

# LATER EXPERIENCES OF JEREMIAH

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 20:1–6;  
37:1–38:28; 43:1–7

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The king commanded Ebed-melech the Cushite (Ethiopian), “Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies.” (Jer. 38:10)

### Daily Bible Readings

|           |         |                        |                                    |
|-----------|---------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>M</b>  | Oct. 27 | Matt. 10:16–27         | Speak as the Spirit Leads          |
| <b>T</b>  | Oct. 28 | Matt. 10:28–42         | Do Not Fear Mortal Powers          |
| <b>W</b>  | Oct. 29 | Ps. 37:1–13            | Wait Patiently for the Lord        |
| <b>Th</b> | Oct. 30 | Ps. 37:25–28,<br>35–40 | God Never Forsakes the Righteous   |
| <b>F</b>  | Oct. 31 | Rom. 12:12–21          | Overcome Evil with Good            |
| <b>Sa</b> | Nov. 1  | Jer. 38:1–6            | Speak Even When the Message Stings |

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

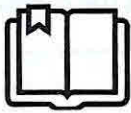
The book of Jeremiah is full of personal laments. In chapter 20, for example, the prophet felt abandoned by God, derided by his contemporaries, and tortured by his mission. God had given him an authoritative message, but the message fell on the deaf, mocking ears of a hardened people. Jeremiah wanted to stay out of it, yet (he said) God *enticed* him and *overpowered* him into speaking the word of doom (v. 7). Ultimately, Jeremiah wrestled through his doubts and relied on God’s presence and power to vindicate him, but that did not make his task any easier.

Jeremiah’s message of judgment and destruction contradicted the popular idea that the Lord would protect Jerusalem because it was the city of God. No one wanted to believe Jeremiah. When he preached, he was ridiculed and called a liar. Even his friends tried to discredit him and take revenge on him. So, he stopped preaching. Then God’s words burned like a fire inside of him, and he could not hold them in. Jeremiah suffered if he spoke and suffered if he didn’t speak. He cried out to God in agony, but he was compelled to

continue preaching. He trusted that God would eventually prevail, but the meantime was painful.

As the year 587 BCE unfolded, the pathetic disintegration of Israel's national life became more and more obvious; the grim future appeared to be inevitable. Jerusalem was surrounded, and food was rapidly running out. Zedekiah the king was no longer in control of events, even in his own court. Jeremiah was in prison, accused of undermining the morale of the nation. Yet the optimistic court prophets continued to voice their hollow promises that God would never allow the special city and temple to be harmed. They could not have been more mistaken.

*Gracious God, we confess that we are sometimes afraid to follow the path you show us—afraid of what it will cost, afraid of where it will lead, afraid of what we might lose. Empower us to listen to you and to act more faithfully, we pray. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 38:7–13

**38:7** Ebed-melech the Cushite, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, <sup>8</sup>So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, <sup>9</sup>"My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." <sup>10</sup>Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Cushite, "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." <sup>11</sup>So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. <sup>12</sup>Then Ebed-melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. <sup>13</sup>Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

*Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.*

## AN UNPOPULAR MESSAGE

**T**his lesson's Scripture selection tells of the cistern incident, which came as the result of Jeremiah's efforts to get the people to repent. Time after time, he had continuously prophesied judgment to the people, while the more popular prophets

had told them what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah told the people they worshiped the temple itself, rather than the God represented by the temple. The other prophets said that did not matter because God would never destroy the city of the temple.

In particular, Jeremiah suffered for saying that Jerusalem's downfall could no longer be stopped and that the people should therefore surrender to the Babylonians /Chaldeans (see Jer. 38:2). "How dare you?" said the people. "God used the Egyptians to stop a Babylonian attack on Jerusalem before, so that could happen again, right?" The battle of Carchemish (605 BCE), in which Egypt was decisively defeated and from which Babylonia emerged victorious, seemed to have been forgotten. Also forgotten was the realization that Babylonia was now the dominant world power, and only sentimentalists would still cast their lot with Egypt.

The immediate context of our Scripture begins with the charge leveled against Jeremiah that he had a defeatist attitude (v. 4). The officials accused the prophet of weakening the morale of the soldiers, of discouraging those who remained in the city to fight. The charge was treason—the penalty, death.

Enter King Zedekiah. Nowhere in the biblical record is this weak, cowardly king's true character so vividly portrayed as in this narrative. Did the king suspect that Jeremiah prophesied the truth? Jeremiah 37:16–21 paints a picture of an anxious ruler on the threshold of decision, yet Zedekiah lacked the fortitude to commit himself to Jeremiah's plan. The pitiful, vacillating, indecisive king became a puppet in the hands of the officials who plotted Jeremiah's death. Zedekiah not only failed to resist those who wanted to kill the prophet but also gave Jeremiah into their hands (38:5).

Now the princes could do with Jeremiah as they pleased. What they wanted was to kill him, but outright murder was too obvious, too blatant. Thus, a more subtle approach would suffice; they would toss Jeremiah into an almost-dry cistern. Cisterns are bell-shaped holes used in the Middle East for catching rain-water during winter for use in the dry summer season. Perhaps Jeremiah's stay in the cistern came near the end of the dry season because "there was no water in the cistern but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud" (v. 6).



**Have you ever taken an unpopular stand or spoken against a popular view because of your faith? If so, what happened? If not, what circumstances might lead you to do so?**

## A TIMELY RESCUE

Jeremiah's rescue came from an unexpected source. Ebed-melech, whose name means "servant of the king," was from Ethiopia and was also a eunuch—both conditions that set him outside a covenant relationship with God. Nevertheless, this neutered foreigner views Jeremiah's abuse through the lens of compassion and takes steps to save him. He represents the very spirit of the Good Samaritan, whom Jesus lifted up as model for our behavior (Luke 10:25–37).

Ebed-melech heard of the prophet's predicament and quickly located the king, seeking permission to rescue Jeremiah. With all the drama of a last-minute escape from the certainty of death, Ebed-melech and his friends hauled Jeremiah out of the cistern. God's prophet escaped death. Just as his seditious temple sermon had brought death threats (Jer. 26:8, 11, 15), here Jeremiah again received divine protection. A conscientious official used his influence with Zedekiah to do what the king lacked the courage to do: spare Jeremiah's life.

For those of us in the U.S., the genuine severity of Jeremiah's circumstances may be hard to internalize. Few who live in free countries suffer bodily harm for what they believe to be truth. Yet many can attest to the fact that friends have drifted away, family members have become alienated, and job opportunities have been lost because of political, ethical, and social positions we or they have taken.

There can be harsh consequences for taking a stand that is right. This passage affirms that God is with us, no matter what, and help may come from unexpected sources. We are not promised a life of ease in following God's ways and promoting God's truths—only that in the end we will find blessing.

Ebed-melech's persistence is notable. How often a good intention amounts to nothing because no action is taken. One phone call, no answer, and the thought dies. One outstretched hand of friendship, no response, and the overture is forgotten. Ebed-melech was assertive and persistent in a way that had a positive impact on Jeremiah's life. The prophet's own neighbors sought to kill him, yet the Ethiopian, a foreigner, preserved Jeremiah's life and later received assurance from God of personal safety.

**?** Ebed-melech was an unexpected source of support for Jeremiah. What other examples in Scripture show God using a surprising choice to promote the divine cause? When has God sent an unexpected source of support to you?

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

What do you think about Jeremiah's rescue: is it merely an interesting story or the basis for hope in today's world? Is this a nice testimony and reminder about how those who do right may suffer, but they always come out on top? What *does* this story of Jeremiah's rescue from a muddy cistern say to us? What practical lessons can be discerned that are applicable today?

Jeremiah provides a model of *suffering for truth*. Thankfully, there are still people willing to risk everything for what they believe, what they think is right and fair and just. Jeremiah spoke God's word and suffered; believers today live out God's word even when they are "persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matt. 5:10).

We can also learn from those powerful court officials who tried to silence Jeremiah rather than conform to God's message. In their minds, if Jeremiah was right, all they had worked for would be for nothing. "Don't rock the boat" may have been their underlying motive, much like many today who resist change that threatens the status quo as well as their interests.

Jeremiah and his consistent call to do what was best for the nation can also be a message for us. Today, through human services and church agencies, many adults try to use their social and spiritual influence to address and overcome hunger, injustice, oppression, poor housing or homelessness, illiteracy—the list is endless—to provide better conditions for others. Much of what they do may seem beyond our abilities, and yet each of us is called to render service in our own way.

This takes many forms. Sometimes we respond to a specific call, as when a person decides to pursue life on the mission field. At other times, our experiences are the impetus behind a desire to serve God. Victims of crime, or their survivors, may react by devoting themselves to speaking and writing about the effects of crime and the need to change laws. People who have lived through diseases may feel God leading them to serve as mentors and advocates for those who are in the throes of illness. Similarly, those who have lost a loved one may feel that God wants them to volunteer at a hospice or with a grief support group to assist others as they mourn and readjust to life without a significant person. Positive experiences, such as being in the class of an outstanding church school teacher, may motivate us to heed a call to become teachers ourselves.

It is likely that none of us will ever be called in the same way that Jeremiah was, yet each of us is called and equipped to offer some service to God.

**?** What examples can you give of contemporary people who are “persecuted for the sake of righteousness”? How do they encourage and inspire you?

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.*

1. Jeremiah 20 is from the midpoint of Jeremiah’s ministry (about 605 BCE) when the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar threatened Judah’s existence. Jeremiah warned Judah about this threat, proclaiming God’s warning. The people denounced him (see 20:10). Jeremiah feels caught in the middle between God, who has called him to preach a problematic word, and a people who refuse to believe him.
2. Jeremiah 20:7–13 is one of Jeremiah’s laments (see 11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13, 14–18). The lament expresses his inner turmoil and blames God for circumstances, accusing God of being “like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail” (15:18).
3. Jeremiah 42–43 follows Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of many of its residents. God, through Jeremiah, has commanded the remnant led by Johanan not to go to Egypt. They disobey. Theologically, the future of God’s people is associated with the exiles in Babylon, thus making a move to Egypt shows the remnant’s willful separation from God’s future. However, ethically considered, the decision to go to Egypt exemplifies the human dilemma of deciding amid complex and confusing events. Does God always desire that we choose risky obedience (stay in Judah) over calculated security (go to Egypt)? See Jesus’ call to the disciples to take up their cross, deny self, and follow him.
4. This compilation of passages demonstrates that the writers of the 1929 lesson notes highlighted Jeremiah as an exemplary servant of YHWH, selfless even in the face of opposition, physical harm, and his doubt.