**Jeremiah 38:14-28** July 11, 2021

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*Jeremiahh 38:14King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the Lord. “I am going to ask you something,” the king said to Jeremiah. “Do not hide anything from me.” 15Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me.” 16But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: “As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who are seeking your life.” 17Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. 18But if you will 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 their hands.’ ”*

*19King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me.” 20“They will not hand you over,” Jeremiah replied. “Obey the Lord by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. 21But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the Lord has revealed to me: 22All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you: ‘They misled you and overcame you— those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.’ 23“All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down.”*

*24Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Do not let anyone know about this conversation, or you may die…” 28And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard until the day Jerusalem was captured.*

**Unconfused Christians**

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we drove out of town, things just didn’t look right. We couldn’t be sure because we had never been there before, mut we had a feeling. Fifteen more minutes down the road, it wasn’t matching the road atlas – which tells you how long ago this was. Finally, we stopped. Maybe we had missed a corner? The idea of turning back was unwelcome. It was an extremely long day of driving, in a foreign country. How far back had we lost our way? Or maybe we were on the right road, but there just weren’t signs?

Every one of us has been there, wondering how we came to stand where we were. What corner had we missed? Hadn’t we paid attention? Would our next choice take us closer to or farther from our destination? Confusion.

In Jeremiah chapter 38, a confused King of Judah, Zedekiah, sought an audience with God’s prophet Jeremiah, as he had done several times before. Why is this one conversation the one to remember? Because this is the last conversation between an Israelite king and a prophet of God, ever. The. Last. One.

It was not the best of times; it was the worst of times. You can hear the fatigue in the king’s and the prophet’s voices. They met in a place cryptically called ***“the third entrance to the temple of the Lord.”*** No one’s really sure what this means, but the educated guess that it was the king’s private entry to the Jerusalem temple. At any rate, Zedekiah chose one of the few places he could have a private conversation. You see, Jerusalem, like all ancient cities, was a very tight place: tens of thousands of people living in an area smaller than a pro ball-park with parking lots. Even in the king’s palace the walls had ears. Why not go outside the city? Surrounding the city with arrows nocked and swords drawn was the mightiest army in the world. Outside stood the Babylonians. Zedekiah’s once-proud Israelite nation had been reduced to somewhere between 100 and 200 acres. So, Zedekiah sought out a private audience with God’s prophet.

You can hear the hopelessness, the fear, the lostness in the conversation. Trying to sound like king, Zedekiah demanded, ***“I am going to ask you something. Do not hide anything from me.”*** But he’s desperate; desperate for direction, any direction. Jeremiah, a prophet with forty years under his belt was tired too. He had been ignored, imprisoned and abused ever more often as the years passed. He answered the king, ***“If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me.”*** “Oh king, we’ve been through this before. You’re not going to like the message I have, but I have to say what the Lord tells me. Last time, you imprisoned me. This time you’ll probably kill me. Even if you don’t kill me, you’re not going to listen.”

Ever stand out there on the roadside of life, looking at the scenery, the map, the GPS, the sun, trying to figure out where it all went wrong? And even as you reckon with the fact that the past is the past, you wonder how to find your way forward? It wasn’t supposed to be end like this.

After the king’s assurances that Jeremiah at least wouldn’t lose his life, Jeremiah reveals the Lord’s will. It is crystal clear: ***“The Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live.’”***

To those of us who aren’t kings or queens, that sounds reasonable. Zedekiah and the army of Judah don’t have a chance. “Just give up.” It’s simple. We who measure our bank accounts in thousands or hundreds of dollars, or maybe less, think at the billionaire, “Just take a couple zeroes off your account balance and you’ll still have more than any of us.” Easy for us to say.

In telling the king to surrender, Jeremiah tells Zedekiah to put aside his family, his house, his purpose in life, to hand over all that he has accomplished to some outsider, to give up 400 years of the sons of David on the throne, to extinguish a kingdom, a people. We think at Zedekiah, “Just put down your royal crown. You can still say you *were* king. None of us can say that.” Jeremiah told the king, “Give up everything you have.” That’s not what any of us wants to hear, is it?

To make the stakes clear, the prophet fills out the other side of the equation in longhand: ***“If you will 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.”***

At this, Zedekiah protested. He was worried about old foes waiting with the Bablyonians with scores to settle--as a newly sentenced criminal fears old enemies behind bars with scores to settle.

Then Jeremiah spoke the most beautiful words of this reading. It’s not what he said; it’s how he said it. The prophet who hadn’t wanted to talk abandoned all concern for his own life. Jeremiah, the man of God, was suddenly fully invested in saving Zedekiah, ***“Please obey the Lord in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live”*** (NASB, v.20). Listen to him plead with his king. But since the king seems to be faltering he had to add a sad prophetic vision of the future in the event he should not surrender, ***“All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon.”*** What horror! ***“Those women will say to you: ‘They misled you and overcame you—those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.’”*** What greater sting than the women of the royal house, as they are being taken captive, not crying in sorrow, but mocking and scorning their once-king who could have saved them but didn’t? “Zedekiah, don’t you see what is going to happen? Turn to the Lord! If you are confused and lost, this is the way!”

The prophet bears no animosity to Zedekiah. That’s what people usually think when a man of God shows up on their doorstep: “Pastor’s mad at me. Church council’s mad at me.” No, he’s pleading with you. He’s speaking the truth about choices, not to put you down, but to reconnect you with your God that you may be lifted up! To give clarity and direction.

But the king would have nothing to do with it, and so this interview ended with the end of the kingdom of David, ***“And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard until the day Jerusalem was captured.”***

Years ago, I used to have soft spot in my heart for sad songs. My wife will tell you that. It sounds kind of depressing to like sad songs, but you like what you like. Unfortunately, our oldest son did what boys will do, and he acquired a taste for what his dad liked. And so for a while there we had an eight year old who liked sad songs. I’m not sure if he still feels the same. I’ll have to ask him when we visit this week. But something happened. I’m not the fan of sad songs that I used to be. Not sure why. Maybe I used to like them because of the unrealistic optimism of youth that needed a counterweight. More likely, I’ve heard enough of the sadness of real life to know I don’t need it filling the music I listen to. I don’t know.

But while there is tragedy to this reading, two tremendously bright lights shine, two lights that tell us that while Zedekiah’s confusion ended in tragedy, we have and offer people a way failproof way out of their confusion.

**A.** First, is a reminder that while this king-with-prophet interview sealed the doom of the kingdom of David, it didn’t. There would be another one of the house and line of David, who would sit on David’s throne. All of those Old Testament kings were little reminders to Old Testament believers, imperfect reminders to be sure, that there would be a Messiah, a Savior, who would come from the house and line of David. He would be a different king who would rule on the throne of his father David *forever*. He would offer what no earthly king could ever hope to offer. He rules with healing in his wings. He rules with the mercy and peace he himself won for us on the cross.

**B.** The second related point of light from this reading, which I want to give a little more time to is this: Look at God’s abundant mercy in Jeremiah 38. You heard the prophet plead with the king, assuring him of God’s mercy and care. Put that in context and you find that that was only the tip of the iceberg of God’s grace to Zedekiah. For nine years, Zedekiah had not been listening to God’s prophet. Time and again—we don’t have time to review it all—but time and again Jeremiah had shown up in Zedekiah’s palace and told him God’s will. Each time Jeremiah had spoken of God’s mercy and the aweful results of not standing in God’s grace. Each successive refusal to listen to God’s prophet painted Zedekiah farther into a corner. Nine years later standing on the brink of the abyss, God still held out his merciful hand to Zedekiah. Even at the extremity, God still reached out to him with grace and forgiveness. No matter how lost you feel in life, God’s mercy is there. It is always there. The criminal on the cross next to Jesus was getting what he deserved—those are his words, not mine—but there was Jesus promising heaven to him. Here is Jeremiah still promising God’s abundant care and blessings to Zedekiah. That’s how God’s mercy works. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, whether you are talking about your sins before you became a Christian, or sins after you became a Christian. God forgives in Christ, always. Therefore we can always trust him to guide us right, through the confusing times.

There is an old story that is more humorous than it should be for this message, but it applies. Down on the Gulf Coast there was a hurricane. It was one of those hurricanes with way more rain than wind. Anyway, a man was in his house and the waters were rising. A local guy pulled up to his front porch in a boat and told him, “Get in; the waters are rising.” The resident told him, “Naw. God told me he is going to save me.” An hour later the man is on his roof and a first responder rescue team pulls up in a boat, “Get in; the waters are rising.” “God told me he is going to save me.” An hour later he is standing on his chimney. The National Guard swoop down in a helicopter, a soldier rapels down to him with a safety harness. “Put this on; the waters are rising.” “God told me he is going to save me.” An hour later the man is standing in heaven and he asks God: “What gives? You told me you were going to save me.” “I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?”

Are you confused about the way God is guiding your life? Is the reason you are confused the same reason that Zedekiah was confused? Because God’s answer isn’t the answer you want? Let us not be confused Christians, distracted by the lights and sounds, the wise sounding foolishness of this lost world. Instead take to heart the words of our Gospel reading. Remember Jesus’ words to Martha preparing the perfect meal but forgetting the most important ingredient, *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her”* (Lk 10). We who have tasted God’s goodness in Christ Jesus, *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith… Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us”* (Heb 12).

Confused? Listen to what God is saying. Stop the excuses. Stop telling yourself that God’s way is unreasonable. Stop the confusion. Stop doing a Zedekiah. Listen to God’s merciful voice in His Son, our Savior. Amen.