

## **Jeremiah 38:1-28**

### **Jeremiah Thrown into a Cistern**

Zedekiah was a puppet king, a sort of placeholder appointed by the Babylonians. As such he had very little real authority and was easily bullied by the other princes.

Still, Zedekiah shows a remarkable inability to make a decision. One commentator said he had a wishbone instead of a backbone.

The king had been persuaded to rebel against the Babylonians and now they were besieging Jerusalem. Every day, some Jewish defenders were slipping out of the city and defecting to the Babylonians.

At this time Jeremiah was already under arrest again for preaching the same irritating message of submission to Babylon (see **Jeremiah 37**). In prison he was receiving only a single piece of bread per day.

Now these four princes - Shephatiah, Gedaliah, Jucal and Pashur - demand that the king execute Jeremiah.

**Jeremiah 38:4** - "Therefore the princes said unto the king, We beseech thee, let this man be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them: for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt."

**Jeremiah 38:5** - "Then Zedekiah the king said, Behold, he is in your hand: for the king is not he that can do any thing against you."

Some commentators see a parallel of Zedekiah with Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands to take no responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion.

**Jeremiah 38:6** - "Then took they Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire."

This was a cistern usually used to store water. Now during the siege the cistern was mostly mud, which Josephus says came up to Jeremiah's neck.

By lowering the prophet into this pit, the authorities evaded being directly responsible for Jeremiah's death because no blood was shed. He would simply starve. But it was certainly a death sentence.

Recall that Joseph had been thrown into a pit by his brothers, before they sold him to traveling merchants (**Genesis 37:12-28**). Daniel was thrown into a pit with lions, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were cast into a fiery furnace.

All these seem to foreshadow Jesus in the tomb, His descent into Sheol, and his "harrowing of hell" before His resurrection, when He "descended first into the lower parts of the earth" (**Ephesians 4:9**), demonstrating His power over death and Satan.

It is also a picture of our baptism - we die to our old life in Adam, the old man, and arise in newness of life in Christ.

### **Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian Eunuch**

The Ethiopian eunuch, a servant to Zedekiah (his name literally means "servant of the king") intercedes with Zedekiah for Jeremiah, and the king continues to vacillate.

**Jeremiah 38:9-10** - "My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for there is no more bread in the city. Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die."

### **A Small Detail of Kindness**

Ebed-Melech displays kindness to the aged prophet in the way he extracts him from the pit. Bare ropes would have cut into Jeremiah's arms, now merely skin and bones. But Ebed-Melech throws down some old clothes and rags to use as padding under his armpits when he pulls him out.

### **Eunuchs**

Generally, a eunuch (Hebrew *saris*) is a man who has been castrated. But the word later is used sometimes to indicate simply a high official. (Potiphar is called a "*saris*" of Pharaoh (**Genesis 37:36**), but he had a wife who tried to seduce Joseph).

Eunuchs were among a few groups by law excluded from "the congregation of the Lord."

- **Deuteronomy 23:1** - "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD."

- **Leviticus 21:17-23** gives a series of conditions that disqualifies someone to be a priest:

"Speak to Aaron, saying: 'No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch.'"

Why? For one thing, to distinguish Israel from the surrounding pagan cultures. Priests of some pagan idol worshipping cults were required to castrate themselves, and they also lashed themselves, marred their faces and cut themselves to prove their devotion. In Hittite and Greek myth, the creator god was castrated by his son. Tammuz or Attis was said to be a eunuch from birth. The goddess Ishtar employed androgynous or homosexual priests, although it's unclear whether they were castrated. Devotees of the goddess Cybele were castrated upon entering her service.

Also, since Christ as the sacrificial lamb was to be "without blemish" so should the priests reflect that perfection: "Be ye perfect as I am perfect." The physical picture would reflect the spiritual.

The rabbis said the prohibition applied only to those made eunuchs by the hand of man, and not by the hand of God - through an accident or being a eunuch from birth.

But the Bible shows us several important exceptions. Here, Ebed-Melech shows great respect and concern for Jeremiah, which depicts him as a believer. He plays a crucial role in saving Jeremiah from death.

The prophet Daniel is described as a eunuch, but the prohibitions of entering into the congregation would not have been in effect in Babylon.

Isaiah gives a prophecy of hope for eunuchs and others currently ineligible for inclusion.

**- Isaiah 56:3-5** - "Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, 'The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people:' neither let the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off."

This would be fulfilled in the days of Messiah, when the walls of ceremony would be abolished.

When the disciples ask Jesus whether it is "not good to marry," He describes a broader definition of eunuch.

**- Matthew 19:11-12** - "But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

Jewish tradition strongly urged people to marry and have children, but here Jesus is carving out a place of service for people who are called to remain single.

In the New Testament, we find another Ethiopian eunuch (**Acts 8:26-40**). He was probably a "God-fearer" i.e. a Gentile who was inclined toward Judaism and interested in learning about its beliefs. He "had come to Jerusalem to worship" but no doubt had to stay separate from the regular Jewish liturgy.

Philip was sent by God to meet him, and he found him reading **Isaiah 53:7-8**, a prophecy of the suffering of the Messiah. Philip tells him about how Jesus fulfilled that prophecy, and Philip baptizes him.

This was part of the Holy Spirit breaking down barriers - first the hated Samaritans received the gospel, then this eunuch, and later Cornelius the gentile Roman soldier. All were previously cut off from being part of the Kingdom of God.

We will hear about Ebed-Melech again after Jerusalem falls. God promises him he will be spared "because thou hast put thy trust in me, saith the LORD" (see **Jeremiah 39:18**).

### **Another Discussion With King Zedekiah**

The king wants to hear another word of prophecy from Jeremiah, hoping it will be different this time.

But Jeremiah is wary.

**Jeremiah 38:15** - "Then Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me?"

The king says he is ready to swear that Jeremiah won't be punished.

**Jeremiah 38:16** - "So Zedekiah the king sware secretly unto Jeremiah, saying, As the LORD liveth, that made us this soul, I will not put thee to death, neither will I give thee into the hand of these men that seek thy life."

Zedekiah's promises had proven to be untrustworthy, but Jeremiah decides to speak anyway.

**Jeremiah 38:17-18** - "Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house: But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand."

It's the same message as always!

But Zedekiah has another excuse for not heeding God's word.

**Jeremiah 38:19** - "And Zedekiah the king said unto Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me."

Jeremiah responds that instead of worrying about being mocked by the Jewish deserters, he should worry about the curses he'll receive from his wives and sons as they are taken away by the Babylonian soldiers.

Again, instead of facing the decision he must make, Zedekiah says he fears the princes and begs Jeremiah to keep their talk secret. Jeremiah reluctantly agrees.

Stop and consider this - Because of fear of the opinion of others, Zedekiah failed to act and Jerusalem was lost.

- **Proverbs 29:25** - "The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe."

- **Galatians 1:10** - "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ."

- **John 12:43** - "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."

**Jeremiah 38:27** - "Then came all the princes unto Jeremiah, and asked him: and he told them according to all these words that the king had commanded. So they left off speaking with him; for the matter was not perceived."

The siege was tightening and the destruction of the city could take place at any moment.

**Jeremiah 38:28** - "So Jeremiah abode in the court of the prison until the day that Jerusalem was taken: and he was there when Jerusalem was taken."

### **Bottom Line:**

The focus of this chapter, as Jerusalem is teetering on the edge of destruction, is the vacillation and indecision and "fear of the faces of men" not only by Zedekiah, but also the princes who opposed Jeremiah but didn't want to take responsibility for his death.

Into this cesspool of moral mush steps Ebed-Melech the eunuch, who like the good Samaritan is an outsider, and who takes action and does the right thing. May we always see reality as clearly as he did and have the courage to speak and act as the Spirit directs!

### **Leaving the City**

Spiritually, Jeremiah's instruction to Zedekiah is the same as his instruction to us today -

leave the Jerusalem that now is.

From God's perspective, the only option for the faithful was to leave the city of Jerusalem. To stay in the city meant support for the deceitful and hypocritical religion of pseudo-Judaism endorsed by false prophets that God condemned.

Later, in the Apostle Paul's view, that religion - a rule-following, Pharisaical false-piety that trusts in the strength of the flesh to be obedient - was compared to Hagar and was to be "cast out."

**- Romans 3:20–22** - "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight"

The physical city of Jerusalem now represents false religion, according to Paul's allegory.

**- Galatians 4:25-26** - "For this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all."

The Jerusalem that now is reflects a religion that depends of human strength and leaves us in bondage.

The Jerusalem above is based on love and freedom.

**- Romans 8:3-4** - "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

**- Romans 13:8–10** - "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."

*(Thanks to Robert Sussland for this insight)*