

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)

First Session:

What Is This Horror? How Can There Be Hope?

(Total time: 60–75 minutes)

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Edited by Rev. Carol Wickersham

October, 2005

Objectives:

- To explore our thoughts about the presence of torture in our society.
- To provide a basic Biblical context for study.
- To open participants' ears to the stories of those who torture either by choice or by coercion, and confessionally acknowledge our role in enabling torture.
- To acquaint participants with the recent history of torture and the terminology used.
- To enable participants to experience hope when dealing with this issue.

Scripture used in this session:

- Jeremiah 38:4–13 (see commentary in Appendix 2)

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Session outline:

1. **Introduction to the Five-Week Series:** (17 minutes)
2. **Free Association on the Word “Torture”** (10 minutes)
3. **Putting a Face on Torture** (0–15 minutes)
4. **So, What Is Torture?** (15 minutes)
5. **Biblical Foundations: A Time for Hope** (15 minutes)
6. **Closing** (3 minutes)

Handouts provided for this session:

1. Responsive prayer
2. *Timeline: Our Involvement with Torture Since September 11, 2001*
3. Article: *A Victim’s Story* [*Note: This article is still being written; we ask facilitators to work without it at this time. It will be uploaded as soon as possible.*]
4. *Alleged Detention and Interrogation Practices* by Amnesty International
5. “*What Is Torture?*” by the Center for Victims of Torture
6. Text of Jeremiah 38:4–13

Facilitators should prepare for the session by:

1. Contemplating the Scripture passage that will be discussed
2. Reading all articles
3. Setting up newsprint pages with headings, if desired

Items needed for this session:

Copies of the resource articles

Newsprint

Marking pens

Bibles

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

What Is This Horror? How Can There Be Hope?

1. Introduction to the Five-Week Series: (17 minutes)

The leader should outline what will happen in the next few weeks by saying words similar to those below. The prayer is particularly important and should be used as written to help focus everyone on the core issue and on how we have been called to respond as Reformed people. The second half of the introductory remarks allows the leader to prepare everyone for today's lesson in particular.

“Welcome to our study. During our time together over the next few weeks we hope to challenge and enable you to use your mind, heart and soul 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 you will be challenged to respond to the issue proactively according to how *you* sense God working in your own life. To do this we plan to help you begin to answer some key questions:

- a. What is all this talk about torture?
- b. What is torture? Is the U.S. involved in torture?
- c. What does Christianity have to say about torture?
- d. How should Christians view torture?
- e. What can we do to support our troops in crisis?

We have planned to meet four more times in the next few weeks to accomplish our task. Here you'll find a safe space in which to explore your own thoughts and feelings about the practice of torture. We will also study what the Bible and our Reformed tradition have to say about the matter. Together we will look at a little history and a lot of current events, and we'll learn the language being used by people around the globe when they talk about torture. We'll hear the stories of people who have been tortured and of those who have witnessed or practiced torture. We'll also seek to understand what people experience in their lives after the torture has stopped. We recognize that this sort of topic is, at best, uncomfortable for people to deal with. Torture is an ugly and angry beast. We do not intend for anyone to leave feeling as though the situation is hopeless. So each week we will take a few moments to seek out and experience a little of God's grace. Our last session will focus especially on this. Are there any questions thus far? (Answer questions.)

OK, let's begin with prayer. 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*.)

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

Torture has 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 the victims of Roman torture before Constantine made Christianity the official state religion. 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, while

many Christians stood by – their senses numbed. Modern times are full of fresh examples: the killing fields of Cambodia, Peru, El Salvador, South Africa, Argentina and Chile. And we also are aware that torture and abuse are present in our society today. This study focuses on current practices, but we give this overview to remind ourselves that torture is not confined to one ideology, nor is it practiced by only one political party or belief system. Its roots are sunk deep in the covert corners of many cultures. Nonetheless, many sense what is new is that torture is becoming a more acceptable practice—more normal.

The timeline that we are now distributing will help us to get a sense of present day practices. Let's take a couple of minutes to look the timeline over before we proceed.

After 2–3 minutes have gone by, invite people to share their reactions with one other person in the group. Allow 5 minutes, then, continue with these words:

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 that the information garnered through such tactics is more often fiction 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 become more and more tenuous until people are picked up simply because the tortured person so feared for his or her life that s/he pointed towards generalized groups living in particular areas or working in certain places. Further, those who inflict such pain on other human beings are themselves debilitated.

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, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The 216th 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 our action or inaction.

As Christians, the memory of the photos from Abu Ghraib causes confusion and grief in our hearts. How could we be complicit 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. But we can begin by struggling to understand. I'd like to ask you to think out loud with me now...

2. Free Association with the Word “Torture” (10 minutes)

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 “How do you suppose God feels and thinks about torture?”

3. Putting a Face on Torture (0–15 minutes)

Read and reflect on *A Victim's Story*. Alternatively, if time is short, let people take the story home to read. ***[This article is still being written. It will be uploaded onto the website as soon as possible. Until then please move on to item #4 below.]***

4. **So, What Is Torture?** (15 minutes)

If the class is larger than seven, break into 4–5-person subgroups for the following:

- Hand out Amnesty International’s list of *Alleged detention and interrogation practices*.
- 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.
- Ask everyone to consider these discussions prayerfully at home over the next week.
- Distribute the “*What Is Torture?*” handout and ask everyone to read that at home, as well.

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

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 the 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 saved 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 the accused being unable to

defend against charges, as well as being subjected to 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.

6. Closing (3 minutes)

- Thank everyone for sharing in today’s experience.
- Ask them to consider, until the next session, how they can best serve Christ given the experiences they have shared and the information they have learned today.
- Invite them to express their thoughts through journaling or writing a poem or drawing a picture or in whatever other way they feel drawn.
- Offer a brief closing prayer or invite everyone to say the Mizpah Benediction:

“The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.”

If the Benediction is used, make sure it is pre-written on newsprint for all to read.

Appendix 1

^{NRS} **Jeremiah 38:4–13**

For Reader A (in a 3-Part Reading)

Verses 4, 11, 13

⁴Then 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." ⁵King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." ⁶So 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. ⁷Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a 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, ⁸So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, ⁹"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." ¹⁰Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." ¹¹So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of¹ the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. ¹²Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian^a said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. ¹³Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

^aOr *Nubian*.

^{NRS} Jeremiah 38:4–13
For Reader B (in a 3-Part Reading)
Verses 5–6, 10

⁴ 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." ⁵ King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." ⁶ 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. ⁷ Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a 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, ⁸ So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, ⁹ "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." ¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." ¹¹ So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of¹ the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. ¹² Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian^a said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. ¹³ Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

^a Or *Nubian*.

^{NRS} Jeremiah 38:4–13
For Reader C (in a 3-Part Reading)
Verses 7–9, 12

⁴ 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." ⁵ King Zedekiah said, "Here he is; he is in your hands; for the king is powerless against you." ⁶ 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. ⁷ Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a 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. ⁸ So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king. ⁹ "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." ¹⁰ Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian,^a "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." ¹¹ So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of¹ the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. ¹² Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian^a said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so. ¹³ Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.^a

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.

Sources:

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