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Jeremiah Thrown into a Cistern
38:1-28 and 39:15-18

Jeremiah thrown into a cistern DIG: What does this "gang of four have against Jeremiah? Why does the prophet react to them the way he does? Why don't they just kill Yirmeyahu and get it over with? In using a cistern to do the job, what might the king be secretly hoping? Who stands up for the prophet and why? Why the details about the thirty men and the old rags? Is Jeremiah reluctant to answer Zedekiah, or is he simply negotiating (compare Yeshua's same predicament in Luke 22:66-67)? Why didn't Zedekiah either kill God's prophet or listen to his counsel? What does he stand to lose either way? Why is the king afraid to surrender (verse 19)? Who else is he afraid of (verses 24-26 and **16)? What one word describes Zedekiah? Who were those women? Is the omission of true and relevant facts the same as lying? Do you always try to tell the truth, or is there a time for discretion, or silence as in Yirmeyahu's case?**

REFLECT: What has been your spiritual low point? Where did you receive help? Were any "old rags" or trusted friends used in your rescue? Like king Zedekiah, do you come off as "everybody's friend?" Explain? When was the last time you were in a no-win situation? How did you handle it? Who do you know that shows interest in Christ time after time, but never really takes the step of faith? What fears lie behind the mixed feelings? Are there any areas of your life that you have not given totally to Yeshua? Why? What needs to happen to change that? Who can you talk to about it?

587 BC at the end of the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah

It was a late, ominous time for **Jerusalem** and for its **king** . . . **Zedekiah**. Once more, this narrative concerns a confrontation between **the king** and **the prophet**. **They** are the two principle actors in the story, and **they** embody two contrasting perspectives. **The king** is fragile and desperate. **His** only concern in this account is the development of a policy of survival for **Zion**. **His** counterpart, **the prophet**, is by now *persona non grata* among the leaders of **Yerushalayim**, for **he** was not

supportive of their fanciful policies. While **Jeremiah's** position had important implications for the survival of **Judea** that was not **his** major concern. **He** was obsessed with the will and purpose of **YHVH** as the foundation of public life of **Y'hudah**. The conclusions **the prophet** draws from **his** discernment about the will and purpose of **ADONAI** are not conducive to the survival of **Zion** as seen by **the king**.[346]

Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern: We are very close to the end of the long rule of the Davidic line. No wonder there is tension, hostility, distrust and panic among **the leaders**. **Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pash'chur, Jehukal son of Shelemiah, and Pash'chur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people.** Apparently, **Jeremiah's** transfer to **the courtyard of the guard (37:21)** provided **him** an opportunity to address **the people**. At that time **the prophet** declared: **This is what ADONAI** says: **Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. They will escape with their lives . . . they will live. And this is what the LORD** says: **This city will certainly be given into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it (38:1-3).** The reason **Shephatiah**, **Gedaliah**, **Jehukal, Pash'chur** and **the** other **officials** of **Judah** wanted to **kill Yirmeyahu** was because of **the prophet's** insistence that **they** surrender to **the Babylonians**.

The officials of **Y'hudah** had such power that, humanly speaking, if **Jeremiah** allowed **his** mind to wander from **his** calling **he** might have been intimidated by **them**. It is probably more correct to say that **Zedekiah** allowed **them** to have this power. **The prophet** was correct in **his** assessment when **he** asked **the king** not to **send him back to the house of Jonathan or he would die there (37:20)**. **Then the officials said to the king, "This man should be put to death** for two reasons**.** First, **he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them.** And second, treason, **this man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin." He is in your hands, king Zedekiah** answered: **The king can do nothing to oppose you (38:4-5).** What a coward.

Perhaps the officials were afraid to murder the prophet outright and shrank from superstitious dread from such an act; but they conspired on a plan that would accomplish the same result. So they took Yirmeyahu and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. The cisterns of the time were typically shaped like a

huge bottle, with a large diameter but only a small opening at the top, which was often covered with a stone. **They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern.** It seemingly had contained **water** earlier, but **it** had been depleted during the siege and at this point **it had no water** left **in it, only mud, and Yirmeyahu sank down into the mud (38:6). Yirmeyahu** was fully aware that **he** wouldn't last very long in it.

This was the third time **Jeremiah** was **imprisoned**. First, **Pash'chur** had **him** beaten, put in stocks and then **put in prison** (**to see link click Da – Jeremiah and Pash'chur**)**.** Secondly, after **Yirmeyahu** was falsely accused of desertion, **he** was beaten **and imprisoned in the house of Jonathan the secretary, which they had made into a** temporary **prison** (see **Fm – Jeremiah in Prison**)**.** And thirdly, here, where **he** was put **into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard,** and left to die.

But once again **God** fulfilled **His** promise to **Jeremiah** that **he** would not die at the hands of men **(1:19). The LORD** used **Ebed-Melek, a God-**fearing **Cushite** from Ethiopia**, and an official** (Hebrew: *saris*, meaning *eunuch*) **in the royal palace** as **His** servant. The name **Ebed-Melek** is made up of two Hebrew words meaning *the servant of the king.* **He** was an **Ethiopian** and not a **Jew**. As **a eunuch**, the Torah excluded him from **the congregation of Isra'el (Deuteronomy 23:1)**. But when **he heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern**, **the Cushite** knew **the prophet** would die from either suffocation or exposure if not rescued quickly. Being lead by **YHVH**, **Ebed-Melek** immediately went to **the king** and confronted **him** with the injustice that **he** had permitted.

While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate (because of the heavy traffic through this **gate**, **it** became a convenient place for the administration of justice)**, Ebed-Melek went out of the palace and** sought **him** out, saying **to him, "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done** trying to kill this **man. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city" (38:7-9), a natural exaggeration in the effort to plea for Jeremiah's release. The thought being that the shortage was so severe that no one would think about feeding Yirmeyahu who would be hidden away out of sight.**

As astonishing as **the eunuch's** boldness, was **the king's** lack of anger. **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."** Why **thirty men**? **Thirty** was too many to merely lift **Yirmeyahu** out of **the cistern**, but it was enough to stop any interference from the four bloodthirsty **officials**. **So Ebed-Melek took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some of the old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern.** The eunuch didn't want any ropes to cut into **the prophet**. **He** was really looking out for **God's messenger**. **Ebed-Melek the Cushite said to Yirmeyahu, "Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes." Jeremiah did so and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern.** That Gentile gave **Yirmeyahu** much more respect than **the Jews** did. **And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard (38:10-13).**

Yirmeyahu was never popular. **He** was never surrounded with applause. However, **he** was not friendless. In fact, **Jeremiah** was extremely fortunate in **his** friendships. Twenty-one years earlier **the prophet** was almost murdered, but **Ahikam ben Shaphan** intervened and saved **his** life (see **Cg – Jeremiah Threatened With Death**). **Baruch** was his disciple and scribe, loyal and faithful, sticking with **him** through difficult times to the very end in Egypt. And **Ebed-Melek the Ethiopian eunuch,** came to **his** aide. "One friend in a lifetime is much," wrote Henry Adams (American historian and member of the Adams political family 1838-1918), "two are many; three are hardly possible." **Jeremiah** had three.

While Yirmeyahu had been put into Malkijah's cistern in the courtyard of the guard (38:6), the word of ADONAI came to him saying: **Go and tell**

Ebed-Melek the Ethiopian, "This is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el, says: **I am about to fulfill My words against this City – words concerning disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes." But I** promise that **I will rescue you on that day; you will not be given into the hands of those [court officials] you fear. I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in Me" (39:15-18). God** promised to do for **Ebed-Melek** exactly what **He** would not do for **Zedekiah.** The contrast was sharp. **The Ethiopian** trusted in **God** while **Zedekiah** did not.

Ebed-Melek risked **his** life when he confronted **Zedekiah** about **Jeremiah**. Being a foreigner **he** had no legal rights. **He w**as going against popular opinion in a crisis that was hysterical with wartime emotion. That didn't matter. A friend is a friend. **The Cushite** didn't indulge in sentimental pity for **Yirmeyahu**, philosophically lamenting **his** fate; **he** went to **the king**, **he** got ropes, **he** even thought of getting rags for **padding** so that **the ropes** wouldn't cut, **he** enlisted help, and **he** pulled **the prophet** to safety. **He** acted on **his** friendship.

The simple fact that **Jeremiah** had friends says a lot about **the prophet**. **He** needed friends. **He** was well developed in **his** internal, private life. It was impossible to deter **him** from **his** course by hostility or by flattery. **He** was used to the solitude. But **he** needed friends. No one who is whole is self-sufficient. The whole life, the complete life, cannot be lived by arrogant independence. A person without friends is a person in trouble. Our goal cannot be to not need anyone. One of the evidences of **Jeremiah's** wholeness was **his** ability to receive friendship, to let others help **him**, to be open to mercy. It is easier to extend friendship to others than to receive it ourselves. In giving friendship we show strength, but in receiving it we show weakness. But well-developed people are never fortified behind doctrines or projects, but rather they are active in a wide range of relationships.[347]

Zedekiah questions Jeremiah for the third time: Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet a third time **and had him brought to the [private] entrance to the Temple of ADONAI.** Then surprisingly, **the king** opens **his** heart to **the priest from Anathoth. "I am going to ask you something, the king said to the prophet, "Do not hide anything from me." Yirmeyahu said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me." But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah, "As surely as ADONAI lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill**

you" (38:14-16). But if you notice, **he** did not promise to follow **Jeremiah's** counsel.

This led **God's messenger** to move from **his** former courtesy to great frankness. **Then Jeremiah** explained as before: **This is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Isra'el,** says: **If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from them (38:17-18).** The two options **Jeremiah** provided for **the people**, **he** now provides for **their king**. Nothing had changed.

Then **the king** unburdens **himself**, confessing **his** fear of those in **the City** who have already deserted to the enemy: **I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me (38:19).** Many **Jews** had **gone over** to **the Babylonians (39:9, 52:15, 21:9, 38:2)** from **Jeremiah's** own advice. **He** was afraid **they** would **mistreat him**. The word **mistreat** means *to abuse by mockery or physical abuse*. One usually comes with the other (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lu – Jesus' First Three Hours on the Cross: The Wrath of Man**).

The final warning to the last king of Judah: Jeremiah reassures the king that his fear is an empty one. **They will not hand you over, Yirmeyahu** replied: **Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. But if you refuse to surrender, this is what ADONAI has revealed to me (38:20-21).** The relationship between the two is strange: on the one hand, **the king**, who presumably has all the power and whom **Yirmeyahu** has treated respectfully but who cannot face down **his** own **officials** in **their** opposition to **the prophet**. On the other hand, **YHVH's messenger**, whom **the king** seems utterly dependent for advice, is being variously restricted.

Then **the prophet** goes on to share with **him** a vision **he** has had of **the women** of the palace taunting **their king** as **they** are led out to captivity. **Zedekiah** would be both mocked *and* abused physically**: All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Zedekiah** would be mocked. But not by those he feared **(38:22a)**, but by **the women** of **his** own royal harem! Sometimes a defeated king would merely be made

a vassal without the humiliation of having another king take over his harem. But having another king take over your harem was the ultimate mockery for a king **(Second Samuel 16:20-22)**. **Those women will** sing a taunt (mocking) song**:**

The first line is a paraphrase from **Obadiah 7**: **Your own close friends misled you and took advantage of you.** The second line is a flashback to **Jeremiah's** own recent experience in **the cistern** of **38:6**, in which **he sank down into the mud**. Now it would be **Zedekiah** who would **sink down into the mud**, but **he** wouldn't have **Ebed-Melech** to **lift him out** like **Yirmeyahu** did. **Now that *your* feet are stuck in the mud, they have abandoned you (38:22b).** Therefore, **Zedekiah's fear** of mocking would come true if **he** disobeyed **Jeremiah's** counsel, and it would come both from **women (38:22)** and **men (39:6-7)**.

All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down (38:23). By following a policy against which Jeremiah had persistently but unsuccessfully warned him, Zedekiah was responsible for the City being destroyed by fire.

Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "Do not let anyone know about this conversation, or you may die (38:24). If the officials hear that I talked with you (and they probably would, since what happens in a court can rarely be kept secret), and they come to you and say, 'Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; do not hide it from us or we will kill you,' then tell them, 'I was pleading with the king not to send me back to Jonathan's house to die there' (38:25-26)." Jeremiah was not to tell the full truth, but then again, **he** would not be lying. But **he** obviously didn't tell **them** the whole truth. **Jeremiah could not communicate with these officials even if he had wanted to, without betraying a confidence.**

And just what **Zedekiah** feared did come true. **All the officials did come to Jeremiah and question him, and he told them everything the king had ordered him to say. So they said no more to him, for no one had heard his conversation with the king (38:27).**

And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard until the day Jerusalem was captured (38:28). He remained until the bitter end. One sees in this steadfast resolve to stay with the struggle to suffer along with everyone else to the bitter end, a modern parallel in the commitment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German

theologian and martyr of the Nazi era, who in 1939 made the courageous decision to leave New York, where he had gone for a brief sojourn and where he had been offered safe haven, and return to Germany, where he felt the obligation to join in the struggle with his own people until the war ended. His last act before being hanged by the Gestapo was to celebrate communion with his fellow prisoners.[348]