

# NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### BONDAGE IN PLACE OF LIBERTY

(Chap. 34)

The peculiarly vacillating character of Zedekiah and the nobles of Judah is very pronouncedly brought before us in the prophetic message to which our attention is now directed.

The three kings who followed the godly Josiah were apparently all deliberately opposed to Jeremiah, the advocate of submission to Babylon. Their policy was to rely upon Egypt, and by a league with Pharaoh to throw off the Chaldean yoke. Jeremiah, as we have seen, ever counseled the contrary. The king of Babylon had been appointed by God and set over the nations. Egypt was a broken reed. The only safe and right policy was to submit to the authority ordained of the Lord, and to acknowledge how richly the sins of Israel and Judah had deserved this national degradation.

Zedekiah was set up by Nebuchadrezzar, consequently was not so ardent an advocate of a confederacy with Egypt as his predecessors. In fact, only upon a great triumph of the Egyptian arms did he decide to throw in his lot with that once powerful nation and rebel against his liege lord. He seems to have had sincere respect for Jeremiah, frequently counseling with him; but as he was a man of a double heart and not upright before God, there is a painful lack of obedience to the Word of God as thus delivered to him.

Finally, when his position became desperate and the city seemed about to fall, he threw the prophet into prison, and refused to hearken to his admonitions. At times, however, conscience seemed to awake, as in the present instance, but, alas, only to be again lulled to sleep. The incident here recorded probably occurred prior to the imprisonment of which the previous section treats. It was an attempt to enforce the law of God, long neglected, upon a vitally important matter, even the recognition of the Sabbatic year.

The armies of Nebuchadnezzar (as he is here called), consisting of the Chaldeans and subject legions from “**all the kingdoms of the earth of his dominion,**” were surrounding the devoted city when the prophet was commanded to go and speak to Zedekiah (ver. 1). The message was one of gloom and disaster. The Lord was about to give the city into the hand of the Babylonian spoiler, and the king himself must go into captivity.

Nevertheless, as there had been some good things in him - some regard, however slight, for the Word of God, some concern for the state of Judah - he was informed that he should not die by the sword, but in peace; and that customary honors upon the decease of princes should be paid to his remains. He would be lamented in a way that had not been done for the former kings (vers. 2-5).

Jeremiah delivered the divine communication as commanded, but we have no word as to the effect upon the unhappy monarch. The foe had been almost everywhere triumphant; only two of Judah's defended cities remained unconquered, besides the capital. These were Lachish and Azekah, both west of Jerusalem, and about some fifteen miles apart. These were invested, and all hope of their holding out much longer was vain (vers. 6, 7). It would seem that Zedekiah keenly felt the plight he was in, and in his distress he had made a covenant with all the people to observe the Sabbath year - so far as it affected the relationship of masters and slaves. The portion referring to the land could not be carried out, as all the fields were overrun by the foragers of the Chaldean armies, and the husbandmen carried away or slain.

The law (Exodus 21:1-6; Deuteronomy 15:12-18) regulated servitude in Israel by commanding that all male slaves of Hebrew birth, and all maidens not betrothed to the master or his son, should serve at the most but six years, and in the seventh go out free; unless, having been given a wife in bondage, the servant should of his own volition choose to remain with her in his subject condition. Rapacity and covetousness had made this law a dead letter for years. Now, the king and people covenanted to observe it, and to **“proclaim liberty unto them; that every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, being a Hebrew or a Hebrewess, go free; that none should serve himself of them, to wit, of a Jew his brother”** (vers. 8, 9).

This was fully in accord with the mind of the Lord; and if there had been purpose of heart to continue in it, and genuine repentance because of past sin, it would have been acceptable in His eyes. But, alas for man's stability when left to himself! The proclamation was hardly made before it was repealed! Possibly some slight rift in the dark clouds overshadowing them gave them to suppose that, after all, the seriousness of their condition had been exaggerated; consequently they returned to their old ways, which had never been truly judged, bringing the servants and the handmaids once more into subjection (vers. 10, 11).

The Lord, accordingly, once more put a word in His servant's mouth, and sent him unto the vacillating and unstable people. He reminded them of the covenant made with their fathers when He brought them out of Egypt, and of the provisions of the year of release, as recorded in Deuteronomy 15, above referred to. Their action in proclaiming liberty He describes as being right in His sight. In turning from their covenant, and causing their servants once more to enter into bondage, they had polluted His name. Now He would proclaim a liberty against them - even to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine! (vers. 12-17). It is true of nations as of men that whatsoever is sown must be reaped. Obedience to the Word of God brings blessing. Disobedience is the sure precursor of judgment. **“Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”**

In the most solemn manner had Judah's princes and people sealed the covenant which their cupidity caused them so readily to violate. They had "**cut the calf in twain and passed between the parts thereof**" (ver. 18).

From of old this seems to have been a customary form for the contracting parties to a solemn covenant. A sacrifice was offered, and the pieces or parts thereof arranged in order on the altar; then the persons pledging themselves passed between the pieces. We see God pledging Himself thus in Abraham's day. The patriarch was instructed to take "**a heifer of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove and a young pigeon**" (Genesis 15:9).

All these were typical of the one true sacrifice - the Lord Jesus Christ - each representing Him in some special aspect.

- The young ox speaks of Him as the patient Servant, providing food for others.
- The goat is, in Matthew 25, used to picture the sinner, and points, therefore, to Him whom God made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
- The ram is the consecration offering, and tells of His submissive obedience unto death.
- The turtle-dove, as others have suggested, is the bird of love and sorrow: and never was either love or sorrow so great as His.
- The pigeon, of course, is similar; and both being from the heavens, they pointed to the One who came from heaven to die on earth for our redemption.

Abram, whose name had not yet been changed, took "**all these and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another; but the birds divided he not.**" Each part being placed in order, he kept watch over them, driving away the unclean fowls which gathered to devour them, as the Christian to-day is called to contend earnestly for the great "**mystery of godliness,**" suffering no unclean one to rob him of the truth as to "**the doctrine of Christ.**"

Night falling, the watcher wearied, and fell into a deep sleep. A "**horror of great darkness fell upon him**" - a symbol of the hiding of the Lord's face, which his seed must in measure experience. It was then that God drew near and reiterated His promise of blessing for the chosen race, but open end up likewise something of their future sorrows, coupled with their final deliverance. Then He confirmed His covenant in a remarkable manner. A smoking furnace was seen, symbol of their affliction in the Egyptian bondage, and, following after it, "**a burning lamp, which passed between the pieces.**"

This burning lamp, or, literally, lamp of fire, was the visible manifestation of God's presence. By thus passing between the pieces He pledged Himself, by the Cross of His beloved Son, to fulfil all His covenant. And notice that Abram was not called upon to do likewise. He made no pledge. None was asked of him. It was a covenant of pure grace. In this way, then, the people of Judah had confirmed a covenant in regard to the Sabbatic year of release. They had offered to the Lord a calf, and "**passed between the parts thereof.**" Nothing could have been more solemn.

They bound themselves, by the strongest of all vows, to proclaim liberty to every bondman or bondmaid of Hebrew birth. But because there was no true self-judgment, no sincere repentance, they soon fell back to their old ways.

As a result, all these unfaithful swearers who “**passed between the parts of the calf**” should be given up to death; for their so doing was practically a declaration that they would forfeit their lives if they violated their agreement.

They should be taken at their word. The Lord would give them into their enemies’ hands; and their dead bodies should have none, like Abram, to drive away the carrion birds of prey, but they should “**be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth**” (vers. 19, 20). It is a fearful thing to trifle with God. He is a consuming fire. How little even saints realize the solemnity of having to do with Him, the High and Lofty One, who inhabiteth Eternity!

From the last verses (21, 22) we gather that the direct reason for the unfaithful going back of the people had been the withdrawal for a time of the army of the besiegers. They had evidently struck their tents and temporarily left the city to itself. This was taken to mean that the siege was abandoned. Those who before were desperate now became elated and careless. Their complacency was ill-timed. The Lord would command, “**and cause them to return to this city, and they shall fight against it, and burn it with fire.**” The cities of Judah would become a desolation, without an inhabitant.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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