

Jeremiah's Rescue

Devotional Reading: Romans 13:1–10

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 20:1–6; 37:1–38:28; 43:1–7

Today's Scripture: Jeremiah 38:7–13

I. Jeremiah's Predicament Jeremiah 38:7–10

⁷ But Ebed-Melek, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸ Ebed-Melek went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.”

¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-Melek the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.”

7a. Jeremiah's location in *the cistern*, where his enemies have left him to die, draws the attention of a certain *Ebed-Melek, a Cushite*. This cistern is an underground reservoir used to collect water. There is no way to escape without outside help. Jeremiah was completely trapped, left to starve to death in a horrible pit where he could not even lie down.

If Jeremiah's legs sank even a couple of feet into the clay, any escape would be impossible; Jeremiah was in a hopeless situation. Perhaps Jeremiah's friends

might notice his disappearance, but his corpse might not be discovered for months, if ever. Psalm 40:2 offers a similar word picture and praises God for a rescue from a (figurative) “slimy pit” filled with “mud and mire.” It was probably of little comfort to Jeremiah that such facilities for storing water were ceremonially clean.

7b. Ebed-Melek knows the king's habits and movements. *The Benjamin Gate* is likely on the northeastern corner of Jerusalem's wall; it is the gate that Jeremiah tried to use in attempting to return to Anathoth. Jeremiah had been beaten there, and his arrest at this same gate has led to his current confinement.

A city gate was more than a fortified entry point. Some gates had benches for elders of the community to sit and render judgments (see 2 Samuel 19:8; Jeremiah 26:10). Gates were gathering places for those seeking authoritative rulings on legal matters (2 Samuel 15:2). King Zedekiah was at the gate presumably to administer judgments in his official capacity. Thus his servant knows where to find him. He can go to seek an audience, like the other citizens of Jerusalem.

8. To travel from *the palace* to the Benjamin gate is a distance of no more than a quarter of a mile. The royal palace, built by King Solomon some 330

years prior, is probably to the immediate south of the temple.

Ebed-Melek approaches the man who had given tacit approval to Jeremiah's execution. The approach takes place in a public venue, where witnesses will hear an official response. It could be that Ebed-Melek suspects that the king is willing to let Jeremiah die, but admitting it publicly is another matter.

The king's servant seems to have no problem gaining an audience with King Zedekiah. Ebed-Melek's case concerns a life-and-death matter, a dire need that goes beyond the usual questions of property disputes or inheritance rights.

9. We speculated earlier on the reason for Ebed-Melek's intervention. Now we see more of the immediate context: given that people are beginning to starve due to the siege, no one will be throwing bread down to Jeremiah (if there were anyone doing so to begin with). The fact that the prophet has been treated unjustly and does not deserve to die is summed up in the line *these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet*.

This servant of the king trusts in the legitimacy of Jeremiah's message, or at least the earnestness of the prophet's ministry. The servant seems to be persuaded that Jeremiah has spoken the truth. But even if the king were to choose not to listen to Jeremiah, it would be wicked to leave him to die in a pit by an unapproved means of execution enacted without due process.

Ebed-Melek's words sound as if he believes the king to be unaware of what Jeremiah's opponents have done to the prophet. Even if he blames Zedekiah, the servant does not accuse his *lord the king* in public, with witnesses at the gate who can overhear.

Instead, Ebed-Melek chooses not to

identify Jeremiah's enemies by name specifically (*these men*). A willingness to shed innocent blood was among the gravest charges that Jeremiah had brought against King Zedekiah and his predecessors (2 Kings 24:3–4; Jeremiah 22:3, 17). Jeremiah had warned the kings to pursue judgment and righteousness in order to avoid the most destructive consequences. But instead, the nobles turned against the prophet because of his willingness to speak the truth and seek the good of his city. Jeremiah's own futile ministry had become the ultimate demonstration of the cravenness of Judah's ruling powers (Jeremiah 5:20–21).

10. We notice that the king's orders are to stop the damage that is in progress, not to find and punish those responsible. Of course, readers understand why the king does not seek those who are responsible, because he gave them permission in the first place! He was caught in the difficulty of his own making with a failed attempt on Jeremiah's life now exposed to public scrutiny. So the king gives orders to show that he is doing something about the situation. He will be able to claim that he saved Jeremiah's life.

The king is likely surrounded by bodyguards, and they are likely the source of the *thirty men* Ebed-Melek is to take *from here*; this is the suggestion of Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian. Or they may merely be men of the city who have some role in the city's defense. A band of this size will be sufficient to overcome anyone who tries to stop them from freeing the prophet. The wording *before he dies* paints a picture of urgency.

II. Jeremiah's Rescue Jeremiah 38:11–13

¹¹ So Ebed-Melek took the men with

him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern.¹² Ebed-Melek the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so,¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

11a. An earlier place of Jeremiah’s confinement was “the courtyard of the guard” (Jeremiah 32:2, 8; 33:1; 37:21). He is now in the same area, but below ground in a reservoir for water. We were previously told that the “cistern” chosen for Jeremiah’s captivity was under the house of Malkijah. This house was part of the “court of the prison,” meaning it bordered on an open area given that name (38:6). Even though Malkijah is “the king’s son,” he is not the son of Zedekiah. He is one of the “princes” who are pressuring the king and seeking Jeremiah’s death. Malkijah was the father of Pashhur, one of four named individuals who confronted Zedekiah in the first place, demanding Jeremiah be killed (38:1, 4).

Before proceeding to the cistern itself, Ebed-Melek and his men go to a room in the king’s palace. This is identified as being *under the treasury*, a different room in the palace on a higher level. The reason they go here comes next.

11b. They find *old cast clouts* as well as *worn-out clothes* in the storage area.

Archaeologists have found dozens of ancient cisterns around Jerusalem, some 100 feet deep. One, known as the “Great Cistern,” is estimated to have the capacity of two million gallons of water, although this cavity seems to have been

built after Jeremiah lived. We can easily imagine the relief that Jeremiah experiences: the cover of his prison is removed, he is able to hear friendly voices at the top, and soon a soft bundle is lowered from above.

12. The purpose behind the collection of old clothes is now revealed. They are to serve as padding for the *ropes*. Ropes or cords of antiquity would be rough and could cut into Jeremiah’s skin as he is hauled to the surface, possibly ending his life through a nasty infection. Perhaps Jeremiah is bare-chested or was stripped naked before being placed in the cistern. If so, his skin could be made raw as the cords are used to tug and pull him out of the mud. The men have to bring him up slowly and carefully, with the rope rigged around his body under his arms. Fortunately, they are not too late. Jeremiah has not lost consciousness; he is able to do what they tell him and arrange his padded harness.

13. Pulling the prophet *out of the cistern* is surely a long and nerve-wracking procedure. With his rescue complete, Jeremiah does not attempt to flee the city. He remains where he was previously confined, the *courtyard of the guard*. He may be intentionally remaining in a type of “protective custody” so that he can steer clear of rearrest or assassination from the nobles and false prophets who are after him.

The epilogue to this story is that, later, Jeremiah calls Ebed-Melek back to the court of the prison where he is confined. The courageous official is told that he shall escape unharmed from Jerusalem’s impending destruction when the Babylonians breach the walls. The Lord’s message to this deliverer is that, because of his trust in the Lord, on that day, “I will save you” (Jeremiah 39:18). On that day, the rescuer would be rescued.

Involvement Learning

Jeremiah's Rescue

Into the Lesson

*If you can't say anything nice,
don't say anything at all.*

Give an example of when you followed that advice:

Give an example of when you did not follow that advice:

Today, we will learn how one man stood up to the king and the officials. Because this man chose to speak up, Jeremiah's life was saved. As we study, consider how today's lesson can guide us in helping others who need rescue or intervention.

Into the Word

Read Jeremiah 38:7–13 and then prepare a presentation about one of the characters in the narrative. Use online resources in your presentation, if you wish. Your presentation needs to address the following questions:

What are the words and actions of your character in today's Scripture?

What word(s) best describes your character?

What other passages from Scripture, if any, mention your character?

In what ways can we learn from the words and actions of your character?

Key Verse

Then the king commanded Ebed-Melek the Cushite, "Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies."

—Jeremiah 38:10

Into Life

We too can be bold and stand up for those in spiritual and physical need. Identify one way you can meet either a physical or spiritual need of members of the community. Write down a specific plan to accomplish this in the upcoming weeks:

Thought to Remember

God might ask us to take risks to help others.