

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.

The Chaldeans had surrounded the city of Jerusalem and were intending to burn it. Within the walls of the besieged city was Jeremiah the prophet. Knowing that the city was going to fall into the hands of the enemy, 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 desperate resistance. This kind of advice sounded like treason.

When the princes could not stand it any longer, they approached the king and in bitterness charged Jeremiah with sedition. They told the king that the prophet was a dangerous man, one who was unfriendly to his government and people. They urged that Jeremiah be put to death. Unwilling to do anything contrary to their wishes, Zedekiah the king told them to do as they pleased with Jeremiah. The weak monarch could not have passed a worse sentence on Jeremiah than to say to these wicked princes: "Behold, he is in your hand: for the king is not he who can do any thing against you" (Jeremiah 38:5). This gave them the authority to do with him whatever they pleased, no matter how unjust or cruel it might be.

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 hole in which there was a lot of thick, sticky mud. It was deep, dark, damp and muddy. It was a miserable place, where neither rest nor comfort were possible. Doubtless the princes intended that he 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.

This incident reminds us of the fact 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. And, 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.

I. A Sad Picture.

God's prophet was in the lowest condition of wretchedness, 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, light or food, his only prospect was suffering, starvation and death. There was no hope for his life. Those who put him there realized this and were glad that they had gotten him out of the way. They wanted him to die.

In that place and condition Jeremiah was 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 the Christian can and does sing joyfully:

"My hope is built on nothing less
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.

The story of the kindness of Ebed-melech to Jeremiah as told in this chapter is very winsome. Who was Ebed-melech? He was not a Jew. He did not belong to the chosen race. He was an Ethiopian, a colored man from the South. He was a servant of the king, performing his duties in connection with the king's harem.

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 provides a way either around a trial, over it, through it or out of it. He always sees and knows each of His children and feels for them. In Jeremiah's case God raised up and had ready for him in his need a true friend, of whom otherwise we might never have heard. He always has somebody ready for every emergency.

Just how Ebed-melech heard that the princes had placed Jeremiah in the dungeon, we are not informed. They did it secretly, and, yet, it had become known. Upon hearing that the prophet was in the dungeon, Ebed-melech felt sorry for him because he suffered unjustly. Realizing that he could not be true to God without being loyal to His prophet, Ebed-melech courageously and promptly went to his monarch and called his attention to the injustice and cruelty of his princes toward Jeremiah. At the risk of his own life, he sought the welfare of God's prophet. In this connection we learn that it pays to stand for what is 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 delivery 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 and make him carry out His own wish.

Certain things about Ebed-melech are very commendable. He was better than the class to which he belonged. For this reason he claims our attention and evokes our admiration and appreciation. As a class, the eunuchs of the East were cruel, coarse and treacherous. As a rule, the servants of the king were a godless class and the royal households were haters of God's prophets. But, because of his trust in God, Ebed-melech loved His prophet and endangered his own life in order to rescue Jeremiah.

Ebed-melech was superior to his surroundings. He lived in the king's palace, where scenes of vice confronted him continually, but he overcame his environment. He had the courage of his convictions. He publicly protested the monstrous wrong which had been done to Jeremiah. A public protest against evil is never easy and frequently is hazardous. Our age needs men of heroic mold. He had a good way of doing kindness. He wanted to relieve and rescue the prophet of God at all costs.

We admire Ebed-melech because he achieved such marvelous results with poor instruments. He rescued a prophet, saved a precious life, perpetuated a noble ministry and laid the ages under infinite obligation to him. How did he accomplish this? He did so by means of ropes and rags.

III. A Simple Provision.

It is very interesting to observe the manner in which Jeremiah was delivered. Having sunk into the mud in the dungeon, Jeremiah could not climb out. There was nothing which he could do whereby he might deliver himself.

When Ebed-melech got permission from the king to rescue Jeremiah, 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. When they arrived at the opening of the dungeon, Ebed-melech addressed Jeremiah in a most kind and friendly manner. His coming must have brought great comfort and hope to the prophet. Can you imagine him looking up to the opening of the dungeon and discovering the face of the eunuch, who was God's messenger of deliverance for Jeremiah in that hour?

Notice his tender solicitude in instructing the prophet 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. He did not want to hurt the prophet in rescuing him. These worthless clothes were to be used for the purpose of lessening the pain of a man of God.

How grand that an ordinary man could be used of God in aiding one of His most faithful servants! It is a privilege to serve others, but to do things for God's called and commissioned servants brings the highest rewards of all. God not only uses humble persons in His service, but He also uses some very humble things. It would appear that, if He could and would use such trifling things as torn clothes and worn-out garments, He can use anything.

With the ropes and the rags they drew up Jeremiah from the mire of the dungeon. After they rescued the prophet, he remained in the court of the guard.

God's plan 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." Won't you receive Him now?