

## Jeremiah: Preacher of Doom and Life

### Jeremiah 38:14-23

<sup>14</sup> King Zedekiah sent for the prophet Jeremiah and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD. The king said to Jeremiah, “I have something to ask you; do not hide anything from me.” <sup>15</sup> Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me.”

<sup>16</sup> So King Zedekiah swore an oath in secret to Jeremiah, “As the LORD lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life.”

<sup>17</sup> Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. <sup>18</sup> But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be handed over to the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand.” <sup>19</sup> King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, for I might be handed over to them and they would abuse me.” <sup>20</sup> Jeremiah said, “That will not happen. Just obey the voice of the LORD in what I say to you, and it shall go well with you, and your life shall be spared. <sup>21</sup> But if you are

determined not to surrender, this is what the LORD has shown me— <sup>22</sup> a vision of all the women remaining in the house of the king of Judah being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and saying,

‘Your trusted friends have seduced you  
and have overcome you;

Now that your feet are stuck in the mud,  
they desert you.’

<sup>23</sup> All your wives and your children shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon; and this city shall be burned with fire.”

### Theme Statement

Long besieged by the overwhelmingly powerful Babylonian army, King Zedekiah sought the word of the Lord through Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s plain-spoken counsel, that the king should surrender and thus save his life, was met with resistance, fear, and disaster.

### Exploring the Word

*Jeremiah 37 and 38 describe the last months of Judah before that nation was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II. As might be expected, leading officials, the king, and the inhabitants of a besieged Jerusalem are at once terrified and conflicted as to the best course of action.*

**Jeremiah 38:14-23 A secret meeting at the third gate**  
No doubt hoping that Jeremiah would offer a more encouraging word of the Lord than he had previously, Zedekiah sent for the prophet. They met at the “third entrance to the temple” (38:14), about which we know nothing. Nevertheless, and given Jeremiah’s prior two messages about the certainty of Babylon’s victory and Zedekiah’s fate should

the king not surrender to Nebuchadnezzar in advance (37:7-10, 17), the third entrance must have been one with limited access and a guarantee of privacy.

Zedekiah demanded a prophetic word, and he wanted it without prevarication. Jeremiah's response illustrates his dilemma: Telling Zedekiah the truth would lead to Jeremiah's execution. On the other hand, advising the king was useless because, by this time, Jeremiah had enough experience with Zedekiah to know full well that he would not listen to Jeremiah (38:15), and, thus, he would not listen to the word of the Lord. Indeed, the king's unwillingness to listen to the word of the Lord characterized his indecisive leadership and, ultimately, his sad end (39:4-8).

Invoking a solemn oath formula, "as the LORD lives" (38:16), Zedekiah swore secretly neither to execute Jeremiah nor to surrender him to the men who sought his life. His previous questioning of Jeremiah was also done secretly (37:17). Zedekiah was aware that confidentiality was needed since a significant portion of the officials did not want the king to heed Jeremiah's message (38:24-27). They remained confident that the Egyptian forces that had repelled Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Egypt and had recently forced a Babylonian withdrawal from Jerusalem (37:5) would prevent the destruction Jeremiah proclaimed as inevitable.

In contrast to the officials who arrested him, Jeremiah articulated essentially the same message he had delivered to both the king and the populace previously (37:7-10, 17; 38:2-3): surrender, live, and save the city from immolation; or do not surrender, and die.

After yet another warning about resisting the Babylonians (38:23), the episode ends with Zedekiah commanding Jeremiah to keep their conversation confidential on penalty

of death (38:24). Anticipating that his own officials might threaten the life of Jeremiah should he not disclose the conversation, Zedekiah described a ruse. Jeremiah should say that he had implored the king not to send him back to the house of Jonathan, his first place of confinement (37:15). In fact, Jeremiah had earlier asked the king for that exact favor (37:20), so the prophet did not lie when he was pressured by the officials (38:27). The fact that Zedekiah once again is helpless against his own officials does not bode well for his will or ability to lead as Yahweh directed him through Jeremiah.

## The Word Today

The text raises interesting questions for moderns.

First, what does Jeremiah's example say about the role of contemporary communities of faith and their leaders who, like Jeremiah, have a biblical word of God to share? It implies that Christian believers need to be a voice in the public square, calling leaders and fellow citizens to account when public policy or governmental activity is damaging to the creation and to society's most vulnerable citizens. The latter concern, of course, transcends national borders, race, and creed.

In representative democracies such as exist in North America, believers have the right and, I believe, the obligation to let their voices and votes count. This, obviously, is hardly a new idea. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the so-called Moral Majority movement insisted that elected officials in the United States should reflect the values and mores of the "silent majority." They assumed that majority was composed of conservative fundamentalist Christians. Historians will sort out those claims, although it already seems they represented the vestigial remains of

an unhealthy Christian hegemony over all facets of society that began to dissolve in the 1960s. The Moral Majority movement was wrong in that, in a diverse society, it is not healthy for any single faith tradition to exercise political and legal domination over the rest. That leads to twisted theocracies where, for example, women are openly oppressed and dissidents, persecuted. Political domination is not the way of Jesus.

On the other hand, the Moral Majority was correct in asserting that believers should speak up, take constructive action, and vote, although I would add these caveats: Christians in North America certainly ought to be modest in their claims to represent absolute truth in all matters. Christians surely ought to be loving, for as Paul said, love “does not insist on its own way” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Christians ought to listen and learn what we can about our own faith from others whose religions differ from our own and from those who subscribe to no creed. Then, let faith be active in love.

The text also begs us to consider what Jeremiah’s word to Zedekiah says about God. Jeremiah repeatedly told Zedekiah and others that they should surrender and live. We learn, therefore, that this Lord wills life, not death. Consequently, they were offered a way to live, albeit one that called for personal and national sacrifice, less arrogance, and willingness to repent of behavior that had led them to disaster. Given the enormity of the environmental and social ills that face us, it is not too much of a stretch to see that something of Zedekiah’s choice is before us. The Lord of life, however, wills us all to choose life.

## Questions for Discussion

### Beginnings

1. Tell about a time when someone gave you excellent advice. Did you take it?
2. Is it appropriate for elected officials to have secret meetings? Why or why not?

### Exploring the Word

1. Of whom was Zedekiah afraid, and why?
2. Between what choices did Zedekiah need to decide?
3. Officials in Zedekiah’s court wanted to suppress Jeremiah’s message and block the king from heeding it. Of what were they afraid?

### The Word Today

1. “In representative democracies such as exist in North America, believers have the right and . . . the obligation to let their voices and votes count.” Do you agree or disagree?
2. Recently, several US congressional representatives were sworn into office with their hand on the Quran. Rank your reaction on a scale of 1 (anger at the idea) to 10 (complete comfort).
3. What other religions are represented in your community? How might you find out more about them?

### Closing Prayer

*Lord, when we find ourselves pressured to keep quiet about our faith and our understanding of your will for the world, give us courage to speak the truth to those who lead and the grace to speak with love. Amen.*

## Further Study

2 Kings 24:1-20; Numbers 22:1-41

## Daily Readings

M. Acts 4:13-22

F. Jeremiah 38:24-28

T. Jeremiah 37:11-16

S. 2 Kings 25:1-12

W. Jeremiah 38:7-13;  
39:15-18

S. Jeremiah 38:14-23

T. Jeremiah 37:17-21

## Memorization

### Jeremiah 38:15

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me."