

AN UNFORGETTABLE STORY

"And Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah, Put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords. And Jeremiah did so. So they drew up Jeremiah with cords, and took him up out of the dungeon: and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison" (Jeremiah 38:12-13).

Being the type of a preacher who took orders from no one but God, it wasn't long until Jeremiah got into difficulties because of his preaching. The Chaldeans had surrounded the city of Jerusalem and intended to burn it. Within the walls of the besieged city was Jeremiah the prophet. Knowing the city was going to fall into the hands of the enemy, due to the fact that the people had forsaken God and plunged into idolatry and immorality, Jeremiah urged the inhabitants thereof to surrender in order that their lives might be spared and their city might be left intact. He contended that, because of their sins in forsaking God and in going after idols, they must go into captivity for a time. With Jeremiah preaching capitulation, it was very difficult for the patriotic princes in Jerusalem to arouse the people of their city to strong resistance.

The princes approached the king, told him that Jeremiah was a dangerous man, one who was unfriendly to his government and people, charged him with treason, and urged that the prophet be put to death, whereupon Zedekiah gave them permission to do with him whatever they pleased. The weak monarch could not have passed a worse sentence on Jeremiah than to say to those wicked princes: "Behold, he is in your hand: for the king is not he that can do any thing against you" (Jeremiah 38:5).

In all probability, when the princes seized Jeremiah, they intended to kill him. But when he stood before them strong in the Lord and with his face shining, they shrank from the thought of instant murder. One of them suggested that they "cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah, the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison" (Jeremiah 38:6), and they did. This dungeon was a bottle-shaped hold in which there was a lot of thick, sticky mud. It was deep, dark, and damp. It was a miserable place in which neither rest nor comfort were possible. Doubtless the princes intended that Jeremiah should die there from neglect, cold, and hunger. This terrible punishment, which was meted out to the prophet of God, shows the unreasonable hatred in which he was held by those who were in authority. It shows the enmity of the natural man toward a Spirit-filled, faithful servant of the living God who was proclaiming the truth and pointing out their shortcomings. With cords the princes lowered Jeremiah into that miry dungeon, with the thought that the city would never hear of him again, as he would soon die from exposure and starvation and be forgotten.

This incident is a reminder that many of the greatest men, who have ever lived, were subjected to cruel punishment. Jeremiah was truly a great man. The more that modern scholarship examines his writings and his place in history, the higher is its estimate of his greatness. Yet, he was in a dungeon. For what crime was he placed there? His crime was that he refused to say what they wanted him to say. Instead, he spoke what he knew to be the truth and what God told him to say, so they imprisoned him. One of the hardest duties that ever falls on a man who loves his country is to point out the fact that his people are doing wrong. When Jeremiah, like a brave hero and a true patriot, told his people of their folly, of their sins, and of their approaching doom, he met with the usual brickbat argument, brute force. Jeremiah was cast into the dungeon, and ill-treated in various ways, but every prediction that he made came true.

I. A Sad Picture.

God's prophet was in a position which became extremely precarious, and wretched down in the dungeon, sunk in the mire, and left in the cold and dark solitude to the horrors

of an approaching starvation in that prison. He was in imminent danger of being forgotten. Without a firm standing and without light and food, Jeremiah's only prospect was starvation, suffering, and death. There was no hope for his life in that wretched place. Those who put him there realized this and were glad that they had gotten him out of the way. They wanted him to die, and the sooner the better.

In that place and condition Jeremiah was a type of all who are unsaved. They, too, are without a firm standing in a world of darkness. The only firm standing is in Jesus Christ. That is why the Christian can and does sing joyfully:

"My hope is built on nothing less
T Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the vale.

His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

On Christ, the solid, Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand."

This story is a remarkable illustration of salvation by grace. Jeremiah had not always been in that dungeon. Because of his absolute loyalty to God, and seeming disloyalty to Jerusalem, he had been placed in it. So it is with man as a sinner. He has not always been a sinner. When God placed man in the Garden of Eden he was perfect in every particular. Then, Adam sinned, with the result that he fell from perfection. Thus man fell from a position of holiness to one of sin.

II. A Saving Person.

God provided a deliverer for Jeremiah. His name was Ebed-melech. Who was he? He was not a Jew. He did not belong to the chosen race. He was an Ethiopian, a black man from the south. He was the servant of the king, performing his duties in connection with the king's harem.

Ebed-melech was an eunuch. The eunuchs of the East were extremely coarse, treacherous, and cruel. Their delight was to wound, vex, and slay. Yet Ebed-melech was as kind as his class was cruel. He was a far better man than the class to which he belonged. Whereas his class was godless, he was as faithful a servant of God as he was of the

king. This goes to show that it is not right to condemn an individual simply by reason of the class to which unhappily he belongs. Ebed-melech put more pretentious people to shame.

It should be remembered that Jeremiah was not in the hands of the king, nor those of the wicked conspirators, but in the hands of God. Because God had other thoughts and plans for Jeremiah, He refused to permit his martyrdom. God sometimes lets His servants get into very trying situations even though they have been faithful to Him, but He does not forsake them. Quite frequently He raises up real friends for them. God either provides a way around a trial, over it, through it, or out of it. He always sees and knows the circumstances of each of His children and feels for them. In the case of Jeremiah, God raised up and had ready for him in his hour of need a true friend, of whom otherwise we might never have heard. God always has somebody ready for every emergency.

We are not informed as to how Ebed-melech heard that the princes had placed Jeremiah in the dungeon. They did it secretly, and, yet, it had become known. Upon hearing that the prophet was in the dark, damp, and muddy dungeon, gallant Ebed-melech felt sorry for him because he was suffering unjustly. Realizing that he could not be true to God without being loyal to God's prophet, Ebed-melech promptly and courageously went to his monarch and called his attention to the injustice and cruelty of his princes toward Jeremiah. He took his life in his own hands when he did that, but, at the risk of his own life, he sought the welfare of God's prophet. In this connection it is clear to all who want to learn that it pays to stand for the right.

It was a daring act when Ebed-melech faced the king in his own court, for he was to some extent blaming him for what his princes had done. His effort met with success. Permission was given him by the king to take Jeremiah out of the dungeon. To guarantee the safe deliverance of God's prophet, and that without successful interference from the princes, the king gave his servant the assistance of thirty men. God can turn the heart of a king, or of any other man, and cause him to carry out His own wish.

Jeremiah had been left in that filthy dungeon to die, but God still had some work for him to do. This kind man was chosen by God to be the human instrument to effect the deliverance of the prophet. The story of the unusual kindness and tenderness of Ebed-melech is very winsome. Due to the fact that his heart was "a great magazine of kindness," he resolved that he would do his best to rescue and relieve the persecuted Jeremiah, regardless of the cost to himself.

III. A Simply Provision.

Sunk down in the mud within the dungeon, Jeremiah could not climb out or deliver himself therefrom. Even so, there just isn't anything that an unsaved person can do to deliver himself from his lost condition in sin, and set his feet on the solid Rock of Ages. A sinner may clothe himself with his own so-called righteousness, and may try by his morality, good deeds, and righteousness to save himself, but in the end he will find that it was a total impossibility.

Ebed-melech got permission from the king to deliver Jeremiah out of the dungeon. As Jeremiah's deliverer came forth from the presence of the king, our Redeemer, Saviour, and Deliverer came forth from the presence of the King of kings—even God Himself.

Not only was it impossible for Jeremiah to climb out of the dungeon, but he could not even climb part of the way out. Every unsaved person is just as helpless. Some talk about waiting until they are better to come to Christ. May we remember that

the invitation is for us to come:

"Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

While the majority of unsaved people realize that they can't fully save themselves, they believe somehow that salvation is a mixture of grace and works, and that if one does the best he can he shall be saved. Let me remind you that salvation is not such a mixture. Salvation is by grace alone. It is by grace through faith, plus nothing, and minus nothing. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2: 8-9). God's plan of salvation through the ages has been one of utmost simplicity.

When Ebed-melech got permission from the king to rescue Jeremiah, due to his kindness of heart he went into the palace and got a supply of rags and cast-off or worn-out garments, and then took with him thirty men from the king's household and proceeded to the dungeon. Being kind and considerate, he wanted to liberate the prophet as comfortably as possible. From the opening of the dungeon he addressed Jeremiah in a most kind and friendly manner. His coming must have brought great comfort and hope to the prophet. Can you imagine Jeremiah's joy as he looked up to the opening of the dungeon and discovered the face of the eunuch, who was God's messenger of deliverance for him?

Notice his tender solicitude in instructing Jeremiah to put the old, soft rags and worn-out garments, which he was about to let down to him, under his armpits, so that when they began to pull the ropes he would not be cut by them and subjected to torturing pain. These worthless clothes were to be used for the purpose of lessening the pains of a man of God.

Ebed-melech achieved a great service in emancipating a prophet, saving a precious life, perpetuating a noble ministry, and placing posterity under infinite obligation to him. And how did he accomplish this? By means of ropes and rags. What wonders the mighty God has accomplished through the use of insignificant things! So many times He has enabled His servants to achieve wondrous results with weak instruments.

How glorious that an ordinary man could be used of God in aiding one of His most faithful servants! It is a privilege to render service for anybody, but to do things for God's called and commissioned servants brings the highest rewards of all. God can and will use each of His children who is humble enough to be willing to do what He wants done. If God could and would use such insignificant things as torn and worn-out garments, He can use anything.

With the ropes and the rags Ebed-melech and his associates drew up Jeremiah from the mire of the dungeon. And thereafter the prophet remained in the court of the guard. Little did he dream, when he did this noble deed, that his reward would be so vast. God surprised him, as He so often delights to surprise His children with the scale of the recompense. God always recompenses the good deeds of His obedient children.

God's way of salvation has always been a matter of utmost simplicity. How was Jeremiah going to get out of that dungeon? Not by climbing out, for that was beyond the realm of possibility. Certainly not by complaining about the ropes and the rags because he did not like them. It was either by means of the ropes and the rags or not at all.

So, the only prospect of salvation for the unsaved is by receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Saviour. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Unsaved friend, with spiritual death as your only prospect, won't you receive the Lord Jesus Christ now and be saved?