

Jeremiah's Rescue

Devotional Reading: Romans 13:1–10

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

Jeremiah 38:7–13

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.”

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.



Key Text

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

Introduction

A. Unjustly Imprisoned

In 1962, Nelson Mandela was arrested and sentenced to five years' imprisonment for working to overthrow the racist regime of his country of South Africa. In 1964, justices handed down a sentence of life imprisonment. For 18 years, Mandela was kept in the notorious Robben Island prison, a former leper colony and mental asylum.

But through all those years, Mandela's voice was not stilled, and international observers continued to monitor his status. He was eventually released in 1990 and, in an abrupt turn in 1994, was elected South Africa's first Black president. Although imprisonment for political reasons is wrong, it can sometimes have an effect that the persecutors do not expect. And so it is with today's text.

B. Lesson Context

Zedekiah was the last king of Judah before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In 597 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon seized control of Jerusalem. He deported the then-current king—Jehoiachin—to Babylon along with the royal family, court officials, 7,000 elite fighters, and other prominent citizens (2 Kings 24:14–16). Nebuchadnezzar installed Jehoiachin's 21-year-old uncle in his place, changing his name from Mattaniah to Zedekiah, which means “the Lord is righteous” (24:17). But Zedekiah did not honor the Lord.

Zedekiah and the prophet Jeremiah had a complicated relationship. On the one hand, Zedekiah consulted Jeremiah and asked him to pray (Jeremiah 37:3). Zedekiah wanted a “word from the Lord,” seeming to trust the prophet (37:17). But Zedekiah did not like what he kept hearing. He refused to humble himself and heed Jeremiah's message (2 Chronicles 36:12).

Even under duress, Jeremiah advised surrender to the Babylonians to save lives (Jeremiah 38:2–3). This led to accusations of being a traitor, resulting in imprisonment (37:11–16). A subsequent audience with the king resulted in more lenient treatment for a time (37:17–21). Yet the enemies

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 2: Jeremiah and the Promise of Renewal

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the historical context of Jeremiah 38.
2. Explain the points of view and motives of the various parties involved.
3. Identify the specific needs of someone who requires spiritual or physical rescue.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Unjustly Imprisoned
- B. Lesson Context

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

- A. Noticed by an Ally (vv. 7–9)
Malnutrition and Dehydration
- B. Addressed by the King (v. 10)

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

- A. Springing to Action (v. 11)
Urgency Required
- B. Creative Solution (vv. 12–13)

Conclusion

- A. Rescuers
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

of Jeremiah still conspired with King Zedekiah to have the prophet put to death (38:4–6; compare 26:11). Jeremiah has long predicted the doom of Jerusalem, and this isn't the first time he has advocated outright surrender (see 27:11). A previous king in Jerusalem had actually done just that several years prior (2 Kings 24:12).

All in all, Jeremiah is seen as a threat to the vested interests of the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem as he opposes their attitudes and practices again and again. One example is his criticism of their re-enslaving freed slaves (Jeremiah 34:8–22), a violation of the Law of Moses (compare Exodus 21:2–6; Deuteronomy 15:12). It has all led up to this point of being cast into a dungeon to die slowly of dehydration and malnutrition, the harshest punishment yet (Jeremiah 38:1–6).

I. Jeremiah's Predicament

(Jeremiah 38:7–10)

A. Noticed by an Ally (vv. 7–9)

7a. But Ebed-Melek, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern.

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. Many private homes may have had their own such cisterns for collecting water in this period (see 2 Kings 18:31). But given the dire needs of the besieged city, this one has become empty and is evidently deep due to the enemies' need to lower

Jeremiah into it by use of "ropes" (Jeremiah 38:6). 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. We might imagine that they got the idea from Genesis 37:18–23.

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 (Leviticus 11:36).

The word *Ebed-Melek* means "servant of the king." Thus this may be the man's job description rather than a personal name. His country of origin is south of Egypt. He may be friendly to Jeremiah because of being re-enslaved per discussion of Jeremiah 34:8–22, above (although he is not of the 12 tribes of Israel). Based on the way he acts in the narrative, he appears to be someone of authority, someone the king trusts.

The underlying Hebrew word translated *official* occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament. Older English translations, such as the *King James Version*, translate this word as "eunuch." While the Hebrew term for *official* might also be used in a more technical sense to describe eunuchs, it is not clear whether the kings of Israel and Judah had eunuchs in their service, as did other kings in the ancient Near East (compare 2 Kings 9:32; 20:18). The 45 occurrences of the Hebrew word at issue are translated "officer(s)" or "official(s)" 67 percent of the time, with translations "eunuch(s)" at 31 percent, "attendants" at 2 percent, and as a proper name at 6 percent in the *New International Version* of the Old Testament.

7b. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate,

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

How to Say It

Babylonians	Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.
Ebed-Melek	Eh-bed-Meh-lek.
Ethiopian	E-thee-o-pee-un (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Jehoiachin	Jeh-hoy-uh-kin.
Josephus	Jo-see-fus.
Malkijah	Mal-kye-uh.
Mattaniah	Mat-uh-nye-uh.
Nebuchadnezzar	Neb-yuh-kud- <i>nez</i> -er.
Zedekiah	Zed-uh-kye-uh.

return to Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1). Jeremiah had been beaten there (20:1–2), and his arrest at this same gate has led to his current confinement (37:11–17).

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. Ebed-Melek went out of the palace and said to him,

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. Various details of the original palace complex are found in 1 Kings 7:1–12, but we don't know which of those are still present by Jeremiah's day.

Ebed-Melek approaches the man who had given tacit approval to Jeremiah's execution (Jeremiah 38:5). 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 (as in Ruth 4).

What Do You Think?

When was a time you had to choose the right moment to begin an important conversation?

Digging Deeper

What is similar and what is different about the ways that Esther approaches King Ahasuerus in Esther 5:1–8?

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.”

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. Indeed, the king's statement, “He is in your hands The king can do nothing to oppose you,” in Jeremiah 38:5 almost sounds like an admission of powerlessness or at least intentional ignorance. Ebed-Melek may be phrasing his appeal tactfully and diplomatically, without a specific accusation. 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).

What Do You Think?

What is an example of a time when you witnessed a person treated unfairly?

Digging Deeper

Consider David's prayers in Psalm 72:1–2, 12–14. How does Jeremiah 38 illustrate the failure of Judah's kings?

Malnutrition and Dehydration

Quick—place your hand over the next paragraph so you don't see the answer to this question: What word fits this definition: "An attempt to explain or justify one's own behavior or attitude with plausible reasons, even if these are not true or appropriate"?

The word being defined above is *rationalize*. We humans are good at doing that, aren't we? Think about nutritional guidelines. On the one hand, there are many such guidelines and standards that we acknowledge as being healthy and reasonable. But on the other hand, our reasons for violating them are often a little more than transparent rationalizations.

The same is true in a spiritual sense—perhaps more so. Instead of seeking the bread of life (John 6:48), people rationalize reasons for feeding themselves impure spiritual bread made "with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness" (1 Corinthians 5:8). Instead of seeking the one who provides living water (John 4:10–14; 7:38), people favor "broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Who in your circle of influence needs living water and the bread of life today? —R. L. N.

B. Addressed by the King (v. 10)

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."

We notice that the king's orders are to stop the damage that is in progress, not to find and pun-

ish 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 (see Lesson Context)! 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.

What Do You Think?

Have you been tempted to take credit for an idea that wasn't yours? When have you witnessed this in others?

Digging Deeper

Jesus says the "heart" is where evil thoughts begin (Matthew 15:19). Why do we do the right thing for the wrong reasons?

II. Jeremiah's Rescue

(Jeremiah 38:11–13)

A. Springing to Action (v. 11)

11a. So Ebed-Melek took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace.

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. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern.

They find *old cast cloths* 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.

What Do You Think?

Have you ever struggled to deliver help to someone in need? What made it difficult?

Digging Deeper

What is a practical way that you might fulfill a need without being noticed or credited?

Urgency Required

When I was a sophomore in college, I received a phone call that no one wants to receive: my dad was being rushed to the hospital. My dad was eating a sandwich when he accidentally swallowed part of his dentures. It lodged in his throat and began to obstruct his airway.

Paramedics came immediately and rushed my dad to the hospital. Preparations were underway in the event that surgical removal was required.

Swelling in his esophagus was life-threatening. Just before the decision to perform surgery, an emergency room doctor was able to remove the obstruction. My dad could breathe again! His voice took time to return, but he eventually made a full recovery.

Likewise, when the king’s servant noticed Jeremiah’s need, he didn’t linger. He sought an immediate solution and brought the right people to help. If those around us are in need of rescue, we may not have the skills or experience to perform surgery, but we can set everything aside to make ourselves available. For spiritual needs, we can always point our friends and neighbors to the Savior, who is an expert rescuer!

If immediate action is required, are you prepared to respond?
—B. R.

B. Creative Solution (vv. 12–13)

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,

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. and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

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.

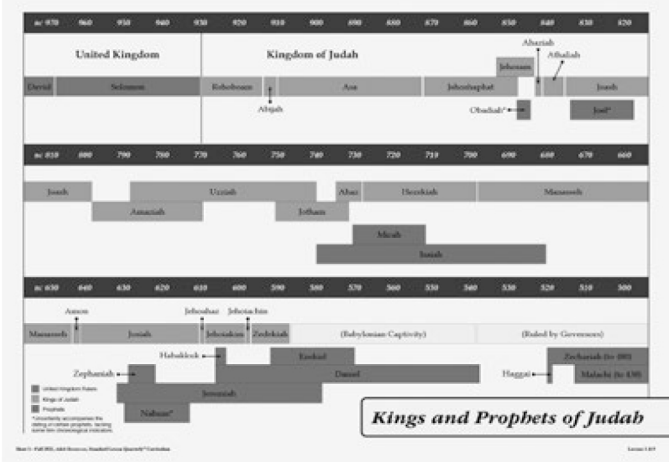
What Do You Think?
 Why do you imagine that Ebed-Melek risked so much to save the life of Jeremiah?

Digging Deeper
 Compare how God spared Ebed-Melek here and Rahab in Joshua 6:22–23. What about God’s character is revealed in these two stories?

Conclusion
A. Rescuers

The story of Jeremiah, Zedekiah, the plotting princes, and Ebed-Melek teaches several lessons. For Jeremiah, as with many of God’s prophets, the task of accurately reporting the word of the Lord was a difficult path to walk. Jesus himself would later travel to Jerusalem and experience deadly resistance, like the prophets of Israel’s past (see Matthew 23:37). Jesus warns those who wish to be his disciples that they too shall face resistance, shall be asked to “take up [a] cross” in order to follow him (Matthew 16:24). In the example of Zedekiah, we glimpse the consequences of cowardice, of caring only about a public perception instead of seeking truth. God’s plans may have disrupted the self-serving actions of Jerusalem’s nobles, but a just king should have stepped in to protect Jeremiah and listen to God’s message.

Ebed-Melek is an example of a courageous rescuer, one who risked the disapproval of his own



Visual for Lessons 1 & 9. Display this chart as you help participants familiarize themselves with the timeline of Judah’s kings and prophets.

boss to save the life of God’s servant. And God responded to this individual’s faithfulness, protecting him in the middle of a war zone. God is faithful to individuals, which is especially clear to those who are in desperate situations (see Joshua 6:22–23; 1 Samuel 23:26–29; Ruth 4:13–17).

Modern “rescuers” may take the form of professionals with high-tech equipment and training. When someone needs physical rescue, we are taught to call these emergency services. But there are many other opportunities for believers to perform small acts of deliverance for one another: giving financial assistance, offering care for children, and sitting with those experiencing tragedy or loss. A faithful rescuer should not give up. Ebed-Melek risked his favorable position, perhaps even his life, to confront the king at the gate and direct Jeremiah’s deliverance. He did what was right for someone who needed his help, and he did not look away.

B. Prayer

Lord God, give us spiritual sight to see those who are struggling and whom we can help. May we never look away when we see suffering and injustice. We pray in the name of Jesus, our rescuer from the powers of sin and death. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God might ask us to take risks to help others.