

Jeremiah 38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Jeremiah chapter 38. Now Shephethiah the son of Matan, Gedaliah the son of Pasha, Jukul the son of Shalamiah, and Pasha the son of Malkiah, heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people. Thus says the Lord, He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. But he who goes out, the Chaldeans, shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war and live. Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken. Then the officials said to the king, Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm. King Zedekiah said, Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you. So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malkiah the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud. And Jeremiah sank in the mud. When Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern, the king was sitting in the

Benjamin gate, Ebed-Melech went from the king's house and said to the king, My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city. Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, Take thirty men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies. So Ebed-Melech took the men with him, and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe in the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. Then Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes. Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes, and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet, and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord. The king said to Jeremiah, I will ask you a question, hide nothing from me. Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me. Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, As the Lord lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death, or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life. Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.

King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them, and they deal cruelly with me. Jeremiah said, You shall not be given to them. Obey now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared. But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the Lord has shown to me. Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon, and were saying, Your trusted friends have deceived you, and prevailed against you. Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you. All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city shall be burned with fire. Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. If the officials hear that I have spoken with you, and come to you and say to you, Tell us what you said to the king, and what the king said to you.

[4 : 0 1] Hide nothing from us, and we will not put you to death. Then you shall say to them, I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.

Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him.

So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken. In Jeremiah chapter 38, the story of the suffering prophet continues. Although Jeremiah has been persecuted and put in prison by the officials in the preceding chapter, he still seems to be able to deliver his message to people. He was released from the prison house of Jonathan the secretary, and he was imprisoned in the court of the guard instead. And now, imprisoned in the court of the guard, he is delivering a message that is threatening their cause. Back in chapter 21, verses 8 to 10, we read, And to this people you shall say, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. But he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have his life as a prize of war. For I have set my face against this city for harm and not for good, declares the Lord. It shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. The officials here repeat in summarized form the message that Jeremiah has been delivering. One can imagine in a war it is all or nothing. A character like Jeremiah to the officials would be regarded like Lord Haw-Haw during the Second World War, broadcasting Nazi propaganda to demoralize and discourage the allied troops. Jeremiah's message that they should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans was the very last thing that they wanted to get around. His message was demoralizing that the city would fall, that their efforts were in vain, and also seemingly treacherous.

Nebuchadnezzar being described as the servant of the Lord, the one to whom they should surrender. Indeed, had not Jeremiah himself been caught on the way out of the city, presumably to defect to the Babylonians? In the light of such fears and suspicions, you can understand the perspective of the officials. It is not going to be easy for them to admit that they are fighting against the word of the Lord. When they bring their word to the king, it becomes apparent that the king is not really the one in charge anymore. They are the ones that really hold the power. King Zedekiah seems to be fearful of his own officials and gives in to them, because he cannot withstand them. In a kingdom that had witnessed several coups over its history, the king's fears were quite understandable. He offers no resistance to them. Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you. The officials then take Jeremiah and cast him into what was probably a bottle dungeon, a bottle-shaped hole from which someone could not climb out. Here, in the suffering of Jeremiah, we might hear some resemblances with the suffering of Joseph and the way that he was cruelly mistreated by his brothers.

[6 : 53] Back in Genesis chapter 37 verses 20 to 24, Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams. But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, Let us not take his life. And Reuben said to them, Shed no blood, throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him, that he might rescue him out of their hand, to restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colours that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. Jeremiah's pit is described in a similar way to that of Joseph. It is the same word that is used, and once again we are told that there is no water in the pit. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, they wanted to shut up his prophetic dreams. Something similar is going on in the case of Jeremiah. The princes and the officials are concerned to shut up the word of Jeremiah from the Lord, the word that is discouraging the city. Their hope, like that of the brothers minus Reuben, is that the unwelcome prophet will waste away in the pit, dying without water to drink or food to eat.

The word of what has happened to Jeremiah comes to the ears of Ebed-Melek, an Ethiopian eunuch within the king's house. There is more than one significant Ethiopian eunuch in scripture.

Ebed-Melek was probably a foreigner close to the king. As a foreigner who had no family of his own, he could be more protective of the king's interests than some of the officials, and the king might trust him a lot more. The Judahite officials would all have their own clan interests and their desires to get their families ahead, whereas an Ethiopian eunuch would represent no faction within the nation itself, and would have no descendants that he was trying to advance. As a result, his interests were entirely thrown in with the interests of the king and his dynasty. Ebed-Melek seems to

have more regard for the prophet than any of the officials of Judah.

In speaking of Jeremiah's plight to the king, he underlines the fact that Jeremiah is the prophet in his description of him. The king is here described as sitting in the Benjamin Gate. Perhaps we are supposed to see some association between the king and the character of Benjamin, the brother of Joseph, who was not present as Joseph was sold into Egypt.

[9 : 10] Later on in the chapter, in Jeremiah's word to Zedekiah, Jeremiah will describe the fate that awaits King Zedekiah in language that recalls his own plight in the bottle dungeon. During the reign of Jehoiakim, the opponents of Jeremiah were primarily priests and prophets, and the officials of the land were on his side. And now it seems to be a reverse situation.

The powerful officials of the land are against him. The weak king, however, seems to be more favorably inclined towards him at this point. As Joseph's life was saved by Ishmaelites, Jeremiah is delivered by the Ethiopian Ebed-Milek. On the king's instruction, Ebed-Milek takes 30 men with him to bring Jeremiah up out of the pit. Perhaps the number of men are needed as a guard to protect Jeremiah from the officials that might try and capture him again. Having been brought up, Jeremiah is placed in the court of the guard again. After he's been moved to the court of the God, King Zedekiah summons Jeremiah, desiring a private conversation with him. Understandably, Jeremiah is wary. If he declares the word of the Lord honestly to King Zedekiah, Zedekiah might put him to death. King Zedekiah, however, gives Jeremiah assurances, swearing in the name of the Lord that he will not put him to death, nor will he deliver him into the hands of those who seek his life. The message that Jeremiah brings is the same as before.

He must surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon. If he does this, the way of life is open to him. If he fails to do so, he will not escape them and the city will be destroyed. Zedekiah, however, is fearful. A number of the Judeans have deserted to King Nebuchadnezzar.

If he surrenders to the Chaldeans, will he just fall into their hands? King Zedekiah seems to have enemies and opponents on all sides. It seems that he is king and little more than name. He is besieged inside the walls of his city by the men of his own court, the officers who are more powerful than him, and from whom he wants to keep his conversation with Jeremiah secret. He instructs Jeremiah not to reveal anything of the conversation that they have shared. Their suspicions must be allayed.

Outside the walls of the city, there are defectors who hate him, and there's the king of Babylon who's over all of them, his former suzerain that he rebelled against. However, if he listens to the word of the Lord delivered through his prophet Jeremiah, he could be protected from all of these enemies.

[11 : 19] Handing himself over to the king of Babylon, he would be delivered from those who seek his life. Jeremiah declares a vision that he has received, the women of the house of the king of Judah going out to the king of Babylon and his officials, all describing the way that King Zedekiah's trusted friends have turned against him. The people that he once trusted have proved untrustworthy.

This would be the final indignity for the king, as his wives and his children are brought out to the Chaldeans. The very people that he would most want to protect are now taken outside of his protection, falling captive into the hand of his great enemies. As Zedekiah expected, the officials asked Jeremiah about the conversation that he had with the king. By answering as the king instructed, Jeremiah manages to put them off the scent. He is sent back to the court of the guard, and he remains there until the time that Jerusalem falls. A question to consider. As they go out to the king of Babylon in the vision of Jeremiah, the women of the house of the king of Judah speak of Zedekiah in this way.

Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you. Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you. The description of the king's plight, betrayed by people and placed in a pit where he's sinking in the mud, is very much like Jeremiah's earlier in the chapter. What might we learn in comparing and contrasting the figures of Jeremiah and King Zedekiah?