

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

G. Campbell Morgan, D. D.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE MESSAGE OF JEREMIAH

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THERE is no prophetic book concerning which it is more necessary that we have in mind the times and the man if we are to discover its permanent value and its living message.

These general facts are indicated in the opening sentences of our lecture upon the content of the book, "Jeremiah was the Lord's spokesman in days of darkness and disaster." That is a very brief, but all-inclusive service reminding us of the times in which these words were uttered, and revealing the authority of the man who uttered them. The times were days of darkness and disaster. The man was the Lord's spokesman. Let us then remind ourselves of the times which in a sentence are described as days of darkness and disaster. Jeremiah exercised his prophetic ministry in Judah about a century after Isaiah had delivered his last message.

The Northern kingdom of Israel had passed away, and the whole attention is centered upon Judah. Two nations affected her at the time; on the south, Egypt, and on the east, Assyria. During the time that Jeremiah exercised his ministry Judah was attempting either to play these off one against the other, or was hesitating as to which she should make an alliance with, in order to protect herself from the enmity of the other. A recognition of these facts will enable us to understand the reason of the terrible condition in which she found herself.

Her vision of God was dimmed, if she had not lost it altogether. Her hope lay not in Him, her one and only King, but in her ability either to stir up strife between these two nations, or to secure the aid of one against the other. Her internal condition was equally terrible. Isaiah had delivered his great messages in Hezekiah's reign. Immediately succeeding Hezekiah, Manasseh came to the throne. Notwithstanding the fact that there was a place of repentance found for him, his reign was characterized by reaction from the influence of Hezekiah; he set up altars and idolatry even in the courts of the house of the Lord. The nation sank lower and lower.

The brief reign of Ammon was a failure. Then followed the period of Josiah. When he had been upon the throne for twelve or thirteen years Jeremiah commenced his ministry, which lasted at least forty-six years, being exercised through the reigns of Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, and during the early part of the exile. It is but to name these kings to be reminded of the darkness of the days.

The national movement was downward, the people sinking ever lower. The reform under Josiah was entirely upon the surface of things so far as the people were concerned. There was no vital change wrought in their character. Jehoahaz reigned for thirteen months in the midst of evil of every description. Under Jehoiakim, evil became even more widespread, and deeper. Jehoiachin reigned briefly and was deposed. Then came Zedekiah, a man meaning well, but preeminently weak, and the vassal of another nation. Never for one single moment during the forty or more years of his ministry did Jeremiah arrest the downward progress of the people; never by anything he said, never by anything he suffered, never by anything he did was he able to check that deterioration. The description of the darkness of the times has thus been given by Dr. Moorehead:

"It was Jeremiah's lot to prophesy at a time when all things in Judah were rushing down to the final and mournful catastrophe; when political excitement.. was at its height; when the worst passions swayed the various parties, and the most fatal counsels prevailed; . . . to see his own people, whom he loved with the tenderness of a woman, plunge over the precipice into the wide, weltering ruin."

No words could more graphically portray the times. The prophesying of other men always seems to have produced periods of reformation. Even if Isaiah had at last to say, **“Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?”** his influence was nevertheless manifest in Hezekiah, and in the reformation under him. Jeremiah, on the other hand, watched the ruin of his people, saw them rush headlong to the final calamity, constantly uttering the word of God to them out of a heart filled with despair.

Then also we must look at Jeremiah himself. It is not carelessly that I have described him as the spokesman of the Lord. It is quite impossible to lay any great emphasis on the full meaning of his name simply because no one knows exactly what its real significance was. There is, however, one quantity included in it concerning which there can be no question.

It has been suggested that the name means *the Lord appointed*. Hengstenberg affirmed that it signified *the Lord throws*, the idea being that of God throwing and overthrowing, Jeremiah being the instrument of His activity. It has also been declared that the name means *the Lord exalts*. Yet again there are those who maintain, and I personally incline to this view, that the name signified *the Lord founded*. Without laying undue emphasis upon that, however, it is noticeable that every suggestion relates the man to the Lord, whether the thought be appointed, or throws, exalts, or founded. Moreover, that declaration is made in the opening chapter of the prophecy,-

“Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee; and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

That is a distinct declaration that he was foreordained to the ministry exercised. To that declaration Jeremiah replied, **“Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child,”** and continuing his story the prophet declares;-

“But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”

Thus it is evident that he was foreordained, perfectly equipped, and Divinely appointed to that long, forlorn ministry which he so heroically and graciously fulfilled. We may also look at the man as to his personal character, for there is no prophet who has given us so clear a revelation of himself as Jeremiah, and yet there was no other who shrank from publicity as he did.

Because his message was of the very bone and fiber and sinew of him, because he entered both into the life of his people and into that of the Lord, and because he spoke to them in such disastrous circumstances, the picture of the man is clearly stamped upon the page of his prophecy.

There are three things apparent:

- His simplicity,
- His sensitiveness, and
- His strength.

His absolute simplicity manifested itself when the command first came to him, **“Ah, LORD God I Behold I cannot speak; for I am a child.”** He never lost the child heart and the child nature. His sensitiveness is seen in the way in which he shrank from his work. Even in hours of sacred fellowship with the Lord he protested against having to deliver the messages of judgment. He felt all the pain of the judgments falling upon his people. He was, moreover, a man of absolute and overwhelming strength. If his nature was so simple that he had to say, **“I am a child”**; if his sensitiveness of soul was such that he constantly shrank from delivering his messages, his strength was such that he spoke every word that God gave him to speak.

No prophet in the long line was more like Christ than Jeremiah. He was a fit instrument for uttering the truth of the throne in days when its government was rejected and its grace neglected. It is most necessary in days when government is rejected and grace neglected that the voice of the Throne should be heard. Jeremiah was the fitting spokesman of that Throne. Chosen and known before his birth, equipped by the touch of God upon his lips, in his simple nature he was a perfect instrument through whom God was able to speak; in the sensitiveness of his heart he was a revelation to men of the love of God; and in the strength that dared he was able to cooperate with God.

All this brings us to an understanding of the permanent value of the book. It is the revelation of God in the midst of an age of unutterable failure. That revelation is threefold.

First, it is that of the Lord’s judgment of sin.

Jeremiah saw in all the destruction, and devastation, and sweeping ruin, God’s activity revealing God’s attitude towards sin.

Secondly it is that of the Lord’s suffering for sin.

In the story of Jeremiah’s shrinking and pain and tears we have a picture of a man in such perfect fellowship with God, that through him God was able to reveal His own suffering in the presence of sin.

Thirdly, it is that of the Lord’s victory over sin. In Jeremiah’s moral and hopeful triumph over sin even in prison, we have evidence of the certainty of God’s ultimate victory.

First, then, this book reveals through the ministry of Jeremiah, God’s judgment of sin. In the second chapter is recorded the prophet’s impeachment of the nation. Let us recall some of his statements.

A graphic picture of the degradation of those in authority is found in the eighth verse:

“The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew Me not: the pastors also transgressed against Me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit.”

In the nineteenth verse the prophet declares the relation between wickedness and judgment;-

“Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, and that My fear is not in thee, saith the LORD, the LORD of hosts.”

In the thirty-fifth verse the most sinful of all sins is revealed:

“Yet thou sayest, Because I am innocent, surely his anger shall turn from me. Behold, I will plead with thee, because thou sayest, I have not sinned.”

Thus the message of Jeremiah to his own people was one which persistently declared that their ruin was the result of their sin. Politicians would have attributed the national trouble to the difficulty of their position, having Egypt on the south and Assyria on the east. The prophet declared that the reason was in themselves. They had forgotten God, and were discussing policy and arrangement, instead of putting away sin.

Then observe the process of Divine judgment as Jeremiah explained it. We read the history merely and say, What an unfortunate succession of kings; how singularly these people failed to produce statesmen who were able to cope with the political situation. This lonely figure, observing the race to ruin, said, The failure of your kings and the failure of your policy prove that the hand of God is upon you in judgment. It is He Who breaks down the power of your king. It is He Who will bring to nought your intrigue with Egypt, and hand your city over to the Assyrian who is already at your gates. He declared that the process of judgment was that of the direct action of God.

Jeremiah stood, the Lord's spokesman, alone, unheeded, persecuted, but insistent; and events moved on and vindicated him, as the Lord crushed and broke, and cast away the people who had sinned against Him.

I would to God a voice like that of Jeremiah might be heard to-day, calling men back to recognition of the fact that all ruin and loss and national decay are due first to the fact that we forget God, and then to the fact that God lifts up or breaks down according to whether or not a nation is living in right relationship to Himself.

This figure of Jeremiah is full of majestic force. Though he spoke so long ago, his voice is a living voice to-day. The things he said during those years of hopeless ministry have application to all nations through all time. The root sin of national life is forgetfulness of God, and consequent rebellion against Him. The failure of kings and politicians, the matters of which we speak as the misfortunes of the age, are evidences that God has not abandoned the Throne of supremacy.

I look again and see, through this man's suffering, a revelation of the most overwhelming and astonishing description; that namely of the Lord's suffering for sin. Do not let us forget the beginning of this story, those words we have already read, **"Before I formed thee . . . I knew thee."** Jeremiah was formed by God according to a pattern of Divine foreknowledge. This man of God's formation and appointment is seen shrinking, not from the delivery of the message, but because of the pain he saw coming to his own people. He cried out in his anguish,

"Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"

The prophet's agony created his need of being strengthened whenever he received the messages of the Lord.

In the central lamentation he identified himself with the sufferings of his people, expressing all the sorrows that he had described in the earlier sections, as though they were his own. We have read this prophecy very carelessly if we have simply seen in it the sorrows of a man, **"Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people."**

Can we find anything to match that? We have already done so. We have traveled through the centuries until we have stood upon the slopes of Olivet with a Man more lonely than Jeremiah, and have seen Him looking at Jerusalem, and have heard Him pronounce its doom, weeping as He did so. That is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. The stern denunciation that doomed Jerusalem was uttered in a voice choked with emotion, while the eyes were suffused with tears, as they saw the fire that soon was to destroy it.

The interpretation of Jeremiah's suffering is to be found in the suffering of Jesus, and the interpretation of the suffering of Jesus is to be found in the suffering of God. Jeremiah stood as the Lord's spokesman, shrinking and sorrowful, because he entered into the profoundest fellowship with God.

A wonderful revelation is this.

Stern denunciation of sin continued through all the processes of ruin, no truce with it, no excuse for it even though such denunciation resulted in stripes, brutality, and the dungeon; never flinching, never excusing, never condoning; yet all the while the . message accompanied by the flow of tears and uttered in tones of anguish.

Once again, there is revealed in this prophecy the fact of the Lord's victory over sin. There is no figure in the Bible that sets forth the sovereignty of God so uncompromisingly as that of the potter and the clay.

"O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel."

How we have trembled in the presence of those words. The potter moulds the clay as he pleases,

and the clay cannot object. It has no right to object. That is the doctrine of absolute sovereignty. It cannot fail to make the heart tremble; but let us carefully note the use Jeremiah makes of this figure.

In words full of beauty he declares the ultimate activity of sovereignty.

“And the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.”

If there were nothing but the figure of the potter with its awe-inspiring revelation of sovereignty, I should be broken and crushed with hopelessness, but there is more. There is the declaration of the ultimate activity of sovereignty, **“he made it again.”** That was the great message of Jeremiah. Think of him as he watched the people he loved rushing to ruin, feeling all the time in his heart the very anguish of God in the presence of the disaster; and then uttering this high word which seemed as though it never could be fulfilled, **“He made it again another vessel.”**

Then come to the central chapters of the book and listen to him in the darkest day, the day in which he was in the innermost dungeon. It was then that he wrote the prophecies of hope contained in chapters thirty to thirty-three. When he spoke of Jacob’s trouble he declared it was trouble that proceeded to triumph. He believed that ultimately God would work out the purpose of His love and the purpose of His grace. In this aspect also, therefore, Jeremiah stood the spokesman of the Lord, and out of the midst of sorrow and sin gave utterance to the songs of certain victory. The permanent values of this book constitute its living message. I utter that in briefest sentences.

First, it teaches us that sin is its own destruction. No policy can outmaneuver God. National rebellion is national ruin. Sin carries within itself the force of its own punishment and its own retribution.

Secondly, it affirms that the heart of God is wounded by sin. Judgment is His strange act. He weeps over the doom of a city.

Finally it declares that the ultimate victory is with God, **“He made it again.”** The Branch is appointed. The King-Priest has come.

We are to learn that God must punish sin, that the most awful fact of sin is that it wounds God; and finally, that if we will but have it so, if we will but turn to Him and listen to His call, He overrules by canceling, and breaking the power of sin, makes again the vessel marred in the hand of the potter.

~ end of chapter 24 ~

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