

SUFFERING FOR TRUTH

Why would someone prefer a lie to the truth? There are probably many reasons: pride, fear, and greed are three possibilities that cover most situations. In other words, sinfulness in attitude leads us away from the truth. I am amazed that individual people, corporations, and governments find it so easy to lie. Sometimes we think that the overall goal of what we are trying to accomplish is so worthwhile that whatever means we use is justified. I have even heard people say that consistency is more important than truth. In other words, it is all right to lie, provided you don't get caught. If governments, corporations, and individuals are living a lie, then anyone who advocates the truth becomes a threat to them. This is why there are political prisoners in South Africa, Russia, South America and Cuba. This is why people lose their jobs over matters of principle and why the best of friends part ways.

In the days of Jeremiah the people and their government wanted to believe a lie. The LIE was more comfortable than the TRUTH. Judah had failed to repent and turn back to God and had suffered defeat at the hands of the Babylonians who set up Zedekiah as the king of Judah and exacted tribute from the people. There was a popular notion that Judah could and would re-establish their national sovereignty so a possibility of revolt against Babylon was explored. This just made Nebuchadnezzar angry and so he set out to punish their puppet king and the people. They besieged Jerusalem but before they could defeat the city the Egyptian army came to assist. The Babylonians left Jerusalem and went to meet the Egyptian threat and the people of Jerusalem thought that this was the answer to prayer. Zedekiah had sent two governmental leaders to Jeremiah asking him to pray for the nation's deliverance. Instead Jeremiah told them that the situation was futile. They could forget about the Egyptian help. The Babylonians were God's instrument of judgment against this rebellious people. He kept telling the leaders that their only hope was to submit to God's will and surrender to the Babylonians. Jeremiah sounded as if he were a traitor to his nation.

During the time the Babylonian siege was lifted Jeremiah was going to Anathoth (a nearby city) to buy a piece of land. As he left the city he was arrested and accused of defecting to the Babylonians. He was declared to be guilty of treason, beaten and placed in a maximum security prison. Before too long the king called for Jeremiah to be brought to him. Zedekiah asked Jeremiah, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah could have told the king that all is well and that they should resist the Babylonian army for they were going to win. This message would have gotten him out of prison and he would have been a popular person. But the truth of God was more important to Jeremiah than the suffering that he had to endure and he did not change the message.

He did take this occasion to challenge the king regarding the injustices that he had suffered. He was no traitor, but a proclaimer of the truth. Jeremiah reminded the king that only he had been proven to be right of all the prophets in Jerusalem. He had warned that war would come and the others had said that peace would prevail. There were strangely silent now but they were free and Jeremiah was imprisoned in awful conditions. Jeremiah asked that he not be sent back to the dungeon that he was in before. Although the king did not free him, he was kept in a more favorable prison near the palace.

Jeremiah did not stop telling the truth and this angered many of the officials.

JEREMIAH 38:4-5 Many thought that Jeremiah ought to be killed because he was demoralizing the troops. The king was weak and he went along with whatever anyone suggested to him. This is a formula for disaster in any situation.

JEREMIAH 38:6 To have executed Jeremiah would have been taking a chance on making him a hero among the people, so they chose a less conspicuous way of doing away with him. They put him in a cistern, knowing that the cold, damp conditions along with lack of food would soon take its toll on Jeremiah who was now approaching age sixty.

These men refused to accept the truth and embraced a lie because they could not voluntarily face the consequences of turning away from God. They held out for the slightest hope that they could win and they tried to do everything they could to improve their chances just short of surrendering to God's will. It looked as if Jeremiah was hurting their changes; therefore, he had to be silenced.

Not everyone in Judah was motivated by pride, fear and greed. Some people still cared.

JEREMIAH 38:7-9 Had this black man not had courage and a sense of what is right, Jeremiah might have died in that dungeon. Ebed-melech was not an important official in the government, but he was an important agent in the Kingdom of God. God can use any of us, regardless of status or position to do his work.

JEREMIAH 38:10-13 There are some lessons to be learned from the rescue operation that took place here. First of all there were sufficient resources to get the job done. Ebed-melech did not try to do the job by himself. His action was in recognition of the fact that there were opposition forces in operation. Thirty men would discourage the ones who put Jeremiah in the cistern from interfering. Secondly, they went to get the proper tools to do the job. So often in our zeal to do something for the Lord, we go off unequipped or untrained. This took some thought and planning before starting the job. A third point is that many things that have little value to society (such as the old worn out clothes) can be used in helping others. Our trash can be a treasure to people who have nothing. The fourth point, and perhaps the most important for us to learn, is that when we help those in need that we need to be gentle and provide some padding so that the help we give them does not hurt so much. A lot of times when we help people we do so in such a way that it destroys their self esteem and makes them feel worse off than before we got involved. A little thoughtfulness, a little planning and an awareness of the opposition that we might encounter can help make the work of the Kingdom successful.

Jeremiah shows us that standing for the truth is not always easy, that sometimes we will suffer for it. But we can stand with Paul who said that he reckoned that the sufferings of this present time are nothing to be compared with the glory awaiting for us when we see Jesus.