

Jeremiah: The Suffering Preacher of Doom

Bible Background • Jeremiah 37-38

Printed Text • Jeremiah 38:14-23 | Devotional Reading • Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15–18

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will IDENTIFY Jeremiah’s hesitation to give controversial advice to Zedekiah, SENSE Jeremiah’s apprehension when talking to Zedekiah, and COMMIT to giving challenging godly advice.

In Focus

Walter was stuck between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” Walter still liked to hang out with his single friends, reveling in his former life, but sought to change his ways, especially for the sake of his marriage. In the past, Walter used his brother Ronald as a cover without his knowledge and rationalized that it was just more comfortable for him not to know so he could avoid the lecture. He hadn’t meant to do it again, but then his single friends planned a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Jamaica. Walter promised this would be the last time he tried to cover up his actions with these friends, and told his wife just he and Ronald were going for brother time.

While out at a family function, Tonya asked, “So Ronald, how are plans for your trip to Jamaica? Walter told me you all would be using our timeshare.” Ronald was at a loss for words and gracefully excused himself from Tonya to calm down.

Later, Ronald confronted his brother “Hey man, enough is enough, I am not going to be a part of your lies and deception. If you don’t tell Tonya the truth, I will!” Walter replied, “Ronald, what do I do? I just wanted to get away and have some fun with the fellas, and I figured if Tonya thought you were going, she would not ask too many questions.”

Walter had no idea how to get himself out of the mess he made, both with his wife and with his brother, but he could not bring himself to face the truth.

Which is harder to expose the truth or remain silent?

Keep in Mind

“Jeremiah said, ‘If I tell you the truth, you will kill me. And if I give you advice, you won’t listen to me anyway.’” (Jeremiah 38:15, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Chaldeans (Jeremiah 38:18) kasdim (Heb.) — Inhabitants of Chaldea, in the lower Mesopotamia; Babylonians

B. I Beseech Thee (v. 20) na’ (Heb.) — Please; a particle of incitement and entreaty

Say It Correctly

Ebed-melek. eh-BED-meh-LEK

Zedekiah. zeh-deh-KYE-ah

Jehoiachin. jeh-HOY-ah-kin

Mattaniah. mah-tah-NYE-ah

KJV

Jeremiah 38:14 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.
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.
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 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.

NLT

Jeremiah 38:14 One day King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah and had him brought to the third entrance of the LORD's Temple. "I want to ask you something," the king said. "And don't try to hide the truth."
15 Jeremiah said, "If I tell you the truth, you will kill me. And if I give you advice, you won't listen to me anyway."
16 So King Zedekiah secretly promised him, "As surely as the LORD our Creator lives, I will not kill you or hand you over to the men who want you dead."
17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "This is what the LORD God of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the Babylonian officers, you and your family will live, and the city will not be burned down.
18 But if you refuse to surrender, you will not escape! This city will be handed over to the Babylonians, and they will burn it to the ground.'"
19 "But I am afraid to surrender," the king said, "for the Babylonians may hand me over to the Judeans who have defected to them. And who knows what they will do to me!"
20 Jeremiah replied, "You won't be handed over to them if you choose to obey the LORD. Your life will be spared, and all will go well for you.
21 But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me:
22 All the women left in your palace will be brought out and given to the officers of the Babylonian army. Then the women will taunt you, saying, 'What fine friends you have! They have betrayed and misled you. When your feet sank in the mud, they left you to your fate!'
23 All your wives and children will be led out to the Babylonians, and you will not escape. You will be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city will be burned down."

The People, Places, and Times

Jeremiah. The son of a priest, Jeremiah was born in Anathoth, a village three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Jeremiah received his calling as a prophet in 626 BC during the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign. The

Book of Jeremiah reveals the inner turmoil and conflict out of which Jeremiah delivered his prophetic burden. Jeremiah resisted his call to prophetic ministry, citing his youth as an obstacle (Jeremiah 1:6-9). But God's will cannot be resisted. Jeremiah followed his calling faithfully, but the road was hard. He was rejected by his people (Jeremiah 15:10). He was frustrated by their hardheartedness (Jeremiah 5:3). In spite of all of the difficulties that Jeremiah experienced, he found that he could not resist God's call to prophesy. He had to declare the word of the LORD as the LORD had directed him. It was a compulsion. It was a dynamic, powerful inner motivation that made him prophesy. "Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9).

Background

Jeremiah, whose name means "Yahweh appointed," was set apart by God as a prophet from the womb (Jeremiah 1:5). For over forty years he was God's mouthpiece as he called out judgment against Judah for their wickedness. In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim's eleven-year reign, the Lord commanded Jeremiah to provide a written account of everything spoken about Israel, Judah, and all the nations from the time of King Josiah until that present which included His reminders of the disaster to come. God's objective was to extend mercy if hearers would only repent (Jeremiah 36:1-3). King Jehoiakim and his officials heard the prophetic word but rather than repent, the scrolls were burned (Jeremiah 36:1-25). In spite of the tough words he had to deliver and personal pain experienced, Jeremiah followed through with everything the Lord commanded. In the last days of Jerusalem King Zedekiah, a weaker king was in power and the Lord sent word through Jeremiah that although Judah looked to Egypt as an ally, the other nation would leave them to fend for themselves. He further warned that Judah's nemesis—the Chaldeans—would prevail against them, burn down the city, and scatter them as exiles. However, this destruction would be averted if the king and his leaders would turn back to the Lord. The officials were angered by his prophecy and sought to paint Jeremiah as a traitor to the Chaldeans; he was beaten and thrown into prison (Jeremiah 37:1-16). What does it mean to speak truth to power?

At-A-Glance

1. A Final Interview (Jeremiah 38:14-18)
2. A Final Response (vv. 19-23)

In Depth

1. A Final Interview (Jeremiah 38:14-18) King Zedekiah on more than one occasion privately sought out Jeremiah to hear what the Lord had revealed to him. The king had other prophets who told him what he wanted to hear regarding Judah's national security. But those prophets did not align with what the Lord spoke through Jeremiah, who proved to be His true prophet. The Lord delivered Jeremiah from his officials through King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 37:17-21). Jeremiah would find himself in trouble with the king's officials again for delivering the Lord's proclamation of calamity for disobedience and coming Chaldean siege. He was considered a trouble maker who caused unrest in the land and was thrown into a dry cistern by the king's men. The king would later rescue Jeremiah from death, but he would be once again locked up (Jeremiah 38:1-13).

King Zedekiah sought to show honor for the word of the Lord and had Jeremiah brought to him at the Temple to inquire what the Lord might say through him. Jeremiah was hesitant to answer because he recognized that Zedekiah would probably not listen to his counsel. His officials had great power and influence and wanted Jeremiah dead. The king promised in their one-on-one conversation that neither he nor his men would kill Jeremiah because the king wanted to hear what the Lord said. Jeremiah gave the Lord's word by advising the king and his officials to surrender to the Babylonians so that they may live. However, if they did not heed his counsel from the Lord, the city would burn, and they would not escape.

How do you discern when to speak and when to be quiet?

2. A Final Response (vv. 19–23) After hearing Jeremiah’s prophetic word to surrender, King Zedekiah in confidence shares with Jeremiah that he fears what will happen if he follows the instructions given by the Lord. Jeremiah assures the king if he and his officials obey the Lord, the crisis will be suspended and they will be saved. However, if he refuses, the Lord revealed that the Chaldeans would burn the city and the people would be taken captive by Babylon. Further, Jeremiah tells the king that he and his officials would bring disgrace upon themselves as the people who trust them realize they had misled them. Their wives who are the life-givers and their sons who represent their bloodline would be captured. The king and all of his officials would be destroyed. King Zedekiah led Judah through habitual disobedience and bad advice, and Jeremiah foretold the consequences of those decisions. God still provided an opportunity to change their ways if they would only ask for and receive God’s mercy.

What are some reasons people dismiss godly advice?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Jeremiah’s response to King Zedekiah’s request to hear from the Lord (Jeremiah 38:15)?
2. What was the Lord’s advice to King Zedekiah through Jeremiah? What was His warning (vv. 17, 20–21)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Given Jeremiah’s experience as a prophet, was he right to question King Zedekiah’s request? What did the king expect to hear from Jeremiah?
2. Are there times when you have been the recipient of advice you did not want to receive but the Lord confirmed it was from Him? How did you respond?

Liberating Lesson

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke many times about the dangers of keeping silent. There are times when God will compel His people to speak truth to those who will not receive it favorably, but we must stand for righteousness even if it costs. Some believers live in parts of the world where they are faced with persecution daily for boldly living their faith. Those of us blessed with religious freedom must continue to pray and support those who do not have the same freedom. Think of ways your small group or church can help people living in countries where Christianity is actually illegal. Even on our side of the world, we must be intentional to equip ourselves and others in the spirit of God’s love to share and defend our faith in the public square amid opposition.

Application for Activation

In our world, we still hear the chant “no justice, no peace,” because there is a need to keep speaking out against systemic injustice. The Church must champion against injustice because we are recipients of God’s mercy and made equal at the Cross of Jesus. No matter the race, color, or creed injustice against any people does not reflect the God who created humanity in His image with the capacity to love without limit. There are plenty of causes in need of individual and collective voices for social change. Commit to sharing your time, talent, and resources as an individual, a class, or a church to bring God’s kingdom of righteousness in the earth.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Jeremiah 38:14–23 Jeremiah 37–39 is a chronological narrative of Prophet Jeremiah’s life during the reign of King Zedekiah in Jerusalem until its final siege and destruction by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia. In an earlier conquest of the city, Nebuchadnezzar had taken King Jehoiachin captive and replaced him with his uncle, Mattaniah whom he ironically renamed Zedekiah, which means, “Yahweh is righteous” (2 Kings 24:15–17; Jeremiah 37:1). King Zedekiah’s life was anything but righteous for he “did what was evil in the LORD’s sight” (from 2 Kings 24:19–20, NLT). Zedekiah also made Judah sin against the Lord God. The Lord determined to discipline Jerusalem as a consequence for their rebellion using Babylonia as His instrument. However, the Lord used the prophets including Jeremiah to warn the people of the imminent destruction that awaited them unless they repented. Despite a series of warnings through Jeremiah, King Zedekiah and the people continued to rebel; they refuse to heed the word of God (37:3–10). Rather, they conspire to kill Jeremiah and put him in prison three times for speaking the mind of God (cf. 37:11–16; 38:1–6).

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?

Verses 7–13 record how the Lord used an Ethiopian eunuch, an officer in the royal palace, Ebed-Melech, to rescue Jeremiah from the officials of the city who had plotted to kill him. They had gone to Zedekiah and accused Jeremiah of discouraging the people with his prophecies. To them it was a treasonous act. On their demand for Jeremiah’s death (vv. 2–3), Zedekiah handed him over to the officials. They cast him into a dry but muddy cistern and left him there to die. Jeremiah sank into the mud, but for Ebed-Melech’s timely intercession to the king, Jeremiah would have died. Zedekiah then gives orders and Jeremiah is rescued from the cistern (vv. 9–13). Jeremiah would later send a special message to Ebed-Melech assuring him that when the city is taken, God would spare his life and he would be delivered (39:15–18).

Later, King Zedekiah invites Jeremiah for a private and secrete consultation. According to records, this is the fourth and last contact King Zedekiah had with Jeremiah before the fall of the city to Babylonia.

On his arrival, Zedekiah takes him “into the third entry that is in the house of the LORD.” It has been suggested that this entrance may refer to a private entrance that connected the king’s palace with the Temple. Without going directly to his inquiry, the king solicits for Jeremiah’s honesty to tell him the truth. The request seems to put Jeremiah in a dilemma because of his past experiences. This is the third occasion Zedekiah called on Jeremiah. The two previous times did not go well. After giving the word of God the first time, Jeremiah is imprisoned (37:1–16). After the second summons, he is thrown into the cistern (38:1–6).

Based on these previous experiences, Jeremiah is apprehensive; he expresses two objections. First, “If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death?” That is, if he would say things unfavorable to the king, there is no guarantee the king would not kill him. Second, “if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me?” In other words “there is no need giving you advice because you will not listen.” Previously, Jeremiah has warned Zedekiah and the nation of Judah several times of the impending destruction of Jerusalem because of their rebellion, but they have flouted God’s words and ignored Jeremiah’s counsels. Indeed Jeremiah has become unpopular with the officials for his negative messages regarding the fall of Jerusalem so they plot his death (cf. 26:10–11; 37:11–15; 38:4). King Zedekiah’s decision to meet him privately was for fear of the officials (37:17; 18:5).

16 So Zedekiah the king swore 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.

After Jeremiah has voiced his objections, King Zedekiah secretly vows to Jeremiah using the Lord's name that he would neither kill him nor hand him over to the people. With these specifics, the king stops himself from a loophole. One can imagine an evil twist as the king promises not to kill the prophet, only for him to be handed over to someone else who will kill him. King Zedekiah does not take advantage of that trick, though, and answers Jeremiah's first objection, but not the second. He promises to spare Jeremiah's life but never promises to comply with Jeremiah's messages and counsel.

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.

Zedekiah probably thought that Jeremiah must have been enticed with the promise of his safety to compromise God's message. Apparently, he must have thought that Jeremiah was as unstable, wobbly and fearful as himself, and therefore would change his message to suit the king. But Jeremiah is stable, obedient, and faithful to God and His word, unlike Zedekiah. Therefore Jeremiah's message remains the same as before (cf. 21:1–10; 37:17; 38:1–3). Jeremiah boldly declares to him what Lord has revealed to him, this time with emphasis, "Thus saith the LORD" According to the word of God, if Zedekiah would surrender to the Babylonians, then his life would be spared, Jerusalem would be conquered but it would not be burned down, and his family would be spared and safe. However, if Zedekiah refuses to surrender, Jeremiah assures him, Jerusalem would be handed over to the armies of Babylonia who would burn it down and Zedekiah would not escape from their hands (cf. 21:10; 32:3–4, 29; 34:2, 22; 37:8,10; 38:23).

For its authenticity and its fulfillment, Jeremiah identifies the source of his prophecy: it is from the "LORD, the God of host, the God of Israel" using God's divine attributes and identities that are familiar to Zedekiah. The same God in whose name Zedekiah swore to Jeremiah of his safety if he would be honest with him. One would think that on hearing that the order is from the Lord God of Israel, Zedekiah would listen and follow the prophet's advice. But the contrary is the case. Instead of trusting the Lord and obeying His word and in spite of Jeremiah's guarantee of safety if he would follow his advice, Zedekiah prefers to fear his own people rather than God.

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.

King Zedekiah would not follow Jeremiah's advice because of fear. He tells Jeremiah that he is afraid if he surrenders to the Babylonians, they might hand him over to the Jews who had already had gone to Babylon; and they would him to taunt and ridicule. They might maltreat him and his family because of his acts of cruelty toward them in the past. If Zedekiah had trusted in the Lord, he would not have been afraid of either the officials or the deserters. Not minding the spineless king's flimsy and ridiculous excuses, Jeremiah reassures him that the Babylonians would not deliver him to his detractors. Pleading, Jeremiah tries to persuade him to obey God's word. The phrase "I beseech thee" is from the Hebrew word *na'* (*naw*), a particle of incitement and entreaty, that can simply be translated as "please." Jeremiah begs Zedekiah to obey the Lord and to voluntarily surrender to the Babylonians in order to save his life, his family, and Jerusalem. Jeremiah then reiterates the consequences if he refuses to heed the word of God.

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 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.

Jeremiah's plea to King Zedekiah is followed by a stern warning. Jeremiah warns him that if he fails to surrender to the Babylonians, worse things than what he fears will come upon him. To stress the seriousness of the consequences of his refusal to obey, Jeremiah warns the king affirming that his revelation is from God—it's not man's words or just a made-up story. Therefore Zedekiah should take it seriously because what is coming to him will be worse than what he is afraid of. When the Babylonian army comes and takes the city, all the women would be given to the officers of the Babylonian army. What he feared will then come to him. "The woman," Jeremiah basically tells Zedekiah, "will ridicule you, and mockingly sing to you, 'What fine friends you have! They have betrayed and misled you. When your feet sank in the mud, they left you to your fate!'" In other words, "What type of good friends you have who have betrayed and misled you with false advice and now you are in trouble, they have deserted you and abandoned you to your fate."

Continuing his warning in verse 23, Jeremiah tells King Zedekiah that if he refuses to surrender to Babylonia, he would watch his wives and children be taken away. He himself would be captured and the city of Jerusalem would be burned down as the Lord had spoken (cf. 38:18). The fulfillment of this prophecy is recorded in the next chapter (39:6). Like the coward he is and being afraid of the officials, Zedekiah warns Jeremiah not to disclose their conversation to the officials, and if he did he would lose his life (vv. 24ff). It is no surprise that King Zedekiah disobeyed all the words the Lord had spoken through Jeremiah. That notwithstanding every word of Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled. The question is why would Zedekiah not believe Jeremiah. It has been suggested that one of the reasons could be Ezekiel's prophecy that he would never see Babylon: "I will bring him to Babylon to the land of the Chaldeans; yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there" (Ezekiel 12:13). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had agreed in all the prophecies regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and that Zedekiah would be taken captive to Babylon. Zedekiah indeed was taken captive to Babylon just as the prophets had prophesied, but he never saw Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had made him watch his sons slaughtered before him, then he gouged out his eyes, bound him in bronze and led him to Babylon (Jeremiah 39:6–7).

Zedekiah means "Yahweh is righteous" ironically given him by Nebuchadnezzar (2 King 24:15–17). He was one of the most unrighteous, wicked and godless kings reigned in Israel and Judah; he was an epitome of evil and led Judah to sin. Jeremiah ministered under him during one of the most difficult times in Jerusalem. Jeremiah's life was threatened constantly and he was often imprisoned—yet he remained truthful and faithful to God's Word. He never compromised; he fearlessly proclaimed the word of God and was never afraid to say the truth. Playing on the meaning of King Zedekiah's name, Jeremiah prophesied that the Lord would send a king worthy of the name. This future King will come from King David's lineage to save his people, taking up the messianic name "Yahweh Is Our Righteousness."

On the one hand, Zedekiah-types are not lacking in our society and in many nations today. It is not rare to find ungodly leaders who, like Zedekiah are disobedient to the word of God and who are leading their countries. Many are fighting the Lord. On the other hand, Jeremiah-types are rare and almost impossible to find in our churches today. The Gospel is compromised, we have become weak and afraid to proclaim God's word fearlessly; our priority has changed, instead of propagating the Gospel, prosperity is preached and amassing wealth. Private jets and big mansions have become the symbol of success and church growth. Only very few if any can faithfully stand on the truth of God's Word under threat imprisonment or death. May God restore the spirit of Jeremiah among us.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Apostles Speak Truth to Council
(Acts 4:13–22)

TUESDAY

Prophet Jeremiah Is Arrested and Imprisoned
(Jeremiah 37:11–16)

WEDNESDAY

Ebed-Melech's Trust in Jeremiah Honored
(Jeremiah 38:7–13; 39:15–18)

THURSDAY

Jeremiah Reaffirms Prophecy of Zedekiah
(Jeremiah 37:17–21)

FRIDAY

Jeremiah's Last Days in Jerusalem
(Jeremiah 38:24–28)

SATURDAY

Jerusalem Destroyed; People Exiled
(2 Kings 25:1–12)

SUNDAY

Zedekiah Must Submit to Babylonian Conquest
(Jeremiah 38:14–23)