

May 16 Lesson 11 (NIV)

PREACHING DOOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 37-38

JEREMIAH 38:14-23

¹⁴ Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. "I am going to ask you something," the king said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me."

¹⁵ Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me."

¹⁶ But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill you."

¹⁷ Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. ¹⁸ But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from them.' "

¹⁹ King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me."

²⁰ "They will not hand you over," Jeremiah replied. "Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. ²¹ But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me: ²² All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you:

" 'They misled you and overcame you—
those trusted friends of yours.
Your feet are sunk in the mud;
your friends have deserted you.' "

²³ "All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down."

KEY VERSE

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me." —Jeremiah 38:15

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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 - A. Information Request (v. 14)
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- II. A Private Prophecy (Jeremiah 38:17–23)
 - A. Results of Obedience (vv. 17–20)
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- A. A Successful Ministry
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HOW TO SAY IT

Ebed-MelekEe-bed-*mee*-lek.

JehoiachinJeh-*hoy*-uh-kin.

JosiahJo-*sigh*-uh.

MattaniahMat-uh-*nye*-uh.

NebuchadnezzarNeb-yuh-kud-*nez*-er.

ZedekiahZed-uh-*kye*-uh.

Introduction

A. Unheeded Warnings

Katsuhiko Ishibashi, a seismologist and university professor in Japan, for years warned that many of Japan's nuclear power plants were at risk for significant damage from earthquakes. Though he and his colleagues warned about possible catastrophe, they were largely ignored. When a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred off the northeastern coast of Japan's main island in March 2011, the resulting tsunami caused massive damage to the nuclear power station in Fukushima.

The ensuing radioactive fallout forced some 160,000 people to evacuate their homes across an area of approximately 300 square miles. Studies and reports since published vindicate Ishibashi's warnings about possible disaster at the site.

When the nation of Judah faced God's wrath for their many violations of the covenant with God, the Lord commissioned Jeremiah to sound the warnings and call them to repentance. Perhaps it was not too late for this faltering nation and their king to avert the disaster and desolation that awaited them.

B. Lesson Context

The prophet Jeremiah delivered God's message to the nation of Judah from 627 until the mid-580s BC. That was roughly a century after the prophet Isaiah. Five kings reigned over Judah during Jeremiah's ministry. Josiah, the first of these five, was righteous (2 Kings 23:25). The four following him, however, were all wicked. These included Jehoiachin, who was removed from the throne and taken into captivity when the Babylonians invaded in 597 BC (24:12). King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon replaced Jehoiachin with that man's uncle, Mattaniah, renaming him Zedekiah in the process (24:17).

Zedekiah wavered between service to the Babylonian king and rebellion against that overlord. Zedekiah ruled for Judah's final decade as a nation before it fell in 586 BC.

The destruction of Judah at the hands of Babylon that Isaiah had foreseen decades earlier (see 2 Kings 20:16–18) drew near during Jeremiah's day. Like the northern kingdom of Israel before, Judah's unfaithfulness to the covenant had exhausted the Lord's great patience. Jeremiah proclaimed that the Lord would use the Babylonians as instruments of judgment against Judah (Jeremiah 20:4–6).

Throughout his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah warned Jerusalem in word and in deed of the coming destruction. He illustrated this message in symbolic actions (examples: Jeremiah 13:1–11; 19:1–15; 27:1–11). Yet rarely did anyone take this prophet seriously (37:2). His oracles were misunderstood and dismissed as the rhetoric of a traitorous, pro-Babylonian sympathizer (37:11–13). Jerusalem's more "loyal" prophets proclaimed peace, safety, and deliverance. Their fabricated, uninspired message was believed among the populace.

Twice in Judah's closing months, while Jerusalem was under siege, Jeremiah endured punishments for his message of doom. First, he was beaten and held in a dungeon cell for many days (Jeremiah 37:15–16). Zedekiah, however, summoned him from the dungeon and released him into the courtyard of the guard (37:21). There he continued to reveal the unpleasant things God told him (38:1–3).

Zedekiah's officials took exception to Jeremiah's preaching because his warnings were deemed treasonous and demoralizing (Jeremiah 38:4). With Zedekiah unwilling to oppose them, the officials had Jeremiah put down into a muddy cistern (38:6). But a high official named Ebed-Melek gathered 30 men (also with Zedekiah's concession) to lift Jeremiah out of the mud and rescue him from certain death (38:8–13).

I. A Secret Meeting (JEREMIAH 38:14–16)

A. Information Request (v. 14)

14. Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. "I am going to ask you something," the king said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me."

When the Babylonians returned and besieged Jerusalem and defeat seemed near, *Zedekiah* began to summon *Jeremiah* for conversations. *The third entrance to the temple of the Lord* probably indicates a backdoor access from the palace to the temple. The king apparently wanted a private setting where he could talk with Jeremiah outside of his officials' hearing (see Lesson Context). Perhaps Zedekiah thought that Jeremiah might reverse his oracles of judgment and the Lord would grant Jerusalem a reprieve after all.

This was not the first such conversation (see Jeremiah 34:6–7; 37:17). Zedekiah's repeated summoning of Jeremiah shows that at least part of him respected Jeremiah's advice, if not his standing as an inspired prophet of God. Yet his terse command to Jeremiah, *Do not hide anything from me*, shows that Zedekiah did not yet understand that Jeremiah always told the king everything God told the prophet.

B. Setting Terms (vv. 15–16)

15. Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me."

Jeremiah certainly feared for his life and may have considered whether repeating earlier warnings was worth the risk. God had given him assurances of protection at the time of his calling, even from kings and officials (Jeremiah 1:18–19; 15:20–21). Yet Jeremiah still feared, for he too was human with doubts (1:6; 15:18; 20:7). Given recent events, he had every reason to believe that a harsh word against Zedekiah could spell his own demise (26:20–23).

Jeremiah surmised that Zedekiah was hoping for a more favorable word from the Lord this time. But the prophet also knew that no favorable word would be forthcoming.

16. But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill you."

King Zedekiah continued the secret conversation by giving *Jeremiah* the purported assurance of safety that he sought. Whether or not *Zedekiah* was sincere was one question; the more important question was whether he would follow through. His word meant little because, unlike his father, Josiah (2 Kings 23:24–25), or his brother Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36:1–2, 4, 20–26), his character was not dependably good or evil.

Zedekiah believed he held Jeremiah's life in his hands. He ironically swore this oath by *the Lord ... who has given us breath*, a poetic way of acknowledging that God gives life. The king inadvertently acknowledged that God is actually the one who decides between life and death.

II. A Private Prophecy

(JEREMIAH 38:17–23)

A. Results of Obedience (vv. 17–20)

17a. Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

Jeremiah knew that this king would likely waffle, given past behavior (example: *Jeremiah* 34:8–22). Even so, the prophet still proclaimed the word from the Lord, come what may. This is the mark of true commitment. *Jeremiah* did not ask what Zedekiah wanted to learn or tell the king what he hoped to hear. Even if *Jeremiah* had wanted to withhold the message, he would have failed anyway. The word of God was like a fire in *Jeremiah's* bones (20:9), impossible to hold back whether anyone listened or not (6:10–11).

Piling up designations for *the Lord* emphasized that *God Almighty* was the true king in Israel. God had allowed the Israelites to have a human king because they desired to be like the other nations (1 Samuel 8:5–9). He knew this was a result of faithlessness and would also lead to more faithlessness.

Referring to the Lord as *the God of Israel* has implications for how the people were called to conduct themselves (compare Leviticus 26). But idolatry and injustice had landed them in a position to face God's punishment. They did not act as people who belonged to the Lord.

17b. “ ‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live.

The Lord's offer to spare Zedekiah's life upon surrender to the Babylonians accords with terms previously stated (*Jeremiah* 21:8–9). God's offer to spare the *city* from fiery destruction might seem like an astonishing, last-minute reversal (compare 21:10; 34:2, 22; 37:9–10). But the Lord has the freedom to change his mind about either blessing or punishment for a nation that alters its course (*Jeremiah* 18:5–10). He did so for Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah (*Jonah* 3:10). The Lord did not offer a solution in which Zedekiah was allowed to remain king in Jerusalem. But the Lord did offer a solution that would avoid Jerusalem's being *burned down* or Zedekiah's experiencing great personal violence.

The nation of Judah apparently had chances early on to avert disaster entirely (*Jeremiah* 4:1–4). Yet God eventually was determined unreservedly to punish Judah (4:27–28). Although judgment in Babylon was by this time assured, God still offered mercy to his people and their king (compare 1 Kings 21:20–29). Nonetheless, *Jeremiah* offered a glimpse of what would occur if Zedekiah made other choices. Accepting God's mercy in judgment would mitigate some of the horrible consequences that otherwise would follow.

Christians still experience God's discipline tempered by his mercy, even though we don't always recognize it as such (1 Corinthians 11:31–32; Hebrews 12:4–11). This is part of the process of God's using all things for our good (Romans 8:28). This isn't to say we will enjoy all things or

that all things will seem good at some point. Instead, *all* things that happen to us and around us are meant to make us into the image of Jesus (8:29).

18. “But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from them.’ ”

Jeremiah’s words implicitly called for Zedekiah to ignore the officials who were urging him not to surrender (Jeremiah 27:12–15). But beyond Zedekiah’s lack of character and the grave sins of Judah, there was another reason Jeremiah could be resigned to Jerusalem’s being burned by *the Babylonians*. The prophets had been warning of Judah’s destruction for many years (2 Kings 21:10–15; Isaiah 39:6; Micah 3:12; compare Jeremiah 7:25–26; 25:4; 26:17–18). Though God can change his mind (see commentary on Jeremiah 38:17b, above), he also clearly stated that blessing resulted from obedience and curses came from faithlessness (Deuteronomy 30:15–18). Without repentance and obedience, Jerusalem had no hope of experiencing God’s great mercy.

19. King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me.”

Had *Zedekiah* feared the Babylonians themselves, it would be hard to blame him. Even fearing his own officials is understandable to an extent, since his predecessor, Jehoiakim, was probably murdered by his own officials the last time the Babylonians invaded (Jeremiah 22:18–19; 36:29–31).

The fear he expressed at this point, however, seems comparatively insignificant. Some of Jerusalem’s citizenry already had surrendered to the Babylonians. Zedekiah did not want to expose himself to their scorn or potential murderous mistreatment.

20. “They will not hand you over,” Jeremiah replied. “Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared.

Zedekiah had tried to make the issue into a purely political matter, but he was oblivious to the real issue. *Jeremiah* thus directed the king back to the core spiritual realities.

Obedience to *the Lord* was Zedekiah’s only viable course of action. The promise *your life will be spared* probably referred more to quality of life than mere survival, for Zedekiah was already guaranteed to survive (Jeremiah 34:4–5). Indeed, the quality of Zedekiah’s life after remaining rebellious to both God and Nebuchadnezzar ended up being quite poor (52:8–11).

B. Consequences of Rebellion (vv. 21–23)

21. But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me:

Jeremiah made clear that this preview of the future comes from God. Contrary to what Zedekiah might have thought, the prophet himself could not set the course. He had no more control over what happened than a weather forecaster has control over the weather.

22. All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you: “ ‘They misled you and overcame you—those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.’ ”

Zedekiah's *palace* would fall if he didn't do as the Lord had revealed (see Jeremiah 38:17, above). This could refer to his family in general, his descendants, or (less likely) the Davidic line entirely.

Jeremiah painted a picture of Zedekiah's *women* (referring to wives and concubines) ridiculing him as they became captives to the Babylonians. Women in war suffer immensely at the hands of oppositional forces. If Zedekiah cared for the women of his household, he would follow Jeremiah's counsel. That would spare the women's being taken into the houses of *officials of the king of Babylon* for whatever purpose those men desired.

Maybe to curry favor and maybe just out of heartbreak, the women would mock Zedekiah because of his officials' treachery. Many of those advisers already had deserted him (Jeremiah 37:19), and the rest would soon follow. Jeremiah knew what betrayal felt like (20:10) as well as having his *feet ... sunk in the mud* (38:6). Zedekiah would have no Ebed-Melek to rescue him from the metaphorical pit (38:7–13). Jeremiah hoped this grim vision would appeal to the king's fear and self-interest and result in obedience.

23. "All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down."

Jeremiah built on his dire prophecies by emphasizing that not only Zedekiah's *wives* but also his *children* would go into Babylonian exile. Like their mothers, children suffer horribly in wartimes. This is a clear escalation of Jeremiah's appeal not to Zedekiah's logical side but to his emotional center. What father would willingly subject his children to seeing their mothers *captured* and their *city ... burned down*?

Yet even hearing the sad fate that awaited his family failed to move Zedekiah. He was more concerned about keeping the secret from his officials, maybe even protecting Jeremiah, than about obedience to God or the consequences that awaited him (see Jeremiah 38:24–26, not in our printed text).

The dates given in Jeremiah 39:1–2 compute to a siege of 18 months, ending on July 18, 586 BC. The king and some of his soldiers fled Jerusalem at night (Jeremiah 39:4; 2 Kings 25:4; compare Ezekiel 12:12). The Babylonians hunted him down, however, and captured him.

Zedekiah's sentence was to see his sons put to death before his own eyes, be blinded afterward, then taken in shackles to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7). His officials, what few remained at that point, were executed (Jeremiah 39:6). The city of Jerusalem was burned to the ground (2 Kings 25:9).

Zedekiah's demise came by God's hand (Jeremiah 34:22; Ezekiel 12:13–14). That was something even the Babylonians themselves realized (Jeremiah 40:1–3). Such was the fate of one who trusted in human wisdom rather than believing that God would do what he said (Proverbs 3:5–8).

Conclusion

A. A Successful Ministry

What other ministry of doom would we hold in such high esteem as Jeremiah's? He was a failure by human standards: accused falsely instead of believed, persecuted by officials, betrayed by family. No one obeyed Jeremiah's words. Even after his predictions about Zedekiah and Jerusalem were fulfilled, Jeremiah continued to be disbelieved and dismissed (Jeremiah 43:1–3).

Yet from the standpoint of faith, the life of Jeremiah was successful by God's standards. The contrast between him and Zedekiah could hardly be starker. Zedekiah was one whose mind wavered moment by moment as he tried to save his own skin in his own way. He had no meaningful faith, no courage, no enduring principles. All the while Jeremiah remained true to his calling, willing to deliver the word of God, even though he knew it could cost him dearly. He was open to God's leading even through doubts, tears, and fears. Those are the marks of real success.

Jeremiah is a book for today's times. Christians too can expect the world to ignore our message and ridicule our convictions. We can expect hostility to arise in areas where the gospel is proclaimed boldly.

In some nations, this results in loss of relevancy and influence. In others, it results in torture, rape, or beheading. Though Christ is with us always (Matthew 28:20), Christian discipleship carries no guarantee of personal comfort or applause. But like Jeremiah, we must learn to see the world as God sees it and remain true to our calling. We must continually pray that we will speak the truth boldly (Ephesians 6:19–20).

B. Prayer

Father, teach us what it means to live successfully in your sight. Give us the strength to proclaim your message to the world boldly, come what may. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Proclaiming God's message is risky,
but to ignore that message is fatal.¹