

Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehukal^b 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. They will escape with their lives; they will live.’³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be given into the hands of 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-Melek, a Cushite, an official^p in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate,⁸ Ebed-Melek 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-Melek the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.”*

¹¹ *So Ebed-Melek 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-Melek 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. (Jeremiah 38:1-13 NIV2011)*

Speak What the Lord Says

God had warned Jeremiah that this was how the people would react. The people would reject the message. They would try and frighten him. They would fight against him. And still, the Lord remains faithful forever. And so he sends his messenger, Jeremiah, to speak what the Lord says.

When we hear Jeremiah speaking in Jeremiah 38 the army from Babylon surrounds the city of Jerusalem. It’s only a matter of time before it inevitably will fall. However, there are still some with this lingering hope for escape. Somehow and in some way their great city that had stood all those years was going to get through this. And then there’s Jeremiah who says: **“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. They will escape with their lives; they will live.’³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be given into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’ ”**

Where the people want to hear there’s a chance, Jeremiah says there is none. There is no hope for anyone who stays in the city. You will die either by the sword of the attacking enemy, famine from attacking starvation, or plague from attacking disease. This is not a fight that you can win. The Lord has already wrapped Jerusalem up as a gift and set it into the hands of the king of

Babylon. He will capture Jerusalem. But those who go over to the Babylonians before that happens will live. It's that plain and simple. Stay in the city—die—go to the Babylonians—live.

Not exactly the most rousing speech before a great battle. We would say, there was still time left on the clock. Are you just going to give up? Until those walls are breached, there has to be a chance. Keep fighting until the end; we get that. But in this instance that's not what the Lord says.

That's not what the city officials want to hear. They have had enough of Jeremiah's nonsense: **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" (v.4).** Not only was he being unpatriotic; this is treason! He's saying they should betray their country. As far as they were concerned, Jeremiah didn't care about the people. The people need encouragement in these dark days, not words of warning. They need to know they have the support of other people around them. They need to hear it's going to be okay. "He's not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.' Jeremiah, you are the bad guy!"

You get it. Maybe not the death threats, but sharing God's Word often isn't met with raving reviews. That's especially true when the message is not one they want to hear. But, like with Jeremiah, we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus warned you too, "**The world will hate you because of me**" (Matthew 10:22). The message you have is just as scandalous as Jeremiah's to Jerusalem. This message says that life is found in no one else. It says to your pride, "You cannot save yourself." This message proclaims there is one and only one way to be saved. Salvation is found in no one else except Jesus. And so we to confront the sinner so that they may confess their sins, turn from them, and live. We warn of the great danger to those who continue in sin. It's not because their sin is worse than others but by continuing in sin they are rejecting the one who saves. We share the warning because God warns that those who claim to be without sin do not have the truth in them. Those who claim sin isn't a sin, they are calling God a liar and his word has no place in their lives (1 John 1:10). They are rejecting the very thing they need to live!

The problem is, similar to Jeremiah, you have a whole world around you saying otherwise. You hear people say, that can be your truth, but I have my own. If you love them, you will support them no matter what. Sometimes it might be a little hostile: he gets mad at you because you pointed out what they were doing is wrong. She won't talk to you because you told her you don't support what she is doing. Things just haven't been the same because you weren't going to ignore it any longer. Now they are talking behind your back and you can't defend yourself. Or there's just no reaction at all. You speak with them how many times. You try and encourage as much as you can. And it doesn't change a thing. They just don't seem to care.

The temptation is to say, "Fine, if you don't care, I don't care either." Tell yourself that someone else will take care of it. It's their responsibility. (At times, that's true. More often that's just the convenient excuse.) The temptation is to decide that they aren't going to listen anyway, so why waste my breath?

Jeremiah felt those temptations too. But the Lord still loves his people. And so Jeremiah goes and speaks what the Lord says.

God still loves his people. He still wants all to be saved. Even when we know that many will fight against it, even when we know the world will hate us because of Jesus, God has not turned his back on them. So he continues to send his message through you and me to bring life.

By no means would this have been easy for Jeremiah especially when the one guy who should defend him fails. Zedekiah says in v.5, **“He’s in your hands. The king can do nothing to oppose you.”** This wasn’t so much a case of not being able to do anything than Zedekiah just didn’t want to do anything. So the officials take Jeremiah and lower him into this empty, deep, dark well to die. They didn’t want to have any blood on their hands and this provides a convenient way to silence their consciences as well as Jeremiah.

As we watch Jeremiah sink into that mud we might look at Jeremiah’s situation and wonder: Is God asking too much from his people? We might see what Jeremiah has to endure and wonder why didn’t he just change his tone a little bit? Why did he have to keep on speaking out? He already did this preaching plenty of times before. We might look at that and wonder: is it really worth it? You shouldn’t have to suffer so much or too much to be a follower of Christ, should you?

But that’s the Christian’s cross. No need to be a martyr and make yourself miserable. The Christian cross says “no” to self and follows God’s will no matter the suffering. And it is hard. It’s hard saying “no” to self that doesn’t want to confront that brother in Christ for the sake of having a little peace right now. It says “no” to self that doesn’t want to pick up that phone and encourage someone for the sake of spending my time doing what I want. (Granted, there are times when we need to do our stuff as good managers of time. At the same time, we also need to be wary of how convenient that excuse is.) The Christian cross says “no” to self that wants to just say about sin: “That’s okay, don’t worry about it,” for the sake of not wanting to come off judgmental or too harsh. It says “no” to self that says God is asking too much from me. It’s hard to say “no” to self that says they don’t deserve more of your time or your energy. It’s hard to say “no” to self that knows what God calls us to do but wants that momentary release, relief and escape from reality. It’s not just in sharing God’s Word where we find this Christian cross. Saying “no” to self and following God’s will is part of every calling in which God has placed you: mom, dad, husband, wife, child, worker, etc.

If that were it, it would hardly seem worth it. But Jesus warns, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (**Mark 8:35**). If for the sake of convenience, comfort, ease, whatever it might be you choose to not pick up that cross, you lose the life he gives. Without the cross, that sinful flesh that is ours by nature condemns us. We are lost. We have no hope.

We are only able to pick up those crosses because of the prophet who would come almost 500 years after Jeremiah to carry his own. He too preaches a message that his people did not want to hear. When he explains his work—that he would suffer, be rejected, killed, and three days later rise again—a friend takes him aside and tells him, “You can’t let this happen.” How tempting that had to have been to not pick up the cross at all. Here’s a way out! But he would not let this deter him. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured His cross and scorned its shame. He was familiar with the pain that must come, he asked the Father to take this cup of suffering from him. Then, with Jesus, we see an example of what it means to deny self and follow God. He continues his prayer to His Father: “Not my will but your will be done.”

He sees us in the pit sinking in our sins, sentenced to not just suffering while on this earth but for eternity, and throws himself in to pull you out. He who was rejected by the same people he came to save was forsaken by His Father to endure the deepest pit of hell for us. He knows better than you do the times when you have dropped your cross in following him. He knows better than we

do how we have taken the shortcuts, how we have said “yes” to ourselves and denied following God’s will. He suffered for it all. But that’s why Jesus willingly carries his cross, allows his hands and feet to be pierced, his blood to pour out, the punishment be carried out on him so that we might have peace with God and forgiveness of sins. Such love we cannot deserve; but that’s grace. It’s yours. And we believe it because the Lord would not let his Holy One see decay as he is buried in the pit of the tomb. No, on the third day Jesus rose again and lives for you. He who died on the cross now has the crown as all power and authority are his and he lives and reigns eternally.

So it is for us. First the cross of suffering, then the crown. We pick up those cross not because we are trying to impress God or prove we should have his love. It is grace, Jesus’ love, and God’s promises that works in us to pick up the cross and follow him. As the Lord did not forget Jeremiah in the pit, he does not forget about you. Like Jeremiah, before he formed you in your mother’s womb he knew you. Before you were born, he set you apart as his own. As the water pours over your head in baptism you rose from the pit of sin with Jesus. From that moment you started carrying that cross. And it’s a good cross. It’s daily putting to death that Old sinful flesh that does not want to follow God’s will and is looking for ways to justify itself and its actions. So we kill it by denying self. That cross teaches me to look to the one who carried the cross for me to give me the strength to do it. It keeps me reliant on him. This suffering for Jesus’ name has meaning. The struggle has a purpose. It shows me how completely reliant I am on Jesus and need him. And when I drop that cross again, there’s your Savior who gives you his body and blood sacrificed on his cross for you. Your sins are forgiven. Go at peace this suffering and cross-bearing have an end date. Like with Jesus, after the cross comes the crown. It was won for you on Jesus’ cross, sealed to you at your baptism, and when we are called out of the pit of this world, it will be your reality in heaven. This is what the Lord says. Amen.