

Servant Of God, Act II: God's Gift Of Faith

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The story of Ebed-Melech, Zedekiah and Jeremiah, recorded in Jeremiah 37-39, is more than a historical narrative of events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. As we saw in Act 1, it presents an example of the reciprocal nature of mercy. What goes around, comes around.

But there is still more to the story. Ebed-Melech and Zedekiah did not know it, of course, but their lives serve as examples to us "upon whom the ends of the world are come" (I Corinthians 10:11, KJV). Theirs is a story deep with New Testament meaning. Beneath its surface is an allegory of God's granting the hope of spiritual salvation to the Gentiles. To grasp this allegory, first notice some important similarities and contrasts:

1. Zedekiah is an Israelite, and more, a descendent of David. Ebed-Melech is a Gentile servant, politically disenfranchised, excluded by reason of his emasculation from "the congregation of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1).
2. To *both* men, God promises deliverance—physical salvation in the allegory. As the story proceeds, the two men's ethnic and social differences, as obvious as they are, become irrelevant.
 - A. To Zedekiah, God promises, "If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then your soul shall live" (Jeremiah 38:17). This is an example of a *conditional* promise. The king's lack of trust in God shows itself when he refuses to set aside his fear of his own princes (verse 19) and in his rejection of God's commands to surrender himself to Babylon.
 - B. To Ebed-Melech, God promises, "I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword, . . . because you have put your trust in Me" (Jeremiah 39:18). This is a promise after-the-fact, not conditioned on future behavior. As such, it is of the same ilk as God's "unconditional" promise to Abraham (e.g., Genesis 22), *after* his obedience.
3. The two men exhibit vastly different levels of belief in God. Ebed-Melech, fearing men (Jeremiah 39:17) less than God, *acts* on his trust by approaching the king about Jeremiah's plight in the dungeon. Conversely, Zedekiah, fearing men more than God, refuses to believe God's promise to him. It is in Ebed-Melech's and Zedekiah's *disparate* levels of faith toward God that the allegory of the Gentiles' New Testament access to the grace of salvation begins to take its shape. The allegory, however, goes well beyond that.
4. The two men's destinies take opposite turns, based upon each one's active faith. Ebed-Melech trusts, acts, lives. On the other hand, Zedekiah, inert when he should have taken believing action, dies, never receiving God's conditionally promised salvation. It is living faith alone—its presence or absence—that determines whether each person enjoys deliverance. As determinants of salvation, social rank and family are immaterial.

Faith and the Children of Abraham

The interface of these two men, wherein the Gentile/Israelite dichotomy forms such an obvious backdrop, pictures the extension of God's mercy to the Gentiles. Two of the many elements of His mercy are germane. First, through His mercy, God gives the Gentiles the ability to become Abraham's children. Second, He makes them to become recipients of the promises He made to Abraham.

Who are Abraham's Children?

Paul cryptically answers this question with his well-known oxymoron, "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). In his writings, Paul makes clear what God wants the term "children of Abraham" to convey to His people: "And if you are Christ's, *then* you are Abraham's seed" (Galatians 3:29). The apostle directs our understanding of Abraham's offspring away from the usual biological definition and toward one pivoting around a relationship with Christ. A few verses earlier, he shows that *faith* is the crucial substance (see Hebrews 11:1) of that relationship: "Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7).

Operatively, then, "the faith of Christ" (Galatians 2:16, KJV), not a faith we inflame within ourselves, is the source—we could even say, the functional cause—of our spiritual kinship with Abraham. *Through our exercise of Christ's faith in us, we become Abraham's children.* Regardless of lineage, we are not his *spiritual* children by birth. For the purposes of spiritual salvation, reconciliation with God by the faith of Jesus Christ renders irrelevant the genetic, national, social and gender differences among *Homo sapiens* (see Galatians 3:26-29).

Thus, the apostle stresses the importance of *faith* over genealogy. Israel, from God's viewpoint, is first and foremost a *spiritual* entity, a nation and people (I Peter 2:9) of faith, and only secondarily—subordinately—a physical or natural entity. What Ebed-Melech's example shows is that trust in God is what matters for salvation, not lineage or privilege.

In Romans 10:17, Paul tells us something vitally important about faith: "Faith comes by hearing." Faith does not "come" through natural genetic processes. Faith truly has a vital link with blood—the blood of Christ, "whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith" (Romans 3:25). But an individual does not inherit faith through a *natural* bloodline; God did not see fit to encode faith in human DNA, so that it could be passed to offspring.

Christ's disciples, in asking Him to "increase our faith" (Luke 17:5), exhibit their understanding that God, not genetics, is the ultimate source of faith. Because "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34; see Romans 2:11), He has no proclivity to limit His giving and increasing of faith to a particular racial stock. For that reason, faith as a characteristic does not "belong" to a particular race as, say, a set of facial features is peculiar to a given race.

In His time, then, God made faith available to the Gentiles and with it, spiritual salvation, which has its taproot in faith:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, . . . [so] that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

Peter says as much to the church gathered in Jerusalem. In Acts 11:17-18, he connects "the gift" given to the Gentiles with belief—faith—in Christ:

"If therefore God gave them [Gentiles] the same gift as He gave us when we *believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could withstand God?" When they heard these things they became silent: and they glorified God, saying, "Then has God also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

God's Israel crosses natural racial or ethnic distinctions; the faithful of *any* race make up the Israel of God. These are the faithful who receive "the blessing of Abraham" (Galatians 3:14).

Faith and the Promises to Abraham

That blessing of kinship with Abraham brings us to the second element of God's mercy toward humanity.

Who Receives the Promises?

In Galatians 3:29, Paul lists *two* results of being "Christ's." First, we become "Abraham's seed," as explained above. Second, we become "heirs according to the promise." In Romans 4:13, Paul makes plain that this second consequence of being Christ's also pivots around faith: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of *faith*."

Once more, advantage of birth, as real as it may be to the people of the world, is irrelevant to God for the purposes of salvation. Anyone with the faith *of* Jesus Christ becomes an heir to the blessing of the promise. "But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Galatians 3:22). The promise, given to Abraham and repeated in various forms to Isaac and Jacob, is in fact *one* promise, but has a multitude of ramifications. The various statements of this promise appear in a collage of passages (Genesis 12:2-3; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:4-9; 22:16-18; 26:4-5; 28:13-14).

In the Ebed-Melech/Zedekiah story, God's promise of physical safety typifies the spiritual promise that God made to Abraham. Both men wanted safety very much. But wanting is not possessing. For, as the story tells, only *one* man receives the blessing of the promise—Ebed-Melech, who acts out his trust in God (see Romans 4).

Faith and God's Prerogatives

That only Ebed-Melech shows active faith begs a complex of hard questions, all of which pertain to the issue of God's calling—specifically, to His prerogative to be selective in granting grace. If both men are motivated to survive, why do they not both have faith? Is it not within both men's power to generate faith? Why does one have faith and not the other? *More broadly, cannot everyone who wants deliverance, physical or spiritual, muster a faith in God?*

Paul addresses this issue, among others, in Romans 9-11. Chapter 9 begins with his affirmation of the benefits enjoyed by natural Israel. To those people of old "pertain the adoption, the glory, the

covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises" (Romans 9:4). God chose Abraham, and his family after him, to receive promises, while reserving the prerogative to deny grace to others. This means, then, that individuals, at their will, cannot marshal faith toward God!

As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. . . . Therefore has He mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. (Romans 9:13-16, 18)

Citing the Old Testament, Paul says that God, "will call them My people, who were not My people; and her beloved, who was not beloved" (Romans 9:25; see Hosea 2:23). When God offers salvation to individual Gentiles, He reserves to Himself the prerogative to do so selectively, as it pleases Him. About that, Luke is clear in Acts 13:48. As a result of Paul's preaching to the Gentiles in Antioch, "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." *God selectively imparts the ability to believe.*

Paul also declares that the dichotomy between those receiving God's grace and those not is truly the definitive dichotomy between the "election," that is, "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16), and natural Israel:

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were hardened. . . . "Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back always." (Romans 11:7, 10)

So, the Ebed-Melech/Zedekiah allegory touches God's authority to "elect" those who are to receive His grace. Zedekiah the Israelite—as king, he represented all the people of natural (through not national) Israel—had darkened eyes. We can easily imagine how fervently this fearful, vacillating, effete individual desired God's promised deliverance! *But it is not within his grasp.* God had not "increased" his faith. He cannot believe. Against his state of *apparent* hopelessness and helplessness is the trust of the Gentile Ebed-Melech, representing the weak of the world by virtue of his social station and his impotence.

King Zedekiah perishes because God wills to harden him; his servant Ebed-Melech lives because God grants him mercy.

God Before Bar and Bench

"Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22). Is God fair in the way He allocates His goodness and His severity? Indeed, human nature, unable to grasp God's purposes, challenges the morality—if you will, the "political correctness"—of God's actions! "Why did You allow Ebed-Melech to be taken from his home in Ethiopia and sold into slavery?" "Why did You permit Ebed-Melech to be barbarously mutilated?" "Why did You so obviously favor a working-class person, neglecting the needs of a nation's legitimate leader, thereby causing the deliverance of so few and the suffering of so many?" "Why did You blame the razing of Jerusalem on a king You refused to empower to believe You?" "Why didn't You make Ebed-Melech a woman, to gender-balance the story?" Why? Why?

Our civilization's pundits—whether abolitionist, humanist, rightist, elitist, feminist, moralist, or whatever—would summon God before the bench to answer *their* questions. Their indictment of God would fill volumes. Dangerous business, that, for Paul carefully warns us that we dare not "find fault" with God (Romans 9:19). To accuse Him of being unfair or capricious in His dealings with mankind is to forget that He is not bound by the sensitivities of *our* times, not fettered by the Western world's humanistic self-absorption with human rights, equality, democracy.

God will not limit His field of options—in effect placing Himself in a straitjacket—to avoid offending a humanity that lacks His Spirit and is therefore wholly incapable of sharing His perspective. *He is reproducing Himself!* He will not constrain His activities in bringing that sublime purpose about by the "isms" of these times, or for that matter, of *any* historical milieu.

The natural mind would impeach God. As for His people, they take comfort in the sure knowledge that Zedekiah *and* Ebed-Melech will both have their opportunity to receive God's grace for *spiritual* salvation in the Great White Throne Period. Peter is reassuring in this. Both men will have a chance to inherit the *promise* of Abraham, as his children: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). These two men may well come to understand, in the resurrection, that God's dealing with them in this life was not only for their good but for the good of whole nations around them.

Concerning the future of the patrician Israelite, Zedekiah, who did not receive God's grace in his lifetime, Paul is clear:

And they [natural Israel] also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you [Gentiles] were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree, how much more will these, who are the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel will be saved. . . . (Romans 11:23-25)

God will yet provide plenty of power to believe to the movers and shakers (be they Israelite or Gentile) of this present world. Although none sees it plainly now, God's "goodness" underlies His decision to have mercy on one and harden another.

And what of the plebian Ebed-Melech? God addresses the potential of those disenfranchised from power and alternative in "this present evil world" (see Galatians 1:4) in Isaiah 56:3-7:

Do not let the son of the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, even to them I will give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast

My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer.

It is not all that surprising, then, that Paul can conclude his treatise on God's selective granting of grace with a wonderful paean. Far from his spirit is a bitter cry for justice or for equity or for self-determination, or for whatever cause deceived individuals may happen to espouse at any given time in history. Paul's words soar over history, above the inconsequential sensitivities of any *zeitgeist*:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? . . . For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-34, 36)

Some early Irish traditions have it that Ebed-Melech journeyed to Ireland with Jeremiah. There is no scriptural proof of his doing so, but consider these points. Ebed-Melech assuredly did not perish in the holocaust of Jerusalem's fall, for God promised that he would not "fall by the sword" (Jeremiah 39:18). The promise of verse 17, that he would "not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid," may mean that he would not be led captive to Babylon. We can deduce, then, that Ebed-Melech was one of "the people who were left in the land" (Jeremiah 40:6) by the Babylonians. He may well have been of the remnant of "men, women, children, and of the poorest of the land who had not been carried away captive to Babylon" (verse 7). Jeremiah 41:16 tells us that eunuchs were included in this crowd. Jeremiah 43:6 says that Jeremiah, Baruch, and Zedekiah's daughters were also in it.

Consider as well that Jeremiah did not himself carry Jacob's Pillar to Ireland on his back, a stone weighing hundreds of pounds! And surely Zedekiah's daughters did not shoulder it! Also, tradition has it that Jeremiah brought David's harp with him. (A harp appears on some Irish coats of arms, both of Eire and of the Irish Free State.) A less reliable tradition claims that Jeremiah also transported the Ark of the Covenant. Finally, how much baggage would the travelers need to support the long land and sea sojourn from Palestine to the British Isles.

Jeremiah needed help. Maybe God used Ebed-Melech to provide it. It is possible that Ebed-Melech served Zedekiah's daughters, even in Ireland. At least part of the reward God gave the prophet Jeremiah for his service was freedom from the rigors of Babylonian captivity. By receiving Jeremiah as God's prophet, Ebed-Melech may have received that part of "a prophet's reward" (Matthew 10:41) as well.