

# OpenTheo

## February 8th: Jeremiah 38 & 2 Corinthians 6

February 7, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

Jeremiah delivered by an Ethiopian eunuch. Paul's summons to separateness.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share)).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 38. Now Shephatiah the son of Matan, Gedaliah the son of Pasher, Jucal the son of Shalamiah, and Pasher the son of Malachiah, heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people. Thus says the Lord, He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.

But he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war and live. Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, and be taken.

Then the official said to the king, Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm. King Zedekiah said, Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.

So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malachiah the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. When Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern, the king was sitting in the Benjamin gate, Ebed-Melech went from the king's house and said to the king, My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.

Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, Take thirty men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies. So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe in the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. Then Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.

Jeremiah did so. Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern, and Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard. King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord.

The king said to Jeremiah, I will ask you a question, hide nothing from me. Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me. Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, As the Lord lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life.

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand. King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them, and they deal cruelly with me.

Jeremiah said, You shall not be given to them. Obey now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared. But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the Lord has shown to me.

Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon, and were saying, Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you. Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you. All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city shall be burned with fire.

Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. If the officials hear that I have spoken with you, and come to you and say to you, Tell us what you said to the king, and what the king said to you, hide nothing from us, and we will not put you to death, then you shall say to them, I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there. Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him.

So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard, and Jeremiah remained in the court of the God until the day that Jerusalem was taken. In Jeremiah chapter 38 the story of the suffering prophet continues. Although Jeremiah has been persecuted and put in prison by the officials in the preceding chapter, he still seems to be able to deliver his message to people.

He was released from the prison house of Jonathan the secretary, and he was imprisoned in the court of the God instead. And now imprisoned in the court of the God, he is delivering a message that is threatening their cause. Back in chapter 21 verses 8-10 we read, And to this people you shall say, Thus says the Lord, Behold I set before you the way of life and the way of death.

He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. But he who goes out and surrenders to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live, and shall have his life as a prize of war. For I have set my face against this city for harm, and not for good, declares the Lord.

It shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. The officials here repeat in summarized form the message that Jeremiah has been delivering. One can imagine in a war it is all or nothing.

A character like Jeremiah to the officials would be regarded like Lord Hoho during the Second World War, broadcasting Nazi propaganda to demoralize and discourage the Allied troops. Jeremiah's message that they should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans was the very last thing that they wanted to get around. His message was demoralizing, that the city would fall, that their efforts were in vain, and also seemingly treacherous.

Nebuchadnezzar being described as the servant of the Lord, the one to whom they should surrender. Indeed had not Jeremiah himself been caught on the way out of the city, presumably to defect to the Babylonians? In the light of such fears and suspicions, you can understand the perspective of the officials. It is not going to be easy for them to admit that they are fighting against the word of the Lord.

When they bring their word to the king, it becomes apparent that the king is not really the one in charge anymore. They are the ones that really hold the power. King Zedekiah

seems to be fearful of his own officials and gives in to them, because he cannot withstand them.

In a kingdom that had witnessed several coups over its history, the king's fears were quite understandable. He offers no resistance to them. Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.

The officials then take Jeremiah and cast him into what was probably a bottle dungeon, a bottle-shaped hole from which someone could not climb out. Here, in the suffering of Jeremiah, we might hear some resemblances with the suffering of Joseph and the way that he was cruelly mistreated by his brothers. Back in Genesis chapter 37 verses 20 to 24, Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.

Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams. But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, Let us not take his life. And Reuben said to them, Shed no blood, throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him, that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. Jeremiah's pit is described in a similar way to that of Joseph.

It is the same word that is used, and once again we are told that there is no water in the pit. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, they wanted to shut up his prophetic dreams. Something similar is going on in the case of Jeremiah.

The princes and the officials are concerned to shut up the word of Jeremiah from the Lord, the word that is discouraging the city. Their hope, like that of the brothers minus Reuben, is that the unwelcome prophet will waste away in the pit, dying without water to drink or food to eat. The word of what has happened to Jeremiah comes to the ears of Ebed-Melek, an Ethiopian eunuch within the king's house.

There is more than one significant Ethiopian eunuch in scripture. Ebed-Melek was probably a foreigner close to the king. As a foreigner who had no family of his own, he could be more protective of the king's interests than some of the officials, and the king might trust him a lot more.

The Judahite officials would all have their own clan interests and their desires to get their families ahead, whereas an Ethiopian eunuch would represent no faction within the nation itself and would have no descendants that he was trying to advance. As a result, his interests were entirely thrown in with the interests of the king and his dynasty. Ebed-Melek seems to have more regard for the prophet than any of the officials of Judah.

In speaking of Jeremiah's plight to the king, he underlines the fact that Jeremiah is the

prophet in his description of him. The king is here described as sitting in the Benjamin Gate. Perhaps we are supposed to see some association between the king and the character of Benjamin, the brother of Joseph who was not present as Joseph was sold into Egypt.

Later on in the chapter, in Jeremiah's word to Zedekiah, Jeremiah will describe the fate that awaits King Zedekiah, in language that recalls his own plight in the Bottle Dungeon. During the reign of Jehoiachin, the opponents of Jeremiah were primarily priests and prophets and the officials of the land were on his side. And now it seems to be a reverse situation.

The powerful officials of the land are against him. The weak king, however, seems to be more favorably inclined towards him at this point. As Joseph's life was saved by Ishmaelites, Jeremiah is delivered by the Ethiopian Ebed-Melek.

On the king's instruction, Ebed-Melek takes thirty men with him to bring Jeremiah up out of the pit. Perhaps the number of men are needed as a guard to protect Jeremiah from the officials that might try and capture him again. Having been brought up, Jeremiah is placed in the court of the god again.

After he has been moved to the court of the god, King Zedekiah summons Jeremiah, desiring a private conversation with him. Understandably, Jeremiah is wary. If he declares the word of the lord honestly to King Zedekiah, Zedekiah might put him to death.

King Zedekiah, however, gives Jeremiah assurances, swearing in the name of the lord that he will not put him to death, nor will he deliver him into the hands of those who seek his life. The message that Jeremiah brings is the same as before. He must surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon.

If he does this, the way of life is open to him. If he fails to do so, he will not escape them and the city will be destroyed. Zedekiah, however, is fearful.

A number of the Judeans have deserted to King Nebuchadnezzar. If he surrenders to the Chaldeans, will he just fall into their hands? King Zedekiah seems to have enemies and opponents on all sides. It seems that he is king in little more than name.

He is besieged inside the walls of his city by the men of his own court, the officers who are more powerful than him and from whom he wants to keep his conversation with Jeremiah secret. He instructs Jeremiah not to reveal anything of the conversation that they have shared. Their suspicions must be allayed.

Outside the walls of the city there are defectors who hate him and there is the king of Babylon who is over all of them, his former suzerain that he rebelled against. However, if he listens to the word of the Lord delivered through his prophet Jeremiah, he could be

protected from all of these enemies. Handing himself over to the king of Babylon, he would be delivered from those who seek his life.

Jeremiah declares a vision that he has received. The women of the house of the king of Judah going out to the king of Babylon and his officials, all describing the way that King Zedekiah's trusted friends have turned against him. The people that he once trusted have proved untrustworthy.

This would be the final indignity for the king as his wives and his children are brought out to the Chaldeans. The very people that he would most want to protect are now taken outside of his protection, falling captive into the hand of his great enemies. As Zedekiah expected, the officials asked Jeremiah about the conversation that he had with the king.

By answering as the king instructed, Jeremiah manages to put them off the scent. He is sent back to the court of the guard and he remains there until the time that Jerusalem falls. A question to consider, as they go out to the king of Babylon in the vision of Jeremiah, the women of the house of the king of Judah speak of Zedekiah in this way, your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you.

Now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you. The description of the king's plight, betrayed by people and placed in a pit where he's sinking in the mud, is very much like Jeremiah's earlier in the chapter. What might we learn in comparing and contrasting the figures of Jeremiah and King Zedekiah? 2 Corinthians chapter 6 But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way, by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech and the power of God, with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise.

We are treated as imposters and yet are true, as unknown and yet well known, as dying and behold we live, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing everything. We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians. Our heart is wide open.

You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return I speak as to children, widen your hearts also. Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said, I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing.

Then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty. In the previous chapter Paul spoke of God working through himself and his companions. In verse 20, Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. Now in chapter 6 he continues that point, appealing to the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. God's saving righteousness that restores and sets things to rights is at work in and through Paul, and Paul is concerned that the Corinthians received the grace of God in a way that proves fruitful.

He quotes a verse from a passage concerning salvation in Isaiah chapter 49 verses 7 to 13. God's long-awaited righteousness has come near for the Corinthians too, and they ought to seize the day of salvation, not letting it pass them by. The fullness of time has come, God has sent his Son, and people must respond.

Entrusted with this ministry, Paul has been careful to present no obstacle or offence. He has, as he argues in 1 Corinthians, become all things to all men, to ensure that responding favourably to the message is as easy as it could possibly be. No hindrance or discouragement is presented by Paul in his speech or his conduct.

Paul follows this by presenting a list of hardships that he endures in his ministry. He has willingly taken these trials upon himself for the sake of his calling. Once again he is presenting a portrait of the character of his ministry, a character that befits the message and the master that he serves.

The actual list of hardships is carefully structured. It begins with a list of situations and circumstances in which he has undertaken his service in verses 4 and 5. In verses 6 and 7, he describes the manner of his ministry in these situations and circumstances, and the virtues and the means that have distinguished it. In verse 8, he begins to list the extremes of the responses through which he has remained steadfast.

And from the end of verse 8 until the end of verse 10, the list explores the paradoxical character of Christian ministry, largely along the fault line of the inner self-outer self division that he has discussed earlier. Paul presented another hardship list back in chapter 4 verses 7 to 12, but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. In that passage, it was the countervailing power of the life of Christ against the

death and suffering of the body that was foregrounded.

Towards the end of the hardship list in chapter 6, it is the paradoxical forces that Paul and his fellow ministers carry within themselves that is most apparent. Paul experiences the power of these immense and opposing forces, the fault line between two ages, within his very self. Death and life are not merely neatly divided between inner and outer selves, but are experienced within a single person.

Sorrow and joy, poverty and immense wealth, life and death are simultaneous presences in the life of the faithful minister. This hardship list continues Paul's defence of his ministry that he has been developing through the letter to this point. It demonstrates that Paul's mettle as a minister has been tested.

It also manifests once again the way that Paul's existence and self-understanding consistently draw from the horizon of the age to come. Paul now addresses the Corinthians directly, as Corinthians for the first time. Paul is making explicit the intent of his argument at this point.

Throughout the letter, Paul's desire is for the Corinthians to bring him joy. His heart yearns for them, and the pain of the tensions that have clearly come between them weigh very heavily upon him. He expresses his affection to them as a father would to his children.

Indeed, as it was through Paul that they first received the gospel, it is appropriate for him to address them in such an intimate manner. He has unburdened his heart to them, and his heart is wide open to them, earnestly desiring to receive their love back in turn. However, he fears that they have closed their hearts to him, or at least restricted their affections towards him.

He beseeches them to open up their hearts to him again. The concluding verses of this chapter have provoked some debate among commentators. Several regard them as a numb, Pauline insertion in the context.

There is a seeming jolt between verse 13 and verse 14, and if we were to remove the verses from chapter 6 verse 14 to chapter 7 verse 1, the text would flow very smoothly between those two points. Paul was just making a warm emotional appeal, an appeal to which he returns in chapter 7 verse 2, and then he moves into something more like a rebuke. Beyond the sudden transition are some features of this passage that suggest to some that it is non-Pauline.

There is some vocabulary that isn't found elsewhere in Paul. There is a chain of quotations, and whereas Paul will typically distinguish quotations within such a chain, here they are not so distinguished. Furthermore, the introductory expression as God said is used here, an expression that Paul doesn't use elsewhere.



Some have also claimed that there are tensions between the theological emphases of this passage and those in Paul more generally. Others see it as an insertion in the context, but argue that it is from a lost Pauline text, perhaps the letter that he referred to in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 to 10. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

As Paul deals with a number of elements of this passage in 1 Corinthians, where he refers to being unequally yoked in marriage to unbelievers in chapter 7 verses 12 to 15, avoiding all communion with idols in chapters 8 to 10, and separating from immoral persons at the end of chapter 5, he might be clarifying this supposedly earlier letter, at least according to some commentators. What are we to make of all of this? First, I think the argument for a Pauline insertion presents good arguments against the claim that the theology is non-Pauline. These verses comport very well with Paul's message elsewhere.

One of the problems with the theory of an insertion is that it fails to give good explanations of how and why it came to be inserted at this particular point. The arguments from unusual terminology are also not as strong as they might initially appear. There are plenty of passages of undisputed Pauline origin where rare or unique terminology, what scholars called hapax legomena, are used.

Other arguments are weaker on closer examination too. Paul's manner of quotation is not uniform but shows considerable variety. For instance, in Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, he quotes a chain of Old Testament texts.

He also uses expressions similar to as God said elsewhere. Nor are seeming digressions unknown in Pauline epistles. David Garland argues that what we have here is a pattern of argumentation that we also find elsewhere in Paul.

In Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, a catena of citations concludes a section of Paul's argument running from chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20. Furthermore, he observes that the order of Paul's argument here can be loosely paralleled with the order of the argument in 1 Corinthians chapters 4 to 6. If this is not an insertion then, we must give an account of what it is doing here. And I find Garland's suggestion here quite convincing.

From chapter 2 to chapter 6, Paul has been defending his ministry and the manner of his addressing the Corinthians. The issues raised in these verses are issues that are clearly issues of great concern in Corinth, as we have already seen in 1 Corinthians. He has written a painful letter to them and there have been tensions between him and the Corinthians.

Idle food and sexual immorality were manifestly problems in Corinth, but it seems that the practices hadn't been effectively rejected. The weak among the Corinthians weren't

a party that were presenting a case for themselves, so much as they were spiritually vulnerable persons in danger of being wounded by the liberties that the strong were taking. Paul had dealt with these issues in his first letter, but it may well be that his arguments weren't heeded by some, perhaps leading to direct conflict with a leading member the wrong that was done that he refers to, and the painful letter that Paul had to write.

Now, having laid out a defense of his apostleship and its ethos, opened his heart to the Corinthians, expressed his deep love and concern for them, and his greater confidence in their positive response, he expresses his fundamental case in a pithy and forceful manner once again. The point of these verses then is to express the sharpest possible antithesis between the people of God and the world. The people of God must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

Here Paul seems to be referring to more than just marriage, although marriage would also be in view. It is likely that eating food sacrificed to idols at shared feasts might be the background here. Deuteronomy chapter 22 verse 10 is the underlying text.

You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. This is a symbolic commandment talking about the need for a difference and division to be maintained between the people of God and those who are unbelievers. Paul elaborates this antithesis in a series of oppositions expressed in strong rhetorical questions.

The difference between righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, believers, unbelievers, the temple of God, and idols. And then he elaborates upon the fact that the people of God are the temple of God, the place where God dwells. And this is where he begins his series of quotations.

Leviticus chapter 26 verses 11 to 12. I will make my dwelling among you and my soul shall not abhor you and I will walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people. God has set his people apart and they must live accordingly.

Isaiah chapter 52 verse 11. Depart, depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing, go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. Salvation has come near and the people of God must separate themselves as God comes on the scene.

Ezekiel chapter 20 verse 34. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out. God is going to deliver his people from the nations among which they have been scattered.

And when he does that he's going to deal with the unfaithful in their midst so they must be careful. Ezekiel chapter 20 verse 38. I will purge out the rebels from among you and

those who transgress against me.

I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord. He also quotes from the first part of 2nd Samuel chapter 7 verse 14.

I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son. He joins that with the teaching of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 18 to 19. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

The Lord saw it and spurned them because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. Paul is alluding to a wide selection of scripture here all testifying to the same fundamental truth. The divide between the righteous and the wicked that must be established and maintained especially in the face of the coming judgment of God.

However it is important to recognize that it all ends on a strong note of promise. A point that Paul will underline in the first verse of chapter 7. A question to consider. How do we display the holy separateness to which scripture calls us?