

## Out of the Cistern

**“Ebed-Melech the Cushite said to Jeremiah, ‘Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.’ Jeremiah did so, and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern” (Jeremiah 38:12-13).**

Today’s Sunday School lesson is more for pastors and other church leaders than it is for those in the pews. That’s because this lesson powerfully informs how the church should make decisions regarding the work of the church. Evangelical leaders are calling out on the Internet and in print media for a new and fresh understanding of what direction the church should take in light of all that occurred in 2020. The Bible isn’t opaque on this matter.

The narratives of Chapters 36 to 45 of the Book of Jeremiah are there to condemn the nation of Israel, not merely to describe the events just prior to the Captivity. In these chapters, the prophet is being persecuted by his own people because they don’t want to hear the Word of the Lord. These chapters are a dark moment in the history of Israel, but there is in them one shining, precious, thrilling moment that is highly instructive to us today.

In Chapter 36, the king of Judea, Jehoiakim, confiscated and burned up the scroll that God had told Jeremiah to write. Jeremiah took another blank scroll and did it over. In chapter 37, the prophet was thrown into a dungeon, but King Zedekiah changed it to house arrest. Then in Chapter 38, because Jeremiah persisted in speaking the words of the Lord, Zedekiah allowed the people to dispose of Jeremiah as they wished. The nation did not want to hear or to know God’s Word! So they threw Jeremiah into a cistern, a pit that no longer held water. “And Jeremiah sank down into the mud” (verse 6). And they left him there to die.

But someone came to the rescue. And – surprise! – Jeremiah’s life was saved by a Cushite, a Gentile. This Cushite appealed to the king and was given permission to lift Jeremiah from the pit. While God’s own people of God were repulsed by the God who speaks, while they wanted nothing to do with the will of their God, a *Gentile* cared about the Word of God and wanted it to be heard. Or wanted to hear it himself.

Alan Lightman is a theoretical physicist. He sees himself as a scientist, a materialist, and an atheist, “a collection of atoms destined to disperse.” Yet he’s also, in his words, “a spiritual person.” But to him, “spiritual” means . . . well, he doesn’t know. He tries to describe it as “belief in things that are larger than myself, appreciation of beauty, and commitment to certain rules of moral behavior, such as the Golden Rule.” What he means is, he’s ready to acknowledge that there’s more to this world than just physical laws and matter. In fact, he admits that he can’t explain existence. He understands that consciousness is far more than the synchronized firing of neurons in electrical circuits. He understands that blood, bones, and tissues don’t explain why he’s an “I,” a living, thinking person. He knows that he doesn’t know what caused the Big Bang, and that he’ll never know because it’s unknowable. He understands his own mortality, and it leaves him empty.

I don’t know Lightman personally, but I suspect he never in his whole life heard the Gospel. He doesn’t believe God’s Word but, how can he? He doesn’t know God’s Word at all because he’s probably never been confronted by it, or even exposed to it in any meaningful way. If he were to hear the Gospel . . . hey, who knows! The Spirit might open his heart to believe and he might become another Billy Graham.

But it’s not just Lightman. Most Americans, the vast majority of them including regular church-goers, don’t know the Gospel. And they don’t care. We’re *all* products of the Enlightenment: We’re rational, humane, caring people. We eschew injustice. We have compassion for those who suffer and seek to ameliorate it. We value education and the pursuit of achievement in life. We adore virtue. These (and more) all came into the West from the Enlightenment, except that the Enlightenment demanded that it must all be without reference of any kind to any deity. So. We can get thru life perfectly well or at least adequately without knowing God’s Word.

Preachers of course faithfully proclaim the Word from the pulpit. And they have the attention of their audience. But those in the pews have no intention of allowing God’s Word to change their lives. The preached words bounce off the walls of the church auditorium and fall lifeless to the floor. The Word is made ineffective by our indifference to it. We sing, “Trust and obey” with no intention whatever of obeying – if we even know what it is we’re to obey. There’s

certainly no dearth of Bible teaching and preaching in American evangelical churches. Yet the lives of those who profess being Christian aren't changed by it. Something is wrong, *very* wrong. What is it? I suggest that it's this: We're not taking the Word of God out of our church buildings to where unbelievers are. For if those unbelievers were to hear the Word, they might embrace it to the glory of God.

Jeremiah's own nation, the very ones who were supposed to be the people of God, had no ears for the God who speaks. But a Gentile, an outsider, did. That episode of 2500 years ago narrated in the Book of Jeremiah, a cameo of what could be the situation today, screams at us today: Get the Word out. Out of the safety of the church auditorium, out of the hearing of people sated with it and immunized against it. Out of the 2-hour window on Sunday mornings when church is held. Out of the libraries and classrooms of Bible colleges and out of the living rooms of believers safely and leisurely reading their Bibles. Out into the streets where people are who need, who might want to hear God.

We are called to serve God. Not just the professionals of the church, but all of us. Every believer is to be a servant of Christ. That doesn't mean decorating Christmas trees for the front of the church auditorium, or planting flowers in front of the church building, nor paying down the mortgage on the building. It means sharing our faith with others. It means practicing righteousness, and righteousness at its fullest includes wanting to see pagans become saints. Supposing that people can come into the hearing of the Word by coming to church on Sundays is worse than silliness; it's an excuse for disobedience. Alan Lightman wouldn't attend church no matter who invited him. The invitation, if there were one, would be hollow, a mere vanity. We need to go out to where the unbelievers are and share Christ with them. To the streets, the parking lots, the open markets, the parks, the downtown sidewalks, wherever people are.

If invited to church, Lightman would probably have replied, "You want me to become just another church-goer? The narrative I believe may be inadequate in some or even many respects, but I prefer it to your religion of simply going to church on Sunday mornings and that's it. Forgiveness of sin? What sin? The Christians I've encountered aren't any different than I am already. No thanks."

But if Lightman were to hear the Gospel as the Bible presents it, he'd be a fool not to embrace it. The Creator of the universe and all it contains is a living Being, an infinitely perfect Person who can be known and experienced. He entered His creation so we can know Him, love Him and follow Him. He was put to death but rose from the dead and lives today to impart His resurrection life to all who believe in Him, a life that endures for an eternity in spite of the grave, a life that's empowered by His Spirit to enable us to live reflecting His own perfections and to serve Him in some cosmically meaningful way. Christianity isn't church-going; it's fulfilling the very purpose for which we exist, it's uniting with the eternal Creator God and participating in the love and joy of the Godhead. It's the privilege of praying to the sovereign Ruler of this cosmos and having Him respond as a father does to His children. This is what we're to proclaim, and when unbelievers hear this Gospel, they can only be malignant not to receive it with joy inexpressible and enduring gratitude.

At the time of the writing of the New Testament, Roman culture was ghastly. From emperors on down society's strata, all had a demonic penchant for violence. They practiced hideous cruelty, not only in public but in private. There were schools to teach how to murder with poisons. Anyone who died prematurely was presumed to have been murdered. Lust for power, hatreds, homosexuality, abuse of women, revenge-seeking and greed pervaded the empire. They abandoned unwanted newborn babies to die of exposure. They were idolaters, all. Yet out of this brutal, barbaric milieu, in every province and city of the empire, Christ called many of those Gentiles to Himself. And He changed their lives as they responded to the radical, clearly transcendent New Testament writings, every believer excitedly wanting to share the Jesus they loved with everyone else. And so as the Gospel outreach expanded, the church grew. That, it should be obvious, is not how church is today in America, and it's not how we should want church to return to as societal turbulence waxes and the coronavirus spread wanes. The church in America has been turned in on itself for too long.

In what direction should church leaders take the church? Out. Out of the auditoriums and onto the sidewalks, where people are. And then, in response to our obedience to Christ, the Spirit might fill us and change us, and the Church would grow in numbers and in maturity. Our lives would be loaded with eternal significance and the joy of salvation would be ours in its intended fullness. So, let's do it.