

Man of the world vs Man of the Word (Jeremiah 37-38)



A. Timeline

Years	Key Events	References
605	Nebuchadnezzar defeats Egyptians / Assyrians at Carchemish The first siege of Jerusalem – the first deportation to Babylon (e.g. Daniel)	Jer 46:2 Dan 1
604	Jehoiakim burns Jeremiah's scroll	Jer 36
601	Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon [Rechabite's faithfulness]	2 Kgs 24:1; Jer 35
598	Jehoiakim deposed and dies / Jehoiachin reigns for 3 months	2 Chr 36:5ff
589	Jerusalem besieged again for Zedekiah's treachery	Jer 34; Jer 52:3-4
587	Temporary relief from the siege due to the Egyptian army Zedekiah consults Jeremiah 3 times; Jeremiah thrown into dungeon 3 times. Jeremiah's third and final advice to Zedekiah in secret.	Jer 37-38
586	Jerusalem falls after 18 months of siege.	Jer 39

B. Word of God as a Mirror

- Jeremiah 34-45 is a series of narratives highlighting the events that led to Jerusalem's destruction. It is not chronological, but a logical arrangement - a prophetic interpretation of the demise of Jerusalem, packed with lessons. In Jeremiah 36 we saw how Jehoiakim blew it, burning Jeremiah's scrolls after listening to just the first 2-3 chapters. It was the 'now word of the Lord', the only hope that could save Judah from the coming destruction. It was the last chance God offered Jehoiakim, and he rejected God's offer of mercy.

God told Jeremiah to painstakingly write down the entire message of 22 years of prophetic ministry in a written form, so that Jehoiakim could have access to God's word anytime and turn to God for mercy. He refused God's mercy emphatically by burning the source of the divine revelation and the will of God. Not surprisingly six years later Jehoiakim was dead, and his body thrown out on the streets according to Jeremiah's prophetic word. His son Jeconiah barely lasted 3 months and he too was taken out.

- Baruch had to re-write all the words of Jeremiah for the second time – the expanded edition, the book of Jeremiah as we have it. From here on, Jeremiah is presented in the third person as 'he', not in the 1st person as 'I'. Why? It comes not from Jeremiah's perspective, but Baruch's perspective. It was probably a part of Baruch's diary, which became part of the Scripture. What an honour God bestowed on Baruch's faithfulness! The Bible is written in three different languages over 1400 years by at least 40 different authors – Baruch is in that rank.
- What is the core revelation of Jeremiah's prophecies in Ch 1-25? Mostly it is God's direct speech to Israel, baring 'the heart of God' – what God thinks and how He feels, how we affect God's heart. Through the study of Jeremiah, we come to understand what the Father feels. It is the 'window' into the heart of God.
- In Jeremiah 37-38, which is Baruch's contribution written from his perspective, we have a slightly different insight into the situation. Instead of illuminating the heart of God, we see the word of God revealing human nature. Word of God functions like a 'mirror' to see what 'we are really like inside. There is a sharp contrast between the two men - Zedekiah and Jeremiah. We see 'Man of the World' and 'Man of the Word', 'Man of the flesh' and 'Man of the Spirit', 'Doubleminded man' and 'Man of the principle', 'Man governed by the fear of men' and 'Man governed by the fear of God.' (C.f. James 1:22-24)

Someone asked a Jewish man, 'Why is there still so much antisemitism in the world? Haven't we learned from the Holocaust? What is it about the Jewish race that attracts such persecution?' He said, 'We Jews are only human, only more so. If there are virtues in human nature, we have them, only more so. If there are vices in human nature, we have them, only more so, etc.' E.g. Einstein, Karl Marx. The Jewish race is a mirror showing an amplified caricature of human nature, and we do not like to look into the mirror.

C. Man of the Flesh

It is 587BC, the same timeframe as Jer 34. We continue with the story of Zedekiah which was put on a temporary pause. He was a weak king, a double-minded man who set the Hebrew slaves free, but when the situation improved, he went back on his promise and earned God's judgment. There is a deep spiritual problem in Zedekiah.

Two men in particular are set in contrast: Zedekiah and Jeremiah. Both had faith in God, though of different quality. Both men had besetting fears. Zedekiah's fears dictated his faith, but Jeremiah's faith dictated his fears. This distinction not only separates Jeremiah from Zedekiah, but it also splits humanity into two groups – men of the world, and men of the Word.

In 598 BC Zedekiah was put on Judah's throne by Babylonians. Babylonians had already taken the cream of the society, and they put a 'nobody' to take care of a bunch of nobodies. Zedekiah was a weak political man of expediency without principle, but he was ambitious. The little power he had, went to his head. He decided he would become big by aligning Judah to Egypt even though the Chaldeans gave him the privileged position he didn't deserve. Zedekiah took a big risk by backing up Egypt against Chaldeans. Chaldeans responded by laying a second siege against Jerusalem. When the Egyptian army drew close from the west, Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem to face them in battle. Zedekiah thought his plan had paid off. Jeremiah said he was completely wrong – the Babylonians were coming back to finish the job they started. True to Jeremiah's word, the Egyptian army withdrew quickly without a battle (mental scars from Carchemish?), and within weeks Chaldeans were back. In the middle of this short period of respite *Zedekiah consults Jeremiah three times*, each time seeking a different answer! In these conversations, we see into the nature of the two men.

1. Zedekiah believed in prayer - There is no doubt Zedekiah believed in the God of Israel who hears the prayers of His people. He probably even believed in the 'prayer of a righteous man avails much.' That's why he sent his officials to 'entreat Jeremiah to pray for them.' Zedekiah saw the judgment of God coming upon the previous two kings of Judah, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecies. But Zedekiah didn't believe in obeying God's word – *'But Zedekiah, nor his servants, nor the people of the land gave heed to the words of the LORD which He spoke by the prophet Jeremiah.'* (37:2) Zedekiah asked Jeremiah to pray for him so that all things would go well with him. But his faith had no room for God to speak back to him so that he could obey God's command. *'Please pray for me, but don't tell me what to do. Speak to God for me (because you are anointed of God), but don't tell me to change my life. I want God to listen to my prayers, but I don't want God to tell me how to live my life.'*

That was Zedekiah's religion. Does the modern church have faith like Zedekiah? They believe in prayer and they want some anointed man of God to do all the heavy lifting prayer for them, but their religion has no room to hear what God has to say about their life. Instead of repenting and reforming their life by obeying the word of God, they go from one preacher or another until they find someone who will give them the word they want to hear.

2. Zedekiah had fears like everybody – He had two main fears that held him back from obeying the word of God through Jeremiah.

(a) His fear of Babylonians is understandable. When a nation is defeated by an enemy force in a war, the king was brutally mutilated then executed as a symbolic act. Zedekiah knew this would be his fate especially since he betrayed the Chaldeans and rebelled against them. He brought this fate upon himself.

(b) Zedekiah also had a secret fear, not of the Chaldeans, but the fellow Jews. The number of people who believed Jeremiah's prophecies and defected to the Chaldeans was growing each day. If Zedekiah surrenders, the Chaldeans might hand him over to his Jewish people, who might abuse and kill him, 'This ambitious fool put us in this trouble with his disastrous foreign policy, and now we are paying for his stupidity with our lives.' Secretly Zedekiah feared the Jews more than the Chaldeans.

Here is a man driven by fear, but there is one fear strikingly missing from his life, the fear of God. So Zedekiah came to Jeremiah in secret and asked (for the third time!), *'Please tell me, really what will happen to me?'* Jeremiah replied, *'How can I be sure you won't kill me if I told you the truth? You won't like what I have to say one bit. Besides, you won't listen to me anyway.'* Zedekiah promised, *'I won't put you to death if you*

keep silent about our conversation.' He had a fascination to know the future, but like many people, he was not at all prepared to obey God's instructions for him. And his faith did not save him. Zedekiah was taken captive and his eyes were gouged out on his way to Babylon. If you fear God, you will rise above the fear of man. It is the vertical fear that sets us free from all the horizontal fears. If you are governed by the horizontal fears only, then your faith will not deliver you any more than that of an unbeliever.

D. Man of the Spirit

1. What about Jeremiah? Jeremiah's message to the people of Jerusalem was consistent and clear. He sought to spare as many lives as possible by unceasingly speaking out the unpopular message, *'If you want to live, you must surrender. Get out of the city and defect and you will live.'* This got Jeremiah into trouble time and time again. He was imprisoned three times under different conditions – starvation in prison; house arrest; and almost drowning in mud in a cistern.

Jeremiah was captured on his way to Anathoth to see the property he purchased, on the suspicion of defecting to the Chaldeans. (It was like the North Korean defectors escaping to South Korea at the end of the Korean war.) The guard who caught Jeremiah beat him and threw him into a dungeon called 'Jonathan's prison'. Jeremiah was going to inspect his property, his investment in Israel's future! (C.f. Jer 32) Jeremiah planned to stay in the city until the last day, which he did as a prisoner. When Jeremiah was starving in the dungeon Zedekiah helped him to stay alive by providing a piece of cake each day in a slightly better 'prison facility.' (C.f. bakery shop was located in 'Baker Street' in Jerusalem).

Why? Zedekiah probably hoped for Jeremiah's prayer and a favourable prophecy. Jeremiah got into trouble again in the court prison because he continued to speak to the people the same message. Jews who could see the writing on the wall continued to defect to the Chaldeans. It angered the princes so much that they wanted to kill Jeremiah, *'Let this man be put to death. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm – how ironic!'* (38:4) (Pashhur's son, Gedaliah was there, Jer 20:1). Jeremiah was then thrown down into a muddy cistern to die by slow drowning. It took a courageous Ethiopian eunuch to rescue Jeremiah out of the miry pit.

2. Jeremiah had his own fears. The Bible is an honest book. Jeremiah was not one of those 'brave souls' who couldn't wait to die for the Lord. Jeremiah appealed to Zedekiah to get him out of Jonathan's dungeon, where he was slowly starving to death. After Jeremiah was let out of the muddy cistern, Zedekiah arranged for the third and final face-to-face conversation with Jeremiah.

He asked a direct question, knowing there is not much time left, *'Please tell me the truth. Hide nothing from me.'* (38:14) For the third and the last time, Jeremiah told him the same message. The vital word Jeremiah gave Zedekiah in that conversation was 'if', *'If you obey the word of the Lord, you will live, and the city will be spared. But if you do not obey the word of the Lord you will die, and the city will be burned to the ground.'* (38:17-18). Jeremiah could hear in the spirit, 'I hear the women of Jerusalem mocking you with a song describing your demise: *'Zedekiah's feet sunk in the mire, and his trusted officials have stepped on him.'* (38:22). Jeremiah pleaded with him, *'Please, surrender now. It is not too late.'*

How did Zedekiah's response? *'Jeremiah, do not tell a soul about our private conversation today to anyone and I will spare your life.'* Why did Zedekiah want no one to know the word of the Lord? So he can have the final decision power over the word of God. If he feels surrender is too risky, he will disobey God's word without anyone finding out Jeremiah's last conversation with him.

Zedekiah probably had many sleepless nights, but he did not turn. What did Jeremiah do? He kept quiet about the conversation. Jeremiah wasn't ready to die just yet! He was a man just like us. He had fears of dying by 'starvation', 'torture', and 'drowning in muddy dungeon'. But Jeremiah feared God more than he feared man. He put his faith in God over his fears and stayed true to the word of God. His was the kind of faith built on truth and reality of life however unpleasant, and not on some happy illusion.

Both men believed in God. Both believed in prayer. Both had fears of harm and suffering violent death in the hands of men. One had political power, was free and he chose what seemed beneficial. The other was a prisoner with no power, but he chose the word of God. Who was really the prisoner?

Jesus said, 'If anyone will hear the words of mine and do them, he is a wise person.'