

ROPES AND RAGS

"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.

This text takes us back to the time when the army of the king of Babylon had surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Within the walls of the besieged city was Jeremiah the prophet. Knowing that the city was going to fall into the hands of the Babylonians, Jeremiah urged the inhabitants thereof to surrender in order that their lives might be spared. It was very hard for the patriotic princes in Jerusalem to arouse their city to desperate resistance with this prophet preaching capitulation. When the princes could not stand it any longer, they approached the king and charged Jeremiah with sedition and urged that the prophet be put to death, whereupon he was cast into prison.

Jeremiah was imprisoned because he told the truth about the impending judgment and doom of Jerusalem. He took orders from no one except God. He would not preach a lie for a meal ticket in a time of distress. He informed the people in Jerusalem that if they did not forsake the city, and surrender to the Chaldeans rather than continue to fight against them, they would perish by the sword, by famine, or by a pestilence. He told them that if they would leave the city, throw down their arms, surrender to the Chaldean army, and ask for mercy, they would be spared. Although he had received favors from the court and was eating the king's bread, Jeremiah was not to be bribed by these things to hold his peace.

The four princes spoke very disrespectfully about Jeremiah when they laid the case before the king. They requested the death penalty for him. Unwilling to do anything contrary to their wishes, Zedekiah the king told them to do as they pleased with Jeremiah. He had faith in the prophet, but he would not stand up for him. No doubt, when the princes seized Jeremiah they intended to kill him out right. 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 he be placed in a pit or cistern in which the water had dried up, but in the bottom of which there were three or four feet of black mud. So with cords they let Jeremiah down into that miry dungeon, with the thought that the city would never hear of him again, as he would soon die from starvation.

This incident reminds us of the fact that many of the greatest men have been punished. Jeremiah was a great man. The more that modern scholarship examines his writings and his place in history the greater is its estimate of his greatness. Yet, here he is in a dungeon. And, for what crime was he placed there? His crime was that he refused to say what they wanted him to say, and instead he spoke what he believed and knew to be the truth, and so they imprisoned him.

I. A Sad Picture.

God's prophet was in the lowest condition of wretchedness, down in the pit, sunk in the mire, 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 and starved. No light, no firm standing and no food were there. His only prospect was suffering, starvation and death. In that place and condition he is a type of all who are unsaved. They are without a firm standing in a world of darkness. The only firm standing is in Jesus Christ. That is why Christian can sing, "On Christ the solid Rock I stand; 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 loyalty to God and seeming disloyalty to Jerusalem, he had been cast into it. So it is with the sinner. Man has not always been a sinner. When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden he was perfect in every particular, yet Adam sinned, with the result that he fell from perfection. Just as Jeremiah had been cast down into that dungeon, so man fell from a position of holiness to one of sin.

Jeremiah's only prospect was death. There was no hope for him that he might live. 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 his only prospect was death.

II. A Saving Person.

The story of the kindness of Ebed-melech to Jeremiah as told in this chapter is very winsome. He was an Ethiopian and a servant of the king. When he learned about the condition of the prophet, he was deeply concerned. Promptly and courageously he went straight to King Zedekiah, by whose order Jeremiah had been cast into prison, and laid the whole case before him. He charged that they had done wrong in everything they had done to the prophet. A wave of remorse swept over Zedekiah. He went to extremes, as weak people often do. Before, he would not as much as lift a finger in behalf of the prophet, but now he was willing and ready to send thirty men to rescue him.

Ebed-melech the Ethiopian undertook the cause of Jeremiah at the risk of his own life. He received authority from the king, his word. He also received power from the king in the form of thirty men. He was only the king's slave.

1. He was a better man than the class to which he belonged. For this reason he claims our attention and evokes our appreciation. The class to which he belonged were cruel, treacherous, coarse and unclean. He was a eunuch, and the eunuchs of the East were pitilessly cruel. Their delight was a wound, to vex, and to slay. No class had a worse reputation in this regard. Yet, he was as kind as his class was cruel. His heart was a fountain of love. He ministered unto the needy. He was a servant of the king. The servants of the king were a godless class. As a rule the royal households were haters of God's prophets. But Ebed-melech was as faithful a servant of God as he was of the king. He delighted to trust and honor Jehovah. He loved God's prophet. He endangered his won life in order to save Jeremiah's life. We should never condemn individuals because of the class to which unhappily they belong. Ebed-melech was greater than his fellows.
2. He was superior to his surroundings. He lived in Zedekiah's palace. Scenes of vice confronted him continually. His soul was vexed by filthy conversation. Instead of being like a chameleon and take the color of his surroundings, he conquered his environment. He teaches us that God can use us to send forth the rays of the gospel in debased and unfavorable conditions.
3. He had the courage of his convictions. When he learned that Jeremiah had been placed in the dungeon, he felt it to be a monstrous wrong. He publicly protested. He took his life in his hands when he began that task. A public protest against evil is never easy and may be hazardous. It was remarkable heroism for a poor Ethiopian to denounce publicly the godlessness of men high in state affairs. His courage was richly rewarded for he prevailed with the king and became the human saviour of the afflicted prophet. Our age too needs men of heroic mold. As Dean Farrar said, "The chief need of the world is the death-defying courage of true men."

4. He had a kind way of doing kindness.
His faith flowed forth in kindness. He wanted to relieve and rescue Jeremiah at all costs. He had a kind heart towards good men, and especially towards good men in affliction.
5. He achieved wondrous results with poor instruments.
He emancipated a prophet, saved a precious life, perpetuated a noble ministry, and laid the ages under infinite obligation to him. And how did he accomplish this? By means of ropes and rags. And the Lord recompensed him by a promise of life when judgment came upon the guilty.

The name of this man, who delivered Jeremiah, means "the servant from on high." As such, he clearly presents to us the Lord Jesus Christ, since Jesus was such a deliverer. Being a man of another race, naturally it would be said of him that there was no beauty in him. No one sees the beauty that there is in Jesus until he is saved. In order to deliver Jeremiah, Ebed-melech came forth from the presence of the king. So when the Lord Jesus came to save us, He came forth from the presence of the King of Kings--- even God Himself.

III. A Simple Provision.

It is exceedingly interesting to observe the manner in which Jeremiah was delivered. Having sunk down into the mud in the dungeon, Jeremiah could not climb out. There was nothing that he could do whereby he might deliver himself. Neither is there anything that a sinner can do to deliver himself from the condition and power of sin and set his feet on the Rock of Ages.

When Ebed-melech got permission to rescue Jeremiah, he took with him thirty men from the king's household, went to the palace and secured a supply of cast off or worn out clothes, and proceeded to the dungeon. At the opening of this dungeon he addressed Jeremiah in a most kind and friendly manner, directed him to put the old cast clouts and rotten rags under his arm-holes under the cords of rope. The rope was to draw him up with, and the rags were to keep the cords of rope from hurting him, as they pulled. He did not want to injure his flesh in saving his life. Many good deeds are spoiled by the manner in which they are done. It is not only man-like, but also God-like to be gentle.

God's plan of salvation has always been a matter of utmost simplicity. How was Jeremiah going to get out of that pit? Not by climbing out---that could never be done. Not by complaining about the ropes and rags. It was either by means of the ropes and rags or not at all. So, the only prospect of salvation for you who are unsaved is by receiving Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour. Won't you receive Him now? "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."