The Fear of Man and Trust in God
Jeremiah 38-39

We're finishing our look at Jeremiah. We could spend a lot longer on it, but we're going to finish with the fall of Jerusalem. And we're going to look at three men - a prophet (Jeremiah), a king and a eunuch caught up in that event, that national crisis that becomes for each of them a moral crisis. Because each of them has to decide whether or not they say and do the right thing. But as you know, sometimes doing the right thing can be hard because it can be costly.

Reading: Jer 37:21ff

We're going to look at three things: a cost to pay, a peril to avoid, and a courage to receive.

A Cost to Pay
Look at chapter 37:21, 'So Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.' The city of Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonians, and Jeremiah's imprisoned because of his preaching. And yet, imprisonment hasn't silenced him, has it. Somehow he's still getting his message out: 38:2-3, "Thus says the Lord: He who stays in this city shall surely die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, but he who goes out to the Chaldeans [the Babylonians] shall live… this city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon."

And it's because he won't stop speaking God's word, that he gets into even more trouble. The officials know what he's doing, they go to the king and say, v4, "Let this man be put to death."

Now, Imprisonment is one thing, but execution is another, isn't it? And if the situation inside the city under siege is getting more serious by the day, so is the risk Jeremiah's facing.

But look at the reason the officials give: v4 again, "He is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people." In other words, 'we're under siege, and this man is undermining the war effort.' And that was absolutely true. Jeremiah *was* urging surrender not resistance.

And yet, what was not true was what they say next: v4 again, "For this man is not seeking the welfare [the shalom] of this people, but their harm."

So, it's not just the content of his message they attack, it's his motive as well. And yet, it's precisely for the welfare of the people that he's saying what he's saying. And in reality it's the officials who are the ones destroying the people.

But now, Jeremiah's life sits in the hands of King Zedekiah - the one who has the power of life or death over Jeremiah. So what does the king do? He washes his hands of the whole thing: v5, "Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you." Just think about that. The king can do nothing against you. Yes you can Zedekiah! You can stand up for justice, you stand up for righteousness, you can stand up for Gods' word; you can do the right thing Zedekiah… even if it's the costly thing. But he doesn't.

So at this point of national crisis, Jeremiah shows moral courage to keep speaking God's word, and Zedekiah moral cowardice.

John Stuart Mill, the British philosopher said: "Bad men need nothing more to compass [to achieve] their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." And Zedekiah does nothing and so

the officials lower Jeremiah into a cistern - a well. And v6, ‘And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.’ And they intended this be a long, slow death for Jeremiah. Either he will slowly drown in the mud, or starve to death, in this dark and claustrophobic pit.

And just think who this is happening to. At the very beginning of his ministry, the Lord called Jeremiah and said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” (Jer 1:5). And then, “Whatever I command you, you shall speak.” (Jer 1:7-8). And Jeremiah has faithfully fulfilled his calling over decades. And yet, here he is, facing a gruesome death precisely because of that faithfulness. The one who in chapter 2 had praised God as ‘the fountain of living water’, now faces death in an empty cistern. Sometimes, doing the right thing can be hard, can’t it?

I mean, maybe you’re here and you’re not yet a Christian, but I bet you want to live a life of integrity, a life consistent with your beliefs, and to stand on the side of justice: to say and do the right things that genuinely work for the welfare of others. And if you are a Christian you’d add to those things a life of faithfulness to God’s word. So, in one way or another, we all want to be more like Jeremiah than Zedekiah. And yet, sometimes, that takes courage, doesn’t it? Sometimes, to live like that comes with a price tag attached.

It could mean saying no to a relationship that you want, but deep down you know is wrong. It could mean passing up a business deal that would enrich you financially but you secretly know is dodgy. It could mean holding a position on something that’s unpopular, and it’s not just your views that get attacked but your motives - that you’re judgmental.

In other words, Jeremiah tells us that doing the right thing can be costly. But Zedekiah tells us it’s not a given that we’ll be willing to pay that price. And this crisis gives us a reason why.

A Peril to Avoid

Ebed-melech is an Ethiopian eunuch serving in the royal court. And when he hears what the officials have done to Jeremiah he goes to the king and says, v9, “My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet.” So a foreigner, a racial outsider, gets more about good and evil than Judah’s king. And yet, the fact that Zedekiah allows Ebed-melech to go rescue Jeremiah tells us he also knew it was wrong. He just wasn’t willing to stop it.

Why? Well, look again at what he says to the officials in v5, “the king can do nothing against you.” In other words, Zedekiah is not willing to stand up against his officials because he’s not willing to risk their displeasure. He’s not willing to set himself against them and have them against him.

And then look how he responds to God’s offer that, even at this late hour, he can save himself, his family and the city from destruction, if he surrenders to the Babylonians: v19, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans.”

And then look at how he ends his final conversation with Jeremiah before the city falls: v24, “Let no one know of these words.” His future, the future of his family, the future of the city, hangs on his yes or no. He is faced with a stark alternative: obey God’s word and there is hope for you; ignore it and destruction is certain. And his response is… ‘Let’s just keep this little chat between you and me - don’t let’s tell anyone else we’ve spoken.’

So what's Zedekiah's root issue? Why won't he do what he knows is right? Why won't he take up God's offer of rescue? Because he's afraid of what other people will think, or say or do to him. And he's controlled by that.

Listen to what the book of Proverbs says: Proverbs 29:25, 'The fear of man lays a snare.' You see, when you're controlled by what other people might think of you, it traps you, it ensnares you. It stops you being free to do and say the right thing because it might just cost you their good opinion.

And yet, it's not just Zedekiah who has to confront that fear here, is it? Jeremiah does too. Look at his response to Zedekiah's request to talk: v15, "If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me." So, Jeremiah's weighing up the risk of what Zedekiah could do to him. But he's also wrestling with the thought of being ignored - again. And what's the fear of being ignored, or sidelined, or passed over, if it's not another manifestation of being too concerned with what others think of you?

And yet, the difference between Jeremiah and Zedekiah is that Jeremiah faced that fear and chose to do and say the right.

But someone else is also wrestling with this fear of man, and it's Ebed-melech. Look at 39:17, as the Lord says to him, "You shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid." Now, is that the Babylonians surrounding the city, or the king's officials who had thrown Jeremiah into the pit - which would explain why he takes 30 men to rescue him, or both? We don't know. But whichever it was, like Jeremiah, in the face of his fears, Ebed-melech chose to do what was right.

In his little commentary on Jeremiah, Derek Kidner talks about Ebed-melech's appeal to the king for Jeremiah in v9, "He will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." In other words, we need to rescue him or he'll starve to death. But he gives as his reason the fact that there's no bread left in the city. And Kidner points out the lack of logic in that argument: because if there's no bread left in the city he's going to starve outside the cistern just as much as in it! But, says Kidner, 'love spoke louder than logic.' But for Ebed-melech, love also spoke louder than fear.

In Luke 6:26, Jesus said, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." Now, if we were to take a poll, I suspect that deep down most of us would rather like everyone to speak well of us. I mean, if everyone thought I was a pretty great guy I'd be pretty happy, 'cos then I could hold my head up, and I'd think I'd made it in some way. But Jesus says, 'woe to you if that's what you want. I feel profoundly sorry for you, he says, if that's the case.

You see, if the most important thing for you is what others - your parents, your friends, your colleagues, your social circle - think of you, then things aren't going to turn out well for you. If the thing that grounds you, if the thing that makes you smile on the inside is the applause of others, then, like Zedekiah, you're never going to be able to do that thing that costs you their good opinion - even if it's the right thing. Have that as your guiding principle and, as Jeremiah says to Zedekiah, in v22, it'll be "your feet [that] are sunk in the mud."

Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases what Jesus is saying here: 'there's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests… your task is to be true, not popular.'

So how can you risk being spoken badly of, or being mistreated, or even the humiliation of being ignored like Jeremiah? How can you be willing to speak the truth, or do what's right, even if it costs you? How can you risk yourself for others, like Ebed-melech? Where can you find a love like his, a love stronger than fear, or, as the song of Solomon puts it, 'a love as strong as death'?

A Courage to be Received

Look at 39:1-2: 'In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it. In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city.'

So the siege lasted 18 months, and by the end the situation in the city was desperate and the people starving. And as the Babylonians broke through the wall, King Zedekiah, the man who had refused to save his people now abandons them and tries to save himself by running away into the night.

But nothing Zedekiah feared from his officials, or the people, compared to what actually happened to him. And following his capture, the last thing he saw was his sons being executed in front of him, before his eyes were put out and he was led away in chains. And Zedekiah becomes a sobering example of what Jesus said, that if you try to save your life, you'll lose it. He had tried to play it safe and not offend anyone. But as Derek Kidner says, 'Safety is a fatal goal to live for.'

And yet, things work out very differently for Jeremiah and Ebed-melech, don't they? These two guys who were prepared to risk themselves and do what was right, and take a stand for truth. Because they survive both the siege and the aftermath.

And look what the Lord says to Ebed-melech before the city falls: 39:15-18, 'The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard: "Go, and say to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, 'Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will fulfil my words against this city for harm and not for good… but I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord… I will surely save you… because you have put your trust in me."

So, the foreigner, the outsider, is saved, while the king of Judah is lost. And the reason? Because Ebed-melech the Ethiopian did what the king and his officials refused to do - he trusted God.

He trusted God that his word was true, and more to be trusted than the word of those with power. Because he trusted God was just, and more to be trusted than those who governed unjustly. Because he trusted God was good, and loving and kind, and more to be trusted than those who throw people into pits. So, look again at Proverbs 29:25: 'The fear of man lays a snare, *but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe*.' Zedekiah feared men and was led away captive. Ebed-melech trusted God, and was saved.

You see, it's not your status, it's not your background, it's not your ethnicity, it's not your social or political capital that determines whether you'll have the courage to do what's right - it's who you're going to trust. And it's trust in God that gave Ebed-melech a love stronger than fear. It's trust in God that gave Jeremiah a faithfulness to the end.

But listen, you and I have more reasons even than Ebed-melech and Jeremiah to trust God. You see, if here, Jeremiah was falsely accused, so was Christ. And if, here, those with political power turned

on Jeremiah, so they turned on Jesus. And Zedekiah says to the officials, 'I can do nothing against you' and hands Jeremiah over to them, so Jesus, the Son of God, stood before Pilate, and Pilate washes his hands of him and hands him over to be crucified. And Jeremiah is lowered into a pit for a long, slow death, and Christ was raised on a cross, the most agonising of deaths.

But Jeremiah was saved by Ebed-melech, but no one came to save Christ. Jeremiah lived. But Jesus died. Zedekiah, King of Judah ran away to save himself. Jesus stayed, and gave his life, to save us. Listen to how John puts it: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him [whoever trusts in him] should not perish but have eternal life.' (John 3:16)

I don't know if you saw in the press last week, but there was a great story about a young man called Tyler Moon, who entered the Minneapolis Medtronics 10k race. And he's a Christian, and instead of his name he chose the words, 'Jesus Saves' for his race tabard. - because he wanted to make a statement. Except, at the 8k stage, he went into a ventricular tachycardia, collapsed to the ground and suffered a cardiac arrest. But amazingly, running just behind him was an anaesthetic nurse, who saw him collapse and immediately started giving him cardiac massage until the medics arrived. And guess what the nurse's name was? Jesus Bueno! So, Tyler really was saved by Jesus!

It's a great story. But listen, Jesus really does save us. At the cross, he saves us from our sin, if we'll only put our trust in him. But he also saves us from this fear of man.

You see, when you look at the cross and see Christ dying for you, and when you look at him risen and reigning in heaven over you, you know you're loved by God with a love stronger than death. A love that frees you from fear of what others think of you, because you know what God thinks of you. A love that gives you courage.

And that means that if you trust him, he saves you from you trying to protect your life in ways that slowly kill you. He saves you so you can know you can risk: your life, or your reputation, for truth, for justice, for God, for his word, and for others, even when it costs you.

It's a trust that sustained Jeremiah through years of ministry in years of turmoil, and it can sustain you too.

Listen to how Paul puts it in Romans 8: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?… Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?…No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

You are loved by God with a love stronger than death. Trust him and it will calm your fears and give you the courage you need in your moment of crisis.