

CAUSING MEN TO HEAR HIS WORDS

How beautiful is the light that is in the Bible, wherever we peep in. Some cannot see it for the words and verses and chapters; they see these and not the things that the words and verses and chapters represent. This is a failure. The light lies in the things represented and not in words; yet, of course it is by the words we see the things and seeing the things, we see that which gives light and truth and joy. Let us try the process on the chapter read this morning from Jeremiah.

At the first rough glance, we see three things strongly, that suggest many other things. We see Jeremiah speaking unpleasant things. We see him in the land of Israel, over 2,400 years ago. We see him in the midst of the Jewish nation. On this we have to ask, How came there to be a Jewish people? And what led Jeremiah to take up so unpopular an attitude in their midst? The question has a practical present day interest, because the Jewish people are prominently before the notice of mankind at the present hour, and because they are no longer in the land where Jeremiah addressed them, but dispersed among the nations in the circumstances of suffering that Jeremiah predicted. The first of these questions need not detain us on the present occasion: because we all know that the history of the case has but one answer—namely, that God specially formed the Jewish people for Himself by the various circumstances narrated in the Scriptures—the call of Abraham from Chaldea, the settlement of his family in Canaan, their migration to Egypt and multiplication there, and their exodus from that country under Moses by whom (after miraculous deliverance) they were organised into a nation, on the basis of a law direct from God. They had been settled in the land for nearly a thousand years when Jeremiah appeared in their midst.

What has he to say to them? And why? It is the answer to this question that yields so much that is of importance to us. What he says is complex in character, but all extraordinary. The first word of this chapter is a volume itself: “*woe*.” This is the foretelling of evil. Almost the whole of his prophecy is in this key. What is the explanation of this? How was Jeremiah able to foretell evil? If any man in our day say “Woe to Britain,” we attach no weight to it. We instinctively feel it is the voice of fanaticism: it is a querulous egotistical human voice, and a human voice can tell us nothing of the future. But we cannot read “*woe*” in Jeremiah without feeling that it is a very different voice from any modern voice that may say “*woe*.” The surrounding circumstances make us feel the difference, as well as the fact that the “*woe*” has all come to pass. The surrounding circumstances show us a timid man who has no pleasure in messages of evil—

“Oh Lord, thou knowest I have not desired the woeful day” (Jer. 17:16).

He was almost scared into silence by the public scorn.

*“The Word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me daily, therefore I said, I will not speak any more in His name, but His Word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay
(17; 20:8-9).*

He was sick of life through the bitterness of his work:

“Woe is me, my mother, that thou has 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” (15:10),

“Cursed be the day wherein I was born . . . wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed in shame?” (20:14-18)

He was finally overwhelmed with sorrow at the public calamities:

“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” (9:1; and all Lamentations).

“Woe” comes heavily from the lips of such a man. What was its cause—what its explanation? Jeremiah himself was called upon to make a declaration on this point under very extreme circumstances.

He was arrested in Jerusalem during the siege of that city by Nebuchadnezzar, on a charge of intimidating the defenders in the interest of the Babylonians. His captors, backed by an infuriate populace, said, *“Thou shalt surely die.”* They demanded of him,

“Why hast thou prophesied . . . saying, this city shall be desolate without inhabitant?” (26:9).

Jeremiah’s answer was,

“The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard . . . As for me, behold I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you, but know ye for certain that if ye put me to death, ye shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city, and upon the inhabitants thereof: for of a truth, the Lord hath sent me unto you to speak all these words in your ears” (26:12-15).

Here, then, is a specific statement on the most important of all questions, viz., whether we are to trust in the glorious things written in the Bible or not—whether God or man speaks in the case. If man speaks, we have nothing to trust to; for man knows nothing of futurity. He may amuse us with beautiful fancies or beautiful jingle, like “the poet”: but he knows nothing and can tell us nothing of eternal truth. But if God is the speaker, it is a very different matter indeed. That God is the speaker is alleged not once or twice, but many hundreds of times everywhere—in all parts of the Bible—beginning, middle or end. As a specimen of the Beginning, you may take Moses:

“I have not done things of mine own mind” “the Lord said unto Moses” (Num. 16:28; 17:1):

The Middle:

“The vision of Isaiah . . . the Lord hath spoken” (Isa. 1:1):

The End:

“These sayings are faithful and true: the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show unto His servants the things which must shortly be done” (Rev. 22:6).

This fact that the messages of Jeremiah, like the messages of all the prophets, “came not,” as Peter declares (2 Peter 1:21) “*by the will of man, but holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,*” imparts the utmost moment to what we read in them.

Let us return to Jeremiah 23 and ponder God’s comment on the public opinion of Jerusalem that we may get a little guidance for the day in which we live. People attach great importance to the “comments of the daily press,” though it mostly amounts to so much gab.

Public opinion and the public press generally drift together because they are part and parcel of the same thing. One or two of the public get pens in their hands and scribble what as members of the public they think: that is the public press. The rest of the public that read what one or two of themselves have scribbled in harmony with their own thoughts: that is the public. In the case of what we read in Jeremiah, the case is very different. It is the case of one man uttering against a whole community thoughts of God concerning man, not shared by the public, not conceived by Jeremiah, but communicated by the Spirit of God direct, and blown into a red heat in Jeremiah's mind, as we might say, so that he could not resist their utterance, as he says in one of the verses quoted. Now, he has something to say about the public teachers of the city. He says—

"They speak a vision out of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord" (v.16).

He says—

"They make you vain."

"They cause My people to err by their lies" (v.32).

"They strengthen the hand of evil doers, that none doth return from his wickedness . . . They say still to them that despise Me, 'the Lord hath said ye shall have peace': and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, 'No evil shall come upon you'" (v.14&17).

What does God say concerning these corrupting teachers?

"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied" (v.21).

Now, this is interesting and instructive for us to consider because we live in an age when the most prominent figures in public life are the men in what are called holy orders, and who claim to be sent of God and to have authority to speak His Word. We have the archbishops, and the bishops, and the canons and the deans, and the vicars, and the curates, and all the other grades of the clerical army "as by law established."—None more respectable; none higher in the world's honour and esteem: none whom it seems more presumptuous to call in question. But as we listen to Jeremiah's exhibitions of God's estimate of the public teachers of Jerusalem, we are greatly strengthened to consider whether these modern prophets may not be in a like case. Is it quite certain that God has sent these modern prophets who are so quick to run about on their professional errand? Is it quite certain that God has spoken to them? Is it not within the bounds of possibility that they speak a vision out of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord? Is it not indeed a demonstrable fact that they cause the people to err by their lies, and strengthen the hand of evil doers by smooth words to all and sundry? Saying to every one that walketh in the imagination of his evil heart, *"No evil shall come upon you?"*

In the providence of God, through the possession of His Word, we are in a position to decide these questions. This very chapter indirectly supplies the text. Although God disowns the prophets who fathered their misleading vaticinations upon Him, saying, *"He (the Lord) saith"* when they were but using their own tongues (v.31), yet He points out a way in which they might have been of service to Israel though He had not sent them. He says (v.22),

"If they had caused My people to hear My Words, then should they have turned them from their evil way."

There was a written Word in Israel's hands, the Scriptures of Moses and the prophets, so far as developed up to Jeremiah's time. Concerning this work (so far as developed), it had been laid down abundantly in the Psalms that it was a "*lamp to the feet and a light to the path.*"

"The entrance of Thy words giveth light."

So practically was this the case that it was a matter of direction to Israel that they were to use this Word as a test-standard in trying the claims of any man professing to speak spiritual things.

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them"

(Isa. 8:20).

Now, if in God's own nation, and to the leaders of God's own appointing (for it was by divine appointment that the Levitical class assumed to be prophets and teachers), the written Word was to be used as a test in determining all spiritual claims, who shall forbid us applying it in a nation that God has not created except in a providential way, and to a class of men who are self-elected and man-appointed altogether? It must be manifest that in a day when God is silent (as pre-arranged and predicted beforehand), there is no other method of determining such claims. The application of this test disposes of the claims altogether. Nothing is more certain than that the clergy have no authority from God whatever, and that they cause the people to err by doctrines that are the mere outcome of human thought and imagination in various dark ages past, and whose tendency is to strengthen the hand of the evil doer, and to cause the whole wicked world to sit still in a fool's paradise.

There is no hope but in the wholesale appeal that God Himself makes to scriptural enlightenment in this chapter (v. 18):

"Who hath stood in the counsel of the Lord and hath perceived and heard His Word? Who hath marked His Word and heard it?"

It is for those who answer to this appeal to stand forth with confidence. The Bible is the Word of God; and those who have "*perceived and heard*" it, who have become enlightened in its teaching or "*counsel*," who have to come to an understanding of it and are in affectionate submission to its authority, are here rallied by God Himself, as distinguished from the impotent mass of the community who are in bondage to the traditions of men, and who know not what is truth. God appeals to them on the score of knowledge as to what is coming on the wickedness that is tenderly patted on the back by all kinds of false prophets.

"Who hath marked His Word and heard it? Behold a whirlwind of the Lord is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind; it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord shall not return until He have executed and till He have performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly"

(23:18-20)

If God would have been pleased with the false prophets for using their position to enlighten Israel with reference to His written testimonies, although He had not sent them, it is easy for us to perceive an acceptable sphere of service for any man or woman in a similar situation in a different age. God has not spoken in a personal sense to any mortal man living in our age; but He spoke to the Gentiles by the apostles, who though long dead, still speak in their written message. Their word is God's Word, for so Jesus instructed them—that whosoever listened to them listened to him and to the Father who had sent him (Matt. 10:40).

Therefore in “*causing*” any one to “*hear the words*” that God spoke by the apostles, we are doing that which has God’s recorded approval, in this chapter even though we may have had no personal delegation. This is according to common intelligence. God has addressed mankind in general:

“Look unto me all ye ends of the earth” (Isa. 14:22).

“Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden” (Matt.11).

“Ho everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters . . . Hearken diligently unto me and eat ye that which is good. Let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come to me. Hear, and your soul shall live” (Isa. 55:1-3).

“The Spirit and the Bride say, Come; and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17).

But these “great and precious promises” though beautifully written, have no power of self-proclamation. They require a living agency to arrest attention. They depend in great measure for their efficacy on the faithful activity of those who believe. Hence the direction:

“Let him that heareth say, come.”

This is where our opportunity lies. God, as He looks down from heaven, humanly speaking, and surveys mankind in their million-fold occupations and activities, sees a man doing a thing that is according to His mind, who busies himself in “*causing men to hear His words.*” Our ability may be small; our opportunity less; so much the more reason for making the most of what we have. There are many ways of doing this work. If a man have covered his private circle, let him get at what public circle he may, and if he have no public circle, then let him operate through those who have. Whoever helps the work of those who have a public field of labour in this matter becomes a partner in that public work. It is in the power of many private people to thus extend the sphere of their own labour. Some “*know the day of their visitation*” in this matter, and act according to knowledge, some are blinded by jealousy or other derangement of nature, and let their opportunity slip till it is too late.

And the gospel lies here that God is the Rock and the Foundation that has promised to do certain things for us if we believe. His promise standeth sure and his threatenings, too. His Word in this sense is a fire and a hammer. It will break and destroy all that is opposed to His will. He told Israel this, in quiet words, concerning their land and nation; and next day and next year, it seemed that there was nothing in it when the sun rose and all things continued as usual. But in due course, the state of the case appeared. “*I will make this city into ruinous heaps!*” said the still small voice of prophecy—“*without man and without beast;*” the valley of Hinnom, in which the inhabitants gloried for its beauty, shall be called the valley of slaughter. There will be dead bodies there till there is no room to bury. It seemed very unlikely but let us take our stand by Titus, on the day of the capture of the temple: hearken to the hurrahs of the soldiery massed around him as the ensigns of Rome are planted in the holy place: what see we as we glance around? smoking heaps; wide pools of human blood; piles of corpses. The same Word, in the chapter before, promises restoration, rebuilding, restitution and joy. It will all come as assuredly as all the woe, and happy shall we be if, having waited patiently for the salvation of God in a day of contradiction, down-treading and darkness, we are there to see and to share in Zion’s glad morning.

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