

The Faithfulness of Ebed-Melech

Jeremiah 38

Jeremiah 38:1-6 - *"Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah had spoken to all the people, saying, ²"Thus says the Lord: 'He who remains in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but he who goes over to the Chaldeans shall live; his life shall be as a prize to him, and he shall live.'³ Thus says the Lord: 'This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which shall take it.'"*

⁴ *Therefore the princes said to the king, "Please, let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm."*

⁵ *Then Zedekiah the king said, "Look, he is in your hand. For the king can do nothing against you."⁶ So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the king's son, which was in the court of the prison, and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire. So Jeremiah sank in the mire.*

Background Notes

In chapter 37, Jeremiah was falsely accused and put in prison. The prison was a dungeon - a vaulted subterranean cell that was located beneath the house of Jonathan, an official scribe. *"Therefore the princes were angry with Jeremiah, and they struck him and put him in prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe, for they had made that the prison. Jeremiah entered the dungeon and the cells, and Jeremiah remained there many days."* (Jeremiah 37:15-16).

At the end of chapter 37 King Zedekiah listened to reason (at least temporarily), and removed Jeremiah from that dungeon. The king placed Jeremiah under house arrest in the court of the guardhouse. This was significant, in view of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem at that time.

Jeremiah continued to faithfully preach the word of the Lord, even though he knew the king and the people did not want to hear it: Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians, there will be death by sword, by famine, and by plague, and the only way to preserve their lives will be to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian forces.

Sure enough, some of King Zedekiah's officials heard Jeremiah continuing to preach and to prophesy this message of doom. They didn't like it, and they reported it to King Zedekiah. True to his vacillating, spineless character, King Zedekiah, like the future Pontius Pilate, told his officials that Jeremiah was in their hands, and they could do what they wanted with him. As a result, Jeremiah was thrown into an empty cistern that was in the guardhouse court. This cistern

was normally used to collect water, but at this point it had a thick layer of mud at the bottom, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. No doubt the officials were hoping that Jeremiah would die of “natural causes.”

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord strategically places His “Ebed-Melechs.”

Jeremiah 38:7-13 - *“Now Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs, who was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon. When the king was sitting at the Gate of Benjamin, ⁸ Ebed-Melech went out of the king’s house and spoke to the king, saying: ⁹ “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 likely to die from hunger in the place where he is. For there is no more bread in the city.”*

¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, “Take from here thirty men with you, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon before he dies.” ¹¹ So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took from there old clothes and old rags, and let them down by ropes into the dungeon to Jeremiah. ¹² Then Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, “Please put these old clothes and rags under your armpits, under the ropes.” And Jeremiah did so. ¹³ So they pulled Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the dungeon. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.”

Help for Jeremiah came from a most unexpected source. Ebed-Melech, a man from ancient Ethiopia, went out of his way to speak to the King Zedekiah about Jeremiah’s plight. Ebed-Melech means “servant of the king.” Some translations call him a “eunuch” (v7). Although some royal attendants were literal eunuchs, it’s quite likely that he was simply a male court official. In any case, like a “good Samaritan,” this Ethiopian man went directly to King Zedekiah and pleaded for Jeremiah’s life – at considerable risk to his own position and life. And once again King Zedekiah changed his mind. He listened to reason, and allowed Ebed-Melech to rescue Jeremiah out of the cistern.

Do you think all this happened by chance? Of course not! Under God’s sovereign control, the courageous and kind Ebed-Melech “just happened” to be one of King Zedekiah’s court officials, and Zedekiah “just happened” to be in a receptive mood. Ebed-Melech knew exactly what to do, and he organized a team to safely and caringly get Jeremiah out of harm’s way.

The Lord has His Ebed-Melechs today and they are strategically placed in God’s sovereign ways. For example, several years ago our furnace broke down while we were having a Bible study in our home on a cold winter evening. A man who just “happened” to be at the Bible study that night was a furnace expert – and he got it going again! Similar scenarios have happened to us with our cars. I’m sure many of you could share other examples. The Lord strategically places His “Ebed-Melechs”!

2. Believers do not have to tell everything to everyone.

Jeremiah 38:14-28 - *“Then Zedekiah the king sent and had Jeremiah the prophet brought to him at the third entrance of the house of the Lord. And the king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you something. Hide nothing from me.”* ¹⁵ *Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I declare it to you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me.”*

¹⁶ *So Zedekiah the king swore secretly to Jeremiah, saying, “As the Lord lives, who made our very souls, I will not put you to death, nor will I give you into the hand of these men who seek your life.”*

¹⁷ *Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon’s princes, then your soul shall live; this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live.* ¹⁸ *But if you do not surrender to the king of Babylon’s princes, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans; they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.”*

¹⁹ *And Zedekiah the king said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews who have defected to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they abuse me.”*

²⁰ *But Jeremiah said, “They shall not deliver you. Please, obey the voice of the Lord that I speak to you. So it shall be well with you, and your soul shall live.* ²¹ *But if you refuse to surrender, this is the word that the Lord has shown me:* ²² *‘Now behold, all the women who are left in the king of Judah’s house shall be surrendered to the king of Babylon’s princes, and those women shall say: “Your close friends have set upon you and prevailed against you. Your feet have sunk in the mire, and they have turned away again.”*

²³ *‘So they shall surrender all your wives and children to the Chaldeans. You shall not escape from their hand, but shall be taken by the hand of the king of Babylon. And you shall cause this city to be burned with fire.’”*

²⁴ *Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die.* ²⁵ *But if the princes hear that I have talked with you, and they come to you and say to you, ‘Declare to us now what you have said to the king, and also what the king said to you; do not hide it from us, and we will not put you to death,’* ²⁶ *then you shall say to them, ‘I presented my request before the king, that he would not make me return to Jonathan’s house to die there.’”*

²⁷ *Then all the princes came to Jeremiah and asked him. And he told them according to all these words that the king had commanded. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been heard.* ²⁸ *Now Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison until the day that Jerusalem was taken. And he was there when Jerusalem was taken.”*

Jeremiah continued to be faithful to the Lord when he was once again brought before King Zedekiah. The message was still the same: Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians, it will be burned, and the only way to escape with your life will be to surrender to the Babylonians. Jeremiah assured King Zedekiah that the Jews who had already surrendered would not betray him (v19). But if Zedekiah did not surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, then he, his family and his harem would be turned over to the Babylonians (v23-24).

But King Zedekiah did not heed Jeremiah’s advice given from the Lord. He ordered Jeremiah not to tell the officials what they had discussed. Jeremiah was to say that they talked about his safety and welfare in the guardhouse court prison.

Jeremiah did as he was instructed when he was questioned by the officials who were out to get him. Was this a lie? No, because Jeremiah and King Zedekiah *actually had* talked about Jeremiah's safety and welfare. *"Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I declare it to you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me."*
¹⁶ So Zedekiah the king swore secretly to Jeremiah, saying, "As the Lord lives, who made our very souls, I will not put you to death, nor will I give you into the hand of these men who seek your life" (v15-16).

So Jeremiah didn't lie - but he didn't share everything with the cutthroat officials. I believe the Bible teaches that ***it's never right to lie***. However, the Bible indicates that you don't have to give out all information to everyone who questions you. In fact, sometimes concealing information from wrongdoers is the right course of action. Believers do not have to tell everything to everyone.

Practical Application

Don't forget the rags!

Do you save rags? We save our worn-out towels and tee shirts, because rags can be used in a lot of home projects. However, I don't think I ever used old rags the way Ebed-Melech used them – to avoid "rope burn"! Those rags padded Jeremiah's armpits to protect his skin from the pressure of the rough ropes. Those rags certainly made his rescue from the cistern less painful (v11-13). Ebed-Melech not only risked his own life to save Jeremiah, but he also thought of the little things that would ease pain – something that would bring comfort and encouragement to Jeremiah.

We should follow Ebed-Melech's example. When the Lord directs us to help people who are in need, let's try to think of small, thoughtful things that will bring extra comfort and encouragement to them. It may be a cup of coffee. It may be some privacy. It may be a rest break on a long trip, or respite from a difficult job. It may be a warm hat or pair of gloves.

Be an Ebed-Melech. Don't forget the rags!