

Ebed-Melech

An inspiration in times of crisis

The setting is in Jerusalem about 2,600 years ago. The Chaldean army is stationed outside the city walls. The prophet Jeremiah is walking within the city predicting its eminent fall and encouraging king Zedekiah, the officials and the people to surrender. There was fear, sickness and signs of starvation. Clearly the end was near, but the ruling class had not yet come to terms with this new reality. They were still more concerned about feeling in control than submitting to God's voice through Jeremiah. "Then the officials said to the king, 'This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in the 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'". In those tense days leading up to the fall of Jerusalem, an African slave named Ebed-Melech served in the city's royal palace (Jeremiah 38:4, 7). Shortly before these Chaldeans invaded, the Lord Almighty sent a special message to this working class gentile: "I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life" (Jeremiah 39:18). What made Ebed-Melech different from the others in Jerusalem?

1. Ebed-Melech – a compassionate man with a broad vision

The Hebrew word Ebed means "servant", and Melech "a king". This Ethiopian eunuch is mentioned by name 6 times in Scripture, and all we know about him is found in Jeremiah chapters 38 and 39. When first mentioned, we are told that he had just heard that the king's officials "had put Jeremiah into the cistern" (38:7). Given Jeremiah's unpopular message and the crisis in Jerusalem, it is quite reasonable that the leadership wished to silence him. Why would Ebed-Melech want to get involved? Surely what happened to Jeremiah wasn't his responsibility. When we don't really want to do something, many good reasons surface in our mind to justify our passivity. Isn't it the Lord's job to defend His servants? Maybe the Lord is polishing Jeremiah character through suffering. Jeremiah must die someday, why not this week? After all, no one is indispensable in the Lord's work! But Ebed-Melech had cultivated a compassionate heart. This sensitive heart would not allow him to remain indifferent. How easy it is to be absorbed in the endless busy-ness of our small worlds: my study, my family, my home, my job, my local church, my comfort, my future. If we are to be useful to the Lord in a wider sphere, we also need to cultivate a compassionate heart, a heart that will urge us to hear, to see and to feel beyond our usual responsibilities.

2. Ebed-Melech – a moral man in tune with God

The cistern was deep. Jeremiah found it difficult to move and difficult to find rest stuck in the slippery mud. He was damp, tired and hungry. What should prophets do

in such circumstances? Have you ever felt desperately helpless? In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah describes in poetic language this or a very similar critical situation: "I called on your name, O Lord, from the depth of the pit... You came near when I called you, and you said, 'Do not fear'" (3:52-57). After such gentle closeness, the Lord sets Himself to deliver His servant. If He allowed Peter to walk on water, He could have allowed Jeremiah could walk on soft mud! If Elijah was raised into the air, the Lord could easily raise Jeremiah out of the pit. But as is fairly common, the Lord prefers to act through willing human agents. Who in Jerusalem was still sensitive to His voice? Who could the Lord use?

Zedekiah, king of Judah, could have been God's ideal vessel. He was 32 years old and had been a king for 12 years. He was in the privileged position where he could get things done. But he was morally a weak man. His sense of good and bad had been blurred by years of political compromise. It was to his advantage to keep his officials happy (38:4, 5). In Christian leadership, we may become better at discerning the mood of our friends and congregation than at discerning the mind of Christ. Was there no-one in tune with God? Was there no-one trying to listen? Ebed-Melech had listened to Jeremiah and had clear moral convictions. He judged as "wicked" or "evil" what had been done to Jeremiah, and prepared his heart to do something about it. What do you do when you sense something is wrong? We can easily turn our eyes away. "Someone should do something about this" we are prone to complain. "Perhaps it is not so wrong" we begin to think. Moral maturity is the fruit of regular exercise (Hebrews 5:14). Even today, the Lord looks for Godly men and women to correct wrongs. Can the Lord use us?

3. Ebed-Melech – a bold man who broke the silence

Ebed-Melech left the palace, found the king and said "My Lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet" (38:8, 9). These are bold words from a servant to his master. Kings usually don't like to be corrected and especially not on moral matters. Yet deep inside, king Zedekiah knew Ebed-Melech was right. He promptly provided Ebed-Melech with 30 men to "lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies" (38:10). Perhaps there were others in Jerusalem who knew what had been done to Jeremiah and felt uncomfortable, but they chose to remain silent. When you express your concern, you get involved in the problem. Maybe you will be given the same treatment as the one you defend. Your loyalty to the popular cause may be questioned. It takes boldness to break a silence. It takes conviction to stand up against the current. Perhaps you have noticed something that needs correcting: worldliness creeping into your home; a morally incorrect procedure becoming normal in your business; a decision or a practice which conflicts with Scripture in being accepted in your Christian fellowship. It is noteworthy that Ebed-Melech did not start a moral revolution to remove the king or his officials. He made use of proper channels. He was instrumental in changing the King's mind on the issue. He calmly explained before he acted. Many good moral and noble causes have been severely damaged by bad procedures. We are called to do God's work, but in God's way.

4. Ebed-Melech – a consequent man who pulled his weight

You need open eyes and attentive ears to spot a problem. You need a compassionate heart to identify with it. You need boldness to highlight it. Yet Ebed-Melech was not satisfied with only ideas, words and agreements. He took the men, some rags, some ropes, “and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern” (38:11-13). He got his hands dirty and he pulled his weight. When the Lord puts a burning concern in our heart, He would have us act in some way. To think and to talk is not enough. If the Lord gives you a concern for the spiritual condition of a friend or relative, the burden will only rise when you begin to act. Pray. Write an email or a card. Send her a music CD or book. Invite him to a Christian event. Actively look for opportunities. The Lord allowed his disciples to **see** the needs in the harvest field and then he asked them to **pray**: “ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”. A while later, Jesus sends these twelve to **do something** in that harvest field (Matthew 9:35- 10:16). In Ebed-Melech we see a happy concordance between heart and hands, between concern and practical involvement, between words and action.

5. Ebed-Melech – a calm man who chose to trust God

Once Jeremiah was out of the cistern, the attention focused again on the global crisis: the eminent invasion. King Zedekiah and Ebed-Melech were both afraid of the brutal army camping around the city walls. Perhaps Ebed-Melech was also afraid of what the king’s officials might do to him in retaliation for helping Jeremiah. King Zedekiah called Jeremiah privately and asked for a message from the Lord. Jeremiah’s message had not changed: “If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down” (38:17). As Zedekiah considered the possibility of obeying, he was paralyzed by fear. Who did he fear? “I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians” (38:19). Why did he fear them? Because Zedekiah and his officials treated badly those who tried surrender. They called them deserters, traitors. They were arrested and beaten (37:13-15). Zedekiah knew he was in a difficult position: to surrender to the Babylonians, he would have to do what he had previously condemned. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Were you able to recognize and admit to having acted wrongly in the past? Public mistakes require public confession.

Jerusalem fell. The Babylonians set the city on fire. Zedekiah’s children were killed before him. He was chained; his eyes pulled out and he died slowly in exile. Zedekiah paid a high price for resisting the Lord’s guidance. We can see here a vivid picture of the sad effects of lack of humility in leadership, be it at home or in the church. Without a disposition to listen to His voice and adjust our behaviour, we shall lose our “eyes” - our ability to perceive future guidance. We shall remain chained and limited by unhealthy patterns and traditions. We shall cease to inspire our children - we shall lose the next generation. We shall cause pain in others. Eventually we shall die - but a long way away from where the Lord intended us to be. And what about Ebed-Melech? He was at peace. “I will rescue you on that day, declares the Lord; you will not be handed over to those you fear. I will save you... because you trust in me” (39:17, 18). Free and blessed, with the joy and lightness of heart that comes through obedience, Ebed-Melech calmly returns to obscurity.

Conclusion

You may not be in a position of leadership. Neither was Ebed-Melech. Perhaps you have chosen to settle for a passive Christian life because of your nationality, your race, your lack of physical virility, your age or your social position. Ebed-Melech was disadvantaged in many ways, but today, more than two and a half millennia after his death, his actions still inspire us! In the hands of Almighty God, you and I can also make a difference.

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
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