

NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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CHAPTER THREE

FUTURE GLORY CONDITIONED ON REPENTANCE

(Chaps. 3:6-6:30)

The next prophecy is a more extensive one, going on to the end of the sixth chapter, and was uttered during the reign of the pious king Josiah (3:6); but at what particular time we are not told.

The details of the departure from God of both the northern and southern kingdoms (the former one already in captivity) are here more fully gone into; but there are interspersed precious promises of restoration and blessing upon their repentance which the goodness of God will yet lead them to, though it be through deepest tribulation.

“**Backsliding Israel**” had openly revolted from the Lord from the day that Jeroboam’s golden calves were set up. God’s center was disowned and His Word (see especially Deuteronomy 12) despised. It is an oft-noted fact that of only one of their kings do we find it said that he sought the Lord, and then only when pressed by the Syrian invasion (II Kings 13:4, 5); on which occasion, as in the period of the Judges (to which they had practically returned, for “**every man did that which was right in his own eyes**”), “**The Lord gave Israel a saviour, so that they went out from under the hand of the Syrians; and the children of Israel dwelt in their tents as beforetime.**”

But though God was gracious, responding to the feeblest evidence of felt need, the people were unchanged: “**They departed not from the sins of the house of Jeroboam . . . and there remained the grove also in Samaria.**”

This was but one instance of the many in which He said, “**Turn thou unto Me,**” but she returned not. Finally, as an adulterous wife, she was put away when the ten tribes were carried to Assyria (vers. 6, 7). “**Her treacherous sister Judah’s**” case, however, was quite different.

She had, as a rule, professed obedience to the Lord. At least open idolatry had not always characterized her. Backsliding was not so much her continual sin as treachery. A strict attention to the outward ordinances of the temple worship, but the heart going after the filthiness of the nations, was generally her course; as it had been even in the days of Solomon - who built the house of the Lord, and erected altars to the gods of his heathen wives!

This is what markedly characterizes much of what is called Christendom to-day.

There is talk of devotedness to the Lord, a prating of loyalty to Christ; but alas, alas, how little is known of separation from that which dishonors Him!

In fact, the position of Jeremiah in this book must be very much that of the man to-day who would stand for Christ and walk in the truth. Judah had, after all, but copied Israel, though not always so openly. **“Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah hath not turned unto Me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the Lord”** (ver. 10).

The king, and many more associated with him in the revival that was then beginning, were doubtless real; but there were not wanting those, as Ananias and Sapphira in the early days of the Church, who sought a reputation for piety and devotedness while never truly separated from the abounding iniquity.

This is a great snare, and only too common in our own day.

It is, in fact, the very essence of Laodiceanism. Lukewarmness in divine things is treachery against Christ. Better to be cold than this. So he says here, **“The backsliding Israel hath justified herself more than treacherous Judah”** (ver. 11).

She made no attempt to conceal her condition, at any rate. He gives her a gracious invitation to return (even though He had given her a bill of divorce), coupled with an assurance that He was married to her still! (vers. 12-14). Precious it is to know that her sons will, in the **“age to come,”** ask the way to Zion and return to Himself. But one thing His holiness demands: **“Only acknowledge thine iniquity”** (ver. 13).

His mercy longed to go forth; His anger was already well-nigh overpast; but confession there must be. She must sit in judgment on her ways, and repent of her backslidings. The confession must be clear, and the evils specified.

No mere general acknowledgment of failure will suffice:

- (1) **“Thou hast transgressed against Me,**
- (2) **“And hast scattered thy ways to strangers;**
- (3) **“Ye have not obeyed My voice.”**

Nor can it be merely a national repentance.

Nations, as such, do not repent. It must be individual work; so He says, **“Turn, O backsliding children”** (or sons), though the figure of a wife is still maintained; but the nation will be saved in the remnant. **“I will take you one of a city and two of a family and will bring you to Zion; and I will give you pastors according to Mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding”** (vers. 14, 15).

Jeroboam, with many successors to follow his steps, had been an evil shepherd, had led them in false ways hitherto, the fruit of which they were now eating; but God had for them shepherds who would delight to direct their feet to green pastures where the soul would find nourishment in the things of God.

It may be well to state here that it is of a literal return of the scattered Israelites, to a literal Zion in the land from whence they were carried, that the prophet speaks throughout, as we shall see more particularly when we look at chapters 30 and 31. The words are too plain and explicit to require spiritualizing, as has falsely been done.

In the 16th verse we have the last mention of the ark of the covenant; as in II Chronicles 35:3 we have its last historical notice.

There was no ark in the second temple. There will be none in that depicted by Ezekiel for the Millennium. A mere legend, for we cannot count it as anything more, tells us that at the destruction of the city and temple Jeremiah hid the ark in a cave, as also the altar of incense. This story is recorded in 2 Maccabees 2:48, *an apocryphal record of very dubious authority*. However that may be, we are assured that **“in those days”** (the days of the coming kingdom), **“saith the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord: neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more;”** or, according to a marginal reference, *“neither shall they miss it, neither shall it be made any more.”*

Of old, under the first covenant, it was the throne of the Lord in the midst of Israel: but Jerusalem shall be called **“the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart”** (ver. 17).

In that day the Lord Jesus, whom it typified, - the One in whom the wood and gold, humanity and divinity, are found in one Person, will Himself be in their midst; the ark, that but feebly foreshadowed Him, will no longer be needed.

In the end of the chapter, from ver. 19 to the close, we have the repentance of the people already made good by faith. It is a prophecy of what will yet be when they will realize that it is vain to hope for salvation from any but the Lord, so long neglected. This will take place after the Lord has saved the tents of Judah first (Zechariah 12).

The first two verses of chapter 4 give us His response to their cry of anguish, and the promised blessing when in reality they return to God.

From this point the message is to Judah, and is a call for more than mere surface work, such as was then going on. No real fruit for God could be expected where they were sowing on unbroken and thorn-choked ground (ver. 3). The plowshare of conviction must overturn the hardened soil of the heart.

Not the natural flesh alone, but the heart must be circumcised (ver. 4).

“For he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; . . . but he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter” (Romans 2:28, 29). And the same apostle declares the true circumcision is to have **“no confidence in the flesh”** (Philippians 3:3). If the message was unheeded, then judgment must take its course; and already the Gentile destroyer was on his way.

Verse 5 to 13 furnish us a vivid picture of the coming fall of Jerusalem by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. So astounding is this announcement that the prophet is himself astonished (ver. 10), and can scarcely credit that the Lord will so deal with His people.

There is but one door of escape, which he points out in ver. 14 - **“Wash thine heart.”** This can only be by reception of the Word, and allowing it to work in the conscience. He immediately goes on to enlarge on the surely coming overthrow of the city, in most awe-inspiring language (vers. 15-21). But the people of Judah were the very opposite to what the apostle desired for the Roman saints (Romans 16:19) - they were **“wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge”** (ver. 22).

The coming desolation of the land is graphically depicted in ver. 23 to the end. It is not the earth, but the land of Palestine, that is before him, as the companion scripture, Isaiah 24, clearly shows. The language is doubtless highly poetical, yet fully to be relied on, - perhaps one should say rather figurative, than poetical, as the latter expression has been much abused of late.

The subject is continued in the fifth chapter, only with more perspicuity. Individuals are more brought before us. How fallen must have been their state when the prophet had to say, **“Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it”** (ver. 1).

Does not this tell us what might have been had Abraham but had faith to plead further for Sodom? He stopped at ten (Genesis 18). Ten could not be found. Here, Judgment could be averted for one. Alas, they had all alike despised the chastening of the Lord (ver. 3), and turned from the truth.

This amazed Jeremiah the prophet. He could scarcely credit the utterly apostate condition of his nation. There must surely be righteous ones somewhere. He would seek them out. **“Therefore I said, Surely these are poor; they are foolish: for they know not the way of the Lord, nor the judgment of their God. I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the Lord, and the judgment of their God: but these have altogether broken the yoke and burst the bonds”** (vers. 4, 5).

His visit to the great we have not here (we may get many such later), but only proving that ignoble and noble are all one in the rejection of the word of God. So judgment must eventually have its way, though some years elapsed ere its fulfilment. Of this he continues to speak in verse 6-19.

How terrible the indictment of ver. 7! - **“When I had fed them to the full, they then committed adultery, and assembled themselves by troops in the harlots’ houses.”**

What a word for the people of God to-day!

How awful to contemplate the yet patent fact that those who profess to be part of that Church, blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ, should ever turn wantonly to the world and its follies, as Judah had done before - though they were on a much lower plane, their blessings being earthly and temporal. **“Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: and shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?”** (ver. 9). To Christendom He says, **“I will spue thee out of My mouth!”** (Revelation 3:16).

“And it shall come to pass, when ye shall say, Wherefore doeth the Lord our God all these things unto us? then shalt thou answer them, Like as ye have forsaken Me, and served strange gods in your land, so shall ye serve strangers in a land that is not yours” (ver. 19).

Sowing is followed by reaping: dreadful was the reaping of Israel; more dreadful will be the reaping of apostate Christendom - **“Babylon the Great”** (Revelation 17, 18).

Their moral condition is further exposed in words too plain to need comment (vers. 20-29), and all summarized in the last verse.

“A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and My people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” (vers. 30, 31).

Solemn words! Ponder them carefully, my reader, and see if they be too severe to describe the great world-church of today.

Jerusalem’s evil condition fully manifested, the sixth chapter opens with a call to the children of Benjamin to flee from her midst. Only thus could they escape being partakers of her sins. They remained and fell with her.

To those entangled with religious corruption in our day the word is, **“Let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity”** (II Timothy 2). **“Come out from among them, and be ye separate . . . touch not the unclean thing”** (II Corinthians 6). Later, to dwellers in the spiritual Babylon, the cry will go forth, **“Come out of her, My people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues”** (Revelation 18).

The present is no time for temporizing.

He who has saved us, and is Lord of all, looks for clear-cut separation from all spiritual or ecclesiastical as well as carnal or fleshly evil, in sanctification to Himself. To Christendom as a whole, as to Judah then, there is little use to make appeals, nor does the Lord do it. **“Their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it”** (ver. 10).

So it has often been noted that after the days of Pergamos, in Revelation 2 and 3, the call is alone to the overcomer -not to the mass.

What made things all the more dreadful in Jeremiah's time was the mockery of the false prophets, who stilled the fears of the guilty people and prophesied smooth things, thus turning aside the keen edge of the truth. Love of reward was at the bottom of their course. Can any be so charged to-day?

“From the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest everyone dealeth falsely. They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace” (vers. 13, 14). So also in Ezekiel's day (chap. 13:10-12), which was nearly contemporaneous with this.

But the truth rejected did not alter its character.

They would have to learn by judgment what they had no ears for by the word of the prophet. Meantime the call to any individual having a heart for God goes out; but there is no response.

“Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein. Also I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not hearken” (vers. 16, 17).

It is to **“that which was from the beginning”** God ever directs His people in times of failure. Man is continually running after something new, and thus away from God, for He is of old, from everlasting. Evolution there is none in the truth for the dispensation. It is always evil to turn from it. There is no restoration apart from turning back to it. There is no room for development outside the Book.

The message rejected, the nations are called on to acknowledge the justness of the Lord's dealings with so rebellious a people (vers. 18-21), and the chapter closes with the judgment reaffirmed: **“Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the Lord hath rejected them.”**

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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