

# A Surprising Rescuer

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[ 0 : 00 ] In the Bible, we read of God's saints, we read of the Lord's people who at various times in their lives were faithful to God and yet attracted so much hostility from those who hated God and hated God's servants.

So hated were these saints that they were imprisoned for their faithfulness and yet in God's mercy delivered through surprising means, well surprising certainly from a human perspective.

There are many examples in scripture that show us that truth. Take the Old Testament, for example, take the example of Joseph, Joseph in the book of Genesis.

Joseph who'd refused the advances of his master's wife and was put in prison because she falsely accused him of committing adultery against her.

And then Joseph in prison but released because he'd interpreted the dream of two fellow prisoners, one of whom was Pharaoh's cupbearer. Pharaoh's cupbearer later released and later telling Pharaoh of this Joseph when Pharaoh had had a dream and couldn't interpret that dream and Joseph was called to interpret it.

[ 1 : 20 ] And so was released from prison because he correctly interpreted that dream and was elevated to high position in land. One example of God's surprising deliverance of one of his saints.

The New Testament, the apostle Peter, for example, when he was imprisoned by King Herod and there was seemingly no way out of that prison, only for an angel of God to come and release him. And Peter, unable to pass by the guards without being stopped, leaving the city gate of Jerusalem, opening up its own accord to allow Peter to return to his fellow apostles.

Now we could mention many other examples in scripture to show how the Lord used surprising rescuers, surprising saviors to release his faithful servants from what seemed hopeless situations, only for God's power to be revealed and God's people delivered and rescued.

There's one example of such a rescue and such a surprising rescuer that we find in the book of Genesis.

[ 2 : 30 ] Perhaps an individual that many of us don't really know much about, but yet we find in scripture this example to show God using an individual to deliver one of God's servants, to deliver from near certain death.

And this deliverer is a man whose name is given as Ibed Melarch, an African servant who risked his life in order to rescue Jeremiah from certain death.

And the story of this servant is a remarkable account of an individual who gave himself in his work of mercy because of his faith in the one true God.

And that individual who was later rewarded for his faith when he was delivered from the hand of the Babylonians who'd come to destroy Jerusalem.

And although in many ways this individual is a relatively obscure person, there's so much to learn from this episode, so much to learn from this man in terms of, well, how God chooses to act in surprising ways, how God chooses to deliver his people, to rescue his people, to bring salvation to his own.

[ 3 : 49 ] And of course, all these examples, surely examples in scripture, the point to the great deliverer, the great saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord who surprised you by his grace. The Lord who surprised you so that you might be given that gift of faith to believe in him. The Lord who surprised you by delivering you from the power of sin and Satan.

The Lord who surprised you and has delivered you from eternal death and has brought you into his kingdom, even the eternal kingdom of God. And, you know, it's that truth that should really, well, really cause each one of us to rejoice.

It would cause you to rejoice at all times, especially in these particular days that we're living in. You know, there's so much happening in the world and especially happening through the media that's seeking to relieve the various pressures that, you know, people are living in during this time. But I pray that as we read God's word, as we are nourished by God's word, as we hear of these stories of grace that we find in God's word, I pray that this will bring true joy and true contentment and, yes, that true delivery from all the so many pressures that we're living under at the moment. [ 5 : 17 ] Because God's word directs us to the one who's our ultimate deliverer, our ultimate rescuer. The one, as we say, who's surprised you, who know him, who surprised you by his grace and has surprised you with joy.

So let's think of the story that we read in these verses in Jeremiah chapter 38. We need a little bit of background, of course, just to understand what's happening here.

Jeremiah, the prophet, he's in Jerusalem and he's there just as the Babylonians, the fierce enemy from the north is being prepared to come and invade Jerusalem.

And Jeremiah has told the people of Jerusalem, this in chapter 37, he's told them that if the people stay in Jerusalem, if they stay there, they're actually going to be lost.

But if the people go over to the Babylonians, then they're going to survive. And this was, of course, God's message given to the people through Jeremiah. But the nobleman whom we read of there at the start of chapter 38, these individuals who hated Jeremiah, hated Jeremiah as gone.

[ 6 : 37 ] These individuals regarded Jeremiah as a traitor. And these individuals, they persuade the weak king, King Zedekiah, to put Jeremiah in prison.

And it wasn't just an ordinary prison that we think of in that word. This was a particularly, not very pleasant place to end one's life.

It was a very deep underground pit. It was one of these prisons we call like a system, the system that was very wide at the bottom and narrow at the top.

And we're told in the passage there, there was mud at the bottom, the mud that Jeremiah was sinking in. We might say he was going to suffer a slow, lingering, inevitable or near inevitable death. And that's what the fate of the prophets seemed to be. Condemned to death because he'd been faithful in delivering God's word. And condemned to die at the hands of those who had no regard for God's word.

[ 7 : 44 ] And it seemed for Jeremiah, he was in a hopeless, desperate situation. But God was in control of Jeremiah's life as he's in control of your life and my life.

You know, even when times seem hopeless and desperate, God reveals his sovereign control to save and to continue to save all who are his by faith.

And God was to reveal his sovereign control even there in Jeremiah's predicament. And God was going to do this through means that seemed utterly unexpected and certainly utterly surprising. Because Jeremiah is going to be saved. Not by King Zedekiah. Not by his own relatives. Not by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah is going to be saved.

Not by an apparently obscure African servant. This individual from the area of Africa that we call the Upper Nile region in Africa.

[ 8 : 51 ] An area that straddles the border between Ethiopia and Sudan. This is a man who worked in the king's household. This is a man who was a servant there.

But a servant who was considered so inferior that he wasn't even allowed to use his birth name in the royal palace. He was given this name, Ibad Melech.

Two Hebrew words. The first word, Ibad, meaning servant. The second word, Melech, meaning king. He was considered so inferior that the designation that he was given was according to his role in the royal palace.

He was considered so insignificant in the eyes of those around him. And yet, greatly loved in the eyes of God. And despite his seeming insignificance, he was going to be the means by which God would use and God would deliver Jeremiah from that pit.

And we saw there as we read that Ibad Melech appears, as it were, out of the blue. We've been told that Jeremiah has been put in prison. He's been left there to die.

[ 10 : 03 ] He's sinking in the mud. And then out of nowhere, it seems, the name Ibad Melech appears. There's no time gap, as it were, between Jeremiah being put in that prison and Ibad Melech appearing.

Because Jeremiah has to be rescued and rescued fast. We're not told, but we can certainly assume and presume that Ibad Melech had heard Jeremiah proclaim God's word.

And Jeremiah, to be seen by Ibad Melech as truly a prophet of God, whose word must be heard and obeyed. And now Ibad Melech shows that he truly is a follower of the one true God.

And he'll show that he's following the one true God, showing his faith by his actions, as we read in the passage. So we're told he goes to the king.

The king's outside. He's at the Benjamin Gate. He's hearing complaints from his citizens. And Ibad Melech comes up to him. And with great courage, he points out the extreme danger that Jeremiah is in.

[11:10] Let's read verse 9 again. Let's read his words. My lord, the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the system.

And he will die there of hunger, for there's no bread left in the city. In many ways, Ibad Melech himself was risking his life. I mean, he is coming before the king.

He doesn't have any political role. There's no status in society to come before the king at this point. But even Melech trusts in God that he's been given this particular work to do.

And that work will be accomplished for the saving of Jeremiah and the glorifying of God's name.

Now, I've said a lot in background, a lot in relation to the detail of the story.

But I believe there are many lessons that we can learn even for our own current situation at this time. And we might say this, that God will and God does use surprising means to rescue his people, certainly during times of great need.

[12:19] We're all in great need at the moment. We're in great need of God's abiding truth to bolster us in these difficult days. We're in great need of the fellowship of the Lord's people and support of the Lord and the support of one another at this time.

And we might say God has shown us through surprising means the way by which we have been blessed in knowing that love of God, even in the fellowship that we enjoy one with another, even the very fact that we have the means before us and with us to enable us to worship God together in this particular format.

Something that I certainly would never have considered even a couple of months ago, that this is what we'd be doing on April the 19th, 2020.

Gathering together such as this, worshipping together, calling upon God, even through these means. I was speaking to a colleague just a couple of days ago and just sharing with him, as I mentioned this morning, how our own prayer meeting has almost trebled in the last few weeks since the start of this lockdown.

And he said this to me. He said it's exactly the same for the congregation that he's the interim moderator of. And, well, like myself, we might not have a particular leaning towards so much of social media, for example.

[13:52] But these are the means that God has given us to broadcast his word, to proclaim his word, to tell of the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus.

And in many ways, as we've seen even in our own congregation, that many returning, as it were, even through this form of worship, returning in fellowship, at one with another.

Remember, God is in control. And God's blessed us even with this technology that he's given us to enable you and to enable me to unite our hearts in fellowship with God and with one another.

But then we might say this in relation to the passage and the application of it. There's a message here that God uses even so many regarded as insignificant people, the so-called weak things of the world, to be God's servants and to make a difference in the lives of others as channels of God's grace.

We see that throughout Scripture. Excuse me. The shepherd boy who was made king. Ordinary men from Galilee, whom Jesus chose to be his disciples.

[15:07] Even the hated tax collector chosen to serve the one who was despised and rejected by men, the Lord Jesus, the Savior, the man of sorrows, and the one whom the world would not recognize as Lord.

But God sent Jesus, Lord Jesus, whom the world regarded as insignificant. God chose his Son to be that channel of grace by which men and women, boys and girls from every tribe and nation and people and language group might be saved.

But what about you? You know, there are times when all of us, I think, certainly myself, when we think of ourselves as insignificant, unimportant, not worthy of, you know, not worth anything to be of any service to the Lord.

But just think of this for the moment. If God has called you to be his, then you are a true ebed melech. You are a true servant of the king.

God has given you work to do and work to do for him. And just think of the opportunities that there are at this time to be that ebed melech, to be that servant of the king, to follow Jesus as that servant, as his servant, and to show forth the love of Lord Jesus to others.

[16:36] And if you're finding a reluctance so to do that, well, just remember ebed melech. Ebed melech could have said that, you know, when he heard that Jeremiah was in that system, he could have said that he was only a servant and just disregarded by so many in that royal palace.

He could have, you know, taken that line of least resistance and said, what's the point? I'm only ebed melech. I'm only the servant of the king. I'm only someone whose name no one wants to know, real name no one wants to know.

No, it's not. That wasn't what he thought. His faith overcame any apparent weakness in himself. His faith, his true faith in God led him to action.

That's why we see him coming before the king and pleading for the life of Jeremiah. Ebed melech wanted to see justice prevail. He wanted to see wrong replaced with right.

He was going to act in mercy and he'd do it by decisive action. And so the call is given for you who know the Lord Jesus as Savior, for you who serve him, for you who are ebed melech, the servant of the king.

[17:52] Well, use the opportunities that we have at the moment. And of course, all times, even when this lockdown ends, use the opportunities to speak a word in season, to encourage one another.

Yes, use the various technologies that God has blessed us with. Use them to give that word of encouragement one to another. Maybe through social media to give a text of scripture that so blessed you in recent days.

Or maybe a text message to encourage one another at this time. Remember the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples when Jesus sent them into the world.

He said this to them, I am with you always. I am with you always. He, the Lord Jesus, the great I am, the great eternal one. He's with you always.

He's with you. The great I am. With little me, little you. To do mighty things for him. And it really is a staggering thought. But, you know, in the age that we're living in, the circumstances that we're living in, it's for God's people to take that stand for truth and to truly speak in the Lord's name and to show forth the love of the Lord Jesus, a servant, a servant of the king.

[19:13] Well, Ebed-Melech certainly took his stand for truth and right. He showed it by his actions. And so we read in the passage. King Zedekiah, he listens to Ebed-Melech and God's providence accepts what he has to say.

And Ebed-Melech has granted 30 men to rescue Jeremiah from the system. And that's exactly as we read there.

We see Ebed-Melech's faith in action. That practical faith, the practical outworking of that faith, that's so vital when we proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus, when we proclaim the truth of God.

That outworking of our faith seen in works. And we see that here in the rescuing of Jeremiah. Ebed-Melech used the gifts that God had given him to undertake this particular task.

This is a servant. This is a man more used to practical things than the high reaches of political decisions in the land. This is a man who knows the layout of the royal palace.

[20:25] This is a man who knows what's there. This is a man who we see using his gifts, using his skills in the work of God. And we saw that in the detail.

We're told that he goes to a room under the treasury. He gets some old rags and worn out clothes. Things that people would just have thrown away as of no use. And, well, there's going to be much use in the rescue of Jeremiah.

And as we read there in the passage, he throws these old clothes, these rags, down the system for Jeremiah to use to put under his armpits as he's been lifted up with the ropes that are going to haul him out of that system.

Jeremiah would have been weakened. Even the very fact, the detail, we're told, of 30 men. No detail is irrelevant in Scripture. It would have taken that many men to lift Jeremiah out of that system.

If in wartime, maybe 15, 16 men were used to carry a stretcher, 30 men certainly would have been needed to lift Jeremiah out of that system.

[ 21 : 36 ] But you see what we're seeing here. Ebed-Maluch's using his gifts and abilities and experience in the service of the Lord. This is a down-to-earth practical man. He's more used to dealing with practical matters than, as we said, the great affairs of state.

But he uses what God has given him in the service of the Lord. And that's how it should be for you and for me who love the Lord Jesus.

Use the skills and the gifts that God has given you. Use them in the service of God. In this particular time, in this time of lockdown, then sure it's for the Lord's people to be at the forefront, to give as much, even as much practical help that we can in these critical times.

Of course, we have the professionals, the Christian doctors, the Christian nurses, the Christian workers, the Christian carers. We have a number of them in the congregation, even some listening in at the moment.

You're using your gifts that God has given you in the practical service that you're giving in Christ's name. One of these professionals spoke to me yesterday and said of the Lord's being with her during these critical times and of her continued trust in him for his protection as she goes about her frontline duties.

[ 23 : 04 ] And certainly Ibad Melech trusted in God as he undertook his actions in saving Jeremiah. He used what people just discarded, but he used even what God had given him to rescue Jeremiah.

These worn-out rags, these clothes that, yes, the wealthy in the palace had thought were of no use at all. But Ibad Melech using these same objects to provide that little comfort to Jeremiah's being lifted out of his dungeon.

And it's so often the little things in life that make all the difference. As somebody once said, character is formed in the little things we do.

And how often that's true. Jesus echoed these words. We are echoing Jesus' words, in fact, in saying that. We read in Matthew 10, 42.

And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth. He will certainly not lose his reward. And nothing that you do in the Lord's name is too little when you do what you do in his name.

[ 24 : 19 ] Well, as far as Ibad Melech was concerned, that little action, and using even the very rags and worn-out clothes, that showed that he had a character that was right with God.

He showed that act of self-giving love that certainly was a means of saving Jeremiah. It was an action of, you might say, the seemingly insignificant servant.

But that action and that individual saved the life of God's prophet. Because this servant, that true faith and the one true God, ensured that faith by his actions.

And nothing that you do, nothing that you will do in service for the Lord, can be too little in showing your faith in action. And so let's begin together.

Let's begin with the household of faith, with the Lord's people, in the congregation, in the wider church. I mean, we see that, if you like, in miniature in this example here.

[ 25 : 23 ] Jeremiah, the faithful prophet, saved by a faithful servant. Jeremiah, the Lord's prophet. Jeremiah, with all the various cultured privileges that he had as the Lord's prophet, and rescued by this African servant of no name, or the designation he was given.

And we see that there then, we see this example of, if you like, two very different characters, and yet united in God's love. God bringing them together to reveal the love and the compassion of God, to reveal the difference that grace makes.

And so, be kind one to another. Show the love of the Lord Jesus one to another. Go the second mile to one another.

Build one another up. Let's build one another up. Let's not tear each other down. And begin with the Lord's people. Begin there. And then extend that love and grace outside of the congregation, outside of the church, and show to whomsoever God brings you in contact with, certainly even at our social distancing, but whoever God brings before you, show the love of Christ, the Christ who

lives within you.

I firmly believe that the Lord's people are particularly being called to be used at this time to be his witnesses in the world. We live in a world that's desperate for the love of the Lord Jesus.

[ 26 : 55 ] Jesus will go forth and be a surprising rescuer. Because you who know him, you're the follower of the one who's rescued you by his surprising grace and has done so for the glory of his name.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord, you have surprised us with your grace. You surprised us with your joy. You surprised us in the many ways by which we have called upon you, even together in unity such as this.

And so, Lord, we pray that we will continue to know that surprising grace and be a means by which we can be channels of that grace towards others.

So, Lord, we pray that you will so send us forth and that we will be truly your disciples, your servants. And as servants of the King, we pray that you will give us the words to say, the actions to carry forth, and all for the sake of your name, for the glory of your great name.

Hear us, Lord, as we continue in worship before you now. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 28 : 17 ] Thank you.