

In God We Trust

15 While Jeremiah had been confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him: 16 “Go and tell Ebed-Melech the Cushite, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am about to fulfill my words against this city—words concerning disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. 17 But I will rescue you on that day, declares the LORD; you will not be given into the hands of those you fear. 18 I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the LORD.’”

He was not having a good year. In fact, Jeremiah had not been having a very good adulthood. He was still a boy when the Lord called him to be a prophet, and that was amazing, but he was commanded by the Lord not to get married—one of the only men in the Bible ever ordered to remain celibate and unmarried, although God only commanded this while he was still in the land of Judah, and after the exile, he might have been permitted finally to take a wife.

But that’s not why he was having a hard year, not this year. This year was **586 BC**. Jeremiah had been a prophet now for more than 25 years. He had seen a lot of changes. The Egyptians lost an important battle with Babylon. King Josiah was killed in battle. The next four kings, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were all taken into exile by the Babylonians. That’s twenty percent of all the Kings of Judah in the Old Testament. They were all prisoners in Babylon together at the same time. But the prophet Jeremiah remained behind. By this time, the people were being deported to Babylon in vast groups, shackled and forced to march overland, shuffling along together. But not Jeremiah.

It was because of Jeremiah’s preaching, the message that God gave him, that the people didn’t like him. They hated what he had to say. Oh, some people listened, but not whoever was left in charge. More than once—at least three times, by my count (I could be wrong)—Jeremiah was imprisoned because of his preaching.

This was one of those times our prophet was in prison. Once he was in a cistern, a huge underground water-supply; now he was above ground. We all know what kind of prayers he would have been praying: Lord, get me out of here! Don’t let them forget that I’m here. There were people who remembered him—some friends who got him drinking water and what little food there was, and some people still came to listen to his preaching.

And here is where the life of a Christian is illustrated so clearly for us. You see, there are times when we might have personal needs set aside—short on sleep, haven't had a vacation in a long time, lots of people who need your time, but there just don't seem to be enough hours in the day? Your family needs time with you, and you need time with them. And here as often in the life of one of God's servants, Jeremiah's needs get set aside by God for the sake of someone else.

In this case the someone else was a Cushite, a man of African birth, not an Egyptian, who worked in the royal palace as a special official. I don't know whether we would call him a "special counsel" or secretary in the government sense of a high-ranking official, but this man, Ebed-Melech, was also a believer in God. He was one of the shrinking number of people in Jerusalem who listened to Jeremiah's words and knew that they were the words of God himself.

The Lord put Jeremiah's needs on hold in such a way that the prophet did not know whether he would live or die in prison, but he had a message to give to his man, Ebed-Melech. This man was a Gentile and not a member of the Jewish nation, but God needed Jeremiah to proclaim to him the gospel of salvation.

When the Bible describes salvation to us, most of the time this is presented in one of three ways. The doctrine in general is we call "Justification." To be justified by God is to be declared legally, formally, and actually not guilty of our sins by the grace of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Ebed-Melech understood the promise of the Savior, and he was saved by his faith. But it would be good if we took just a little time to understand the Bible's three perspectives on salvation, on this doctrine of justification.

First of all, justification is **universal**. Jesus did not come into the world only to die for the sins of a few people, or the sins only of the Christian Church. **John 3:16** tells us that God loved the world and gave his only son for it. And John the Baptist cried out when he saw Jesus: "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" If this is the case, then why do some people go to hell? It's not because their sins aren't paid for. It's because they reject Jesus Christ. The tragedy of hell is that it is full of forgiven sinners—forgiven, yet they turned away from Christ.

Second, justification is **objective**. By "objective," I mean that it's true and complete whether a person understands it or not. For example, most of us today have cars with automatic, electronic door locks. If you're like me, you might not always trust that the door is really locked, and you might still look to be sure the button is pushed down, or you might even try the door handle. But whether you verify it or not, it was an objective truth: That door was locked. Nobody could open it and steal your *Dad's Driving James Mix CD*. And objective justification is like that: Whether you realize it or not, Jesus Christ really did pay for all of your sins. There is nothing left for you or me to add to that fact. When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished," he meant it. The work of paying for our sins is finished.

Finally, justification is also **subjective**. This is what most people think of when they think about salvation. For something to be “subjective,” it involves your own point of view. So when we talk about how each one of us came to be saved through faith, this is our **subjective justification**.

So: The salvation of the world is **universal justification**. This is taught by the Bible. Our salvation is complete, and declared to be true by God is **objective justification**. This too is taught by the Bible.

And, salvation has come to you and me through faith in Jesus is **subjective justification**. This is also taught by the Bible. All of these are true, and all apply to you and me and every believer.

But since the whole world needs to know these things, God sometimes uses people like you and me and Jeremiah to proclaim the gospel to the rest of the world. God wants you and me to share our faith especially with the people around us in our lives—that’s why we’ve been placed into their lives. And the tool is simple. It’s the same tool, the same resource that Jeremiah had. It’s the word of God that told Ebed-Melech “You will be saved” and will tell your own children that they will be saved, too.

If you’re personal plans have to put on hold like Jeremiah’s did, then shouldn’t we still praise God for that? What a blessing to be thought of so highly by our Heavenly Father, that he might say to you: *I want you to suffer through a sleepless night for the sake of someone else’s eternal soul. Or: I want you to suffer an injury in your body, or life-threatening cancer, in order to bring you into contact with someone who is in danger of suffering an eternity in hell, but you will make all the difference to them.*

What an honor to be lifted up by God, who might say to you: *You sinned. You lost your job or you lost your marriage or you lost your reputation or health because of your sin—and you have repented of that sin. But now, because of your more humble status, you’re going to come into contact with a person who is so lost that they don’t even know it. Don’t ignore them. Touch them with the gospel of forgiveness and your own story of sin and grace.*

We don’t like it when our desires are put on hold by the Lord’s plans. May God forgive our sinful impatience. He doesn’t always share every plan with every one of us, but he trusts that we will trust him. We have the forgiveness of our sins—even our sinful impatience when we like Jeremiah are sitting in a prison of sorts, and our lives or needs are put on hold so that someone else’s *soul* can be rescued. What an honor to be selected for that service. What a privilege to share your Savior. In God we trust, not in our reason or strength, because **universally, objectively, and even subjectively**, we are justified, declared not guilty of any of our sins, and we share that message with the world—or one person who needs to hear it. Amen.