

# WHY DO I GET DUMPED ON FOR DOING THE RIGHT THING?

**SERIES: *WEEPING IN WORSHIP***



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Jeremiah 38:1-13  
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One of the reasons I like movies is because you can always find yourself in a movie. I want us to watch a clip this morning from a movie called *The Incredibles*. It's about a family of superheroes that discovers that their good deeds aren't always appreciated. Let's watch it.

[*The Incredibles* clip]

It turns out that after joining the superhero relocation program, Mr. Incredible finds himself validating insurance claims for a living. Can you find yourself in that clip? Have you ever felt this way? That you're trying to do the right thing? That you are in the right and yet everyone seems to think you're doing something wrong. Have you ever been misunderstood and felt like people just don't give you the benefit of the doubt or they don't quite trust you? If you haven't, then you need to tell me your secret. Haven't most of us felt that way at some point in our lives? Most of us have at one time or another asked the question that we'll be asking today, "Why Do I Get Dumped On For Doing the Right Thing?"

Today is our third message in this part of our series on Jeremiah. We started out this section by looking at the surprising idea that God sent His people into exile because they refused to honor the Sabbath. Last week we saw a little more detail into the process by which God communicated His message to His people. This week we're going to look at what happens to Jeremiah as the messenger of this controversial message. Next week we'll talk about everyone's favorite topic: judgment.

What I love about Jeremiah is that he is a prophet that we can relate to. We can find ourselves in the story that Jeremiah gives us. Because we get to see Jeremiah struggling. We see how hard it is for him to be faithful to God's calling on his life. What we're going to see this morning is a story of Jeremiah being faithful to God, but being knocked down because of it. It's a theme that happens several times throughout this book. Jeremiah does the right thing and he gets punished for it.

Our story for this morning comes from Jeremiah 38:1-13. Last week we saw God speaking to the king through Jeremiah. Last week the king tried to destroy the message that Jeremiah brought. This week we'll see something similar. But because the message couldn't be destroyed, we'll see an attempt to destroy the messenger.

I think we'll find that we can relate to Jeremiah because we'll see that the people Jeremiah thought would be on his side weren't. They tried to kill him. But we'll also see that there is someone on Jeremiah's side and it's not who we would expect it to be. So let's look at this passage to find out why we get dumped on for doing the right thing and whether there's any hope for us when we find ourselves in that situation.

## Expect Betrayal

We'll start out by reading the first half of this passage.

Jeremiah 38:1-6

**Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, "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. He will escape with his life; he will live.' And this is what the LORD says: 'This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.'" 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." "He is in your hands," King Zedekiah answered. "The king can do nothing to oppose you." 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.**

We start out with four guys who have been listening to Jeremiah's message. From what we know, it seems like these were powerful political people. They were part of the ruling authority in power in Jerusalem, but Jeremiah wasn't. The prophets in ancient Israel were never part of the ruling establishment. The priests had power—they ran the religious life of the nation. The king had power—he ran the political life of the nation. But the prophets didn't have power because they were on the outside. They had to be. Because if you have power, then your tendency is always going to be to try to protect your power, therefore, the prophets always spoke as outsiders.

This was important because the prophets often delivered a message that challenged those in power. And they could do that because they were outsiders. That's what Jeremiah is doing. He predicts that Babylon will destroy Jerusalem and that's bad news. But it's especially bad news if you are one of Jerusalem's insiders and are powerful. This is because you have more to lose than the average person. You have your position to lose, your authority, and your power. That's why these four people aren't pleased with Jeremiah. That's why they want to kill him because his message threatens their power.

People in power tend to act to preserve their power. We see this in our world everywhere; from CEO's and corporate executives to political leaders, parents, and priests. When people in power

are backed up against a wall and confronted with something that challenges their power, they will usually act to protect themselves rather than protecting the people they are meant to protect. And in our more honest moments, we recognize the same thing about ourselves. When we are challenged, our tendency is to get defensive and protect ourselves rather than dealing with challenging truth.

So these four guys are powerful, political people. Their jobs are to protect the people of Israel. Are they doing that? It's interesting that they charge Jeremiah with discouraging the people. They charge Jeremiah with not having the interests of the people in mind. But they're the ones who aren't interested in the people. They're the ones that are more interested in their own power than in the people they are supposed to care for.

So they go to the king and ask to have Jeremiah executed. Now if anyone in Israel was supposed to protect the people, it was the king. The king is a representative from God who has been placed in power to ensure that God's will is done for the people. So you'd expect the king of Israel, the steward of the real King, God Himself, to protect Jeremiah from these men intent on evil. He should stand up for Jeremiah and protect him. But ... he doesn't. The king says an amazing thing, "He is in your hands. The king can do nothing to oppose you." Really?!

There's a *Saturday Night Live* sketch during the news segment called "Really?" where they talk about ridiculous stories and just say, "Really? Is that really the best you can do?" And that's what this scene with the king makes me think of. Aren't you the king? Isn't it your job to oppose people with really, really bad ideas about what supposedly needs to be done? You are the representative of God Most High. You are His steward. Or at least, you're supposed to be, but you're not. In reality, the king is just a weak man who fails in the task that God gave him. So the one that is supposed to protect Jeremiah fails and turns him over to these four guys who are determined to kill him.

So Jeremiah is faithful to God in what we know is a difficult task. People in power get mad at him. The person with the most power fails to protect him. And then we realize that we have seen this same thing in our lives as well. We are all too familiar with the pattern of people who are supposed to be our protectors failing in their responsibility. Why do you think the world is so enraged at the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. It's because priests are supposed to protect people. Not abuse them. Not use them for their own self-gratification. Why are you hurt by the failures of your parents? It's because they were supposed to protect you and lead you into health. So it is doubly painful when our parents fail us, or our teachers, or mentors, or bosses, or friends, or spouses. Unfortunately, there are times when all these people sound just like this inept king, "He is in your hands."

So this is the first thing that we see in this passage. The people that are supposed to be on our side, often aren't. We can't expect that those whose responsibility it is to protect will fulfill their task. In fact, we can expect the opposite. Not all the time, but more often than we think. So along with Jeremiah we need to learn to expect betrayal.

When I was young my family attended a summer camp together

in upstate New York. I have this distinct memory of being at this summer camp in the kid's program. We were playing the kids game, *Who Stole the Cookie From the Cookie Jar?* If you've never played this game, it's a singing game where you have to guess who in the group has some item that is hidden. Well, it was my turn to guess and when the group asked me "Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?" I guessed a certain kid. And I was right on my first guess. This makes the game not so fun because it's over right away and you don't get to sing the little jingles. So the instructor of the group accused me of having my eyes open while they were deciding who had the "cookie." She punished me for cheating. But here's the thing ... I didn't cheat. I promise. But she wouldn't believe me. I got punished for cheating even though I was innocent.

This camp counselor, the one who was supposed to care for me, ended up being the one at whose hands I suffered unjustly. Just like Jeremiah, sitting in a muddy cistern, there I was sitting in time-out even though I had done nothing wrong.

Well, that's a pretty minor example, but the truth is that this type of thing is a major theme throughout the Bible. Jeremiah isn't the only one who had to experience unjust suffering. In fact, this story bears a lot of resemblance to several of David's psalms. Psalm 69 starts out this way, "*Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.*" David went through an extended period where he had been anointed as king of Israel, but the current king, Saul, was chasing him around trying to kill him. He knew about unjust suffering.

And he's not the only one. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Daniel was thrown into the lion's den. Nehemiah was attacked by the people around him for rebuilding God's city. And of course, Jesus the King of the universe incarnate, was executed on a Roman cross for what? Blasphemy? How can God blaspheme? And when his accusers brought Him before their authority, what did Pilate do? He washed his hands: telling them that Jesus was "in their hands." The authority could do nothing to stop him.

So we have all these stories of people like this. And yet, when we are misunderstood by our spouses, or get punished for being ethical at work, or are assumed to be ignorant extremists because we believe in Jesus, what is our response? We're shocked. How could this have happened to me? How could I be misunderstood? This isn't supposed to happen. Well, maybe it's not supposed to happen, but we do have warning that it will.

If we follow Jesus; if He is our example; then we should expect to be misunderstood. We should expect to suffer when we don't deserve it. We should expect those in charge to fail in their responsibility to protect us. We should expect the system to break down and to be caught in the middle of it. We need to stop being so surprised when things don't go our way. This is going to happen in the world. I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, but your experience in this world will be filled with getting dumped on even when you've done the right thing. People who are supposed to protect you will choose instead to protect themselves.

In the New Testament, Peter says something very similar. 1 Peter 4:12 says this, "*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*"

So next time you face a really difficult situation, don't be surprised. Expect to be betrayed. Expect people to protect themselves instead of protecting you. That doesn't mean you can't call them on it or be upset by it, but it shouldn't shock you.

So expect betrayal. But don't become cynical. Don't retreat into a place where you never trust anyone. That's one of the things I find remarkable about Jeremiah. He doesn't sugar coat things—he gets really upset when things get hard. But he keeps at it. He doesn't abandon himself to becoming cynical. He stays engaged with people, he stays engaged with God. Betrayal doesn't surprise him and it doesn't make him cynical.

### Expect Nameless Heroes

So we can expect betrayal, but what then? Is everything in this world going to be terrible? Let's read on to find out how Jeremiah's story ended up.

Jeremiah 38: 7-13

**But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, "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." Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Cushite, "Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies." So Ebed-Melech 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. Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, "Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes." Jeremiah did so, and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.**

So now we get introduced to this guy: Ebed-Melech. And this guy is a remarkable guy because he is so unremarkable. First, he is a foreigner serving in the king's court. He is a Cushite—from Ethiopia. So this guy isn't even a Jew, but more than that, he doesn't even have a name. The name given him here, Ebed-Melech, is simply the Hebrew term for 'servant of the king.' It's more of a title than a name. So the rest of our story involves a no-name foreign slave who ends up saving the day.

This is something else that is peculiar about the Bible. Not only are there many stories of betrayal, but there are a bunch of stories of people who don't have any reputation or any notoriety doing something remarkable in God's kingdom. Abraham was unknown when God called him. Esther was a peasant girl who became queen. David was the runt of his family before he became king. Jesus came from Nazareth. Can anything good come from Nazareth?

There's a song I like by a band called *The Basics* about life in

America. One of the lines is talking about a generic man from the suburbs and says, "He's a nameless little guy / though he says his name is Brandon." And that's our man Ebed-Melech. He's a nameless little foreigner.

And yet surprisingly, it is this nameless foreign servant who ends up doing what the king of Israel is supposed to have done in the first place. The way this story is told is great. It makes the king look like the weak pathetic coward that he is. You see, Ebed-Melech notices that Jeremiah is in a cistern. So he goes to the king to tell him about it. Ebed-Melech assumes this has to have happened apart from the knowledge of the king—how could the king have left a prophet to die. Ebed-Melech doesn't know that the king approved of this sentence, but the king plays along. He says, "What? They put him in a cistern? Well, that's terrible—go right away and get him out. What an outrage!" We as the reader get to see the whole action unfold. And with every word out of the king's mouth, what little respect we may have had for him has dwindled to nothing.

What's going on here is that this nameless foreign servant is showing up the king of Israel. He is doing what the king of Israel should be doing. And by the contrast of his actions, we are shown how truly negligent King Zedekiah is.

It's like this—imagine you're in tenth grade and you play the tuba and have been practicing a jazz tuba solo for weeks to play at your recital. After all this time, it sounds pretty good. So when the big day comes, you get up there and you belt out a decent version of this tuba solo. But right after you, a fifth grader comes up to play his tuba solo and he just happens to be playing the same song. He's barely big enough to hold his tuba, but he starts playing and he nails that tuba solo. It is incredible. Like little tuba angels flying out of a large brass hole. How do you feel? Terrible. You've been shown up.

That's how we are supposed to see Zedekiah here. He is the king of Israel. He is supposed to enforce God's will for God's people. And he tries, but he's tired and gives up. Then along comes this nameless foreign servant who is appalled at the way God's prophet is being treated. And Zedekiah is shown for the weakling that he is.

So what do we get out of this? Well, in the beginning of the passage, we saw that we should expect betrayal. And here's where I wish there was a word that meant the opposite of betrayal. Betrayal is when your friend turns on you and becomes your enemy. And that happens a lot, so we have a word for it. But what we see in this story is an enemy, a foreigner, turning and becoming a friend. And you know what? I don't think we even have a word for that because it doesn't happen.

But it's happened here. So our friends may try to kill us, but our enemies might just save us. Our friends may fail us, but our enemies may rescue us. We can expect salvation to come from surprising places. Expect nameless heroes.

Once again, we see that this is a major theme in the Bible. People are always surprised from where their salvation comes. Abraham was met by an unknown priest named Melchizedek who was a servant of YHWH. Daniel is saved from the lion's den by an angel. Paul and Silas are released from prison by an earthquake. Jesus dies,



but He is raised from the dead.

In the Bible, betrayal is never the end of the story. The gospel always talks of salvation and redemption. Psalm 40:2 says this, *“He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.”* So next time you find yourself in a slimy pit, first of all, don't be surprised. But second of all, look for God to save you in an unexpected way. Look for a nameless hero. Look for surprising salvation.

Our problem is that we can be so disappointed in the betrayal that we don't even notice the nameless hero. We can be so upset that our father failed us that we don't realize that God gave us a teacher who loved us like a father. We can be so upset that our friend abandoned us that we don't notice the acquaintance who would love to spend more time with us. We can be so disappointed by our boss' criticism that we don't hear our colleague's praise. Jeremiah shows us that when we're in that pit, we need to expect God to act in surprising ways.

Did you notice in this passage the detail and extreme care that Ebed-Melech showed to raise Jeremiah up from the pit? We hear about him going down to the storeroom basement, finding some old rags, telling Jeremiah to put them under his armpits, and carefully lifting him out of the pit. I mean, Jeremiah is dying in a pit of mud and Ebed-Melech wants to make sure he doesn't give him rope-burn in his armpits when he hauls him up! That's incredible.

This is what God's unexpected salvation is often like. It's bigger and better than what we could have imagined. And when we're able to recognize that salvation from an unexpected source, everything comes full circle. We start out with Jeremiah sinking into the mud crying out, “God you didn't have to do that!” But we end up with Jeremiah being carefully lifted out of the pit looking at the rags protecting his armpits, saying, “God, you didn't have to do that.”

Following Christ will demand more of you than you ever thought you could give. You will suffer unjustly. Being faithful will require that you endure things you never thought you'd be able to endure. But following Christ will also reward you with more than you ever thought you could receive. When God acts in your life, it will astonish you. You won't be able to believe His goodness. And when He acts at the end of history to complete His work of redemption, it will be bigger, better, and brighter than any of us even dreamed to imagine.

Following Christ is harder than you feared, but following Christ is also better than you hoped. Expect betrayal. Expect nameless heroes.

## Conclusion

So Jeremiah is the victim of a terrible plot to murder him and

do away with him, but he is saved. This scene repeats itself several times throughout this book. Jeremiah endures beatings, being put in the stocks, and several other murder attempts because that is what it looks like to be faithful to God.

Remember Mr. Incredible? Remember our little superhero that was misunderstood? Well, he suffered the same thing that Jeremiah suffered. He was misunderstood. He was banished. He was treated unjustly. But his story is about the world coming to realize that he actually is Mr. Incredible. In his story, the ones in charge realize their mistake and apologize profusely. His name is restored and once again he is a hero. This is what we want. We like this movie because we find ourselves in Mr. Incredible's ultimate vindication.

But Jeremiah is different. And finding ourselves in his story is different. His name is never restored. He's lifted out of the cistern, but he's still under house arrest in the court of the guardhouse. His message proves to be true and so he is vindicated. But the king never comes around. And if Jeremiah was waiting for salvation to come from where it's supposed to come from, then he'd still be waiting. He knows to expect an unexpected salvation and that's what he gets. His name doesn't get restored like Mr. Incredible's. Instead he is lifted out of a pit by a nameless Ethiopian servant who takes the time to put old clothes under his armpits. Isn't that far more beautiful and moving in the long run anyway?

Isn't God's salvation usually better than what we expected in the long run? Aren't we grateful for that? If the world worked the way we want it to work, things would be so boring and so predictable. But with God, we can expect the unexpected. We can expect to get dumped on for doing the right thing. We can also expect to be lifted up gently by nameless foreigners. Don't be surprised by suffering. Hope for salvation.