

NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

H. A. Ironside

Copyright © 1906

CHAPTER SEVEN

FAMINE - TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL

(Chaps. 14, 15)

Of old, when the Lord “**led Jacob like a flock,**” and brought the people of His love out of the cruel bondage of Egypt, He set before them blessing and cursing, life and death, good and evil. Earthly prosperity and honor were to accompany fidelity to God. No foe could harm, no drought afflict, no famine or sickness decimate Israel, so long as they were careful to obey the word of the Lord and walk according to His statutes. On the other hand, all these sore trials should certainly follow in the wake of indifference to God and rebellion against His Word.

It is therefore quite in harmony with His ways that we find the people of Judah in great distress for lack of food and water.

The real famine was within. The outward misery was but the reflection of the moral state. Deeply touching, and highly poetical too, is the seer’s description of the desolation wrought in the land:

“Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up. And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the pits, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty; they were ashamed and confounded, and covered their heads. Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads. Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass. And the wild asses did stand in the high places, they snuffed up the wind like dragons; their eyes did fail, because there was no grass” (chap. 14:2-6).

The language is most pathetic, the condition of the people heartrending. The children cried, with parched tongue and fever-cracked lips, for drink; but there was no water to be had. They went in vain, at the behest of the hopeless nobles, to the dry wells. There was no refreshment there. All farming operations were at a standstill. No rain meant no crops and no food. The very beasts of the field shared in the general desolation. The hind, tenderest of animals, forsook her offspring “**because there was no grass;**” the eyes of the wild asses failed as they looked for a few spears of herbage.

There was no yearly overflowing river for Canaan. **“It was a land that drank water of the rain of heaven;”** a land that the Lord watched over continually. He it was who gave refreshing showers in abundance, or who withheld according to the state of His people.

The river of Mizraim might flow on unceasingly, and flood its valley year by year, let the condition of the Egyptians be as it would, but it was otherwise in the land of the Lord. And we may learn from this to-day. Men of the world are often allowed to prosper despite utter ungodliness. Alas, they are lifted up on high to fall more terribly in the end!

On the other hand, the children of God are under His special care, and **“whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth”** (or disciplineth) for their eternal good. The sheep of Christ have not wool so thick but that if they wander from the Shepherd’s side they feel every cold blast of this world. A Christian out of communion must pass under the rod.

To Israel it was said, **“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for your iniquities.”** The principle is the same for us now.

In the next three verses Jeremiah again takes the place of the mediator, and tenderly pleads for those who were called by the name of the Lord. He acknowledges their sin as his own. It is **“our iniquities,” “our backslidings,”** and **“we have sinned.”** Merit he does not plead; but **“for Thy name’s sake”** is his cry.

“O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? Why shouldest Thou be as a man astonied, as a mighty man that cannot save? Yet Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by Thy name; leave us not” (vers. 8, 9).

The grief of the prophet, and yet his implicit faith in the Lord, alike stir the soul. He who would have delighted to show mercy to His people had become as a visiting stranger, so far as their realization of His presence was concerned. In the rejected One, however, is the only **“hope of Israel.”**

He had not actually withdrawn Himself. The Shekinah was still in the temple. His abode **“in the midst”** of them though unrecognized and unsought by the mass.

His answer is, **“Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the Lord doth not accept them; He will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins”** (ver. 10). It was impossible that the Holy One could go on with iniquity. Judgment must begin at the house of God. He loved them too much to let them take their own way with impunity. So He says, **“Pray not for this people for their good.”**

In the New Testament we read, **“There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it”** (I John 5:16). If chastisement is despised, and the Spirit of grace insulted, there comes a time when it is too late for supplication or entreaty. As a last act of God’s holy government, the erring one is cut off, and the case left for the Judgment Seat of Christ.

- We have examples of this in Ananias and Sapphira, both of them cut off in their transgression.
- So with some in the Corinthian assembly that dishonored the Lord at His table in the memorial Supper. The Holy Spirit says, **“For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”**
- And so it was with Israel in the case before us.

It was too late for grace alone to be exercised. They must know to the full the government of God. Neither fasting nor offerings would be of any avail to turn aside the sword, the famine, and the pestilence (ver. 12).

Jeremiah, however, continues to plead; and now on the ground that the people had been misled by false prophets, who had spoken smooth things, and thus led their hearers to suppose that sin was a light thing. For answer, the Lord tells him these evil teachers shall bear their judgment, and be consumed with the rest; but this cannot free their followers, who delighted in them because of their own wicked desires. **“If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch!”** In these verses what a solemn picture we have of Christendom as we know it!

Satan’s ministers turning their hearers away from the truth unto fables! Wolves in sheep’s clothing posing as servants of Christ, yet shaking the confidence of the simple in the truth and authority of the Scriptures, ridiculing and assailing the great and holy truths of the atonement and the eternal judgment awaiting those who trample underfoot the blood of Christ! But alas, the listeners will fall in the doom of the preachers! Wanting smooth things, they refuse the truth when presented to them, and cling to deceivers from sheer love of sin. Together they shall **“perish in the gainsaying of Core”** (Jude 11).

The pathos of the balance of the chapter is beyond description. The prophet, broken-hearted, is inconsolable. He forms one of a trio, with Moses and Paul, who could all alike be cut off themselves if their people might but be saved.

The famine and the sword were doing their deadly work in city and field, and there was no healing. So stirred is his soul that he cannot but continue his agonized intercession: **“Do not abhor us, for Thy name’s sake; do not disgrace the throne of Thy glory: remember, break not Thy covenant with us”** (ver. 21).

It is like Joshua’s cry of old, **“The Egyptians will hear of it.”**

But when the people of God dishonor Him by their lives, He will not spare needed discipline, even though the uncircumcised glory over Him. Better that **“the cause of Christ”** be disgraced before the world than that His people be permitted to go on in sin. God will vindicate His name in His own way and time.

The solemn answer of the Lord in the first nine verses of chap. 15 gives no hope of deliverance. Even though Moses and Samuel stood to entreat for them, they would not be heard. The people must **“go forth;”** and if they despairingly ask, **“Whither?”** the awful answer is, **“Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for the famine, to the famine; and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity”** (ver. 2).

The sword, the dogs, the fowls, and the beasts of the earth, are alike appointed to carry out the work of destruction: and any escaping these would be carried into all the kingdoms of the earth; and this because their share in the sin of Manasseh had never been repented of. None should pity nor care; for having forsaken the Lord, He would stretch out His hand against them. Young and old must be destroyed. **“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God;”** for **“our God is a consuming fire.”**

As the full extent of God’s sentence bursts upon his soul, Jeremiah is overcome by a sense of almost unutterable desolation. How deeply he feels his helplessness and loneliness, as one man endeavoring to stand for God and seeking the good of those who hate and despise Him!

His prayers seem to be unavailing. God apparently refuses to hearken to his voice. The people, on their part, turn a deaf ear to his messages. He cries out in anguish, **“Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me”** (ver. 10).

The Lord at once replies in tenderest compassion and assures him that with himself and any who really seek His face, **“it shall be well . . . in the time of evil and in the time of affliction,”** but due punishment must be meted out to the workers of iniquity. Encouraged by this evidence that his cry has not really been unheard and unheeded, he can now pray with fuller assurance; for the Lord knows and will remember and visit at the appointed time. **“For Thy sake,”** he cries, **“I have suffered rebuke:”** then he tells of what had been his solace in times of indifference and rejection - the Word of God (vers. 15, 16).

“Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart: for I am called by Thy name, O Lord God of hosts.”

Here we have two things intimately connected elsewhere in Scripture - the Word and the Name. **“Thou . . . hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My Name”** (Revelation 3:8). See, also, Revelation 2:13 - **“My Name”** and **“My faith”** - that which is declared by the Word.

Jeremiah, the separatist (II Corinthians 6:14-18; Isaiah 52:11) of his day, who, much as he loved the people of the Lord, yet had to turn sorrowfully from fellowship with them in their evil course, had to learn - as all others must who, in a day of declension, seek to walk in holy separation unto God - that **“he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey”** (Isaiah 59:15).

He was a man, as we have seen, characterized by much tenderness of heart, and certainly by intense affection for the heritage of the Lord (chap. 9:1-3); yet faithfulness demanded that he walk apart from them, testifying against their ways; and as a result he had to say, **“Every one of them doth hate me.”** So also Paul could ask the Galatians, **“Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?”** (Galatians 4:16), when witnessing against their departure from the faith once delivered to the saints: and to the Corinthians he says, **“I will gladly spend and he spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved”** (II Corinthians 12:15).

These dear men of God are seen pursuing their well-nigh solitary way at times, finding their refreshment and strength in the Word and the Name, though denied much as to godly fellowship with others.

In ver. 17 Jeremiah says, **“I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, nor rejoiced; I sat alone because of Thy hand.”** It was in this very period of loneliness for the Name’s sake, when he could say, “For Thy sake I have suffered reproach,” that the Word of God was more to him than ever before. The Lord’s people gave him only grief, but His Word filled him with joy. His heart might almost break as he contemplated their apostate condition. It was made to rejoice when he turned to the sure Word of God.

Job and David in their times could speak in similar terms. The former is heard crying out, **“I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food”** (Job 23:12), and this at a time when the ways of God with His dear servant seemed quite inexplicable, and he floundered in the vain effort to find Him out. Still **“the words of His mouth”** he loved to dwell upon, and, relying on them, dared to say, **“When He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold”** (ver. 19).

The exalted shepherd, in the *“Psalm of the Laver”* (119), sweetly celebrates the preciousness and cleansing efficacy of the Word, and in verse 3 joins with “the weeping prophet” in declaring, **“Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage forever; for they are the rejoicing of my heart.”** And again, he says, **“I esteem all Thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way”** (ver. 128). See also verse 97, 113, 119, 163.

Thus we have patriarch, ruler, and prophet, alike testifying to the fulness and richness of the testimonies of the Lord. And that Word - fuller and richer now because of added treasures, making known the hitherto secret things - shall Christians now treat it with indifference? Many, it is to be feared, find little to interest them in its sacred pages. And the reason is not far to seek - there is so little practical separation from evil, and so little cleaving to the Lord with purpose of heart. Of one thing we can rest assured. Those who really enter into what is involved in being gathered in truth to the Name of the Rejected One, will invariably find His Word an unailing source of delight. Heart-identification with Christ results in heart-appreciation of His Word.

The great desideratum is to go on quietly and humbly with the Lord Jesus Christ, and to walk apart from the abounding iniquity (both in its gross and its pleasing forms) of these last days. Then let the Word of God be the man of your counsel. Make it your daily companion. Search its precious pages prayerfully and perseveringly. Soon you will learn to feast upon it with ever-increasing delight.

An aged Christian once said, “When first converted, I commenced reading the Bible. I read it for ten years, and I thought it a very nice book. I enjoyed it greatly. I read it for ten years more, and I thought it a wonderful book - it thrilled my soul. I read it for ten years more, and I thought it the most surpassingly precious book in the world. It was as food and drink to me. Now I have been reading it for forty years, and I am filled with delight and amazement at its beauties and depth every time I open it.”

May the reader and the writer know more of this increasing love for its “**sure testimonies.**” Thus we shall find our delight in walking with Him, even though, as in Enoch’s day, all the world should take another course.

That separation from evil is the mind of God for His servants is brought out clearly in the few remaining verses of this portion. “**Therefore thus saith the Lord, If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before Me: and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as My mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them**” (ver. 19). Whatever others might think, say, or do, Jeremiah is to walk apart; alone, if need be, from all the abounding evil; not to be amalgamated with it, or with those in it, in the vain hope of doing them good. If others took the same position as he, well and good; he would have their fellowship in his path of separation: but the word is plain, “**Return not thou unto them.**”

In II Timothy 2 the same principle is enforced for the guidance of the man of God in the declension and ruin of the Church. He is to “**purge himself**” from all that is contrary to the Word of God, and from those who tolerate and condone the ecclesiastical lawlessness of the day. So shall he “**be a vessel unto honor, sanctified and meet for the Master’s use.**” This is not, of course, to say that a mere Pharisaic separation from saints who do not see eye to eye as to details of doctrine or practice is enjoined by Him who would have His people endeavor “**to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**” Unity is not necessarily uniformity. But the call is to separation from what is unholy and offensive to God. Unspiritual Christians, as well as worldlings, will doubtless misunderstand and abuse the one who acts upon this “**saying of God,**” but He will see to the consequences if we but yield implicit obedience to His revealed will. He promised to make Jeremiah as a wall of brass, and assured him that though “**they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible**” (vers. 20, 21).

God was for him, who could be against him? His faith in this would be severely tested as the darkness deepened and the thunders of judgment roared more loudly. But “**I am with thee**” is sufficient for every trial. Devils may rage, men may gnash their teeth in malicious hatred, Providence itself may seem to oppose; but the man who can rest in faith upon the promises of the Eternal shall never be put to shame.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
