

Jeremiah

Chapter 38

Jeremiah Cast into the Cistern

Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people: 2 **“Thus says the LORD: He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, but he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war, and live.** 3 **Thus says the LORD: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken.”** 4 **Then the officials said to the king, “Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm.”** 5 **King Zedekiah said, “Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.”** 6 **So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.**

38:1 *Gedaliah.* After the fall of the city, a man with the same name was made governor by Nebuchadnezzar (39:14; 40:5). (TLSB)

Jucal. Aka Jehucal. (TLSB)

Pashhur son of Malkijah. Not the same as the Pashhur of 20:1–6. (CSB)

He was of priestly descent, but full of enmity toward the prophet. (Kretzmann)

Jeremiah was saying to all the people. Though he was confined in the courtyard of the guard (see 37:21), he was allowed to have visitors and to speak freely to them (see 32:8, 12). (CSB)

38:2 *Echoes 21:9* Repeated almost verbatim in 38:2. Jeremiah's counsel of surrender branded him as a traitor in the eyes of many (see 37:13), but he was in fact a true patriot who wanted to stay in Judah even after Jerusalem was destroyed (see 37:14; 40:6; 42:7–22). (CSB)

The number of those who followed Jeremiah's advice apparently was large enough to make the king afraid of them. The king feared that if he, too, deserted to the enemy, Jeremiah's supporter would abuse him for having brought on the city's destruction. (TLSB)

38:3 Sayings of this kind were the gist of Jeremiah's proclamation to the soldiers and to all members of the nation who happened to come into the court of the prison. Although he was under suspicion as favoring the enem cause and even of playing traitor to his own nation, Jeremiah was not deterred from his course of action as the Lord's messenger. This fact, however, filled the leaders of the people with the greatest bitterness. (Kretzmann)

38:4 *officials.* Those named in v. 1. (CSB)

weakening the hands. A similar situation in Lachish ostracon 6: “The words of the officials are not good; they serve only to weaken our hands.” Contrast Isa 35:3. (CSB)

Same type of accusation is found in a letter (ostrakon) from Lachish, in which the writer complains about the words of the princes undermining morale. This letter was written just before the Babylonian siege (c 589 BC). (TLSB)

not seeking the welfare. The Hebrew underlying this phrase is translated “seek the peace and prosperity” in 29:7. (CSB)

their harm. The Hebrew for these words is translated “prosperity ... disaster” in Isa 45:7. (CSB)

So far as outward appearances were concerned, there was some foundation for the complaint of the rulers, for the words of Jeremiah certainly tended to discourage any attempts at defending the city. At the same time, Jeremiah was the best of patriots, having the true welfare of his people in view, for the spirit exhibited by the rulers was not a confidence founded on the divine will, but a carnal obstinacy, which was bound **to** lead to destruction. (Kretzmann)

38:5 *The king can do nothing.* Not because of inability or lack of authority but through failure of nerve. He feared his own officials. (CSB)

He was weakly yielding to the demand of his counselors, especially since he seems to have harbored a secret grudge against the prophet on his own account. (Kretzmann)

38:6 *cistern.* Shaped like a bell, with the narrow end at the top (see 37:16 and note). (CSB)

had no water in the cistern. Zedekiah’s officials wanted to kill Jeremiah (see v. 4), but not by taking his life with their own hands (cf. Ge 37:20–24). (CSB)

The mud and settlings that remained after the water had been drawn out; **so Jeremiah sunk in the mire.** The act shows the hatred of the princes. They did not have Jeremiah executed with the sword, as they might have done; but they deliberately chose this method of letting the prophet die under the most distressing circumstances, while they, at the same time, could quiet the voice of their conscience by declaring that they had not shed Jeremiah's blood. (Kretzmann)

38:1–6 Jeremiah’s enemies secure permission from King Zedekiah to kill him for treason since he advised the city’s soldiers to desert and predicted their defeat at the hand of the Chaldeans. Rather than risk outright murder, they confine Jeremiah to a dry cistern with the expectation that he will die of thirst or starvation. God’s people often face death for their faithful proclamation of His Word. God rescues His people, even when they die, and gives them eternal life (cf Rm 8:31–39). • Lord Jesus, help us to love You more than earthly life so that we do not lose eternal life. Amen. (TLSB)

Jeremiah Rescued from the Cistern

7 When Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern—the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate— **8** Ebed-melech went from the king’s house and said to the king, **9** “My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.” **10** Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, “Take thirty men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.” **11** So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe in the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. **12** Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, “Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.” Jeremiah did so. **13** Then they drew

Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

38:7-10 Ebed-melech appealed to Zedekiah's conscience not to let an innocent man suffer a lingering death, the weak but well-intentioned king not only agreed to the rescue operation but also ordered a contingent of men to carry out the project. (TLSB)

38:7 *Ebed-Melech*. Means "king's servant." (CSB)

Lit, "the king's servant." Significance of his nondescript name is not known. Cf 39:15-18. (TLSB)

Ethiopian. From the region of Cush or Nubia, south of Egypt. (TLSB)

king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate. Since a city gateway was often used as a courtroom or town hall (see notes on Ge 19:1; Ru 4:1), Zedekiah may have been settling various legal complaints on this occasion (see 2Sa 15:2-4) and would therefore be in a position to help Ebed-Melech. (CSB)

38:8 *went...and said* – He did not do this secretly, but openly, fearlessly championing the cause of the persecuted prophet and risking the displeasure of the capricious king. (Kretzmann)

38:9 *no bread left in the city*. Jeremiah had formerly received a daily allowance of bread, chap. 37, 21, but now either the public store of bread was exhausted, or there was practically no bread left anywhere. (Kretzmann)

38:10 *thirty men*. The large number was probably to keep the officials (see v. 4) and their friends from trying to prevent Jeremiah's rescue. (CSB)

Large contingent may have been necessary to prevent interference with the mission. (TLSB)

38:11 *storehouse*. Perhaps a wardrobe storeroom (see 2Ki 10:22). (CSB)

in the cistern by ropes – Ebed-melech evidently possessed both presence of mind and resourcefulness, for he lost no time in beginning his work of rescuing the prophet. (Kretzmann)

Large contingent may have been necessary to prevent interference with the mission. (TLSB)

38:12-13 Suction and weight caused by deep mud made it impossible to escape. (TLSB)

38:12 *Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes*. Ebed-Melech's kindnesses to Jeremiah were evidence that he trusted in the Lord, and the Lord rewarded him (see 39:15-18). (CSB)

38:13 *remained in the courtyard of the guard*. He was still under arrest, but no longer in danger of slow death by starvation. God makes use even of the poor and lowly as instruments of His goodness in protecting His children. (Kretzmann)

38:7-13 Ebed-melech, an official in King Zedekiah's administration, rescues Jeremiah with the king's permission Like Jeremiah, God's people today should never give up hope but rather trust in the Lord, especially when things are at their worst. Also, God works through us to help one another in time of need, as Jesus helps us in our greatest need by rescuing us from sin and damnation. • When all seems lost, O Lord, lift up our heads. Keep our hearts faithful and our eyes on You. Amen. (TLSB)

Jeremiah Warns Zedekiah Again

14 King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me.” **15** Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me.” **16** Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, “As the LORD lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life.” **17** Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will 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. **18** But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.” **19** King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.” **20** Jeremiah said, “You shall not be given to them. Obey now the voice of the LORD in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared. **21** But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the LORD has shown to me: **22** Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and were saying, “‘Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you; now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you.’ **23** All your wives and your sons 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.” **24** Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. **25** If the officials hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,’ **26** then you shall say to them, ‘I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’” **27** Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. **28** And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

38:14-16 Third and final interview. Wracked by indecision, Zedekiah turns once more to Jeremiah, hoping to hear of a last-minute escape out of his dilemma. (TLSB)

38:14 *third entrance* – Perhaps the king’s private-entrance to the temple, mentioned in 2 Kings 16:18. (TLSB)

hide nothing from me. Lit. “a word ... a word,” probably referring to a “word from the LORD” (37:17). (CSB)

The very attitude of the prophet, together with the definiteness of his message, filled the king with apprehension and a foreboding of evil for himself. (Kretzmann)

38:15 *not listen to me* – It is plain that Jeremiah trusted the king neither with regard to the safety of his own person nor concerning the acceptance of any advice which he might give. (Kretzmann)

38:16 *men who seek your life.* Zedekiah’s officials. (CSB)

This was a most emphatic assurance that he would safeguard the prophet’s life. (Kretzmann)

38:19 *I am afraid.* If Zedekiah had trusted in the Lord, he would not have had to fear either officials or deserters (see Pr 29:25). (CSB)

deserted to the Chaldeans – Irijah’s fear was understandable, since Jeremiah recommended surrendering to the Babylonians (see 21:9; 38:2) and since many Judahites in fact defected (see 38:19; 39:9; 52:15). (CSB)

deal cruelly with me. See Jdg 19:25; 1Ch 10:4. (CSB)

It was not merely ridicule that he feared, but actual physical abuse as well. (Kretzmann)

38:21 *the vision.* The Lord enabled His prophet to describe graphically what lay ahead as if he were a witness of the tragedy. (TLSB)

38:22 *women ... in the house ... led out to the officials.* Women in a conquered king’s harem became the property of the conquerors (cf. 2Sa 16:21–22). (CSB)

He hears the women of the king’s court taunting him with a ditty, mockingly lamenting the fact that his trusted friends had left him in the lurch. (TLSB)

deceived you and preferred against me you. Repeated almost verbatim in Ob 7 (see 20:10 and note). Zedekiah’s so-called friends were his officials (see v. 4) and false prophets (see 37:19). (CSB)

feet are sunk in the mud. Symbolic of great distress (see Ps 69:14). (CSB)

This refers to the slipping in the uncertain footing of the mud into which he had been led by his alleged advisers. (Kretzmann)

38:23 Zedekiah’s weakness, vacillation, and disobedience would bring the guilt of its destruction upon his head. (Kretzmann)

38:24–28 At the end of the meeting, Zedekiah gave further evidence of his craven fear of the princes. He pleaded with Jeremiah not to divulge everything they discussed but to mention only his request not to be sent back to the underground cell. Jeremiah promised to do so and was permitted to remain in the court of the guard. (TLSB)

38:26 *house of Jonathan.* Jeremiah would later look back on this prison as a place of great danger for him (see v. 20; 38:26). (CSB)

This very likely used because it contained subterranean cells, or cellars, which could readily be used for that purpose. (Kretzmann)

38:27 *answered them as the king had instructed him.* Jeremiah was not obliged to give the officials the other information, which had been shared in confidence. (CSB)

38:28 *remained in the courtyard of the guard.* The Lord has ways and means of protecting and delivering His children from all evil, even when there seems to be no way of escape. (Kretzmann)

38:14–28 King Zedekiah arranges a private meeting with Jeremiah and learns that he can avoid capture and save the city by surrendering to the Babylonian army, yet Zedekiah fears his own advisers more. God mercifully offers Zedekiah and his family their lives and will spare the city if only they will trust Him and leave matters in His hands. God’s people have always faced the difficult choice of trusting God and doing things His way or following their own wisdom and the world’s way. When faced with such dilemmas, pray that the Lord would grant you both wisdom and courage. Jesus, crucified and risen, is our wisdom

(1Co 1:24). His courage in the face of death is the basis of our salvation. • Grant us wisdom and courage, Father, to do Your holy will. Amen. (TLSB)