing what is not popular because it is doing what is right! It takes great courage to take a stand against peers or the majority, or in the face of tough consequences! (**Eph 5:7-10**)
 - a. In your home → If your child wants something that takes them in the wrong direction, will you risk their being angry with you? Will you enforce godliness in your children even if you know it'll cost their popularity? If your spouse tries to hinder your service to God do you keep serving?

- b. On the job → What if you are asked to do something illegal or immoral, do you refuse at the risk of being fired? What if you are asked to work such hours that it hinders your ability to be a husband or a father... What if it hinders your life as a Christian... Do you make the sacrifice?
 - c. At church → Perhaps division breaks out among the members, whose side do you take, if any? If church discipline is needed, do we go through with it? If someone is teaching something that is wrong, do we take a stand? If a problem with morality occurs, do we take a stand?
 - d. In your individual Christian life in general → Did you know that we are all rulers? We are reigning with Christ now (**Rev 5:10**), we are God's royal priesthood (**I Pet 2:9**), and we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (**Matt 5:13-15**) – As God's people we are leaders in this world! Every day we must choose between doing what is right & doing what is convenient!
3. We must stand firm against allowing others to keep us from obeying the Lord! (**I Peter 3:14-16**)
 - a. Maybe it's fear of peer pressure – We are afraid of losing their acceptance, friendship, or approval
 - b. Maybe it's fear of reactions – We fear whether they will oppose us or somehow bring ruin to us
 - c. Maybe it's fear of condemning – We are afraid that if we believe, accept, and obey some particular thing in the Bible that it will condemn someone we care deeply about.
 - d. We need the courage to do what is right, regardless of who stands with us! (**2 Tim 4:14-17**)
 4. Like with Zedekiah, a lack of courage brings great personal and interpersonal destruction!
 - a. Jesus described the territory of Hell as being littered with the souls of people who lacked the courage to do what was right. Notice the type of "sins" fear is listed with! (**Revelation 21:8**)
 - b. Fear causes us to continue in a path that leads to spiritual destruction, it causes us to sit back and say nothing when others are wrong, it causes us to not to make those difficult decisions
 - c. Many people have faced unjust defamation or mistreatment because one or more people lacked the courage to stand up for what was right and speak the truth!
 5. Courage means being willing to pay the price & suffer consequences for doing what is right, but isn't this what being a Christian involves in the first place? Those who follow Christ must be people of courage