

Jeremiah: The Suffering Preacher of Doom

I'm serious, man," said Carlos. "What should I do?"
Antonne looked warily at his friend. It had been a mistake of monumental proportions. Carlos's employer had deposited someone else's payroll check into his checking account, in addition to his own payroll check!

"Have you ever heard of such a thing? It's crazy, right?" said Carlos. "It has to be a miracle. God wants me to have this money to pay down some of my bills."

"My employer can spare the money. I'm sure they will write another payroll check to the other person," rattled on Carlos. "In the meantime, if I pull the money out and put it in my savings, they can't touch it."

"Don't look at me like that," Carlos continued. "What do you think God wants me to do? I mean, He clearly could be blessing me, right?"

"Do you really want me to tell you?" asked Antonne. "Would you even listen? It seems you are headed down a wrong path already."

"Wrong path?"

"Yes, Carlos, a wrong path," chided Antonne. "This is not a blessing from the Lord. It is a clerical error, and if you keep the money, you will be stealing."

"Trust me, it's not worth trying to keep this money," added Antonne. "It won't be good for you legally, morally, and certainly not spiritually."

1. *What things do we do to try to make life better for ourselves?*

2. *Why is it fruitless to live for ourselves rather than for God?*

3. *Why do we not listen to what God wants us to do?*

King Zedekiah's Request

Jeremiah 38:14-16, KJV

14 Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took Jeremiah the prophet unto him into the third entry that is in the house of the LORD: and the king said unto Jeremiah, I will ask thee a thing; hide nothing from me.

15 Then Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me?

16 So Zedekiah the king sware secretly unto Jeremiah, saying, As the LORD liveth, that made us this soul, I will not put thee to death, neither will I give thee into the hand of these men that seek thy life.

Jeremiah 38:14-16, NIV

¹⁴Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. "I am going to ask you something," the king said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me."

¹⁵Jeremiah 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."

¹⁶But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill you."

Jeremiah's previous prophecies about the Babylonians destroying Jerusalem were not popular with King Zedekiah or his court of advisers. Jerusalem had recently fended off a Babylonian invasion with the help of the Egyptian army (Jer. 37:4-10). But the relief was temporary; Jeremiah continued to predict Jerusalem's coming doom and was labeled a traitor (vss. 14-15). The court of advisers then attempted to kill Jeremiah, but he was delivered, thanks to an Ethiopian official named Ebed-Melek (38:1-13).

In our passage, Zedekiah summoned Jeremiah, though not openly because he feared his officials who had attempted to kill Jeremiah. The two met at the "third entrance" (vs. 14) of the temple, that gave the king a secluded meeting place.

Zedekiah said he wanted to ask Jeremiah a question and

the prophet should not “hide anything” in his reply. In response, Jeremiah bluntly stated that if he told Zedekiah the truth, the king would order the prophet’s execution. At the least, should Jeremiah’s advice be displeasing, the king would refuse to obey it, as he had before (37:2). Zedekiah countered with a secret “oath” (38:16) to do no such thing.

The king solemnly pledged by name of the living “Lord,” who gave life to everyone, that he would not personally execute Jeremiah. Likewise, Zedekiah would not surrender the prophet to the palace officials who wanted to murder him.

4. For what purpose did Zedekiah meet Jeremiah at the temple?

5. How did Jeremiah respond to Zedekiah?

Jeremiah Presents Two Options

Jeremiah 38:17-18, KJV

17 Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon’s princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house:

18 But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon’s princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.

Jeremiah 38:17-18, NIV

¹⁷Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, 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. ¹⁸But 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.’ ”

Jeremiah emphasized that he was giving the king a message from the one who put him in power: “the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel” (vs. 17, KJV). In doing so, Jeremiah signaled to Judah’s king that the Lord reigned supreme—over

Zedekiah and even the enemy forces surrounding Jerusalem. Given that truth, Zedekiah could trust the Lord to bring to pass what He declared through His spokesperson.

God announced through Jeremiah that only two options existed for Zedekiah. On the one hand, if he surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar's forces, Zedekiah and his "family" (NIV) would live, and Jerusalem would remain intact. On the other hand, if Judah's king continued to rebel, God would let the armies of Babylon capture and burn down the city. Also, the invaders would take Zedekiah and his family as prisoners.

6. *What did Zedekiah need to do to preserve his life?*

7. *What outcome would result if Zedekiah continued to rebel against the Lord?*

Jeremiah Foretells a Terrible Outcome

Jeremiah 38:19-23, KJV

19 And Zedekiah the king said unto Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me.

20 But Jeremiah said, They shall not deliver thee. Obey, I beseech thee, the voice of the LORD, which I speak unto thee: so it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live.

21 But if thou refuse to go forth, this is the word that the LORD hath shewed me:

22 And, behold, all the women that are left in the king of Judah's house shall be brought forth to the king of Babylon's princes, and those women shall say, Thy friends have set thee on, and have prevailed against thee: thy feet are

Jeremiah 38:19-23, NIV

¹⁹King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "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."

²⁰"They will not hand you over," Jeremiah replied. "Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. ²¹But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me: ²²All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you:

KJV

sunk in the mire, and they are turned away back.

23 So they shall bring out all thy wives and thy children to the Chaldeans: and thou shalt not escape out of their hand, but shalt be taken by the hand of the king of Babylon: and thou shalt cause this city to be burned with fire.

NIV

“ ‘They misled you and overcame you—those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.’

²³“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.”

Zedekiah not only feared his palace officials, but also the “Jews” (vs. 19) who had already deserted to the enemy. He was alarmed that his captors might deliver him to the defectors and about the horrible ways they might deal with him.

Jeremiah reassured Zedekiah that the Babylonians would not turn him over to his ethnic peers. Instead, his life would be spared (vs. 20). But if Zedekiah defied God’s will and did not surrender, he would bring disaster upon himself.

Jeremiah said if the king was captured, the enemy’s officers would bring out the women who remained in Zedekiah’s royal harem. These captives would taunt and ridicule the king with the truth that his most “trusted” advisers had betrayed, deceived, and “prevailed” (vs. 22, KJV) against him.

Earlier, when Jeremiah’s enemies threw him in a cistern, he “sank down into a thick layer of mud” (38:6, NIV). Now, Zedekiah faced the ironic prospect that his own feet would become “sunk in the mud” (vs. 22). Metaphorically, he faced irreversible hardships from believing his deceptive officials and false prophets in his court who then abandoned him.

Further, Jeremiah said the invaders would burn the capital and make Zedekiah and all his household their prisoners.

8. *What particularly worried Zedekiah?*

9. *What two options did Jeremiah reiterate to Zedekiah?*

10. *What jeer did Jeremiah predict would be made against Zedekiah?*

Listening Is Better for You

We often complain that we don't know what God wants us to do. Zedekiah knew for sure, yet he did the opposite, even though Jeremiah had laid out the horrible consequences for him and the nation that would come from his disobedience.

We often find ourselves doing something similar. Jesus told us clearly to love our neighbors, pray for those who persecute us, forgive those who hurt us, etc. But do we do that?

Mark Twain famously said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it's the parts that I do understand." If we lived the "parts" of Jesus' teaching we understand, life would certainly improve for us. For example, we can ruin our lives by never forgiving a person who has hurt us or wronged us. But forgiveness can relieve our hearts and bring us peace.

We can also suffer when we make lying a part of our lives. One lie births another, and as Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10). Truthfulness gains us people's trust and a clear conscience.

Jesus also said that He came to give "life . . . to the full" (John 10:10) to those who follow Him. As our "good shepherd" (vs. 11), we must listen to what He says in order to truly live. The sheep who listen to—and follow—the Shepherd's voice find good pasture that they cannot find on their own.

11. *What parts of the Bible that you understand are hardest for you to follow?*

12. *Has your disobedience to God ever hurt others in some way? Explain your answer.*

13. *How has your life gone better for you when you've listened to God?*

14. *What Scriptures tell us that listening to God is best for our lives?*

Listen and Live Better

God wants us to listen to Him, and He blesses those who listen to Him with wisdom, knowledge, and peace. Knowing that you're following God helps you when you face adversity and brings joy and happiness that is only possible when you obey Him.

► *List here some things that can help you listen to God, especially when you face adversity this week.*

KEY VERSE

Then Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me? —Jeremiah 38:15, KJV

Jeremiah 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." —Jeremiah 38:15, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of May 17 through May 23

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Deuteronomy 24:14-18—Treat Each Other Fairly.
- Tues.** Jeremiah 31:27-30—Taking Personal Responsibility.
- Wed.** Ezekiel 18:10-13—The Child Who Sins Suffers Punishment.
- Thurs.** Ezekiel 18:14-18—The Righteous Child Is Rewarded.
- Fri.** Ezekiel 18:19-24—All Are Accountable for Their Sins.
- Sat.** Ezekiel 18:25-29—God Is Compassionate and Fair.
- Sun.** Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32—Repent and Live Righteous Lives.