

PREACHING DOOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 37-38

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 38:14-23

I. A Secret Meeting

Jeremiah 38:14-16

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.

14. When the Babylonians returned and besieged Jerusalem and defeat seemed near, *Zedekiah* began to summon *Jeremiah* for conversations. *The third entry that is in the house of the Lord* probably indicates a back entrance from the palace to the temple. The king apparently wanted a private setting where he could talk with *Jeremiah* outside of his officials' hearing. Perhaps *Zedekiah* thought that *Jeremiah* might reverse his oracles of judgment and the Lord would grant Jerusalem a reprieve after all.

This was not the first such conversation. *Zedekiah's* repeated summoning of *Jeremiah* shows that at least part of him respected *Jeremiah's* advice, if not his standing as an inspired prophet of God. Yet his terse command that *Jeremiah* *hide nothing* from him shows that *Zedekiah* did not yet understand that *Jeremiah* always told the king everything God told the prophet.

15. God had given *Jeremiah* assurances of protection at the time of his calling, even from kings and officials (*Jeremiah* 1:18-19; 15:20-21). Yet he still feared, for he too was human with doubts (1:6; 15:18; 20:7). He had every reason to believe that a harsh word against *Zedekiah* could spell his own demise (26:20-23).

Jeremiah surmised that *Zedekiah* was hoping for a more favorable word from the Lord this time.

16. *King Zedekiah* continued the secret conversation by giving *Jeremiah* the purported assurance of safety that he sought. Whether or not *Zedekiah* was sincere was one question; the more important question was whether he would follow through. His word meant little because his character was not dependably good or evil.

Zedekiah believed he held *Jeremiah's* life in his hands. He ironically swore this oath by *the Lord . . . that made us this soul*, a poetic way of acknowledging that God gives life. The king inadvertently acknowl-

edged that God is actually the one who decides between *life* and *death*.

II. A Private Prophecy

Jeremiah 38:17-23

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.

17a. *Jeremiah* knew that this king would likely waffle. Even so, the prophet still proclaimed the word from the Lord, come what

may. This is the mark of true commitment. The word of God was like a fire in Jeremiah's bones (20:9), impossible to hold back whether anyone listened or not (6:10-11).

Piling up designations for *the Lord* emphasized that *the God of hosts* was the true king in Israel. God had allowed the Israelites to have a human king because they desired to be like the other nations. He knew this was a result of faithlessness and would also lead to more faithlessness.

Referring to the Lord as *the God of Israel* has implications for how the people were called to conduct themselves. But idolatry and injustice had landed them in a position to face God's punishment.

17b. The Lord's offer to spare Zedekiah's life upon surrender to the Babylonians accords with terms previously stated. God's offer to spare the *city* from fiery destruction might seem like an astonishing, last-minute reversal (Jeremiah 21:10; 34:2, 22; 37:9-10). But the Lord has the freedom to change His mind about either blessing or punishment for a nation that alters its course (18:5-10). The Lord did not offer a solution in which Zedekiah was allowed to remain king in Jerusalem. But the Lord did offer a solution that would avoid Jerusalem's being burned to the ground.

The nation of Judah apparently had chances early on to avert disaster entirely (Jeremiah 4:1-4). Yet God eventually was determined unreservedly to punish Judah. Although judgment in Babylon was by this time assured, God still offered mercy to His people and their king (1 Kings 21:20-29). Nonetheless, Jeremiah offered a glimpse of what would occur if Zedekiah made other choices. Accepting God's mercy in judgment would mitigate some of the horrible consequences that otherwise would follow.

Christians still experience God's discipline tempered by His mercy, even though we don't always recognize it as such. This is part of the process of God's using all

things for our good (Romans 8:28). This isn't to say we will enjoy all things or that all things will seem good at some point. Instead, *all* things that happen to us and around us are meant to make us into the image of Jesus (8:29).

18. Jeremiah's words called for Zedekiah to ignore the officials who were urging him not to surrender (Jeremiah 27:12-15). But beyond Zedekiah's lack of character and the grave sins of Judah, there was another reason Jeremiah could be resigned to Jerusalem's being burned by *the Chaldeans*. The prophets had been warning of Judah's destruction for many years. Though God can change His mind, He also clearly stated that blessing resulted from obedience and curses came from faithlessness. Without repentance and obedience, Jerusalem had no hope of experiencing God's great mercy.

19. Had *Zedekiah* feared the Babylonians themselves, it would be hard to blame him. Even fearing his own officials is understandable to an extent, since his predecessor, Jehoiakim, was probably murdered by his own officials the last time the Babylonians invaded.

The fear he expressed at this point, however, seems comparatively insignificant. Some of Jerusalem's citizenry already had surrendered to the Babylonians (here called *Chaldeans*). Zedekiah did not want to expose himself to their scorn or potential murderous mistreatment.

20. Zedekiah had tried to make the issue into a political matter, but he was oblivious to the real issue. *Jeremiah* thus directed the king back to the core spiritual realities.

Obedience to *the Lord* was Zedekiah's only viable course of action. The promise *thy soul shall live* probably referred more to quality of life than mere survival (Jeremiah 34:4-5). Indeed, the quality of Zedekiah's life after remaining rebellious to both God and Nebuchadnezzar ended up being quite poor (52:8-11).

21. Jeremiah made clear that this preview of the future comes from God.

22. Zedekiah's *house* would fall if he didn't do as the Lord had revealed. This could refer to his family in general, his descendants, or (less likely) the Davidic line.

Jeremiah painted a picture of Zedekiah's *women* ridiculing him as they became captives to the Babylonians. Women in war suffer immensely at the hands of oppositional forces. If Zedekiah cared for the women, he would follow Jeremiah's counsel.

Maybe to curry favor and maybe just out of heartbreak, the women would mock Zedekiah because of his officials' treachery. Many of those advisers already had deserted him (Jeremiah 37:19), and the rest would soon follow. Jeremiah knew what betrayal felt like (20:10) as well as having his *feet . . . sunk in the mire* (38:6). Zedekiah would have no Ebedmelech to rescue him from the metaphorical pit (38:7-13). Jeremiah hoped this vision would appeal to the king's fear and self-interest and result in obedience.

23. Jeremiah built on his dire prophecies by emphasizing that Zedekiah's *children* would go into Babylonian exile. This is a clear escalation of Jeremiah's appeal to Zedekiah's emotional center.

Yet even hearing the sad fate that awaited his family failed to move Zedekiah.

The dates given in Jeremiah 39:1-2 compute to a siege of 18 months. The king and some of his soldiers fled Jerusalem at night. The Babylonians hunted him down, however, and captured him.

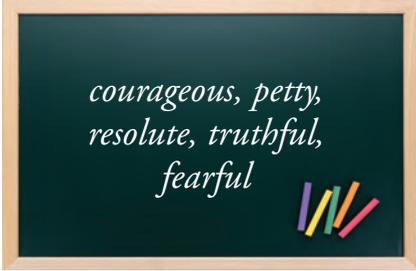
Zedekiah's sentence was to see his sons put to death, be blinded afterward, then taken in shackles to Babylon (2 Kings 25:7). What few officials remained at that point, were executed. The city of Jerusalem was burned to the ground (2 Kings 25:9).

Zedekiah's demise came by God's hand. Such was the fate of one who trusted in human wisdom rather than believing that God would do what He said.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

PREACHING DOOM

Into the Lesson



People are complex creatures who can be curious mixtures of these characteristics at various times. Today's text helps us sort through these with two examples from history.

Into the Word

Read Jeremiah 38:14-23.

List the motives and thoughts of King Zedekiah.

List the motives and thoughts of Jeremiah.

Into Life

Decide how today's lesson illustrates each of the following proposals:

Faithfulness to God doesn't always result in an easy life.

God's mercy will stretch far, but eventually He may exert punishment.

Self-interest can blind us to God's will.

God will not ignore unfaithfulness.

Return to the words listed in the **Into the Lesson** section. Write down one of the negative words that most characterizes you in a weak moment.

Write one step you can take in the week ahead to move yourself closer to the opposite of that negative word.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Proclaiming God's message is risky, but to ignore that message is fatal.