

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 20: Jeremiah in the Cistern; the Fall of Jerusalem

Jeremiah 37:1–39:18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, these chapters show God as the Lord of history whose word does not fail. For decades Jeremiah had announced that Jerusalem would fall to Babylon, and here, in chapter 39, it happens exactly as foretold. The teacher should help the class feel the weight of a God who is holy and just, who patiently warns for years, and whose announced judgment finally falls because of real and chosen sin, not arbitrary fate. This is sobering, but it is also the ground of all our confidence: the same faithfulness that brings judgment also keeps every promise of mercy. What God says, God does.

The passage also draws a sharp, unforgettable contrast between Zedekiah and Ebed-melech. Zedekiah believed the word and would not obey it because he feared people more than God; he lost his sons, his sight, and his throne. Ebed-melech, an outsider with no power, trusted God and acted bravely, and God promised to deliver him in the very day of disaster. The teacher's aim is to press home that saving faith is never mere intellectual agreement. Obedient trust is what God honors, and the fear of man is a snare that can destroy a soul that knows better. Note for the church of Christ teacher: avoid any "faith only" reading here; the whole passage insists that real faith obeys and that one who knows the truth can still fall by refusing to act on it.

Beyond the doctrine, the lesson aims at the formation of the student. Most of us are more like Zedekiah than we wish, hearing God clearly and hesitating out of fear of what people will think. The teacher's goal is that students leave not merely admiring Jeremiah's courage and Ebed-melech's kindness, but resolving to obey God in the one place they have been afraid, trusting that the God who lifts prophets from the mud is with them too.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 37:1–2. Zedekiah, his servants, and the people of the land "did not listen to the words of the Lord that he spoke through Jeremiah the prophet." What does the Scripture's blunt verdict on this whole generation teach us about the seriousness of refusing God's clearly revealed word, and how God holds people accountable for the truth they have heard?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by letting the verdict of verses 1–2 land plainly. After all the sermons, all the tears, all the warnings, the Scripture sums up an entire generation in one line: "But neither he nor his

servants nor the people of the land listened to the words of the Lord.” God had spoken with perfect clarity for decades. The tragedy of Judah was not ignorance; it was refusal.

Teach the seriousness of this. God holds people accountable for the truth they have actually heard. Zedekiah had Jeremiah right there, a living word of God in the room, and still would not listen. To whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:47–48). The greater our exposure to God’s truth, the greater our responsibility before Him.

Guard against the church’s most comfortable sin, which is hearing without doing. James warns of the man who looks in the mirror of the word and walks away unchanged (James 1:22–24). Many in our pews can quote the Bible and still quietly disobey it, exactly like Zedekiah.

Land it warmly but honestly. The question for every student is not “Do I know what God says?” but “Am I doing it?” Knowledge that is not obeyed becomes a witness against us. The kindest thing we can do for a soul is to call it back to simple obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God holds people accountable for the truth they have genuinely heard (Luke 12:47–48).
- Judah’s problem was refusal, not ignorance; the word was clear (37:2).
- The danger of hearing God’s word without doing it (James 1:22–24).
- Greater exposure to truth brings greater responsibility, not less.
- The difference between admiring God’s word and obeying it.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is refusing clear truth more serious than simply not knowing it?
- Where might you be guilty of hearing God’s word without actually obeying it?
- How does having a Bible in every room raise our responsibility before God?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jeremiah was accused of deserting to the enemy and was beaten and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit (37:13–15). When have you been misjudged or made to suffer for doing the right thing, and how did you respond?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question follows Jeremiah’s arrest. He was leaving the city on family business when a sentry accused him of deserting to the Babylonians, an accusation that fit the prophet’s message but not his heart. He was beaten and thrown into a dungeon for a crime he never committed (37:13–15). Few things sting like being punished for doing right.

Invite students into their own experience. Almost everyone has been misjudged: blamed unfairly at work, misread by family, accused of motives they never held. Ask them to name a time honestly, and to recall how it felt and how they answered.

Point to Jeremiah's response as a model that is neither bitter nor passive. He does not retaliate, but neither does he grovel. Later he simply asks the king for a fair hearing (37:18, 20). There is a quiet dignity in suffering wrong without either revenge or collapse.

Lift their eyes to Christ, who "when he was reviled, did not revile in return... but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Our refuge when we are misjudged is the God who sees the truth even when no one else does.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Suffering for doing right, a recurring mark of God's servants (1 Peter 2:20).
- The temptation to either retaliate or collapse when falsely accused.
- Jeremiah's dignified response: no revenge, but an honest plea for justice.
- Entrusting our case to the God who judges rightly (1 Peter 2:23).

Discussion Prompts

- When have you suffered for doing the right thing, and how did you respond?
- What is the difference between defending yourself and seeking revenge?
- How does Christ's example reshape the way you carry an injustice?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 37:16–17. From a dungeon cell, Jeremiah gives Zedekiah the same hard word he has always given: "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon." What does it reveal about God's prophet, and about the nature of God's truth, that imprisonment did not change the message by a single word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 16–17 are quietly heroic. Jeremiah is hauled up out of a dungeon, surely hoping the king's secret summons means relief, and Zedekiah asks, "Is there any word from the Lord?" The prophet could have softened the message to win his freedom. Instead he says, "There is... You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon." The chains did not edit the sermon.

Teach the nature of God's truth here. It is not a commodity to be traded for comfort. Jeremiah is a faithful steward of a message that is not his own; he has no authority to change it, only to deliver it. The word stayed the same in the throne room and the dungeon because the word belongs to God.

Draw the line to our own day. We are not prophets receiving fresh revelation, but we are entrusted with God's completed word, and we face the same pressure to trim it to fit our audience or our advantage. Faithfulness means saying what God has said, whether it helps our position or harms it.

Note the courage that real conviction produces. A man who truly believes his message is God's will not bargain it away for a softer cell. Our boldness rises in exact proportion to our certainty that the word is from God, not from us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's truth is not for sale; it cannot be traded for comfort (37:17).
- The prophet as steward, not owner, of the message (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).
- Faithfulness means delivering God's word unedited, helpful or not.
- Conviction that the word is God's produces courage to speak it.

Discussion Prompts

- Why could Jeremiah not soften his message even to gain his freedom?
- Where are you tempted to trim God's truth to fit your audience?
- How does being a steward, not an owner, of the word change how you share it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jeremiah dared to ask the king, "What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison?" (37:18). Where do you need the courage to speak honestly to those in power over you, and where instead are you tempted to simply stay quiet and safe?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jeremiah's question to the king in verse 18 is striking: "What wrong have I done to you... that you have put me in prison?" He is respectful but honest. He does not pretend the injustice did not happen, and he asks the king plainly not to send him back to the dungeon to die (37:20). Faithfulness is not the same as silence in the face of wrong.

Help students distinguish honest, respectful candor from either cowardice or rebellion. Jeremiah honors the king's office while telling him the truth about his treatment. There is a way to speak truth to those over us that is neither groveling nor defiant.

Surface the real fear. Most of us go quiet around bosses, elders, parents, or authorities not because silence is wise but because honesty feels dangerous. We mistake self-protection for humility.

Move toward something concrete. Where is there a respectful, honest word a student has been swallowing, a conversation with a supervisor, a parent, a leader? Invite them to name one place where courage, not silence, is the faithful path.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest, respectful candor toward those in authority (37:18, 20).
- The difference between godly silence and self-protective cowardice.
- Honoring an office while still speaking the truth to the one who holds it.
- Mistaking fearful quiet for humility.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you tend to stay silent out of fear rather than wisdom?
- How can you tell honest candor from disrespect or rebellion?
- What respectful, truthful word have you been avoiding with someone over you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 38:1–6. The princes call Jeremiah's true words treason that "weakens the hands" of the soldiers, and lower him into a muddy cistern to die. Why does a faithful witness to God's truth so often look like an enemy of the people to those who have set their hearts against God, and how does this expose the human heart's war with the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 38 brings the darkest scene. The princes hear Jeremiah's true words and call them treason: he "is weakening the hands of the soldiers... this man is not seeking the welfare of this people but their harm" (38:4). So they lower him into a cistern of mud to die. The man telling the truth is treated as the enemy of the people.

Teach what this exposes about the human heart. When people set themselves against God, His truth begins to feel like an attack. The messenger who will not flatter becomes a traitor; the one who tells them what they want to hear becomes a patriot. Hatred of the truth always disguises itself as love of the people.

Connect this to the larger biblical pattern that climaxes in Christ. They said of Jesus, too, that He was stirring up the people, a danger to the nation, better that one man should die (John 11:50). The world has always silenced the prophet and crucified the truth-teller, calling it the public good.

Apply it soberly. We should not be surprised when faithful witness is recast as bigotry, hate, or harm. Jesus said the world hated Him first (John 15:18–20). The cistern is sometimes the cost of

the clean word. But note: the mud could not unmake the truth, and the God of truth was not finished with His prophet.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The hostile heart recasts God's truth as harm and the truth-teller as enemy (38:4).
- Hatred of the truth disguised as concern for the people's welfare.
- The pattern from the prophets to Christ: the truth-teller silenced for the "public good" (John 11:50).
- The world's hostility to faithful witness (John 15:18-20).
- The danger of measuring a message by whether it flatters rather than whether it is true.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God's truth feel like an attack to a heart set against Him?
- Where today is faithful witness being recast as harm or hatred?
- How does Christ's own treatment prepare us for opposition to the truth?

Question 6

Student Question:

Ebed-melech, a foreign servant with little standing, risked himself to rescue Jeremiah, even gathering old rags so the ropes would not hurt the prophet (38:7-13). Whose rescue or defense is God placing within your reach right now, and what small, costly kindness could you offer this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ebed-melech is one of the unsung heroes of Scripture. A foreigner, a Cushite, a servant with no political weight, he hears that Jeremiah has been left to die and he will not let it stand. He goes to the king, names the injustice plainly, and is granted thirty men to pull the prophet out (38:7-10). Courage often wears the clothes of an ordinary person doing the next right thing.

Linger on the tenderness of verses 11-13. Ebed-melech gathers "old rags and worn-out clothes" and lowers them on the ropes, telling Jeremiah to put them under his arms so the cords will not cut him. He thought about the prophet's pain. Real mercy is specific; it notices the small hurts and bothers to ease them.

Help students see that rescue is usually within reach of ordinary people. Ebed-melech had no army and no office, only eyes that saw a wrong and a heart willing to risk something to right it. God often places a deliverance within the reach of the one person who will simply act.

Move to the concrete. Who is in the pit near each student, an overlooked coworker, a struggling neighbor, a friend sinking in shame? What small, costly, specific kindness could they offer this week, their own handful of rags let down on a rope?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Courage in an ordinary person who simply acts on what is right (38:7–9).
- The tenderness and specificity of true mercy: the rags under the arms (38:11–12).
- God places deliverance within reach of those willing to risk for it.
- Status and power are not required to do great good.

Discussion Prompts

- Who is sinking near you, and what small rescue is within your reach?
- What does the detail of the old rags teach us about real kindness?
- Where is God asking you to risk something to do the right thing?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 38:14–23. Zedekiah believes Jeremiah’s word enough to consult him in secret, yet says, “I am afraid of the Judeans,” and will not obey. What does Zedekiah teach us about the deadly difference between believing God’s word and actually obeying it, and about the way the fear of man enslaves the soul?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the most penetrating contrasts in the book. Zedekiah summons Jeremiah secretly, even swears an oath to protect him, and clearly believes the prophet’s word. Yet when told plainly to surrender and live, he confesses, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans” (38:19). He believed and would not obey. This is the deadliest condition of the soul.

Teach the difference between belief and obedience with care, for it strikes at the heart of “faith only.” Zedekiah is living proof that a man can be intellectually convinced of God’s word and still be lost by refusing to act on it. The demons believe and tremble (James 2:19); saving faith is the faith that obeys (James 2:17). What God asks for is not bare agreement but trusting surrender.

Name the chain that bound this king: the fear of man. He feared mockery (38:19) more than he feared God, and that fear made him a slave. “The fear of man lays a snare” (Proverbs 29:25). Zedekiah is the case study; he knew the way out and could not take it because of what people might say.

Press the diagnosis gently into the room. Many believers are functional Zedekiahs, fully persuaded of what God says and quietly disobeying out of dread of disapproval. The cure is not more information; he had enough. The cure is a fear of God large enough to crowd out the fear of man.

Hold out hope even here. The door was open to the very end; God told Zedekiah, “Obey now... and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared” (38:20). Disobedience born of fear is

never forced on us. The God who commands also stands ready to help the one who will finally trust Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Belief is not the same as obedience; Zedekiah believed and was still lost (James 2:17–19).
- The error of “faith only”: saving faith is trusting obedience, not bare agreement.
- The fear of man as a snare that enslaves the soul (Proverbs 29:25).
- Disobedience driven by dread of mockery and disapproval (38:19).
- The open door of mercy even to the fearful: “Obey now... and it shall be well” (38:20).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is believing God’s word not enough if we will not obey it?
- How does the fear of man quietly enslave even people who know better?
- Where are you a “functional Zedekiah,” convinced yet disobeying out of fear?

Question 8

Student Question:

Zedekiah feared the mockery of others more than he feared God, and lost everything by it (38:19; 39:5–7). Whose disapproval or ridicule are you most afraid of, and how is that fear quietly steering your decisions away from obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-question turns Zedekiah’s tragedy into a mirror. He feared the ridicule of the deserters more than the judgment of God, and that single fear cost him his sons, his eyes, his throne, and his city (38:19; 39:5–7). The thing he was so afraid to risk was lost anyway, and far worse.

Help students name their own “Judeans,” the particular people whose disapproval governs them. For one it is a parent, for another a friend group, a spouse, coworkers, the watching culture. The fear is rarely abstract; it usually has a face.

Expose the false math of the fear of man. We imagine we are protecting something by our silence or compromise, but like Zedekiah we usually lose the very thing we tried to guard, and our integrity besides. Trying to save our reputation, we forfeit our obedience.

Move to a concrete next step. Ask each person to identify one decision currently being steered by the fear of someone’s disapproval, and one brave, specific act of obedience that would put the fear of God first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the specific people whose approval governs us.

- The false math of the fear of man: we lose what we try to protect.
- How fear of disapproval silently steers our decisions.
- Putting the fear of God ahead of the fear of people (Matthew 10:28).

Discussion Prompts

- Whose disapproval are you most afraid of right now?
- How is that fear quietly steering a decision in your life?
- What brave, specific step would put the fear of God first?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 39:1–10 with 39:15–18. The city falls exactly as God foretold, Zedekiah’s sons are killed before his blinded eyes, and yet God sends a personal promise to Ebed-melech: “I will surely save you... because you have put your trust in me.” How do these two endings, the ruin of the fearful king and the deliverance of the trusting servant, display together God’s certain judgment and His tender, faithful mercy, and what do they show us about what God treasures in a person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest block of the lesson, and it sets two endings side by side. In 39:1–10 the long-promised judgment falls exactly as God said: after eighteen months the walls are breached, Zedekiah flees, is caught on the plains of Jericho, watches his sons killed, and is then blinded and dragged to Babylon. Every word Jeremiah had spoken for decades comes true to the letter. God is the Lord of history, and His word does not fail.

Teach the holiness and faithfulness of God together. This is not arbitrary cruelty; it is the just harvest of a generation’s chosen rebellion after a lifetime of patient warning. The God who is slow to anger is not indifferent to evil. And the very faithfulness that brings the warned judgment to pass is the faithfulness on which every promise of mercy also rests. A God whose word of judgment fails could not be trusted to keep His word of grace.

Now set the second ending beside the first. In the same chapter, tucked into the ruin, God sends a personal word to Ebed-melech: “I will surely save you... you shall not fall by the sword... because you have put your trust in me” (39:17–18). The empire falls, the king is blinded, the city burns, and God pauses to keep a promise to one trusting servant. Mercy is never lost in the rubble; God numbers and keeps His own.

Draw out what God treasures. He does not praise Ebed-melech’s rank, strength, or success. He names the one thing that mattered: “you have put your trust in me.” The same God who weighs the nations stoops to honor the quiet faith of an outsider. This is the deepest comfort of the passage: in the day of disaster, trust in God is the safest place to stand.

Lift it finally to Christ. The God who kept His word to Ebed-melech in the day of Jerusalem's fall is the God who will keep His word to all who trust His Son in the day of judgment. "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (Romans 10:11). Judgment is certain, but so is the deliverance of every soul that puts its trust in the Lord. Both must be preached: the terror of refusing God and the safety of trusting Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as Lord of history: the foretold judgment falls exactly as spoken (39:1-7).
- The holiness and justice of God after a lifetime of patient warning.
- God's faithfulness in judgment is the ground of His faithfulness in mercy.
- The tucked-in promise to Ebed-melech: God keeps His own in the day of disaster (39:17-18).
- What God treasures is trust: "because you have put your trust in me."
- The pattern fulfilled in Christ: certain judgment, certain rescue for all who trust Him (Romans 10:11).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the city's fall, exactly as foretold, deepen your confidence in God's word?
- Why is God's faithfulness in judgment a comfort and not only a terror?
- What does it mean to you that God treasured Ebed-melech's trust above everything else?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, the prophet in the mud, the trembling king, the brave servant, and the burning city. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using these scenes to call you out of the fear of man and into simple, obedient trust in Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers all four figures into a single question of formation. Jeremiah in the mud, Zedekiah on his trembling throne, Ebed-melech with his armful of rags, and the burning city are not just history; they are a mirror held up to the student's own heart. The deep question of the passage is simple: will my life be ruled by the fear of man or by trust in God?

Resist letting this stay abstract. Press for one specific way the Lord Jesus is calling them out of fear this week, a word to speak, a person to rescue, a decision to stop steering by other people's approval, a place to obey what they already know.

Tie it explicitly to Christ. Where Zedekiah failed for fear, Jesus set His face like flint and obeyed the Father to the cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2). We are not formed into His courage by gritting our teeth, but by walking with Him, the One who was himself lifted from the pit of death and now stands with His people.

Invite each person to name their “one thing” aloud or on paper and carry it into the week as a matter of prayer and obedience. Let the lesson end not in admiration of brave people long ago, but in a concrete step of obedient trust.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from study to surrender and concrete obedience (James 1:22).
- Christ as the One who conquered the fear of man, setting His face like flint (Hebrews 12:2).
- Formation as walking with Jesus, not mere willpower.
- Naming one specific step out of the fear of man into trust.

Discussion Prompts

- Which figure in this passage most mirrors your own heart right now?
- What is the one specific step out of fear and into trust you will take this week?
- How does walking with Jesus, rather than trying harder, free you from the fear of man?