

Art Katz:

The absence of persecution in the church is a statement to our shame. There is something wrong in the character of the church when it does not evoke any opposition to itself. It means that the church has been found quite acceptable in the same world that is at enmity with God. It is this contradiction that we want to examine in an account from the life of Jeremiah.

Chapter 38 of Jeremiah gives the account of Jeremiah being placed in a muddy cistern, a hole in the ground. Zedekiah was the King of Israel in those days, and in refusing to heed Jeremiahâ€™s warnings, Jerusalem was conquered.

Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, and Gedaliah the son of Pashur, and Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashur the son of Malchijah heard the words that Jeremiah was speaking to all the people, saying, â€œThus says the Lord, â€“He who stays in this city will die by the sword and by famine and by pestilence, but he who goes out to the Chaldeans will live and have his own life as booty and stay aliveâ€“! This city will certainly be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, and he will capture itâ€™ (Jer. 38:1-3).

The prophecy foretold the defeat of Israel, Judah, and the city of Jerusalem. Those who seek to resist such a word are warned that they are going to perish. If we were living at that time, many of us would have considered Jeremiah to be a false prophet. We would have said that he was saying things that were not in the â€œnational interest,â€ or that he was â€œgiving aid to the enemy,â€ or â€œharassing the church.â€

It was exactly that indictment that came to Jeremiah, and I suspect may well be the distinguishing certification of God for the true prophet in the last days. In other words, the prophetâ€™s message must necessarily be subversive to the vested interests of men and their traditional notions of God, and what they think is right. The message may well contradict all that they suppose is true about God and His way: â€œWould God destroy His own city? Would God destroy present-day Israel, having established it in 1948?â€

Then the officials said to the king, â€œNow let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people, but rather their harm.â€ So King Zedekiah said, â€œBehold he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against youâ€ (Jer. 38:4-5).

A king like that who abdicates his own responsibility to make ultimate judgments, particularly about prophets of God, deserves judgment. Nothing has changed. The leaders of this world are very much of the same spirit. They work according to the polls, i.e., â€œWhich way is the wind blowing? What are the people saying? What do they want?â€ And the answer to those questions is what they will do.

Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the kingâ€™s son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud (Jer. 38:6).

There was no whisper to Jeremiah of, â€œHey, this is only temporary. Stick this out for a day or two. We will be back and get you out.â€ That pit was intended for Jeremiahâ€™s death. There was no food, no water, no light and no warmth. That was to be his end. There was no thought that he was ever to be retrieved. I do not think that Jeremiah was given any encouragement that there would be a future escape from his predicament. He had the full expectation that this was his end. This needs to sink into our spirits. As far as we are concerned, we should have a realistic anticipation that when the end seems to come, that that in fact is the end.

Except it pleases the Lord, it will be the end. But if it pleases the Lord, then there is no pit too deep, too remote or too hidden that He cannot find and rescue us from.

The prophet is suffering the consequences of his obedience to God. He could have been saved this fate had he been more decorous and politic, and careful what he said and how he said it. But in the kind of simple obedience that he rendered, â€œThus says the Lord, â€“This city is going to be capturedâ€“,â€ he was inviting this kind of reaction. He did not have his own self-interest at heart, but was bringing upon himself the logical response that his statement would make in his obedience to God. Persecution is proportionate to obedience. God does not call us to the things that are trifles, but to obedience in the things that necessarily will antagonize and run across the grain of the world and what men want to hear.

There was no illumination in that cistern. It was not something made for human habitation. At that time, all the water was gone, and there was only mud remaining. Can you imagine going into that mud and ooze? Where do you find a place lay down for some kind of momentary comfort? The mud is in your eyes and teeth and hair. It is absolutely wretched! I think I would rather be shot, maybe even burned at the stake, than be lowered to die from starvation and thirst in a mud hole.

But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the kingâ€™s palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin (Jer. 38:7).

â€œEbedâ€ means â€œservantâ€ and â€œMelechâ€ means â€œking.â€ He was a black man and the servant to King Zedekiah. He was also a eunuch. In those days, they fixed a man so that he could render service that would not in any way threaten the harem of these nobles and kings. He was a man of lowly circumstances, being black, a eunuch and a servant. Yet this was Godâ€™s provision to bring the prophet up

out from death. The lowliest social cast-off is the one that God had chosen to be the instrument of Jeremiahâ€™s deliverance.

This episode may well be a picture of the remnant of Israel in the last days; that its last experience is to be cast off and out and thrown into a pit for death. Her dispersal will again be into the nations and into the dungeons of imprisonment in the last days. And God will save them out of those pits, dungeons and confinements by some lowly thing of His choice like, for example, the predominantly Gentile church. There is a place for the despised of the world in the last daysâ€™ purposes of God, and it has to do with the final, ultimate salvation and redemption of His people Israel. This is the way of God from all eternity. It is so much the statement of His wisdom. The thing that the world looks upon as foolish and despicable is the thing that He employs for a most glorious use: to save His ancient people out from death.

And Ebed-melech went out from the kingâ€™s palace and spoke to the king, saying, â€œMy lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the cityâ€ (Jer. 38:8-9).

As a eunuch, you do not just go to a king and say, â€œHey, buddy, can I make a suggestion?â€ What an effrontery! For this eunuch to even approach the king and to make mention of a prophet, who is in dishonor, was a remarkable act of courage in itself. And he was not even a Hebrew! The lowly and despised have a greater sense for God and righteousness than the supposed people of God who will be looking the other way. Where were the faithful of God who knew that Jeremiah was going to suffer such a fate? Yet here was a man willing to take the risk of aggravating and endangering himself by encountering the king.

What one does to the prophet is what one does to God. The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus. When you touch the prophetic man, you are touching the heart of God. The prophet is nothing in himself. It is neither his wisdom nor his words that are being exhibited. He is the mouthpiece and expression of very God Himself. To touch him is to touch the very God who sent him. To do him disservice, or assault, is to lay your hands upon God.

Then the king commanded Ebedâ€melech the Ethiopian, saying, â€œTake thirty men from here under your authority, and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the prophet the cistern before he diesâ€ (Jer. 38:10).

It is clear that the throwing of Jeremiah into the cistern was not a momentary vacation. It was intended for his death, and probably the kingâ€™s conscience was bothering him, having given those men permission to do it. And so he was no doubt relieved that someone took the initiative to give him the opportunity to save himself from a wrong decision.

So Ebed-melech took the men under his authority and went into the kingâ€™s palace to a place beneath the storeroom and took from there worn-out rags and let them down by ropes into the cistern to Jeremiah (Jer. 38:11).

This is not a trivial detail. Godâ€™s deliverance is carried out by employing the lowest of the low, the thing that is the least prestigious, the most insignificant, the poorest, the most despised. In this case, it is worn-out rags! Didnâ€™t they have a decent rope harness in the kingdom appropriate to a prophet? No, they let down some old clothing and rags to pull the prophet out of the pit. This is prophetic from beginning to end. The Lord Himself has got to be our dependency, and it is He who always chooses the foolish and weak thing.

Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, â€œNow put these worn-out clothes and rags under your armpits under the ropesâ€; and Jeremiah did so.

So they pulled Jeremiah up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah stayed in the court of the guardhouse (Jer. 38:12-13).

The king then sends for the prophet.

Then King Zedekiah sent and had Jeremiah the prophet brought to him at the third entrance that is in the house of the Lord; and the king said to Jeremiah, â€œI am going to ask you something; do not hide anything from me.â€

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, â€œIf I tell you, will you not certainly put me to death? Besides, if I give you advice, you will not listen to me.â€

But King Zedekiah swore to Jeremiah in secret saying, â€œAs the Lord lives, who made this life for us, surely I will not put you to death nor will I give you over to the hand of these men who seek your life.â€

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, â€œThus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, â€œIf you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive.

But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then this city will be given over to the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.â€

Then King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, â€œI dread the Jews who have gone over to the Chaldeans, lest they give me over into their hand and they abuse me.â€

But Jeremiah said, â€œThey will not give you over. Please obey the Lord in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live.

But if you keep refusing to go out, this is the word that the Lord has shown me:

Then behold, all of the women who have been left in the palace of the king of Judah are going to be brought out to the officers of the king of Babylon, and those women will say, "Your close friends have misled and overpowered you; while your feet were sunk in the mire, they turned back" (Jer. 38:14-22).

This is a prophecy of what would befall the king, his entourage, his family, and the nobles if he refused to surrender. He did in fact refuse, and everything that Jeremiah said came true. The city was burned with fire; all of Zedekiah's sons were killed before his face, and then his eyes were gouged out. The last thing he saw was the murder of his sons, and then in chains and fetters, he was taken to Babylon to live the rest of his life in humiliation and degradation as a prisoner.

When you ask for the prophetic word, make sure you have an intention of obeying it. To hear the prophetic word, and then ignore it, will bring spiritual blindness upon yourself. In this case, the king's eyes were actually gouged out. You cannot hear the word of God and the prophetic word casually, as if there is no consequence. Either it is going to open your eyes to greater illumination, or it is going to bring a deepened darkness. This episode is charged with remarkable significance. The Chaldeans did not know this conversation, but they plucked Zedekiah's eyes out nevertheless. So the remarkable judgment of God took its full sway, even through Gentiles, who had no knowledge of that God, let alone of being instructed by Him.

So complete is the sovereignty of God in honoring the prophetic word that it was fulfilled right to the letter. The king was told, "If you surrender, your family will be preserved, the city will be preserved, and your own life will be preserved." He chose not to surrender. It was the fear of man and what might fall on him through man that kept him from obedience to God. The fear of man was greater than the fear of God.

You can just read a glimpse of that judgment in chapter 39, which is the fall of Jerusalem in the tenth month. The city of God and the temple were burned, the nobles were killed. Nobles are the people of culture, refinement, education and intelligence. When you destroy them, there is not much left. In fact, the only ones who were allowed to remain in Judah were those who had no distinction, no qualification and no especial ability. But the cream of the crop that distinguished Israel as a nation of significance was destroyed. That has always been the tactic of victorious, triumphant armies; they break the back of a nation by destroying the heart and the quality of it, leaving just a residue of the poor and undistinguished. Israel could have been saved that had they heeded the prophet.

Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, saying, "Take him and look after him, and do nothing harmful to him; but rather deal with him just as he tells you" (Jer. 39:11-12).

The Gentiles "enemies" of Judah were more respectful to the prophet of God than God's own people. Special instructions were issued from the very king of Babylon himself to preserve the prophet and to decently care for him.

Now the word of the Lord had come to Jeremiah while he was confined in the court of the guardhouse, saying, "Go and speak to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am about to bring My words on this city for disaster and not for prosperity; and they will take place before you on that day.'

But I will deliver you on that day," declares the Lord, "and you shall not be given in to the hand of the men whom you dread.

For I will certainly rescue you, and you will not fall by the sword; but you will have your own life as a booty, because you have trusted in Me," declares the Lord" (Jer. 39:15-18).

God went out of His way for this black man to inform him that he was to be preserved. What a statement of how much God honored that self-initiated thing that preserved the life of his prophet, and therefore became life for that black man himself.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nebuzaradan captain of the bodyguard had released him from Ramah, when he had taken him bound in chains, among all the exiles of Jerusalem and Judah, who were being exiled to Babylon.

Now the captain of the bodyguard had taken Jeremiah and said to him, "The Lord your God promised this calamity against this place;

And the Lord has brought it on and done just as He promised. Because you people sinned against the Lord and did not listen to His voice, therefore this thing has happened to you (Jer. 40: 1-3).

Imagine the captain of the guard, a Gentile Chaldean, recognizing the prophetic truth, and even the cause of the judgment. It is like God was punctuating the message of judgment out of the lips of a Gentile, who would have been completely removed from the understanding of the God of Israel, yet recognizing nevertheless that this was a judgment for sin against that city and nation.

So the captain of the bodyguard gave him a ration and a gift and let him go.

Then Jeremiah went to Mizpah to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam and stayed with him among the people who were left in the land (Jer. 40:5f "6).

Though Jeremiah had been thrown into the pit, a most shameful and degrading way for man to end his life, yet he was preserved. The Lord brings him out, spares his life, gives him honor even with the enemy, and is released from chains, given food, a present and told to take his liberty as he felt led and directed. The fact that

the thought would come to a Gentile to give a gift to the prophet has got to be the inspiration of God to a man who is not even regenerate. It is almost like God is saying, “Look, you were obedient to me and took every risk, and it came close to requiring your life, but I have saved you out of the pit, and I have set you free, and here is a final token of My esteem, My affection and appreciation for your uncompromising devotion to Me.”

There is nothing that men can do, however fierce and bitter their anger, against the servants of God that can in any way triumph over God’s own will. He can undo the most diabolical intentions. For those saints whose lives were not spared death, the reader may raise a question, “Was He unable to do for them what He did for Jeremiah, or was their death in His will?” My answer is that they were not to be delivered from it, but delivered in it. The testimony of many who have been burned at the stake is a visible demonstration of joy in their final suffering.

Jeremiah’s time in the pit did not in any way compromise him. In that, we are given a glimpse of what makes a prophet a prophet; his character has a selfless unconcern about his own life. It did not matter what befell him. Two value systems are demonstrated. The one seeks its own life, the material thing, and the benefits of this life, as against the prophet who disregards what the consequence would be for himself.

The Lord is gracious and gentle in giving warning of His judgments. They come in installments, but when people keep refusing to hear, there remains only sudden judgment: Zedekiah blinded and losing his sons, the nation itself destroyed, the temple and city burned, and the final survivors being pursued with the sword and famine and pestilence into Egypt.

We are either going to live from every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, or we will perish. The people did not live by the word of the Lord from the mouth of the prophet. Had they heeded it and received it, it would have been life for them. The rejection of it was their death. They calculated their security along other lines, which is, in the last analysis, idolatrous and God-rejecting. It must bring judgment, especially being the people of God. They were under a double indictment because they had the greater responsibility—the knowledge of God and His provision for them throughout all their history. They had forsaken the Law and the commandments, despite the warnings that God had sent them through His prophets of what the consequence of that rejection would be.

Jeremiah was obedient to God despite any visible evidence that he was being heard by God’s people or being received. It is an excruciating form of suffering. It is like having your guts torn out. There is something in our humanity that cries out for some recognition, “Well done, brother, I appreciated that word.” But for Jeremiah and any true prophet, there was nothing. He had to bear that, though it was death for him.

The two great prophets of restoration are the prophets who brought the words of doom and judgment: Ezekiel and Jeremiah. They were given the privilege of speaking about a last days’ restoration: “It shall come to pass in the last days that God will.” That honor was given to those who had to bear the dishonor and shame. Only a true prophet is willing to bear the reproach of it in the suffering of it. The question for us as the church is whether we will be identified with something that is true in the last days, and that speaks of the judgments to come.