

23.15 Jeremiah in a Cistern (Jeremiah 38; 39:15–18)

✓ “*Check*” it out; opinion, inference, supposed conversation, or fact one can verify follows.

[. . .] Brackets indicate a remark to the teacher that will not be read aloud; they also show answers to questions.

Visuals and Tools:

- Pictures and other visuals found at the end of this lesson. Check “Activities” and “Handwork” found below for additional materials. Please give credit to the sources of pictures. Likenesses of characters change with the variety of pictures. Hopefully, this isn’t too confusing to young minds.
- Ropes and rags

Bible Time Tips and Terms to Teach: Vocabulary words are enlarged for flashcards at the end of this lesson. Print on colorful cardstock and cut apart.

- *cistern*: a pit where much water is stored
- *surrender*: to give up—as to an enemy

Scripture: (ESV)

Jeremiah 38:1 Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people: 2 “Thus says the Lord: He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, but he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. He shall have his life as a prize of war, and live. 3 Thus says the Lord: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken.” 4 Then the officials said to the king, “Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of 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, “Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you.” 6 So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. And there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

7 When Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch who was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern—the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate— 8 Ebed-melech went from the king’s house and said to the king, 9 “My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city.” 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, “Take thirty men with you from here, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of 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 in 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 said to Jeremiah, “Put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes.” Jeremiah did so. 13 Then they drew Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

14 King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the Lord. The king said to Jeremiah, “I will ask you a question; hide nothing from me.” 15 Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I tell you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you counsel, you will not listen to me.” 16 Then King Zedekiah swore secretly to Jeremiah, “As the Lord lives, who made our souls, I will not put you to death or deliver you into the hand of these men who seek your life.”

17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. 18 But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.” 19 King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they deal cruelly with me.” 20 Jeremiah said, “You

shall not be given to them. Obey now the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall be well with you, and your life shall be spared. 21 But if you refuse to surrender, this is the vision which the Lord has shown to me: 22 Behold, all the women left in the house of the king of Judah were being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and were saying, “Your trusted friends have deceived you and prevailed against you; now that your feet are sunk in the mud, they turn away from you.’ 23 All your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon, and this city shall be burned with fire.”

24 Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Let no one know of these words, and you shall not die. 25 If the officials hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,’ 26 then you shall say to them, ‘I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’” 27 Then all the officials came to Jeremiah and asked him, and he answered them as the king had instructed him. So they stopped speaking with him, for the conversation had not been overheard. 28 And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

39:15 The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah while he was shut up in the court of the guard: 16 “Go, and say to Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will fulfill my words against this city for harm and not for good, and they shall be accomplished before you on that day. 17 But I will deliver you on that day, declares the Lord, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. 18 For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the Lord.’”

Introduction/Review:

Time and again Jeremiah prophesied against King Zedekiah and Jerusalem. “Go out and surrender to the Chaldeans, and you will live,” he said. “Stay in the city or try to fight against Nebuchadnezzar, and you will”—what? [Die by sword or by famine or by pestilence.] What do we mean by *sword*, *famine*, and *pestilence*? [War, starvation, or sickness.] ✓King Zedekiah was a weak king. He kept asking for a word from the Lord but then did what the men around him wanted to do, which was to trust the false prophets.

Story:

Leaders want Jeremiah put to death

Jeremiah 38 specifically names four princes and elders. These men came to King Zedekiah saying, “We hear what Jeremiah is saying to everyone: [Teacher, speak in a sarcastic tone.] ‘Thus says the LORD, He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, famine, or pestilence; but he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live. This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon and be taken.’”

“O, King, let this man Jeremiah be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers and people who are left in this city by speaking such words to them. He is not seeking our welfare, but our harm.”

What did these men want Zedekiah to do to Jeremiah? [Put him to death.] Why? [Because they thought he was weakening the soldiers and the people by saying they should surrender.] Did these men think Jeremiah was giving God’s message? [No.] Was he? [Yes.] How do you know? [Things he had prophesied had taken place—like Hananiah’s death and Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem.]

Zedekiah's answer

Listen to what Zedekiah said. This shows how very weak a king he was. “Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you.” In other words, the king, Zedekiah, although he had promised security to Jeremiah, was unable to command these men. He just said, “Go ahead and do what you wish, for I can’t do anything against your wishes.”

Jeremiah put in a cistern

Oh, no! What would happen to Jeremiah? ✓Perhaps the men wished Jeremiah to die slowly, for they put him

in a cistern in the court of the king's son. The cistern was deep enough that the men had to let Jeremiah into it with ropes. When his feet neared the bottom, Jeremiah felt something cold and wet. It was mud. His feet sank into the mud, and ✓he probably kept slowly sinking until, finally, his feet landed on rock. ✓Some Bible teachers think he might have sunk to at least to his chest, but we don't know for sure. What a way to die! What a way to treat an old man. What a way to treat God's prophet!

Ebed-melech's intercession

One of the king's servants, a black man named Ebed-melech, didn't like what was happening to Jeremiah. He went to the king and said, "My lord the king, these men have done evil in what they did to Jeremiah by casting him into the cistern, and he will die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city."

"Take from here thirty men with you, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon before he dies," commanded King Zedekiah.

Ebed-melech did as the king commanded. With thirty men, they could withstand the wicked men who had put Jeremiah in the cistern in the first place. But how would they get Jeremiah out of that mud hole? Ebed-melech figured out a way. Having lived in the palace, he knew where to get some old rags. "Here, Jeremiah," he called as he dropped rags, one at a time, down into the pit. "Put these rags under your armpits for a cushion. [Teacher, wait a dramatic moment.] Are the rags in place? Now, I'll let down some ropes. You put them under the rags. We will pull you out of that wretched hole!"

Jeremiah placed the rags and ropes as Ebed-melech instructed. Those rags would make it slightly more comfortable for Jeremiah to be pulled out of the mud.

Pulling Jeremiah out [✓The following conversation is fictionalized.]

"I'm ready," Jeremiah called up to Ebed-melech.

"All right, men. Let's pull—gently at first because that mud will be pulling on Jeremiah. Gently! Keep pulling! Jeremiah, are you free of the mud yet?"

"Yes."

"We can tell. You seem much lighter now. Keep pulling, men. There. Let us help you out of that hole, Jeremiah. Here sit down."

"Thank you. Thank you. I surely would have died if I had stayed in that cistern much longer. Thank you, indeed, Ebed-melech."

Zedekiah's request

Before long, King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah again. "I will ask you something. Hide nothing from me," Zedekiah said.

Jeremiah replied, "If I hide nothing from you, will you not surely put me to death? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me anyway."

✓Perhaps King Zedekiah moved closer to Jeremiah and with an oath promised in hushed tones, "As the LORD lives, I will not put you to death, nor will I give you into the hand of these men who seek your life."

Then Jeremiah answered Zedekiah: "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: 'If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon, then you shall live; this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your family shall live. But if you do not surrender to Babylon's princes, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans. They shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.'"

Sounds like a "no-brainer" to me. What would you do? What will Zedekiah say?

Zedekiah's fear

Zedekiah was afraid, not of the Chaldeans but of the Jews who had already surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar.

He said, “I’m afraid those Hebrews will hurt me.”

✓This fear seems so ridiculous to me, but since Zedekiah had not been trusting God, perhaps he was more susceptible to unfounded fears.

“Don’t worry about them,” said Jeremiah. “They shall not deliver *you*. Please, obey the voice of the LORD which I speak to you. If so, it shall be well with you, and your soul shall live. But if you refuse to surrender, this *is* the word that the LORD has shown me: ‘You shall not escape from their hand, but shall be taken by the king of Babylon. And you shall cause this city to be burned with fire.’”

Would Zedekiah listen to Jeremiah and do as he said? We will find out next week. All we know at this point is that Zedekiah was still fearful—this time of his own princes and advisers. “Let no one know of these words and you shall not die,” he said. “If the princes hear that I have spoken with you and come to you and say to you, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; hide nothing from us and we will not put you to death,’ then you shall say to them, ‘I made a humble plea to the king that he would not send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’”

Sure enough. Those princes did hear that Jeremiah and the king had had a discussion. “Tell us what he said and what you said, and you will not die,” they demanded of Jeremiah.

“I asked the king not to make me die in the dungeon,” answered Jeremiah. Then the men went away and left him alone, still a prisoner in the court of the king’s house.

God’s promise to Ebed-melech

While he was a prisoner, Jeremiah sent a message to the man who had saved his life. What was that man’s name? [Ebed-melech.] This was the message to Ebed-melech: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I will fulfill my words against this city for evil and not for good. The city will be destroyed, and you will see it. However, I will deliver you on that day, for I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword. You shall have your life as a prize of war, because you put your trust in me, says the LORD.”

Oh, again we see what a kind and Heavenly Father we have!

Zedekiah, see what God said to Ebed-melech? Why won’t you obey God and do His will? God does wonders for those who love and obey Him!

Lessons from this lesson:

- We see Jesus
Ebed-melech is a type of Jesus:
 - Ebed-melech saved Jeremiah’s physical life; Jesus saves the spiritual lives of sinners who trust Him.
 - Jesus, like Ebed-melech, was a humble servant of God, rescuing people without showing off.
- The Bible states, “The fear of man brings a snare [a trap to catch a person]: but whoever puts his trust in the LORD shall be safe” (Proverbs 29:25).
- God’s blessing is with those who love and obey and trust Him.

Activities:

- Play dough: rope; cistern
- Snack: Mud pudding: chocolate pudding with crushed chocolate sandwich cookies on top
- Have children put rags under their armpits. Then put ropes under the rags. Have two adults, one on each side of the child, try to lift the child by the ropes.
- Sink part of a small plastic toy man into a jar of mud. Put strings under its armpits to pull him out of the

mud. (Be sure to protect the floor or table where this activity takes place.)

- Review questions: (Game: Print the page found at the end of this lesson entitled “God’s Blessings on Ebed-melech.” If using a flannel board, back the page with flannel or flocked strips and cut apart the title and blessings. Students who answer questions correctly may place the blessings under the title (in any order). If using a pocket chart, print on card stock; cut apart. Students will place sentences in the pockets.)
 1. Finish the thought. Princes and elders thought Jeremiah’s prophecies were _____.
[Weakening or discouraging the soldiers and people.]
 2. How did Zedekiah show himself to be a weak leader in his answer to the princes and elders? [He told them to do what they wished even though he had promised safety to Jeremiah.]
 3. What did the princes and elders do to Jeremiah? [Put him in a muddy cistern.]
 4. Who came to Jeremiah’s rescue? [Ebed-melech.]
 5. How did the men get Jeremiah out of the cistern? [Had him put rags under his arms and ropes under the rags so that they could pull him up.]
 6. What did Zedekiah do with Jeremiah after Jeremiah was pulled out of the cistern? [He asked him for a word from God *again*.]

Memory Verse[s]: (ESV)

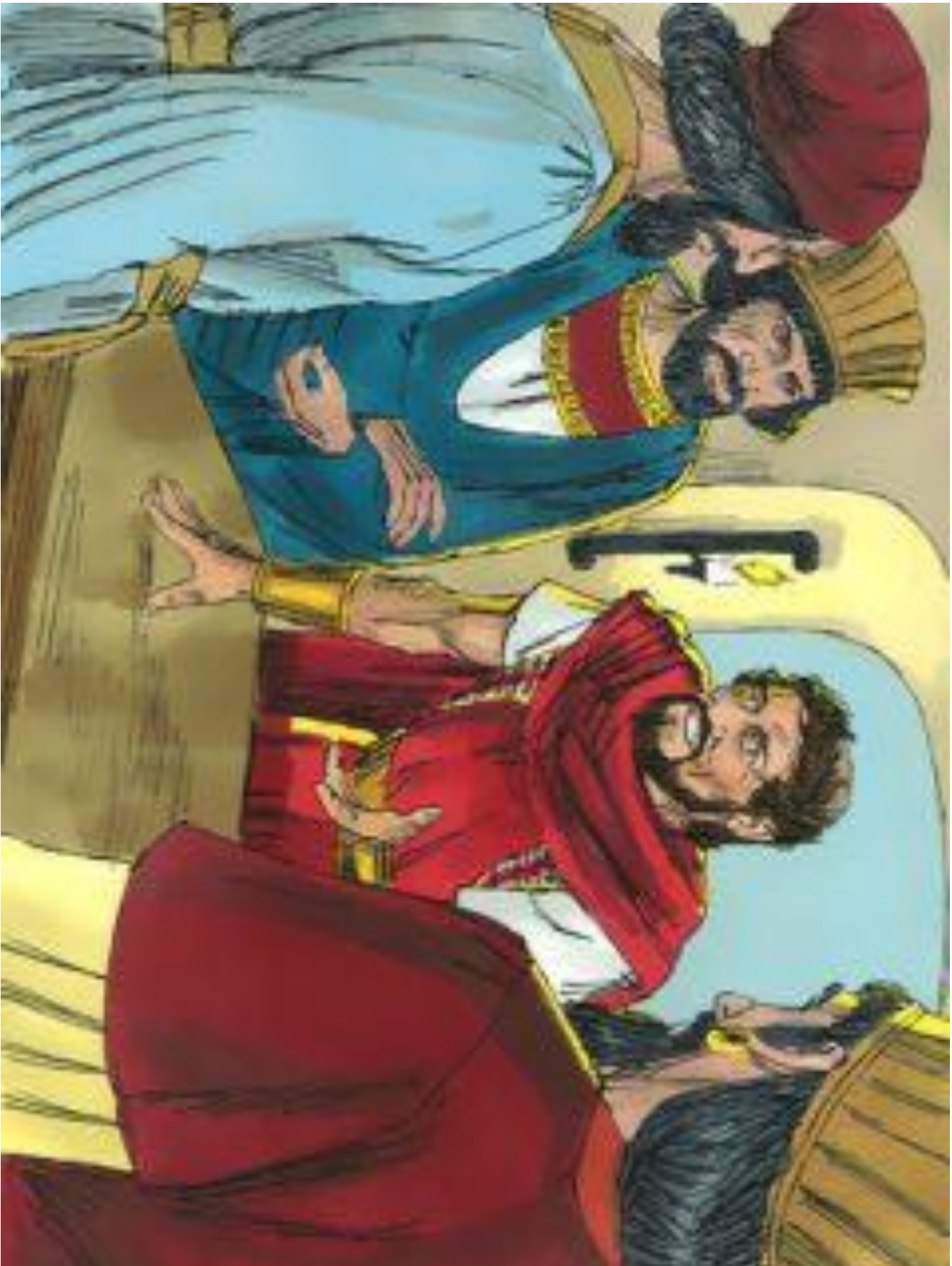
- Psalm 1 (The KJV has visuals at [psalm 1 - Bing images](#) words only, and [Tree & Psalm 1 - Openclipart](#) with a tree in the picture. The ESV has one at [\(840\) Pinterest](#) with a lamp and a Bible in the picture.)
 - 1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 - 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
 - 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
 - 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
 - 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the
righteous;
 - 6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Handwork:

- Print the page found below of 8 Jeremiahs and 8 word strips. Glue the pictures but not the word strips to card stock. Each student will have a toilet paper or paper towel core. Glue a word strip to the core. Tape one end of a string (about 6 inches long, depending on the length of the core) to the back of Jeremiah. Lower Jeremiah to the bottom of the core. Tape the other end of the string to the outside of the core. Students should be able to tell the story by lowering and raising Jeremiah.

cistern

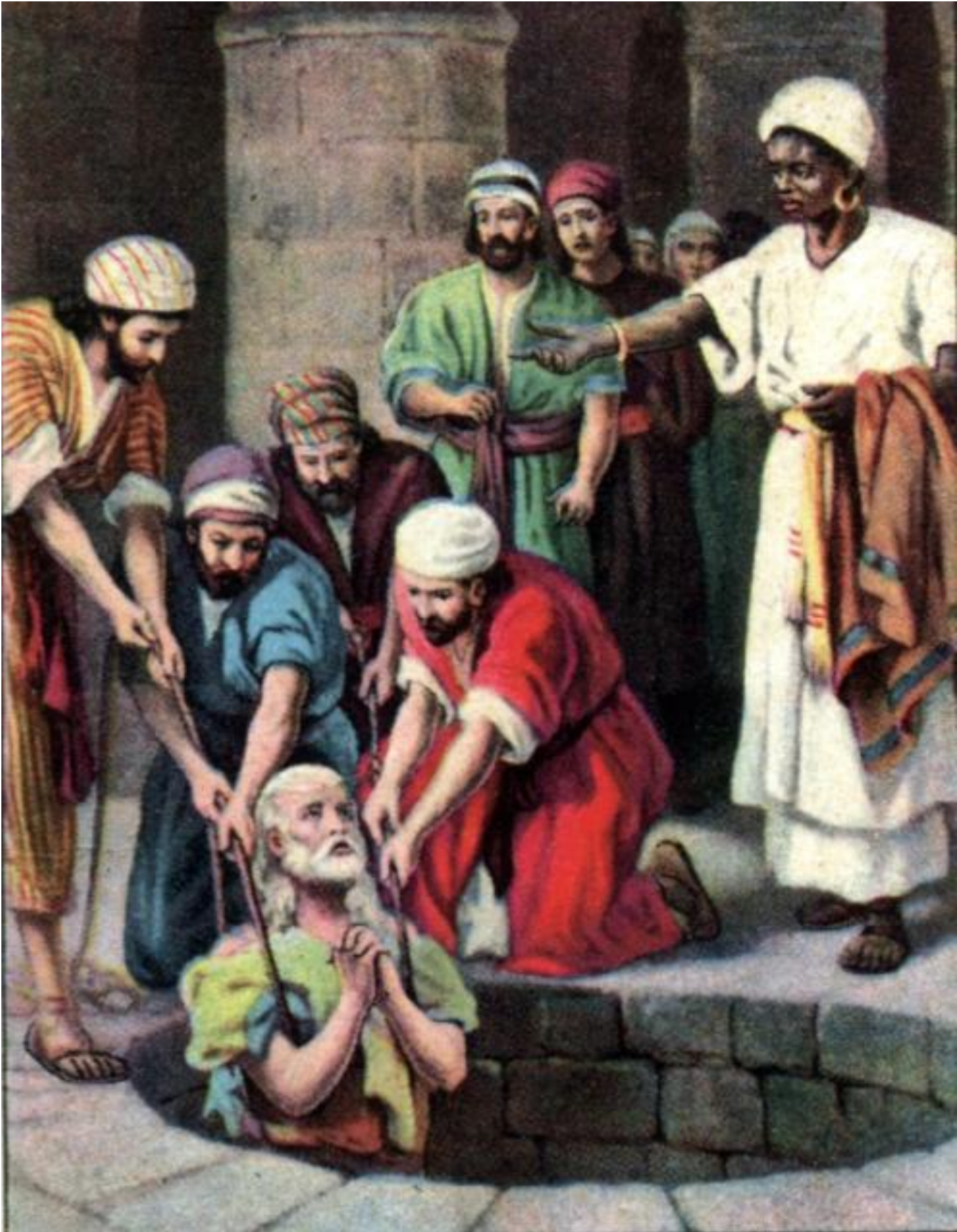
surrender



[Eyewitness to Christmas: Wise Men Secret Meeting With King Herod](#) ★ Diana Leigh Matthews



Unknown source



Unknown source



[SEDER OLAM REVISITED - Chronology of the Bible and beyond \(seder-olam.info\)](http://seder-olam.info)

God's Blessings on Ebed-melech

The city will be destroyed; you will see it.

I will deliver you on that day.

I will surely save you.

You shall not fall by the sword.

You shall have your life as a prize of war.



Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah..	Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.
Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.	Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.
Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.	Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.
Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.	Ebed-melech rescued Jeremiah.

