

Zedekiah and the Slaves (589 BC)

Jeremiah 34

Historical Summary

- 1 The LORD spoke to Jeremiah while King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was attacking Jerusalem and the towns around it with a large army. This army consisted of troops from his own army and from the kingdoms and peoples of the lands under his dominion.
- 2 The LORD God of Israel told Jeremiah to go and give King Zedekiah of Judah a message. He told Jeremiah to tell him, “The LORD says, ‘I am going to hand this city over to the king of Babylon and he will burn it down.
- 3 You yourself will not escape his clutches, but will certainly be captured and handed over to him. You must confront the king of Babylon face to face and answer to him personally. Then you must go to Babylon.
- 4 However, listen to what I, the LORD, promise you, King Zedekiah of Judah. I, the LORD, promise that you will not die in battle or be executed.
- 5 You will die a peaceful death. They will burn incense at your burial just as they did at the burial of your ancestors, the former kings who preceded you. They will mourn for you, saying, “Poor, poor master!” Indeed, you have my own word on this. I, the LORD, affirm it!”
- 6 The prophet Jeremiah told all this to King Zedekiah of Judah in Jerusalem.
- 7 He did this while the army of the king of Babylon was attacking Jerusalem and the cities of Lachish and Azekah. He was attacking these cities because they were the only fortified cities of Judah which were still holding out.

A Broken Promise of Freedom for the Slaves

- 8 The LORD spoke to Jeremiah after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to grant their slaves their freedom.
- 9 Everyone was supposed to free their male and female Hebrew slaves. No one was supposed to keep a fellow Judean enslaved.
- 10 All the people and their leaders had agreed to this. They had agreed to free their male and female slaves and not keep them enslaved any longer. They originally complied with the covenant and freed them.
- 11 But later they had changed their minds. They had taken back their male and female slaves that they had freed and forced them to be slaves again.

God Denounces the Broken Promise

- 12 That was when the LORD spoke to Jeremiah,
- 13 “The LORD God of Israel has a message for you. ‘I made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt where they had been slaves. It stipulated,
- 14 “Every seven years each of you must free any fellow Hebrews who have sold themselves to you. After they have served you for six years, you shall set them free.” [[Exod 21:1–4](#); [Deut 15:12–15](#)] But your ancestors did not obey me or pay any attention to me.
- 15 Recently, however, you yourselves showed a change of heart and did what is pleasing to me. You granted your fellow countrymen their freedom and you made a covenant to that effect in my presence in the house that I have claimed for my own.
- 16 But then you turned right around and showed that you did not honor me. Each of you took back your male and female slaves whom you had freed as they desired, and you forced them to be your slaves again.

Punishment for the Broken Promise

- 17 So I, the LORD, say: “You have not really obeyed me and granted freedom to your neighbor and fellow countryman. Therefore, I will grant you freedom, the freedom to die in war, or by starvation or disease. I, the LORD, affirm it! I will make all the kingdoms of the earth horrified at what happens to you.
- 18 I will punish those people who have violated their covenant with me. I will make them like the calf they cut in two and passed between its pieces. I will do so because they did not keep the terms of the covenant they made in my presence.
- 19 I will punish the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests, and all the other people of the land who passed between the pieces of the calf.
- 20 I will hand them over to their enemies who want to kill them. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals.
- 21 I will also hand King Zedekiah of Judah and his officials over to their enemies who want to kill them. I will hand them over to the army of the king of Babylon, even though they have temporarily withdrawn from attacking you.
- 22 For I, the LORD, affirm that I will soon give the order and bring them back to this city. They will fight against it and capture it and burn it down. I will also make the towns of Judah desolate so that there will be no one living in them.”””

Jeremiah's Arrest and Imprisonment (589 BC)

Jeremiah 37:11–21

Jeremiah's Arrest

11 The following events also occurred while the Babylonian forces had temporarily withdrawn from Jerusalem because the army of Pharaoh was coming.

12 Jeremiah started to leave Jerusalem to go to the territory of Benjamin. He wanted to make sure he got his share of the property that was being divided up among his family there.

13 But he only got as far as the Benjamin Gate. There an officer in charge of the guards named Irijah, who was the son of Shelemiah and the grandson of Hananiah, stopped him. He seized Jeremiah and said, "You are deserting to the Babylonians!"

14 Jeremiah answered, "That's a lie! I am not deserting to the Babylonians." But Irijah would not listen to him. Irijah put Jeremiah under arrest and took him to the officials.

15 The officials were very angry at Jeremiah. They had him flogged and put in prison in the house of Jonathan, the royal secretary, which they had converted into a place for confining prisoners.

16 So Jeremiah was put in prison in a cell in the dungeon in Jonathan's house. He was kept there for a long time.

Jeremiah's Secret Meeting with Zedekiah

17 Then King Zedekiah had him brought to the palace. There he questioned him privately and asked him, "Is there any message from the LORD?" Jeremiah answered, "Yes, there is." Then he announced, "You will be handed over to the king of Babylon."

18 Then Jeremiah asked King Zedekiah, "What crime have I committed against you, or the officials who serve you, or the people of Judah? What have I done to make you people throw me into prison?"

19 Where now are the prophets who prophesied to you that the king of Babylon would not attack you or this land?"

20 But now please listen, your royal Majesty, and grant my plea for mercy. Do not send me back to the house of Jonathan, the royal secretary. If you do, I will die there."

21 Then King Zedekiah ordered that Jeremiah be committed to the courtyard of the guardhouse. He also ordered that a loaf of bread be given to him every day from the baker's street until all the bread in the city was gone. So Jeremiah was kept in the courtyard of the guardhouse.

The Attempt on Jeremiah's Life (589 BC)

Jeremiah 38

The Demand for Jeremiah's Punishment

1 Now Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah had heard the things that Jeremiah had been telling the people. They had heard him say,

2 "The LORD says, 'Those who stay in this city will die in battle or of starvation or disease. Those who leave the city and surrender to the Babylonians will live. They will escape with their lives.'"

3 They had also heard him say, "The LORD says, 'This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon. They will capture it.'"

4 So these officials said to the king, "This man must be put to death. For he is demoralizing the soldiers who are left in the city as well as all the other people there by these things he is saying. This man is not seeking to help these people but is trying to harm them."

5 King Zedekiah said to them, "Very well, you can do what you want with him. For I cannot do anything to stop you."

6 So the officials took Jeremiah and put him in the cistern of Malkijah, one of the royal princes, that was in the courtyard of the guardhouse. There was no water in the cistern, only mud. So when they lowered Jeremiah into the cistern with ropes he sank in the mud.

Jeremiah's Rescue by Ebed-Melech

7 An Ethiopian, Ebed Melech, a court official in the royal palace, heard that Jeremiah had been put in the cistern. While the king was holding court at the Benjamin Gate,

8 Ebed Melech departed the palace and went to speak to the king. He said to him,

9 "Your royal Majesty, those men have been very wicked in all that they have done to the prophet Jeremiah. They have thrown him into a cistern and he is sure to die of starvation there because there is no food left in the city.

10 Then the king gave Ebed Melech the Ethiopian the following order: "Take thirty men with you from here and go pull the prophet Jeremiah out of the cistern before he dies."

11 So Ebed Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasure room in the palace. He got some worn-out clothes and old rags from there and let them down by ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern.

12 Ebed Melech called down to Jeremiah, "Put these rags and worn-out clothes under your armpits to pad the ropes. Jeremiah did as Ebed Melech instructed.

13 So they pulled Jeremiah up from the cistern with ropes. Jeremiah, however, still remained confined to the courtyard of the

guardhouse.

A Second Secret Meeting With Zedekiah

14 Some time later Zedekiah sent and had Jeremiah brought to him at the third entrance of the LORD's temple. The king said to Jeremiah, "I would like to ask you a question. Do not hide anything from me when you answer."

15 Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I answer you, you will certainly kill me. If I give you advice, you will not listen to me."

16 So King Zedekiah made a secret promise to Jeremiah and sealed it with an oath. He promised, "As surely as the LORD lives who has given us life and breath, I promise you this: I will not kill you or hand you over to those men who want to kill you."

17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "The LORD, the God who rules over all, the God of Israel, says, 'You must surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon. If you do, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down. Indeed, you and your whole family will be spared.'

18 But if you do not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be handed over to the Babylonians and they will burn it down. You yourself will not escape from them.'"

19 Then King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Babylonians. The Babylonians might hand me over to them and they will torture me."

20 Then Jeremiah answered, "You will not be handed over to them. Please obey the LORD by doing what I have been telling you. Then all will go well with you and your life will be spared."

21 But if you refuse to surrender, the LORD has shown me a vision of what will happen. Here is what I saw:

22 All the women who are left in the royal palace of Judah will be led out to the officers of the king of Babylon. They will taunt you saying,

'Your trusted friends misled you;
they have gotten the best of you.
Now that your feet are stuck in the mud,
they have turned their backs on you.'

23 "All your wives and your children will be turned over to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from them but will be captured by the king of Babylon. This city will be burned down."

24 Then Zedekiah told Jeremiah, "Do not let anyone know about the conversation we have had. If you do, you will die."

25 The officials may hear that I have talked with you. They may come to you and say, 'Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you. Do not hide anything from us. If you do, we will kill you.'

26 If they do this, tell them, 'I was pleading with the king not to send me back to die in the dungeon of Jonathan's house.'"

Jeremiah is Questioned by the Officials

27 All the officials did indeed come and question Jeremiah. He told them exactly what the king had instructed him to say. They stopped questioning him any further because no one had actually heard their conversation.

28 So Jeremiah remained confined in the courtyard of the guardhouse until the day Jerusalem was captured.

God's Message to Jeremiah's Rescuer, Ebed-Melech (589 BC)

Jeremiah 39:15–18

15 Now the LORD had spoken to Jeremiah while he was still confined in the courtyard of the guardhouse,

16 "Go and tell Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, 'The LORD God of Israel who rules over all says, "I will carry out against this city what I promised. It will mean disaster and not good fortune for it. When that disaster happens, you will be there to see it.

17 But I will rescue you when it happens. I, the LORD, affirm it! You will not be handed over to those whom you fear.

18 I will certainly save you. You will not fall victim to violence. You will escape with your life because you trust in me. I, the LORD, affirm it!'"

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