

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 20: Jeremiah in the Cistern; the Fall of Jerusalem -- Jeremiah 37:1–39:18

Picture a man being lowered on ropes into a pit. There is no water at the bottom, only mud, and the deeper he sinks the more it pulls at him, cold and clinging, up to the knees, up to the waist. The light shrinks to a coin overhead. This is Jeremiah, the prophet of God, left to die slowly in the muck under the city of Jerusalem. His crime was telling the truth. He had said what God told him to say, that Babylon would take the city, and for that the princes wanted him silenced. “This man,” they told the king, “is weakening the hands of the soldiers.” So down he went, into the slime, with the city slowly starving above him.

Over those same days a king is pacing. Zedekiah is afraid, and he keeps sending for Jeremiah in secret, hungry for a word from the Lord. “Is there any word from the Lord?” he whispers (37:17). There is. There is always a word. But Zedekiah cannot bring himself to obey it. He fears the princes more than he fears God, fears the Jews who have already deserted to the Babylonians, fears being mocked. He believes Jeremiah and disobeys him in the same breath. Here is one of the saddest figures in all of Scripture: a man who knew the truth, half-wanted it, and could never quite do it.

And then there is a foreigner, a Cushite servant named Ebed-melech, whose name simply means “servant of the king.” He hears that Jeremiah has been thrown into the cistern, and something in him will not let it stand. He goes straight to the king, speaks up for the prophet, and is sent with thirty men to haul him out. He even thinks to gather old rags and worn-out clothes and let them down on the ropes so the cords will not cut into Jeremiah’s arms. It is a small mercy, tender and practical, and God does not forget it. To this quiet, brave servant God sends a personal promise of rescue: “I will surely save you... because you have put your trust in me” (39:18).

Then the walls break. After eighteen months of siege the famine has done its work, and the Babylonians pour through the breach. Zedekiah runs in the night and is caught on the plains of Jericho. The last thing his eyes ever see is the slaughter of his sons; then they put out his eyes and lead him in chains to Babylon. The fearful man loses everything he was so afraid to risk. And over the rubble of the burning city, the long-promised judgment of God falls exactly as He said it would. This is a lesson about the cost of faithful witness, the ruin of half-hearted fear, and the strange safety of simple trust.

Group Discussion: In these chapters three men face the same crisis in three very different ways: Jeremiah keeps speaking the truth though it costs him a cistern, Zedekiah believes the truth but is too afraid of people to obey it, and Ebed-melech quietly acts on what is right and is promised

deliverance. As you read the whole passage, what do these three responses to God's word reveal about what really shapes a person's life, fear or trust?

Personal Reflection: Zedekiah kept secretly asking Jeremiah, "Is there any word from the Lord?" while never quite obeying the word he was given. Where in your own life are you asking God for guidance you are not yet willing to follow, and what would it cost you to actually do the thing you already know He has said?

Read Jeremiah 37:1–39:18

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Proverbs 29:25, “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe,” the very lesson of Zedekiah and Ebed-melech side by side; John 12:42–43, the rulers who believed in Jesus but would not confess Him “for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God”; Matthew 10:28, “do not fear those who kill the body... rather fear him”; Jeremiah 17:7–8, the blessing on “the man who trusts in the Lord” like a tree planted by water; Psalm 40:1–3, the Lord who “drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog,” an echo of Jeremiah lifted from the mud.

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