

## LESSON 11

May 16, 2021

### Unit III: Courageous Prophets of Change The Consequences of Giving Challenging Advice

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES:** Jeremiah 37-38

**PRINT PASSAGE:** Jeremiah 38:14-23

**Key Verse**—Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me? (Jeremiah 38:15, KJV)

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Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me.” (Jeremiah 38:15, NIV)

#### Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Identify Jeremiah’s hesitation to give controversial advice to Zedekiah.
- Sense Jeremiah’s apprehension when talking to Zedekiah.
- Commit to giving challenging godly advice.

#### KEY TERMS

**Babylonians**(verse 19)—**Hebrew:** *Kasdim* (kas-dah’-ee): inhabitants of a region of South Babylon (or Chaldea) who led the conquest and capture of Judah; “Chaldeans” (KJV).

**Counsel**(verse 15)—**Hebrew:** *yaats* (yaw-ats’): to advise.

#### INTRODUCTION

How do you feel when people offer stern advice that you don’t want to hear? Are you secretly angry, openly impatient, quietly frustrated, or obviously resentful? Many people solicit or seek advice about challenging situations, then refuse to accept advice if it is unflattering or uncomfortable to hear. Most of us are uncomfortable with honest advice that reveals our weaknesses, mistakes, or character flaws. Rather than face the truth with gratitude, some people project their discomfort, anger, insecurity, or other emotions on the one who had the courage and compassion to tell them the truth. The life and ministry of the prophet Jeremiah is a vivid example of this. For approximately forty years, Jeremiah’s unpopular message to the people of Judah was met with rejection, persecution, imprisonment, and even death threats. Centuries later, the Lord Jesus Christ would suffer the ultimate rejection for delivering the truth to a people who rejected Him. Everyone wants to hear messages of good news and blessings from the Lord. But those who are committed to sharing the whole truth of God’s Word, which may sometimes include correction or rebuke, can expect to be rejected and treated unjustly by those who do not want to face their sins and shortcomings. Good advice can change your life, but not everyone is eager to hear it, even when it comes from the God.

## THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Jeremiah prophesied during a dark period in Judah's history. Jeremiah was both priest and prophet who received his call and commission from God during his youth. His long-standing ministry spanned the reigns of the last five kings of Judah and extended into the years of the Babylonian Captivity. Jeremiah preached against the decayed moral and spiritual life of the people and their civic and religious leaders. His passionate calls for repentance from sin and return to God fell on deaf ears. He warned that God's judgment was imminent. Without success, Jeremiah urgently pleaded with His people to return to God so they would be spared from destruction. Instead of repenting, the people of Judah labeled the prophet as a traitor, then beat and imprisoned him, and threatened him with death. The main theme of Jeremiah is judgment upon Judah for her apostasy and the promise of future restoration through God's grace and mercy. This week's lesson text unfolds prior to Judah's impending fall (see 34:1–38:38) at Jeremiah's third meeting with King Zedekiah.

## ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

### A Prophet's Dilemma

(Jeremiah 38:14-16)

#### KJV

**14** Then Zedekiah the king sent, and took Jeremiah the prophet unto him into the third entry that is in the house of the LORD: and the king said unto Jeremiah, I will ask thee a thing; hide nothing from me.

**15** Then Jeremiah said unto Zedekiah, If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? and if I give thee *counsel*, wilt thou not hearken unto me?

**16** So Zedekiah the king sware secretly unto Jeremiah, saying, As the LORD liveth, that made us this soul, I will not put thee to death, neither will I give thee into the hand of these men that seek thy life.

#### NIV

**14** Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the LORD. "I am going to ask you something," the king said to Jeremiah. "Do not hide anything from me."

**15** Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you *counsel*, you would not listen to me."

**16** But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: "As surely as the LORD lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill you."

Doing right is always right, but rarely popular. This statement describes the ministry of Jeremiah. The first time Jeremiah delivered the word of the Lord to King Zedekiah, he was cast into prison. After the second visit, Jeremiah was thrown into a muddy cistern. He was later rescued from the cistern and summoned to meet secretly with Zedekiah for a third time. Zedekiah had a question for Jeremiah and assured the prophet that he could be completely honest with him (verse 14). Jeremiah felt conflicted about answering the king because his two previous experiences with Zedekiah had ended unfavorably. Jeremiah had no guarantee that Zedekiah would not kill him if he gave an answer that the king did not want to hear. Second, Jeremiah was convinced that any advice he gave the king would go unheeded as it had in the past (verse 15). Zedekiah responded to the first objection by promising Jeremiah that he would not kill him or hand him over to those who

were seeking to take his life (verse 16). Zedekiah made no promise to heed Jeremiah's counsel. Perhaps Zedekiah knew what Jeremiah was going to say because he had delivered the same message on earlier occasions. Was Jeremiah's reluctance to advise Zedekiah a lack of faith or simply a practical awareness that his words would go unheeded? People often hesitate to give challenging advice, especially when they have already experienced unpleasant consequences for their honesty. Jeremiah hesitated to respond to the king, but not because of a lack of faith in God. From the time of His divine call to prophetic ministry, Jeremiah had received an assurance of God's presence and protection (see Jeremiah 1:7-10). God's presence with us, however, does not necessarily exempt us from life's hardships. Jeremiah's words to the king would be rejected just as the two previous ones, but God never holds the messenger accountable for the people's response to him or her. The messenger's duty is to deliver the word from God whether it is accepted or rejected, and regardless of any personal consequences.

### **What Do You Think?**

What is the right and wrong way to handle rejection for speaking God's truth?

### **A Prophet's Advice**

(Jeremiah 38:17-18)

#### **KJV**

**17** Then said Jeremiah unto Zedekiah, Thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thine house:

**18** But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand.

#### **NIV**

**17** Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "This is what the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live.

**18** "'But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from them.'"

Jeremiah's message remained the same: If Zedekiah would surrender to the Babylonians, then he would save his life, the city would not be burned, and his family would live (verse 17). If the king continued to resist, then the Babylonians would soon capture the city and burn it, and Zedekiah would not escape their hands (verse 18). Despite all he had endured and the possibility of being executed for treason, Jeremiah did not compromise the Word of God. As requested, Jeremiah kept nothing back from the King. The moral and spiritual condition of our society today is not unlike the spiritual state of Judah in Jeremiah's day. Everyone will answer to God for their deeds; therefore, God's people must take His word seriously. Preachers and teachers of the Gospel must not be tempted to compromise God's truth to please people. God warns against adding to or taking away from His Word (see Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 4:2; 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19). Doing what God requires takes courage that is strengthened by an intimate relationship with God

and a rich understanding of His Word. God is still looking for men and women with the spirit of Jeremiah, persons who have the courage to speak His Word regardless of the consequences.

### **What Do You Think?**

In what ways do some Christians, preachers, teachers, and even some gospel songwriters water down or compromise God's Word?

### **A Leader's Folly**

(Jeremiah 38:19-23)

#### **KJV**

**19** And Zedekiah the king said unto Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen to the *Chaldeans*, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me.

**20** But Jeremiah said, They shall not deliver thee. Obey, I beseech thee, the voice of the LORD, which I speak unto thee: so it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live.

**21** But if thou refuse to go forth, this is the word that the LORD hath shewed me:

**22** And, behold, all the women that are left in the king of Judah's house shall be brought forth to the king of Babylon's princes, and those women shall say, Thy friends have set thee on, and have prevailed against thee: thy feet are sunk in the mire, and they are turned away back.

**23** So they shall bring out all thy wives and thy children to the Chaldeans: and thou shalt not escape out of their hand, but shalt be taken by the hand of the king of Babylon: and thou shalt cause this city to be burned with fire.

#### **NIV**

**19** King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the *Babylonians*, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me."

**20** "They will not hand you over," Jeremiah replied. "Obey the LORD by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared.

**21** "But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the LORD has revealed to me:

**22** "All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you: 'They misled you and overcame you—those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you.'

**23** "All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will be burned down."

Zedekiah wanted to hear the word of the Lord, but fear and pride caused him to reject the very words he insisted on hearing. A weak, amoral, and indecisive leader, Zedekiah had already aroused the anger of the Jews that had deserted the nation to side with the Babylonians. He possibly feared that if he surrendered Jerusalem to Babylon, then the leaders might hand him over to former Jewish subjects who might have tortured and humiliated him (verse 19). Jeremiah assured the king that he had nothing to fear because this message had come from the Lord (verse 20). He pleaded with the king to surrender because the consequences for refusing to do so had also come from the Lord (verse 21). Refusal to heed God's Word meant being mocked by the women of his harem when the Babylonians captured the city—because Zedekiah was listening to his friends instead of God (verse 22). Jeremiah warned that the king's own palace attendants would betray the king's family and turn them over to the Babylonians (verse 23), and that Zedekiah would also be taken captive.

Jeremiah was well acquainted with the hard consequences of giving challenging advice, but he was more willing to face the consequences of his words than to refuse to deliver the message that God had given him to declare. Zedekiah, however, had a fear of humanity that was greater than his fear of God. That fatal fear blinded him to his very chance to repent and save his life, his family, and the city. Today, God still calls His people to repentance. Many people lack courage and fear the consequences of turning from their sin. But God's presence, power, and provision are still available to anyone who dares to take God at His word.

### **What Do You Think?**

Why do you think Zedekiah refused to take Jeremiah's counsel?

### **A CLOSING THOUGHT**

There are often very real consequences for speaking unpopular or unpleasant truths from God's word. The Scriptures are a mirror that often force people to see themselves as God sees them—it challenges them to either change or remain the same. Those who resist changing in response to the Word often blame or ridicule the messengers, charging them with meddling or being judgmental rather than choosing to repent. Jeremiah was a bold, uncompromising prophet who suffered abuse and received death threats for his unwavering commitment to God's word. The conditions of our world in this generation demand more "Jeremiahs" who will stand on God's Word without compromise even when opposed by voices in the church and in popular culture.

### **YOUR LIFE**

Every believer has the responsibility to speak God's truth with love to those who seek advice and even to those who do not. A courageous commitment to truth involves accepting the possibility of difficult consequences that result from personal convictions. Are you prepared and willing to suffer for boldly speaking the Word of God?

### **YOUR WORLD!**

Many Christians imagine that the only people who need the Word are lost sinners. Within the church, there is still an urgent need for "Jeremiahs" who will challenge doctrinal error and take a stand against immorality and other sins. Does your church have courageous leaders who are willing to confront compromise and sin, even when others silently go along with it?

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Dear God, thank You for the promise of Your presence, power, and provision that strengthens us to do Your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **CONCLUSION**

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week, we will discover that as difficult as the task of taking responsibility for our mistakes may be, God holds each of us accountable for our own behavior (see Ezekiel 18:1-9; 30-32).

## **HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

**(May 17-23, 2021)**

### **Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles**

MONDAY, May 17	“Treat Each Other Fairly”	(Deuteronomy 24:14-18)
TUESDAY, May 18	“Taking Personal Responsibility”	(Jeremiah 31:27-30)
WEDNESDAY, May 19	“The Child Who Sins Suffers Punishment”	(Ezekiel 18:10-13)
THURSDAY, May 20	“The Righteous Child Is Rewarded”	(Ezekiel 18:14-18)
FRIDAY, May 21	“All Are Accountable for Their Sins”	(Ezekiel 18:19-24)
SATURDAY, May 22	“God Is Compassionate and Fair”	(Ezekiel 18:25-29)
SUNDAY, May 23	“Repent and Live Righteous Lives”	(Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32)