

JEREMIAH'S RESCUE

Cynthia was just about to start her morning walk when she heard someone behind her. “Give me your purse.” She turned around, and saw the gun. The young man repeated the demand. Cynthia nervously told him that her purse was in the house. “Go get it.” He motioned toward my door.

As Cynthia walked toward the house, she prayed. Her two children were sleeping upstairs. What was she doing? What if they got hurt?

The man followed her into the house. She showed him her purse, which was on the kitchen table, and pulled out some cash. “That’s not enough,” he said.

Cynthia emptied her purse, letting everything inside fall to the floor. Surely he’d see that she didn’t have any more money. His eyes lit up. *Her debit card.* Cynthia grabbed it. “I’ll take you to the bank.”

He nodded in agreement. He went out first, and as soon as he was outside the door, Cynthia slammed it behind him, locked it, and ran upstairs to call the police.

After the police left, Cynthia fell to her knees and wept. She praised God, who had rescued her. God figured out a way. He made sure that the man walked out of her door first, and she never had to get in a car with him.

1 Consider a time when you needed rescue. What happened? Who came to your aid?

2 When was the last time that you felt powerless?

3 When have you helped someone in desperate need? What led you to help?

⁷ Now when Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs which was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon; the king then sitting in the gate of Benjamin; ⁸ Ebed-melech went forth out of the king's house, and spake 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 like to die for 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 hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die.

⁷ But Ebed-Melek, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸ Ebed-Melek went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.”

¹⁰ 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.”

An Unlikely Savior

Imprisoned in a dark and empty cistern, with no food and no way out, and locked within the walls of a city that will soon be under siege, the prophet Jeremiah is in a desperate situation. Jeremiah has found himself lowered into a cistern because he has been preaching an unpopular message. He has been sharing that the city of Jerusalem will fall, and he has been urging everyone to surrender to the Babylonians to save their lives (Jer. 38:2–3). But Jerusalem's officials fear this will only discourage the soldiers and undermine all efforts at defense (Jer. 38:4). The officials get their king's permission to “take care” of this troublesome prophet by killing him (Jer. 38:5). Their method is cruel and cowardly. They put Jeremiah into an empty cistern, leaving him to die of hunger and exposure (Jer. 38:6). In this way, they leave no body and no apparent evidence of a crime.

A cistern, which normally holds water, is a terrible muddy hole when it has been emptied of water (as in a city under siege). Jeremiah probably cannot sit or lie down. By the time that someone

discovers Jeremiah's confinement months later, he will have become a lifeless corpse.

Fortunately, God provides an unlikely agent of rescue, Ebed-Melek. Ebed-Melek means "servant of the king," so this might be a job title rather than his name. The text says that he is part of the king's court, but it does not say whether or not he knows that the king himself had privately agreed to Jeremiah's murder. Apparently, Ebed-Melek believes Jeremiah and his message.

He is also prudent in his way of advocating for the prophet's life. Instead of approaching the king privately, he waits until the king is holding court at the gate of the city (v. 7). The king will not be able to sweep the issue under the rug or make the problem go away.

As the king's own servant, Ebed-Melek has no problem receiving an immediate audience. He quickly summarizes the actions of men who have "done evil" against the prophet (v. 9 KJV). Ironically, one of the major concerns of Jeremiah's ministry is the shedding of innocent blood (Jer. 22:3, 17). The kings of Judah did not pursue justice for the oppressed and innocent, and the pattern has now been demonstrated in Jeremiah's own attempted murder.

Ebed-Melek's compassion and boldness outshine any concern for his own safety at the hands of the palace officials. At great personal risk, Ebed-Melek confronts Zedekiah, whose secret ambivalence has allowed the prophet of God to come to harm. And Ebed-Melek's boldness pays off, for the king does not wish to be publicly perceived as opposing the prophet of God. He quickly issues the command for Ebed-Melek to lead a rescue party of thirty men, so that Jeremiah can be lifted from the pit (v. 10).

1 Why has Jeremiah been lowered into a pit or cistern?

2 What makes Ebed-Melek an unlikely advocate for his safety?

3 Why does the king respond as he does?

¹¹ So Ebed-melech took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took thence old cast clouts and old rotten rags, and let them down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah. ¹² And Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah, Put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords. And Jeremiah did so. ¹³ So they drew up Jeremiah with cords, and took him up out of the dungeon: and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.

¹¹ So Ebed-Melek took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. ¹² Ebed-Melek the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, ¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

God Rescues

Once he has the permission of the king, Ebed-Melek immediately implements the plan of rescue. He starts by collecting old rags from a room under the palace (v. 11). This attention to detail demonstrates empathy and compassion, for he wants to pad the ropes and prevent the prophet from injury and infection (vv. 11–12). The cistern is deep, and Jeremiah needs many men to haul him out of the mud. Thus, without padding on his body, the ropes would abrade his skin.

The imagery calls to mind Psalm 40:2, where the psalmist exclaims, “He [God] drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog.” While the words of the psalm express a metaphor, the pit for Jeremiah is all too real. And Jeremiah’s rescuer has a human face.

After being pulled out, he does not run away or flee the scene in fear (v. 13). After his confinement, he probably could not move quickly, and he remains under the safe custody of the men who have hauled him up from the darkness. An additional conclusion to this story happens beyond the printed text. Jeremiah tells Ebed-Melek that he shall escape unharmed from Jerusalem’s impending destruction. Because of his trust in the Lord and service to God’s prophet, on that day the Lord shall save him (Jer. 39:15–18).

Even as the book of Jeremiah recounts the stunning failure of God's people to collectively repent, this story paints a powerful image of deliverance. A desperate man is unable to free himself. Then comes an unexpected savior, acting with justice and compassion. Jeremiah and Ebed-Melek each show concern for the safety of others and share the heart of a God who "will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they" (Jer. 3:11). The heroic tale is a picture of hope for those living under oppression. God is able to rescue His people.

This story also demonstrates God's faithfulness to righteous individuals. While neither man is spared from all hardship—they are living in a city under siege, after all—the Lord rescues each from destruction. God's rescue displays His great love and concern to spare the lives of people who are suffering for doing what is right.

1 What do we learn about Ebed-Melek from his actions?

2 How does God prove to be faithful, both to Jeremiah and to Ebed-Melek?



This example of a water cistern is cut into the rock of an area outside the city of Jerusalem. Cisterns would fill with rainwater seasonally, and they would often be covered with a large stone. No one would easily be able to hear Jeremiah's cries for help.

Davidbena

Leaving the Rest to God

Doing the right thing is not always easy, because there is often a difference between what is right and what is pleasing to others. As a preacher, I've sometimes wrestled with this disparity. Like most people, I want to be liked. I want others to think well of me—to shake my hand and congratulate me on “another fine message.” My sense of pride feeds off that kind of stuff. But what happens when faithfulness means speaking an unpopular message, confronting sin, or addressing something harmful that is masquerading as good? Sometimes faithfulness to God means stepping on toes and getting kicked.

I knew a denominational leader who got kicked, hard. He was attempting to address troubling patterns of leadership, which others were determined to sweep under the rug. He spoke an unpopular message and suffered for it. In fact, he was driven out of the denomination he loved. It was a hard road, but God met him and was faithful to him, just as God was faithful to Jeremiah in today's lesson. God rescued my friend in a different way, by surrounding him with steadfast support and by giving him a new ministry.

Choosing what is right does not exempt a person from suffering. Sometimes following God means walking a hard road. In rare cases, it even means facing death. But the Bible consistently points to a God who vindicates those who seek Him, who sees their suffering and moves to deliver them. Sometimes that looks like rescuing a prophet from the bottom of a cistern. Sometimes it looks like renewing a trampled leader's heart and granting him or her a fresh purpose. But ultimately it looks like the Son of God dying on the cross to defeat death, so that He can raise His people up on the last day. As for today, my task is to follow Christ and choose what is right, leaving the rest to God. God can rescue those who do the right thing.

1 When in your life have you had to choose between what is right and what is pleasing to others?

2 How have you witnessed God's rescue or provision for someone who suffered for doing the right thing?

3 When and why can it be difficult to trust in God to rescue us?

Prepare for Spiritual Survival

As natural disasters make the news more and more, retailers have begun selling “survival kits” to prepare people for rescue in times of crisis. A survival kit contains items that a person would need in an emergency: water and food, something to signal for help, and supplies to deal with physical injuries.

Imagine that you have been asked to supplement a survival kit with items that will provide spiritual support for a person in crisis. What would you include, and why? You might even feel motivated to pack a spare bag this week as if you were preparing it for a friend in need.

Key Text

Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. —Jeremiah 38:10 KJV

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.” —Jeremiah 38:10 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of November 3 through November 8

Mon. Luke 12:42–48—The Master Is Coming Soon.

Tue. Luke 12:49–53—The Purifying Fire of Change.

Wed. Lamentations 2:17–22—The Lord’s Purifying Purpose.

Thu. Lamentations 3:21–36—Hope in the Lord.

Fri. 1 Peter 1:1–12—Faith Tested by Fire.

Sat. 1 Peter 1:13–25—Prepare for Action.

Next Week: 2 Kings 24:18–25:9

We will discuss the utter failure of Judah’s leaders and the fall of Jerusalem. If you spend any time reading the news, you’ll probably spot several examples of failed leadership.