



Jeremiah 38:1-13 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. 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.

The mudflats of the Cook Inlet near Anchorage, AK, are notoriously dangerous. Most mudflats don't pose too much of a threat to people, but these ones are particularly deadly. Geologists have studied the peculiar type of mud unique to the Cook Inlet mudflats and have found the grains to be "highly angular." They rest in a delicate balance, and when disturbed by a foot, they will resettle around your foot, the angular grains essentially locking themselves into place around you. It's then nearly impossible to pull out the mudflat's victims, locked in the mud as they are; eventually the tides come back in, and drowning is usually the eventual cause of death. Over the decades, many people have become trapped and eventually died there in the mud of the Cook Inlet. It's a gruesome way to go.

The Prophet Jeremiah found himself in a similar situation in our text. There he was, in a cistern prison, stuck in the mud with seemingly no way out. And he was stuck in the mud simply for sharing God's Word. Now, as Christians under persecution from a world that hates the Savior, we too might at times feel like we are stuck in the mud with no way out. But as Jeremiah sat there in that deep cistern, the only place for him to look was up. That's where we ought to train our eyes as well, for the only deliverance from the mud of this life comes from above. And like with Jeremiah, help is coming for us as well. The theme we'll be considering today is:

The Lord Pulls You Out of the Mud

- I. The sinful world wants to see you sink
- II. The Lord's salvation is closer than you think

The national faith-life of Judah was at an all-time low. For centuries, the people of God had been embracing the false gods of the land in which they dwelt. Baal and Asherah seemed to capture the people's attention and love much more than the true God did. For centuries, God had been sending His prophets to warn the people to turn away from their idols in repentance, turn to Him and live! And they often ignored those threats. In the 720's BC, God sent the world super-power of the day, Assyria, to take out the northern Kingdom of Israel, and they were wiped out. As for the southern kingdom of Judah, God spared them at that time, sending His angel to strike down 185,000 Assyrians in their camp, sparing the people of Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. (cf. 2 Kings 19)

You might think that this would be the wakeup call Judah needed, but no. Fast forward 150 years, and now Babylon has replaced Assyria as the world's most powerful empire, and though they were continually warned, the people of Judah kept right on in the sins of their fathers. It was to these people that God sent His prophet Jeremiah, during whose lifetime Jerusalem and Judah would ultimately fall to Babylon. Now, when God called Jeremiah to be His prophet and warn His people of Judah, He didn't sugarcoat anything. He told Jeremiah the reality of his mission, ***"Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD, to deliver you."*** (Jeremiah 1:18-19)

Speaking out against the whole land, warning them against their sin, that's exactly what we find Jeremiah doing in our text. He warned them, ***"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."*** And what was the response? It was just as the Lord had said, ***"They will fight against you."*** In our text, the princes said to the king, ***"Let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm."***

Receiving the blessing of King Zedekiah, they took Jeremiah and tossed him into a cistern, a deep tank for holding water. This particular one was not actually full of water, instead it had a deep layer of mud at the bottom, into which we're told Jeremiah sank. The plan was for him to die there, stuck, without any food to speak of, but he wasn't going to die just yet. Even so, he would no longer be able to speak out against the people and their sins, which is exactly what those princes were going for.

Have you ever felt like Jeremiah? You stand up for your faith, and the world spits on you in return? The world wants to see you sink in the mud for your faith, and your life is more difficult because of it? If we're being honest, most of the time, the answer to that is, "No, not really." Most of us can't relate to Jeremiah's situation, because we're very good at doing what we can to stay out of the pit. Yes, maybe we all feel the general disdain towards Christians that is prevalent in this world, but how many of us can claim that we've been personally afflicted because of our faith on an individual level? I can't relate to that very much at all. Jesus said in our Gospel reading, ***"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."*** (Mark 8:34-35) Ask yourself, "Am I denying myself and taking up my cross? Or am I dumping it off as an inconvenience? Am I willing to lose my life for the sake of the Gospel? Or am I willing to sacrifice the Word of God for the sake of my own comfort in life?"

The truth is, we want to stay out of the mud. We often want people to look at us as if we're ordinary just like anyone else. Sure, we retreat in secrecy to church on Sunday mornings, but we're effective at separating that part of our life from the rest of our lives, spending the rest of the week at work vocally living a normal human life for everyone to see.

So, we *are* stuck in the mud, but it's the mud of our sin. It's really a far cry from Jeremiah's circumstance. There Jeremiah stood, stuck deep in the mud, all because he was faithful to the Lord's message. There he was, chest-deep in the mire, looking up for some deliverance, and who could blame him if he started questioning God, "God, you said they would not prevail against me, that you would be with me and deliver me! Where are you?" But just as God had promised, **"I am with you. . . to deliver you,"** so it was done. The Lord's salvation was much closer than Jeremiah thought; the servant, Ebed-Melech alone stood up and did what was right, pulling Jeremiah up out of the muck and fulfilling God's promise to him.

Wouldn't it be nice if we had our own Ebed-Melech's coming to our aid—an unlikely deliverer that can come and scoop us out of our own dire situations! Well, we do, in fact, have just such a deliverer. When you heard the name Ebed-Melech, you probably didn't think much of it. Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, not really a name that any of us are looking to give to our children. But if you spoke Hebrew, you'd know exactly what this name means. Literally translated, Ebed-Melech means "servant of the King." And yes, we do have our own Servant of the King who has come to deliver us. Of course, I'm talking about the *Lord's* Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Now, Ebed-Melech, he was of no account to the people among whom he lived. He was an Ethiopian, an outsider to the people of Israel. And he was a Eunuch at that, which by Jewish law meant that he was to be excluded from the Assembly of Israel—truly, a man without a country, and an unlikely source of salvation for Jeremiah. This man of lowly status marched right up to the King of Judah and requested that Jeremiah be spared of this slow and lonely death. And what boldness we see in this action! Because, as a servant of the king, Ebed-Melech would speak when spoken to! He could not ordinarily presume to just walk up to the king and speak with him and expect to live! But this was a man who was sent by God for this task, and he was successful in his mission.

And then I love the vivid description of the events that followed Ebed-Melech's brave request. **"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."** That's some tender-loving care by this Ethiopian. You can almost picture him rummaging around for some rope with which to fish out the Prophet, but then also taking a moment to consider Jeremiah's armpits in the process. He doesn't want him to get rope burn, and so he starts digging out old clothes, taking them to Jeremiah, and instructs him to put the clothes under his arms so that the rope won't dig in painfully. Just a beautiful display of bravery and care.

It's hard not to see our own Savior in this description of Ebed-Melech. For the Servant of the King who was sent to deliver us is described by the Prophet Isaiah as one who **"had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."** (Isaiah 53:2-3) Jesus was the of-no-account Servant of the King, of whom His contemporaries scoffed, when they said, **"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his**

mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ ⁵⁷ And they took offense at him.” (Matthew 13:55-57)

Despised and rejected though He was, Jesus marched right into the royal city of Jerusalem, where He knew that death was awaiting Him. From the prince of the power of this world, your Savior snatched you up, taking no consideration of His own life, but concerned only with yours. And how tenderly He has done this, understanding each of our own individual burdens, carrying the guilt of each of our own individual sins. Weighing upon Himself the guilt which you all bear and crucifying it to the cross.

When we were stuck, with no hope of getting out, Christ came for us. That’s the reality Paul describes in his letter to the Romans, ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”***

(Romans 5:6-10) Consider how God describes you in those verses, ***“weak. . . ungodly. . . sinners. . . enemies of God.”*** This is the deepest, darkest pit that you can be in, the most stuck-in-the-mud stance against God that we can take. And yet, it was while we were in that very condition that Christ died for us, lifting us up out of the pit.

We could never put ourselves into a worse position than we’ve already been in, could never possibly make ourselves more unforgiveable, more irredeemable, more unlovable, than how Paul describes your reality in those verses. And yet in that state, we were forgiven, we were redeemed, we were loved. The only thing we can do now is to proclaim with the Psalmist, ***“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, ³ who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.”*** (Psalm 103:2-4)

And if Christ has drawn you up out of *that* dark and muddy pit, He certainly will not forget you in whatever other mud pit the world sinks you in. So, stand up for your faith! Don’t hide it on the shelf at home during the week! As Peter says, be ***“prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”*** (1 Peter 3:15) And if you do stand up for your faith, and wear your hope in Christ on your sleeve, you will be afflicted for it. But even then, you won’t be hopeless! Afterall, if the world wants to see us sink in the mud and tosses us in it, remember, we’re not alone. Jesus says, ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”*** (John 15:18) If the world has you in the pit, it has you there right alongside Christ. You are never alone. For, ***“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*** (Romans 6:4) Christ has been raised from the pit of death, and you will be too, and if you think about it, that’s the very worst that this world can throw at you. Even if you are persecuted to the point of death, the world still will not have been able to touch you. For your ***Lord is the one who pulls you out of the mud.*** As the writer to the Hebrews declares, ***“We can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”*** (Hebrews 13:6) May God grant us the same confidence, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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