

Compassion in Transition: Wisdom from Ebed-Melech



Odds are you've never heard of Ebed-Melech.

Neither had I, until a few days ago — but he's a hidden gem.

Within the book of Jeremiah (chapter 38) we get a glimpse of this empathetic, bravehearted man.

He was black. He was obscure. He was a hero.

More background details: he was an Ethiopian eunuch who worked as a servant for King Zedekiah, during the years that Judah was besieged by the Babylonians.

Food was running out and tensions were high, to say the least. The threat of violent conquest loomed heavily over the nation, but the king and his advisors clung to the delusion that they could prevail.

You can imagine, then, how unpopular Jeremiah the prophet was when he repeatedly delivered God's message that they would surely be defeated — and that everyone had two options: *surrender* and live in captivity or *resist* and die by the sword, famine, or plague.

Such was the experience of nearly every prophet: faithfully proclaim the Word of the Lord, and be thoroughly hated for it. There's a reason why '*don't shoot the messenger*' became a common saying.

In Jeremiah's case, they didn't want the guilt of bloodshed, so they opted not to shoot him, preferring instead to lower him into a muddy, abandoned cistern — leaving him there to die slowly of starvation ("*They*" being a malicious group of officials in the royal court).

They justified this cold-blooded plan by accusing Jeremiah of being a traitor, discouraging the people, and robbing Judah's soldiers of what little morale they had left. They claimed that he was seeking to harm the nation, which was pure slander against the prophet, who selflessly served both God and his country. But because of cowardice, King Zedekiah gave in to their demands and allowed them to harm Jeremiah in this way.

It wasn't until Ebed-Melech caught wind of it, and courageously confronted King Zedekiah in public, that he reconsidered.

But Ebed-Melech, a Cushite, an official in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, Ebed-Melech went out of the palace and said to him, "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. (Jeremiah 38:7-9)

It takes guts to confront *anyone* and stand up for what is right, let alone against a king and a cabal, but Ebed-Melech acted despite the fear he undoubtedly felt, and the risk that he'd be ganged up on and thrown into that cistern next.

His indignation against the injustice and his benevolent concern for Jeremiah stood out starkly against a vast majority, who either condoned it or decided not to *get involved*.

Contrary to the self-righteous, faux-morality of many, playing Switzerland in every conflict .. is not a virtue. Ebed-Melech understood that and didn't take a cop-out.

Whenever people excuse themselves from responsibility like that, I always think, “good luck when *you* desperately need help, and no one wants to ‘*get involved.*’”

Loving our neighbor and caring for ‘the least of these’ requires that we get involved.

Rescue those who are unjustly sentenced to die; save them as they stagger to their death. (Proverbs 24:11 NLT) — Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17 NIV)

In broad daylight, Ebed-Melech brazenly approached King Zedekiah, and he called it like he saw it. The way the officials treated Jeremiah was evil, and he didn't mince words. Fortunately, the king proved weak against peer-pressure, across the board; he was just as easily swayed to do what was right, as he was to sanction what was wrong. He gave E.M. permission to take a group of men with him to rescue Jeremiah, but first E.M. made a quick detour for some unexpected supplies:

So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in 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 38:11-13 NIV)

Ebed-Melech wasn't just eager to save the prophet; he was mindful not to cause any added injury to his weakened and emaciated body. Being yanked up several stories by ropes is not a comfortable mode of travel, especially not for someone who lacks natural padding. E.M. was compassionate *and* thoughtful to make this provision so that Jeremiah wouldn't suffer more than necessary.

How often do people mean well, but end up causing harm in their attempts to play the hero? How many ribs have been broken by good samaritans who weren't properly trained to perform CPR?

There are so many different scenarios where you can cause serious harm or even death by hastily “providing care” or rushing the rescue process. If a person is hypothermic, one of the worst things you can do is put them in a hot bath. If someone has been an alcoholic for years, the worst thing you can do is pour out all of their booze and force them into sudden withdrawal. If a deep sea diver has gone to a dangerous depth, the most lethal move is to come up too fast: diver’s bends are excruciating at best, lethal at worst.

Steps should be taken to avoid unnecessary mental/emotional distress too. If you adopt a child to ‘save them’ from a bad environment, but you don’t adopt their sibling, thereby forcing them to be separated, then you need to re-evaluate. As the Bible so eloquently puts it, “even the compassion of the wicked is cruel” (Proverbs 12:10).

Other times, we may not cause harm to the person we’re trying to help, but by hastily rushing in, we render *ourselves* incapable of continuing to help — and then there are two people who need to be saved: for example, if someone has fallen through the ice and you race out there only to fall in too, then what good did that do?

(Cat carrier example. I don’t just want Max to be in a better place once we move; I want her to be comfortable *on the way there* too. She feels claustrophobic in her old carrier because she can’t stand up in it, so I picked out a new one that will lessen her discomfort while I transport her)

Let us become more intentional with our good intentions so that we can serve people better. We should pray to be like E.M — and like our Father in Heaven, whose compassion is the most thoughtful, detail-oriented and tailor-made.

Some level of stress and discomfort is unavoidable in this fallen world, but we should make an effort to minimize it where we can.

God took the Israelites along the *scenic route* through the wilderness because He knew that the shorter route would have been too brutal on them, and may have caused them to give up and turn back (Exodus 13:17-22).

He also didn’t drive all of the wicked nations out of the Promised Land at once because the terrain would have become overrun with wild beasts.

This is an allusion to deliverance for Christians because we would be worse off seven-times over if every unclean spirit was cast out the second we got saved (Matthew 12:43-45). We aren't ready to maintain that freedom right off the bat, so God protects us by doing it gradually.

It's not just about speed though, it's about being flexible and deliberate in our approach toward every unique situation. God knows that certain dynamics and certain people call for different rescue strategies. Sometimes *as quickly as possible, however possible*, is the right idea. When it's a matter of life or death, and there's no time to be cautious or gentle, then messy and imperfect action is far better than *inaction*.

Be merciful to those who doubt. Rescue others by snatching them from the flames of judgment. Show mercy to still others, but do so with great caution, hating the sins that contaminate their lives. (Jude 1:22-23)