

Jeremiah 38:1-13. Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, ² “This is what the LORD says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.’ ³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’” ⁴ Then the officials said to the king, “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.” ⁵ “He is in your hands,” King Zedekiah answered. “The king can do nothing to oppose you.” ⁶ So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud. ⁷ But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, ⁸ Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, ⁹ “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.” ¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.” ¹¹ So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. ¹² Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, ¹³ and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.

We are called to do the difficult work of the kingdom

- 1. It is difficult work***
- 2. But the Lord will lift us up***

The harvest has begun and it seems like things are off to a good start. We have had favorable weather for harvesting. Not too hot. Not too cold. And things seemed to be on schedule, perhaps even ahead of schedule. Now, I am certainly not the expert when it comes to farming or bringing in the harvest, but I am sure that much like everything else there are a few parts of this work that are more enjoyable than others. And I am sure that there are some other parts that are not enjoyable at all. There are difficult tasks that are highly unpleasant, but they need to be done. In order to produce a productive harvest the grunt work, the frustrating repairs, the thankless and unpleasant tasks have to be taken care of. A farmer worth his salt can't just do the work that is enjoyable and expect the harvest to come rolling in.

Our Lord teaches us a lesson very similar to that in our lesson for today. He teaches us that as Christians we are called to do the work of the King and bring in the harvest. Our Lord and King has called us to do work that is tough, that is dirty, that is thankless, but it is work that needs to be done. And he promises us that when this work gets us down he will lift us up.

In our daily lives sometimes we talk about getting down in the dumps. We talk about sinking down and getting bogged down in our work and in our lives as Christians. Of course we are talking figuratively. But this is something that literally happened to one of God's faithful prophets Jeremiah.

God had called Jeremiah to declare to the people that judgment was coming. The people of Judah had abandoned God. Their kings and leaders had deserted the ways of the LORD and now God was going to send judgment. He was going to send the Babylonians to defeat and to crush his people. God would allow the Babylonians to take his chosen people into captivity. He was going to allow this in order to chastise his people and punish them for their disobedience. And God had sent his prophet Jeremiah to deliver this message. Jeremiah was to proclaim that judgment was coming from God and the people were to accept this judgment and turn to their LORD God for protection and deliverance as many would face a brutal end and others would be taken away into captivity. But of course the people did not want to hear this message. This message was too harsh for their ears. This message was too difficult for them to accept. In their minds there was still a chance for them to overthrow the mighty Babylonians. But again the force against them was not just the Babylonians, but it was their God and so Jeremiah persisted.

This was difficult work. This was dirty unpleasant work, but this was work that needed to be done, for this was the message that God had given him to speak. This was the message that God's people needed to hear. We are told already in chapter 37 that Jeremiah had been branded a traitor, been beaten, and had already been arrested and thrown into prison for proclaiming this word of the Lord. King Zedekiah knew that Jeremiah spoke God's word and eventually freed him, and yet despite all the difficulties of proclaiming this message Jeremiah continued. ***"This is what the LORD says: 'Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with his life; he will live.'*** ³ ***And this is what the LORD says: 'This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.'***

And what was Jeremiah's reward for being a faithful messenger of God. Did he receive a medal from the king for his honorable work? Did the people at least recognize that he proclaimed God's word? Did they listen to him? No they became upset and rejected him. And these officials were far worse than mere hecklers they became so upset that they wanted Jeremiah dead. Our lesson describes the reaction in this way: ***the officials said to the king, "This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin."***

The king knew that Jeremiah spoke the truth. And yet the king refused to give up his plan, he refused to repent and follow the Lord's advice spoke through Jeremiah. And so as long as Jeremiah continued to speak, continued to be tolerated, the king's officials continued to put pressure on him to punish this so called traitor until finally the king crumbled. He gave

in to their demands and agreed to look the other way as these men did whatever they pleased with the prophet of God.

We are not sure of their motives and why they would deal with Jeremiah the way that they did. Perhaps deep in the hearts of these officials these men knew Jeremiah spoke the truth. Or perhaps they hated Jeremiah so much that they wanted to make sure that he died a slow and painful death. Either way they did not kill Jeremiah immediately, but instead **they lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.** Down into the muck and mire, the filth and darkness Jeremiah sank.

Jeremiah would have indeed died a slow and awful death, but God used another faithful servant to rebuke the king and to rescue Jeremiah. Ebed-Melech, was the servant of the king. He was a personal attendant to King Zedekiah. He was not a Jew, but rather he was of North African descent. But this humble slave called the king to repentance. He had heard the word that Jeremiah proclaimed and in faith he approached the king. And as the king sat on his seat of judgment at the city gate, Ebed-Melech pointed out the king's failing in justice. He noted the cruelty in which God's servant, Jeremiah, was treated and Ebed-Melech pleaded for Jeremiah's life. Our lesson tells us, **But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace,** went to the king and said to him, ⁹ **"My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death.**

Having heard his servant's rebuke the king changed his mind once again and relented. By this time however Jeremiah was so weakened by hunger and exhaustion and exposure that he was not able to climb a ladder to get out the cistern so the king ordered that Ebed-Melech to take 30 men to lift the prophet of God up out of the cistern. Ebed-Melech took care to gently, but swiftly lift the suffering prophet out of his muddy dungeon.

In our lesson for today not only does Jeremiah serve as an excellent example of faithful proclamation of God's Word in a difficult situation, but Ebed-Melech is also an excellent example of doing the challenging work that God wants us to do. Ebed-Melech could have easily looked the other way. He could have easily said, "Who am I to point out the king's error?" "Who am I to call him to repentance?"

When we gather for worship and confess our sins, we often confess, "I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good." My friends, all too often this is the kind of good that we have failed to do. I must admit that I am guilty of it, and so are you. Instead of rolling up our sleeves and going and doing this dirty, unpleasant work that God has called us to do we let it go undone. You and I turn a blind eye to our brother and sister's sin. Even though we may be the closest person to offer help and admonition we sit back and expect someone else to take care of it. Or we just ignore it completely even though we know this is not right and this is harmful for that individual. And yet we easily fall into that thinking that says, "Who am I to call a brother or sister in the faith to repentance? Who am I to point out a person's fault and rebuke them and restore them gently?"

Well God has called us to do that. He has called us to do this foreign and difficult work. In Matthew 18 the Lord Jesus commands us to call our fellow believers to repentance. With the same urgency that he tells us to, **"Go and make disciples"**, he tells us to **"Go and show your brother his fault just between the two of you."**

It is much more pleasant work to reach out to that un-churched co-worker who is curious about God, but what about reaching out to that son or daughter who is caught in a sin? It is much more enjoyable work to reach out and invite that new neighbor to come to church - and we should do that, but God also wants us to do the difficult thing and invite that neighbor of many years to come back to church. God wants us to go and do the work that seems much more difficult. He wants us to talk to our niece or nephew who is not honoring marriage by living with a boyfriend or girlfriend outside of marriage. He wants us to admonish our fellow believer who is neglecting the means of grace. This is difficult work, but the Lord's harvest needs to be brought in, and we can't just sit back and do only the work that's more enjoyable.

When doing this work we will be rejected. There will be times that the people that we are reaching out to in love will act in hatred toward us. There will be times that we are discouraged and give up on this important work, but instead of being bogged down by rejection and then paralyzed by guilt the Lord lifts us up and energizes us to do this necessary work.

Only the good news of Jesus has the power to do this. We are energized and empowered and equipped to serve the Lord in this difficult way because Jesus took his difficult road to the cross. The Lord of glory came down and suffered and died in our place. Jesus took on rejection for you and me. He submitted himself to rejection and ridicule and yet in love and in mercy he continued to reach out to the stubborn, to the hard hearted, so that the gospel might sink in. He was rejected by his peers, mocked and spit upon by his fellow man, but he willingly suffered and died for us. And in his love he calls out to us, he restores us, and he forgives us when we fail to follow and serve him.

When we are tempted to despair, to become discouraged, or to look the other way instead of offering loving and necessary rebuke; when we are tempted to think "Who am I that I should rebuke my fellow believer?"; remember who you are in Christ. Remember that Christ has covered you with his love. He has forgiven your sins. He has made you his child, and he has called you to be a part of his priesthood of believers. Your Lord and your Savior, the God of the universe, has called you to encourage and admonish your fellow believers. He has united you to himself and he has united you to your brothers and sisters in the faith. Jesus, who breathed on his disciples and gave to his church the keys of the kingdom, encourages you to use his Word which is all God-breathed and ***is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness***, He will strengthen us. He will equip us. And he will remind you of his persistent love. When you and I are stuck and bogged down in despair and the pain of rejection the Lord Jesus will daily and gently pick us up with his goodness and forgiveness. He will lift us up in order to serve the kingdom. He will help us bring in his harvest.

Dear friends, go and do this work. Ask the Lord for the courage, the wisdom, the perseverance, to faithfully proclaim his word, to rebuke sin, and gently restore those who need to be admonished. Go and do this difficult work and pray. Pray for your pastor and the elders and leaders of this church. Pray that they might be strengthened by God to publicly carry out this difficult task. Pick them up and encourage them when this work takes its toll on them. And know that the Lord will sustain you and refresh you as you take on this task as well. To our Savior who willingly died for us, to him be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.