

**Out of Horror, Hope:**  
**A Biblically Based Study of Torture's Ravages and**  
**Potential Responses in the Reformed Tradition**  
*from the*  
No2Torture Group (studyguide@No2Torture.org)

**Single-Event Session :**  
***What Is This Horror? How Can There Be Hope?***  
(Total time: 2–2¼ hours)

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Edited by Rev. Carol Wickersham  
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This event challenges and enables Presbyterians and others to begin to grasp the complexities of the policy and practice of torture of detainees the United States and its allies. Examining these issues by the light of faith, we encounter issues of complicity, responsibility and, finally, hope through grace and action. *Please feel free to lengthen this session as appropriate to your group.* Time allotments indicate the minimum necessary for fulfilling the experience of each element.

***Objectives:***

- To encourage participants to explore their thoughts about the presence of torture in our society.
- To provide a basic Biblical context for study.
- To acquaint participants with current questions about the practice of torture in society and with terminology used in discussions of torture.

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- To be exposed to the stories of victims, as well as key issues surrounding the experience of torture.
- To encourage hope through Scripture and the 2004 General Assembly's *Resolution and Confession on the Torture and Abuse of Prisoners*.
- To encourage active, outward response to the issue, and to the work of the Holy Spirit among the participants.

***Scriptures used:***

- Jeremiah 38:4-13 (see commentary in Appendix 2)
- James 1:22-25

***Session Outline:***

1. **Overview with Prayer** (5 minutes)
2. **Timeline** [optional] (0–6 minutes)
3. **Free Association with the Word “Torture”** (10 minutes)
4. **Biblical Foundations: A Time for Hope** (15 minutes)
5. **A Personal Account of Torture** (15–20 minutes)
6. **So, What Is Torture?** (15–20 minutes)
7. **Sing *O God, Our Words Cannot Express* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette** (2 minutes)
8. **Examining Our Assumptions about Torture** (20 minutes)
9. **SO WHAT?** (15 minutes)
10. **Group Brainstorming of Action Ideas/Steps They Can Try** (20 minutes)
11. **Confession** (5 minutes)
12. **Closing** (2 minutes)

***Handouts provided for this session:***

1. Responsive prayer
2. *Timeline: Our Involvement with Torture Since September 11, 2001*
3. Text of Jeremiah 38:4–13
4. *It's Time to Say No to Torture (Part 1, Excerpts)* by Doug King
5. *Alleged Detention and Interrogation Practices* by Amnesty International
6. Hymn: *O God, Our Words Cannot Express* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette

7. *What Is Torture?* by the Center for Victims of Torture
8. *Eight Lessons on Torture* from the Center for Victims of Torture
9. *A Resolution and Confession on the Torture and Abuse of Prisoners* by the 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2004) of the PC(USA)
10. *A Call to Say No! to Torture* from Rick Ufford-Chase and Ed Brogan
11. *What We Can Do* by the No2Torture Group
12. *12-Point Program for the Prevention of Torture...* by Amnesty International
13. *Internet Resources on Torture*
14. Responsive Confession

***Facilitators should prepare for the session by:***

1. Contemplating the Scripture passages that will be discussed
2. Pre-reading all articles
3. Setting up newsprint pages with headings if desired
4. Writing the opening litany, hymn and confession on newsprint, if desired

***Items needed for this session:***

Newsprint

Marking pens

Bibles

Three marked copies of Jeremiah 38:4–13 for Part 5 (available as Appendix 1)

Copies of the resource articles

Writing papers, pens and envelopes

Sample letters

## ***What Is This Horror? How Can There Be Hope?***

### **1. Overview with Prayer (5 minutes)**

#### **Instructions:**

Distribute the “responsive prayer” handout, then begin by offering these words to those gathered:

Acts of torture have been with us since before the book of Genesis was written. Judges 19 tells us the gruesome story of the fate of a “certain Levite’s” concubine. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern and left to rot. Early Christians were tortured by the Romans for their belief in Jesus Christ. The Middle Ages witnessed the Inquisition. Salem, Massachusetts in the 1600’s was the scene of horrible violence perpetrated against women who were suspected of witchcraft. During World War II, the Nazis committed horrific acts against human beings. Modern times are full of fresh examples: the killing fields of Cambodia, Peru, El Salvador, South Africa, Argentina and Chile.

Police and armed forces often claim that torture is the lesser evil — that the damages and loss of human life that might be inflicted by suspected guerrillas or terrorists outweighs the use of violence in interrogating them. Yet studies show the information garnered through such tactics is fiction more often than fact. Rarely is useful information obtained through the relentless application of emotional, mental or physical pain. Over time evidentiary links between those tortured and those whom the torturers seek becomes more and more tenuous until people are picked up simply because the person who had been tortured so feared for his or her life that s/he pointed towards generalized groups who live in particular areas or work in certain places. Further, those who inflict such pain on other human beings are themselves debilitated.

It is with this in mind that this event was created. Here you will be allowed to use your mind, your heart and your soul in an effort to begin to grasp the complexities of the policy, practice, and experience of torture by the United States and its allies, especially of our post 9/11 detainees. And here you will be challenged to respond to the issue proactively according to how *you* sense God working in your own life.

Let us pray together:

One: Gracious God, Omnipotent God, we live in a broken and fearful world,

**Many: A world that permits our brothers and sisters to live in the constant fear of arrest,**

One: A world where persecution and maltreatment have come to seem like business as usual.

**Many: Those who abuse others may not be sadists but may believe they act for a noble cause, or they are following orders, or they forget it is wrong because everyone is doing it.**

One: And so we pray for those who are tortured and those who torture and for ourselves.

**Many: The knowledge of the existence of such pain tears us spiritually limb from limb!**

One: Living God, through your Holy Spirit, give us courage to witness among all people to Christ as Lord and Savior.

**Many: Help us to unmask idolatries in church and culture.**

One: Let us hear the voices of peoples long silenced.

**Many: Let us work with others for justice, freedom and peace.**

One: And in gratitude to you for the gift of life itself, let us strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for your new heaven and earth, praying,

**Many: “Come, Lord Jesus!” Amen.**

(By Deborah Bowsher, based on *A Brief Statement of Faith; Book of Confessions: 10.465-10.476*.)

## 2. Timeline [optional] (6 minutes)

***If not provided during the session, distribute the Timeline at the end to take home.***

The leader arranges to have someone distribute the *Timeline: Our Involvement...* handout, then continues:

We are aware that torture and abuse are present in our society today. The timeline that we are now distributing to you will help us get a sense of present day practices. Let's take a few minutes to look over the timeline before we proceed.

After 2–3 minutes has gone by, ask people to share their reactions with one other person in the group. Allow 3 minutes, then continue with these words:

Yes, free societies absolutely must pursue programs of diligent self defense in order to maintain their values of life, truth, and justice. However, by acting in ways that degrade or dehumanize any other human being – regardless of what s/he is suspected of having done – nations undermine the rights, freedoms and morals that form their own core values. The international community, through both the Geneva Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights decries the subjection of persons to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment. The 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly's *Resolution and Confession on the Torture and Abuse of Prisoners* also speaks forcefully, calling for adherence to internationally agreed upon standards, as well as calling for our acknowledgment of the part we play by action or inaction.

As Christians, the memory of the photos from Abu Ghraib causes confusion and grief in our hearts. How could we participate in something that goes so completely against what we have been taught? Yet we are separated from the reality of the situation by what seems to be an impenetrably dense, grey cloud of bureaucratic fog. The questions posed by the implementation of current policies on torture are many. The answers are complicated. I'd like to ask you to think out loud with me now...

### 3. **Free Association with the Word “Torture”** (10 minutes)

#### **Instructions:**

Explain to participants that it is important that we have a common understanding of torture that can bring us together and guide us in effectively discerning our responses to those acts.

- Write the word “Torture” in the center of a sheet of newsprint. Ask participants for the first thoughts and feelings that come to them when they hear the word “Torture.”
- As people share, record their responses on the newsprint. Put down ALL responses. Do not question or judge – even with facial expressions. Just record.
- Post the newsprint for all to see throughout the session.
- Invite participants to think for a moment about these words and ask:
  - a) “How do you suppose God feels and thinks about torture?”
  - b) “What is the role of fear in the practice of torture?”
  - c) “Where/When/How does torture fit into our lives as Christians?”

#### 4. **Biblical Foundations: A Time for Hope** (15 minutes)

##### **Instructions:**

This is a group oral reading of Jeremiah 38:4–13.

- If possible have three different volunteers read verses aloud.

Volunteer A: verses 4, 11, 13;

Volunteer B: verses 5–6, 10;

Volunteer C: verses 7–9, 12.

For simplicity, readers may use copies with their parts marked (Appendix 1).

- After reading this passage, ask these questions of the group:
  - a) Which character do you relate to in this story? Why?
  - b) How does your soul feel after hearing about what happened to Jeremiah?
  - c) What message do you think the story provided for early Israelites?
  - d) Ebed-melech was an Ethiopian in Zedekiah’s court. What is the significance of the fact that a foreigner was to save Jeremiah?
  - e) How does the passage relate to today’s situation?

Jeremiah's “crime” was very different from some allegedly committed by U.S. detainees. However, there may be parallels in their lack of ability to defend against charges, as well as punishment that is “cruel and unusual.”
- Be sure that verse 13 is recognized by the group as something that points us towards the hope that all people who experience torture can be pulled up and out of the desperation they probably feel. Remind them that God’s voice is reflected in this passage.

## 5. A Personal Account of Torture (15–20 minutes)

### Instructions:

- Pass out the *Say No to Torture (Part 1, Excerpts)* article by Doug King.
- Ask the group to read it – quietly on their own, or orally with each person reading one paragraph.
- After everyone has read the excerpts, ask “What causes people to 'say anything to satisfy the torturer' – fear or hope?” After people have thought this over and shared their thoughts, ask them:
  - a) “Are we outside the perimeter of guilt for the torture inflicted upon people in the name of security?”
  - b) “Are we responsible for these people – or anyone that may be tortured in the name of security?”

## 6. So, What Is Torture? (15–20 minutes)

### Instructions:

- Hand out Amnesty International’s list of *Alleged detention and interrogation practices*.
- If there are more than 7 in the class, break it into 4–5 person small groups.
- Ask participants to use an exclamation mark to indicate the items on the list that they don’t agree to be acts of torture, and a question mark to indicate the ones about which they are unsure.
- After the group has had 2–5 minutes to do this, read through the list together, asking group members to speak out if they have marked the item in either way.
- Ask the group to discuss the marked items to learn what’s behind their opinions. Remind them that there are no right or wrong answers, and that each person is entitled to speak her/his mind about these acts without arguments as we are here to learn from each other.

**7. Sing *O God, Our Words Cannot Express* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2 minutes)**

**Instructions:**

Let the group know that the inner turmoil they may well now be feeling is something that God anticipates. Then say words similar to: “Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is the co-pastor of the Limestone Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware and author of *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Geneva Press, 2000). She has written a new hymn that might help us voice what is now in our hearts. This hymn is set to an old and familiar tune. You’ll recognize it as “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” It is important to remember that right now, just as in ages past, God is present among us and can help us come to grips with what it is we are experiencing.”

*If the group is reticent about singing together, invite them to read the hymn aloud, as an oral prayer together.*

Be ecologically minded and post the words on newsprint for all to see; text is also reproduced as a handout.

**8. Examining Our Assumptions About Torture (20 minutes)**

**Instructions:**

- Distribute the “*What Is Torture?*” and *Eight Lessons on Torture* handouts.
- Ask for volunteers to read aloud the UN definition of torture.
- Have others read aloud the eight bullet points below the definitions.
- Ask the group:

*“What comes to your mind when you hear these words?”*

Allow the group to talk for four minutes. Invite a participant to serve as newsprint scribe for this. When everyone has had an opportunity to express him/herself, summarize their words.

- Ask: What have we learned about torture thus far?
- Then say words like these:

The Minnesota-based Center for Victims of Torture is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1985. The first organization of its kind in the United States and the third in the world, CVT has pioneered a comprehensive assessment and care program that is unique in the U.S. They offer us these lessons about torture. Some of this information we heard about today. Some you

may have already known. Some you may have never considered. Regardless it's OK. You are all here now and are learning about these practices – and the results they garner – which are now occurring in some military installations. It's also important to recognize that torture in some forms is also practiced in some of our state prisons across the country. While this is a frightening situation that deserves our attention, today we have been focused on the situation as experienced by people in places known and unknown. A little sleuthing on the web reveals a great deal more than we can cover here today. But what can we take away from our time together? Let's look at CVT's 'Eight Lessons.'

- Invite participants to volunteer to read aloud the salient points which are underlined (and in red, if printed in color) and the **explanatory text which is bolded (and in blue, if printed in color)**.

#### 9. SO WHAT? (15 minutes)

##### **Instructions:**

Ask the participants this question:

So what does all this mean to us? Based on what we have witnessed today, and what you may have known before regarding torture, what, *if anything* should we do about this matter? Before we answer this question let us remember the words of James 1:22–25:

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are merely like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.”

Allow the group to talk through their thoughts on this for 2-3 minutes. During the conversation remind them of the *Resolution and Confession on the Torture and Abuse of Prisoners* by The 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2004) of the PC(USA) [included as a handout]. Read the resolution and discuss briefly.

## 10. Group Brainstorming of Action Ideas/Steps They Can Try (20 minutes)

### **Instructions:**

- Ask the group to brainstorm aloud about things that they might do in response to torture. Remind them that, as is true of any real brainstorming, there is no room for debate – there is no right or wrong idea. This is a time to allow each person the chance to begin to discern how the Holy Spirit is working in their minds, hearts and souls regarding the practice of torture in prisons.
- Use the newsprint to list all of the ideas as they surface.
- *If the group needs ideas*, stimulate the discussion:
  - ◆ Refer to the handouts provided: *A Call to Say No!...* and *What We Can Do*;  
OR
  - ◆ Distribute copies of *Amnesty International's 12-Point Program*, then ask the group to suggest specific actions to implement the program.
- After a few minutes of activity, take the paper and post the ideas next to the thoughts and feelings listed at the beginning of the session.
- Be sure that the list includes:
  - ◆ Ideas that will enable us to support captors, as well as captives; captors may also be victims of circumstances beyond their understanding or control.
  - ◆ Ways to address public policy through advocacy. One of the simplest ways to stay on top of current issues, so as to address public officials, is through the [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/) site (click on “Act Now” and then on “Stopping Torture”). Making a commitment to write a letter a week (or a day!) can be a powerful form of spiritual discipline! In addition to this site, many of the other organizations on the Internet Resources list have advocacy suggestions.
  - ◆ The suggestion to attend the Jan. 6, 2006 gathering in Miami, Florida with Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase for a time of public witness, prayer, study, and strategizing. For details, see the [www.No2Torture.org/](http://www.No2Torture.org/) or [www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/](http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/) websites.
- When the brainstorming has followed its course, distribute, for future study and action, any remaining handouts, including *Internet Resources...* that lists Internet sites and curriculum references related to torture.

## 11. **Confession** (5 minutes)

Set the context by reminding the group that, even as we are aware of the horror of torture, we are also aware that God's love is more powerful. God always offers the possibility of change and forgiveness. Aware of God's steadfast love, we dare to look at the uncomfortable possibility of our own complicity as individuals and citizens. Have our ignorance, silence, indifference or cynicism contributed to the problem? Have we accepted easy explanations and assigned blame, rather than insisting on investigations that might reveal uncomfortable truths?. God asks us to search our souls, so that we might repent and receive God's transforming mercy, as we strive to witness to Christ's reconciling work in the world.

After these words, invite people to take at least 2 to 3 minutes for silent confession. Then invite people to either speak their prayers out loud, as the Spirit moves, or join in the litany below, saying:

Others who are equally concerned about the presence of torture in our society wrote the words for the confession on the newsprint before you[or handout].

Let's say them together:

Leader: Heavenly Creator, you have told us we do not live or die to ourselves,

**People: Yet act as if life and death decisions are ours to make.**

L: Through Christ you have revealed yourself as Lord of all Life,

**P: Yet we've chosen to pass judgment on the lives of our brothers and sisters.**

L: We know that one day you will judge us by how we have treated the most vulnerable,

**P: Yet we still despise and dehumanize other human beings.**

L: You tell us to love you with our hearts, minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

*P: And so we ask that, in your mercy, you teach us to be accountable to you. Bless us, O God, that we might leave our insecurities behind and instead come to show your compassion even to those who frighten us.*

**AMEN.**

Remind everyone that this is just a beginning and each is invited to pursue their interests on this topic on their own or in groups as appropriate.

## 12. Closing (2 minutes)

### **Instructions:**

- Thank everyone for attending.
- Invite them to continue to pray about what they have experienced today.
- Invite them to continue to think of, and act on, responses to what they have learned about today.
- Close by sharing in either Psalm 23 or the Lord's Prayer together.

## Appendix 1

### <sup>NRS</sup> Jeremiah 38:4–13

#### For Reader A (in a 3-Part Reading)

#### Verses 4, 11, 13

<sup>4</sup>Then the officials said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." <sup>5</sup>King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." <sup>6</sup>So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. <sup>7</sup>Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, <sup>8</sup>So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, <sup>9</sup>"My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." <sup>10</sup>Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." <sup>11</sup>So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of<sup>1</sup> the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. <sup>12</sup>Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian<sup>a</sup> said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. <sup>13</sup>Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

<sup>a</sup>Or *Nubian*.

**<sup>NRS</sup> Jeremiah 38:4–13**  
**For Reader B (in a 3-Part Reading)**  
**Verses 5–6, 10**

<sup>4</sup> Then the officials said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." <sup>5</sup> King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." <sup>6</sup> So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. <sup>7</sup> Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, <sup>8</sup> So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, <sup>9</sup> "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." <sup>10</sup> Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." <sup>11</sup> So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of<sup>1</sup> the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. <sup>12</sup> Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian<sup>a</sup> said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. <sup>13</sup> Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

<sup>a</sup> Or *Nubian*.

**<sup>NRS</sup> Jeremiah 38:4–13**  
**For Reader C (in a 3-Part Reading)**  
**Verses 7–9, 12**

<sup>4</sup> Then the officials said to the king, "This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." <sup>5</sup> King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." <sup>6</sup> So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. <sup>7</sup> Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate. <sup>8</sup> So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king. <sup>9</sup> "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." <sup>10</sup> Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,<sup>a</sup> "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." <sup>11</sup> So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of<sup>1</sup> the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. <sup>12</sup> Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian<sup>a</sup> said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. <sup>13</sup> Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.<sup>a</sup>

Or *Nubian*.

## Appendix 2

### Commentary on Jeremiah 38:4–13

In Jeremiah readers witness the destruction of the Temple and the people's exile through the eyes of the prophet and the pen of his scribe, Baruch. Here, placed on Judah's throne by the Babylonians, King Zedekiah and God's children are besieged by that empire. The southern kingdom is in its last days. The relationship between Zedekiah and Jeremiah is ever tenuous. Chapter 37 tells reader of how the grandson of Hananiah, one of the court's prophets, well-liked for his continually positive predictions, accuses Jeremiah of desertion to the Babylonians. This results in a terrific beating of, and subsequent imprisonment for, Jeremiah. Yet the prophet pleads his case to Zedekiah, who merely confines him to the Court of the Guard instead of the cistern house's cells.

While imprisoned in the court of the guard, Jeremiah has continued to speak out to the frightened people on behalf of God, asking their obedience for their own well-being. He points them toward the knowledge that God intends for them to live and urges the survivors of this siege to surrender so that their lives will be spared "as a prize of war." But the people are of a mind to blame God for their current pain. Already fearful and agitated, they do not want to hear predictions that additional death by sword, famine and pestilence will befall them, unless they give up their dream of self rule.

In the belief that Jeremiah is endangering the state by his disruptive behavior, four government officials act to remove him from the community. Taking the law into their own hands, these unnamed, but powerful, officials complain to their powerless king, Zedekiah. Apparently without consulting Mosaic law, these four condemn Jeremiah and demand his life. Acquiescing to them and betraying the man he had befriended, Zedekiah acknowledges not only their power, but also his lack of leadership capacity. In an act of cowardice, Jeremiah's fate is turned over to these vigilante officials.

Victorious, these officials now determine to act technically within the bounds of the law. Rather than spilling Jeremiah's blood on their hands and thus becoming impure, they simply throw him into the soggy bottom of an empty cistern and leave. Though it is uncertain if this act was made in public, it is safe to say Jeremiah effectively disappeared and was expected to die slowly of starvation and exposure, his body rotting in the wet mud into which he sank.

But nothing can truly be kept a secret, and the news of Jeremiah's situation reaches the ears of a certain Ethiopian eunuch who served the king. The author of the Book chooses Ebed-melech as the Ethiopian's name. Translated this name means "servant of the king," but he comes on this scene from out of nowhere. Readers must ask how a non-Israelite came to be in the king's service, and more importantly, which king does he serve? Ebed-melech's

courageous voice is heard petitioning the king at the Benjamin Gate – a very open and public place that is far removed from the private palatial rooms in which the four officials made their case. Could Ebed-melech be speaking not just to Zedekiah but also to all people who were within hearing distance? Could Ebed-melech be speaking on behalf of God?

Attempting to appear powerful and compassionate before the people, Zedekiah waffles from his earlier decision and authorizes three men accompany this servant in the proposed rescue. Where four men threw away the prophet's life, now four others were gently and carefully pulling him by rag-wrapped ropes back out into fresh air and daylight.

This passage encourages contemporary readers to consider the kind of moral and religious character possessed by political leaders and their advisers, but there is something even more important contained in these words. Jeremiah precedes Jesus as one who reminds us that God's desire for life and wholeness for all those who believe in him is not necessarily lived out in the way we might expect. We all prefer independence over oppression and domination from afar. Indeed we feel threatened by those who are unlike us, and we actively fear their ways. Yet here, God invites the Judeans to have faith that in him their lives will be made whole and peaceful whether or not they are in control of their country.

In Ebed-melech, God even sends a second messenger to prove the point. Jeremiah has been subjected to harsh beatings, imprisonment, and starvation at the bottom of a dank and dark cistern. For most of us, such a death would feel torturous. But Ebed-melech reminds us what it means to act in faithful service to God. He counters common wisdom about Jeremiah and seeks to follow God's law and return the society to a somewhat more honorable status by raising the prophet back up into the community. Unwittingly, even Zedekiah participates in this process by commanding that others help Ebed-melech return Jeremiah to the Court of the Guards.

No, perfection is not achieved here, but the lesson is powerful: By working together, society can find ways for people to balance the tension between our fears of outside threats and our desire to live within God's law. And when we locate that place, we will be better able to find ways to grow towards wholeness and shalom in God's light.

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