

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Why do you suppose so many people like sports? I think it has to do with competition. Competition seems to be a required emotion for us humans. We like to win, or be on a winning team, or root for a winning team. Even if it's not sports but a game of cards instead, or politics, or your standing in a group, we like winning competitions. Since we can't win every time, we're supposed to learn how to be gracious in loss, to have good sportsmanlike conduct. But some people hate losing even more than they love winning. This leads some to cheat, or get overheated when they lose. Sometimes fights break out. As soon as competition turns ugly, many of us say it's not fun anymore.

Warfare takes competition to a level that isn't fun anymore, especially for the losing side. The people of Jerusalem were on the losing side of a war. It was their own fault too (see 2 Kings 22:16-17, 2 Chronicles 36:13-16). The Lord had told them repeatedly that they must obey him and do what is right in his sight. They ignored him. You can ignore the Lord only so long. Sooner or later God's justice catches up with you. Much better to repent for whatever we've been doing wrong, turn to the Lord Jesus for full forgiveness, and then walk steadfastly on the path that pleases God as our way of thanking him for rescuing us.

At this time in Bible history, the final king of the southern kingdom Judah is now on the throne. The northern kingdom, Israel, has already been decimated and hauled off into captivity 125 years ago. Same reason: unwilling to listen to the Lord and change

evil behaviors. You'd think Judah would have learned a valuable lesson from watching what happened to Israel. But we humans can be pretty slow to learn from the mistakes of others, huh?

Judah has an advantage right there within the walls of their capital, Jerusalem. This advantage is a person named Jeremiah. He's trying to help everyone stay alive. He's from God Almighty, one of the Lord's prophets. Jeremiah has been telling the people of Judah the right thing to do for several decades now. "Turn away from anything the Lord labels as sin and turn to the Lord. Otherwise the Lord will cause Jerusalem to be destroyed." But most of the people are not listening. They don't want to hear it. They're like Americans: they want to do what they want to do. They've gotten away with choosing for themselves according to their own moral standards for so long, they have actually lost the ability to see things from God's perspective. They're so out of touch that they think God's prophet is out of touch.

Let's go join the people of Jerusalem. Okay, we're now inside the walls of this walled city, but we don't feel very safe. An army surrounded the city about seventeen months ago. They won't let any food supplies in. Despite extreme rationing, the food's almost gone. We're probably not going to get lunch today.

As if the impending doom isn't enough to handle, Jeremiah keeps *telling all the people*,² *"This is what the LORD says: 'Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. He will escape with*

his life; he will live.’³ And this is what the LORD says: ‘This city will certainly be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’” Jeremiah has been preaching surrender for some time now (see Jeremiah 14:12 and 21:9). I wonder how many of you are ready to heed Jeremiah’s advice and go surrender to the Babylonians—blink your eyes if you’re ready. If you did not blink your eyes, maybe you didn’t understand, or maybe you just never surrender. I hope you’re not rebellious like the people of Jerusalem. Do you understand you will die if you don’t surrender?

Ok, if you did blink your eyes, are you crazy?! Do you not understand how fierce the enemy soldiers are who surround the city? They’re probably going to ruff you up for not coming out sooner. You will end up with nothing but your life. There won’t be any reasoning with the enemy or asking them to take it easy on you. It would be like surrendering to the Taliban or Isis-K. ?You are willing to leave this fine, walled city of Jerusalem and go out to the Babylonian soldiers? Well, yes, I would. The Lord said through Jeremiah to go surrender. We obey whatever the Lord says, no matter how difficult. I know, no one likes to lose. But our choice here isn’t to win or to lose. Jerusalem will soon fall. The choice is either to lose and live or to lose and die. I’d rather obey the Lord and live.

But not everyone agrees with Jeremiah.⁴ Then the officials said to the king, “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not

seeking the good of these people but their ruin.” You might wonder how these officials could be so daft. I can’t be sure how, but consider this: officials usually hate losing more than the average person does. They tend not to surrender, ever. And consider this: Jerusalem has withstood several sieges in the last 130 years. During one siege the Lord himself fought for the people of Judah, wiping out 185,000 enemy soldiers in one night (2 Kings 19:35). The walls of Jerusalem are still standing after all that. These officials wonder why they should listen to this Jeremiah, or why anyone should have to listen to him anymore. “*This man should be put to death.*”

⁵“*He is in your hands,*” King Zedekiah answered. “*The king can do nothing to oppose you.*” “What do you mean, Zedekiah?! You’re the king! Just say ‘no.’” Ah, well, it’s not that easy to say ‘no’ to powerful people in politics, especially when you’re afraid. Zedekiah doesn’t have the guts to say ‘no.’ Jeremiah’s king won’t protect him. And when your leader won’t carry out this first duty of government, you’re in a world of hurt.

⁶*They took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern [a pit for storing rain water] of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.* With your hand, show on your body how deep you think Jeremiah sank into the mud. Okay, so you’re down there in the mud with Jeremiah. This cistern makes quite a prison. Probably doesn’t smell very good. But at least you have the company of a few dozen vermin. They

won't gnaw on you real bad, not until you're too weak to scare them off. Talk about stuck in the mud. Are you bored yet? There's nothing to do. Are you hungry yet? They'll probably forget to feed you. The point of putting you in this pit and forgetting about you is so they don't have to end your life directly: "Let nature take its course."

Have you ever had a day as bad as the one Jeremiah is having? Me neither. If I can keep this story in mind, whenever people ask me how I'm doing, I think I'll tell them, "It's a really good day," and I'll be thinking to myself, "Yeah, no one's thrown me into a muddy cistern today."

I'd sure like to ask Jeremiah if he's ready to give up now. I hope he's not. God usually grants us some kind of victory after every kind of trouble. That's GOD'S WAY: VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. It might not be the victory that you want, but it'll be the victory you're supposed to have. Some examples. How many times has your health been restored after illness? That's GOD'S WAY: VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. How many of your setbacks have resulted in better outcomes than you even dreamed of? That's GOD'S WAY: VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. And now for the most important question: How many times have you been restored as God's forgiven child after repenting of sin? We deserve to get stuck in a much worse prison than a muddy cistern. Yet thanks to Jesus' death on the cross, here we are in God's house as his honored children. Just as you have a place here, you have a place waiting for you in heaven. That's one of the things our Lord Jesus is doing right now, he's preparing a place for you who trust in him. After all the

trouble you will have had in this life, you're going to have victory because of Jesus.

But let's get back to God's prophet. The Lord is about to give Jeremiah VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. ⁷*Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official [possibly a eunuch] in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern.* The name 'Ebed-Melech' means 'the king's servant.' 'Ebed-Melech' may have been his actual name, or it might have just been what everyone called him, like when you call me Pastor. ⁸*Ebed-Melech said to the king, ⁹"My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city."* Actually the Hebrew indicates that Ebed-Melech is concerned about Jeremiah starving right now since there is so little bread left in the city. "They'll refuse him bread since he's a prisoner."

¹⁰*Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech, "Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah out of the cistern before he dies."* Thirty men? How deep is Jeremiah stuck in the mud? Deep enough for perhaps half of the thirty men make sure Ebed-Melech isn't prevented from rescuing Jeremiah by those who hate him.

¹¹*So Ebed-Melech went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes to the cistern.* ¹²*Ebed-Melech said to Jeremiah, "Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes."* When Jeremiah was sufficiently padded and roped up, they pulled on the ropes. Come on, everybody

help. Give a pull on the rope. No, no, he's really stuck down there. You're gonna have to grunt a little, like you hear people do at the gym. Okay, while you're all grunting away up top, what sound is Jeremiah hearing down there. You've walked through deep mud before, right? Did you ever lose a shoe in the mud? Go ahead, make the sound of something coming out of the mud. For Jeremiah that's the sound of VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. Ebed-Melech and his men ¹³*pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.*

What sound do you make when you've been stuck in the mud by sin for a while, and then God wraps the ropes of righteousness around you, padded by the soft rags of his mercy, and he pulls you out? What sound do you make? Does it sound like this? "Thank you, Jesus. Help me live for you now." Isn't it wonderful when God strengthens you to say 'no' to the temptations that have seized you in the past? That's GOD'S WAY: VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE.

"Yeah? Well, someday we're just gonna die anyway. So what good are these little victories?" I'm so glad you asked. Yes you're gonna die, but death won't defeat you. It'll be like going to sleep. And when you wake up, it'll be Jesus shaking your shoulder and saying, "Good morning, Sunshine! Welcome to Camp Victory! Have I got a few surprises for you!"

But we don't have to wait that long for God's gift of victory after trouble. In Jeremiah's day, for instance, those who went out and surrendered to the Babylonians got to live. Granted, they went into captivity. But they

lived. Seventy years later, their children and grandchildren got to come back to Jerusalem and wait for the Lord to send the promised Messiah. VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE.

When the city of Jerusalem fell, the king of Babylon made a search for Jeremiah. He freed the prophet from chains and let him live anywhere in the land that he wanted (see Jeremiah 40:1-6). VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE.

What about Ebed-Melech, the foreigner who risked his life to rescue Jeremiah from the muddy cistern? Do you think the Jewish officials were nice to him after he foiled their evil plans for Jeremiah? God was nice to him. ¹⁵*While Jeremiah had been confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him: ¹⁶"Go and tell Ebed-Melech the Cushite, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am about to fulfill my words against this city through disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. ¹⁷But I will rescue you on that day, declares the LORD; you will not be handed over to those you fear. ¹⁸I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the LORD'"* (Jeremiah 39:15-18). That's GOD'S WAY: VICTORY AFTER TROUBLE. Never give up the fight against sin. Never give in to despair. Hold on to Jesus. You're going to have trouble sometimes. But soon enough God will give you the victory.