

# Servant Of God, Act One: Going Around, Coming Around

by Charles Whitaker

*Forerunner, May 1999*

Matthew 16:25 states a profound paradox: "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." An incident in the life of a virtually unknown character in history illustrates the outworking of this paradox. The actors in our drama include three "stars":

*Jeremiah, the prophet to Judah.* God chose him to serve Him in a momentous period of His peoples' history. Among other things, God charged Jeremiah with nothing less than destroying and throwing down the Davidic monarchy from its seed grounds in Palestine, and replanting it in the West (see Jeremiah 1:10).

*Nebuchadnezzar, the great king.* His throne was over the Babylonian Empire when she was sole superpower over the Middle East. In his day the sun was rising over Babylon, while farther west, Rome was still sleepy-eyed and London slumbered.

*Zedekiah, a scion of Judah through David.* His was "the throne of the Lord" (I Chronicles 29:23; Acts 2:30-31). But, as a rebellious vassal king of Judah under Nebuchadnezzar, he became the last monarch of the *independent* line of Pharez.

This is a cast of both famous and infamous, all players in the story of the fall of Judah to the Babylonian Empire. They take center stage in an axial time, when nations not a few perish, only to be transmuted, reincarnated, elsewhere—usually westward—on the face of the planet.

## *The King and Jeremiah*

We join the action in the midst of the proceedings.

Zedekiah, having a notion that Jeremiah speaks for God and curious to know how the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem will turn out, has an audience with the prophet. Like a fly on the wall, we get to hear this fascinating interview. We start with Jeremiah's reply to a question from the king:

Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; "If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then your soul shall live; this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live." (Jeremiah 38:17)

Jeremiah does not say that God will preserve Judah in Palestine. He just submits that suing for peace—surrendering to the Babylonians—will preserve the king's life and the lives of his family (his "house"), while ensuring that Jerusalem will not burn.

At this juncture, God has not made an irrevocable decision concerning the evil He will soon create for His people (Isaiah 45:7); He has not condemned Zedekiah to death, the house of Pharez to extinction, or Jerusalem to flame. Zedekiah, by making the right decisions, can salvage the situation in part. Given the historical moment—the burden on the king—his answer to Jeremiah appears almost surreal: "I am afraid of the Jews who have defected to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they abuse me" (verse 19).

History would have been different if only he had obeyed God. To Zedekiah, a prophet of God is nothing more than a crystal ball with legs, valuable as a source of knowledge of things future. Jeremiah shares the fate of Cassandra, a woman of Greek myth who, though blessed with great prophetic power, is cursed to be always disbelieved.

Zedekiah's "I am afraid" reveals a pathetic character indeed. He fails to understand his obligation to heed the pronouncements of the prophet God has so graciously provided. He lacks the resolve to obey God, his fear for his safety overruling his sense of responsibility to his subjects and to his capital.

In verses 20 and 22, Jeremiah reiterates his position as God's prophet, at the same time reassuring the king, imploring him to obey.

They shall not deliver you. Please, obey the voice of the LORD which I speak to you. So it shall be well to you, and your soul shall live. . . . Your close friends have set upon you and prevailed against you; your feet have sunk in the mire. . . .

Jeremiah urges the king to obey God, turning away from his "friends," Judah's princes of whom, as we will see, he has so much fear. Zedekiah's feet are immersed in mud, or a bog, as in quicksand. He cannot move.

Jeremiah raises the stakes. If the king does not surrender to the Babylonians, he continues, his "friends"

. . . shall surrender all your wives and children to the Chaldeans. You shall not escape from their hand, but shall be taken by the hand of the king of Babylon. And you shall cause this city to be burned with fire. (verse 23)

The burdensome weight of office must have shaken the weakling king, maybe even overwhelmed him. He abruptly and unceremoniously ends the interview. Apparently, afraid lest his princes learn of the momentous burden on his shoulder, he promises Jeremiah royal protection as long as he remains silent. The prophet departs unheeded, and waits.

What a burden is Zedekiah's: "You shall cause this city to be burned with fire." The fate of Jerusalem rests on the king's decision, on a person whose feet are "sunk in the mire." The times demand a courageous leader resolved to obey God, able to make and implement decisions, yet the king appears almost catatonic—paralyzed with fear, as one in a nightmare, trying desperately to flee disaster but unable to move. His only action, it appears, is to retire into the relative—and temporary—safety of his palace. There, like Jeremiah, he waits.

### ***The Princes and Jeremiah***

Had that species of worms, the grandees of Judah, the princes that Zedekiah fears to cross, had their way, Jeremiah would have been dead long before his audience with the king. One man's forthright and courageous intervention saves the prophet's life. That man is Ebed-Melech, servant to king Zedekiah, who shares the stage, albeit briefly, with the conquerors and kings of his age. Ebed-Melech stands in stark contrast to his weak and fearful master.

Before continuing, however, we need to backtrack a bit to fill in the story:

Now Jeremiah was coming and going among the people, for they had not yet put him in prison. Then Pharaoh's army came up from Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard news of them, they departed from Jerusalem. (Jeremiah 37:4-5)

Jerusalem enjoys a brief respite from siege while the Babylonians engage an Egyptian army hired by Judah. Jeremiah may have sought to use this occasion to escape, for verse 12 tells us that he "went out of Jerusalem to go into the land of Benjamin to claim his property there among the people." He could hide in anonymity among the general populace.

God, however, acts to keep him in Jerusalem, the center of the action. The authorities arrest him as he leaves the city, accusing him of "defecting to the Chaldeans" (verse 13). Since the Babylonians have *already* left the area, the accusation of defection is clearly a ruse, an excuse to imprison him (verse 15). After "many days" in a dungeon (verse 16), Zedekiah, solicitous of one empowered to tell the future, orders him transferred to the "court of the prison" (verse 21)—a real upgrade.

Judah's hawkish princes, isolated from God by their unbelief, find Jeremiah's message repulsive. God records that message, as it pertains to Jerusalem, in Jeremiah 37:7-8, 17 and 38:2. Succinctly: Jeremiah says the Babylonians will reinstitute their siege, and Jerusalem will fall, with attendant loss of life and destruction. It is a "gloom and doom" message, and at the same time, a *surrender-and-live* message.

Seeing in the prophet's confinement an opportunity to silence him for good, the princes request permission from the king to execute him. Jeremiah 38:4 tells us the reason they offer Zedekiah:

[F]or thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm.

Zedekiah's response displays his typical weakness before his princes: "Look, he is in your hand. For the king can do nothing against you" (verse 5). Zedekiah's fear has immobilized him; figuratively, his feet are mired in a bog. The princes waste no time hurling Jeremiah into a *literal* bog, a miry pit, with the intent that he will die of exposure and hunger there.

### ***The Eunuch and Jeremiah***

Enter "Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs, who was in the king's house" (verse 7). He approaches his master about Jeremiah's plight: "My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon, and he is likely to die from hunger" (verse 9).

In another vacillating response, Zedekiah reverses himself and orders Ebed-Melech, "Take from here thirty men with you, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he dies" (verse 10).

It is not likely that Ebed-Melech sways the king by humanitarian or moral considerations. He simply stresses to the king his belief that Jeremiah is a prophet about to die. Zedekiah probably acts to return Jeremiah to the relatively posh digs of the royal guards because he too realizes that Jeremiah is a prophet. He does not want to lose his crystal ball. Evidently, the king holds an audience with Jeremiah just after his release from the pit (verse 14).

The commentators assert that it is probably just after this incident that God encourages Jeremiah's benefactor through a firm promise:

"I will deliver you in that day," says the LORD, "and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword; but your life shall be as a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me," says the LORD. (Jeremiah 39:17-18)

God recognizes that Ebed-Melech is no superman, but like everyone, is fearful in the face of mortality. He overcomes his fear, subordinating it to his conviction that Jeremiah is God's spokesman. It is his trust in God that empowers him to show mercy by speaking up for—and then by acting on behalf of—Jeremiah.

God, who "shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11), answers in kind, characteristically granting mercy to the merciful, more specifically in this instance, granting mercy to him who "receives a prophet in the name of a prophet" (Matthew 10:41). Christ makes it plain that God is resolute in His promise of reciprocity:

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward. (verses 41-42)

Using a different image, Solomon says the same: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

God is adamant: What goes around, comes around.

### ***Ending and Beginning***

The end that comes around for Zedekiah is not gentle. Jeremiah 52:4-11 records the tragedy. Just as Jeremiah predicted, the Babylonians renew their siege. Eighteen months later, in July, the city burns. Capturing the ever-fearful Zedekiah as he flees, the Babylonians bring him to Nebuchadnezzar's operational headquarters at Riblah. There he sees his sons die before his conquerors blind him, bind him, and transport him to Babylon, where he remains until his death.

He had the opportunity to avoid that end. But Zedekiah, though born into privilege and of family, possessing by those tokens the potential for power, remains paralyzed by an egocentrism that comes to circumscribe his whole character. As a result, he loses all but his daughters, and even those he never sees again. Because he is too fearful to obey God, he misses the opportunity God offers him for his safety, as well as the safety of his family and of his capital. And so he exits our drama.

### **A Christian Type**

In how many ways is "Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs" typical of true Christians today?

» ***Ebed-Melech is a nameless nobody!*** His mother did not call him Ebed for short, because Ebed-Melech, meaning "the servant of the king," can hardly be his real name. Someone else renamed him, later on, to reflect his position in society—which is not very high. His name appears to be only a title.

» ***As a eunuch, Ebed-Melech lacks hope in this world.*** He cannot even hope to make a better life for his descendants, because he, of course, cannot reproduce.

» ***As an Ethiopian, Ebed-Melech is a stranger.*** He is a foreigner, separated from natural Israel by birth. In fact, the Mosaic law forbids one such as he from entering "the congregation of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1). Ethnically and socially, Ebed-Melech is on the outside looking in.

No, in terms of power and alternative, Ebed-Melech has little going for him. A fine example of the weak of the world (I Corinthians 1:26-27), he becomes a fit representative of the people of God, whose "citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). The great irony lies in the fact that he is more a man than his master the king, who, by his birth and position, represents those having a vested interest in "this present evil world" (Galatians 1:4). Is it not Zedekiah who in fear flees responsibility first, and in the natural course of things, his enemies later?

Years before Zedekiah's acts of cowardice, God called Ebed-Melech, perhaps in Africa, to do a work for Him. Unlike Zedekiah, who immobilizes himself by fear, Ebed-Melech overcomes his fear, sets aside his humiliation, discounts his disenfranchisement—all to the effect that he boldly approaches the king, reproaches his princes, and risks his life in an act of mercy on behalf of God's prophet. He receives a prophet's reward.

We have only begun to plumb the depths of the Ebed-Melech story. For, below its surface is an allegory of the grace God has granted to the Gentiles in these New Testament times. We will take that up in Act II.