

## **EXPERIENCE OF EVIL A COROLLARY OF DIVINE SERVICE AND APPROVAL.**

The chapter we have read from Jeremiah is remarkable in more ways than one. It will be profitable for us to consider it for a few minutes, as affording us an opportunity of doing what James recommends when he says, *“Take my brethren, the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction and of patience.”* Jeremiah is more serviceable in this respect than almost any of the prophets, for we get closer to him, and observe the shades of his individual feelings in the various circumstances in which he was placed.

His prophecy is remarkable for the absence of all pompous introduction. Nothing could be more bald or literal than the preface which describes him as *“Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth, of the land of Benjamin, to whom the Word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, unto the end of the 11th year of Zedekiah... unto the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the 5<sup>th</sup> month.”* What a total absence is there here of any attempt to magnify the importance of Jeremiah and his writings. How unlike in this respect to all ordinary literary efforts; how indicative, amongst many things, of the genuine character of his communications from God. Then we have Jeremiah’s extreme sense of unfitness for the work to which he was called. The first message to him is that he had been ordained a prophet before his birth, *“Before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”* The natural corollary of this as a matter of human thought would have been one of two things, and perhaps both, first, that God would have made Jeremiah a strong, self-sufficient, impervious man, proof against all trouble, and secondly, that Jeremiah would at least have had a strong sense of his capacity for the work to which he was called. Instead of that, the very first response of Jeremiah is, *“Ah, Lord God, I cannot speak for I am a child.”* This response could never have been written but for the sincere experience of the sentiment; and it never could have found entrance into a human conception of a prophet’s mission. It is a characteristic that crops up very frequently in the history of God’s use for men. Even Moses, the first and greatest of the prophets, raised a similar objection, a sense of extreme self-deficiency; and Paul confesses to the same feeling. Such a feature naturally belongs to the genuine employment by God of men for purposes of revelation. It is easy to understand that Omnipotence would employ weak human mediums in the revelation of divine purposes and wishes; human importances and self-confidences would naturally have been in the way.

Jeremiah appears very far from one in the position of self-confidence. At this very opening interview he is divinely exhorted to be strong, because he was feeling weak. *“Say not, I am a child, for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee shalt thou speak. Be not afraid of their faces, for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them”* (Jer.1: 17).

Thus authorized, Jeremiah goes forth to his work, and soon finds it the most painful work a man could have been called to; so painful that he wishes himself dead. *“Cursed be the day wherein I was born; let not the day wherein my mother bear me be blessed. Cursed be the man that brought tidings unto my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee, making him very glad. Let that man be as the cities which the Lord overthrew, because he slew me not from the womb. Wherefore came I forth to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?”*

When we analyse his case, we find the reason of these bitter feelings. *"I am in derision daily,"* he says, *"Everyone mocketh me. The Word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me, and a derision daily."* Why this should be it is not difficult to see. The messages he was commanded to deliver were such as to excite the utmost resentment on the part of the populace. When we read his prophecies we find them one continuous condemnation of their ways and prediction of coming woe, such as, *"Behold I bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto My Word, nor unto My law, but have rejected it. They are all grievous revolters, walking with slanders; they are brass and iron, they are all corrupters. Reprobate silver shall men call them, because the Lord hath rejected them... Behold ye trust in lying words that cannot profit. They steal, murder, commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations. Is this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? I will cast you out of My sight. Therefore pray not thou for this people...for I will not hear thee...Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked therein, therefore thus saith the Lord God of Hosts, the God of Israel, behold I will feed them with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink, and will scatter them also amongst the heathen, whom neither they nor their fathers have known; and I will send a sword after them that shall consume them."*

It is no wonder that Jeremiah was detested. We have only to imagine such things addressed to people in our own day, to realise how inevitably it would stir hatred, and lead to that stubborn wrath that made Jeremiah feel it was no use speaking. He had really come to that decision at one stage of his work. *"I said I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name."* However he was not able to act out his own feelings in this matter. When the Word of God is in a man, it is too strong for his natural control. *"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."* And so he went on delivering in public places the various messages as they arrived. At last things came to a serious pass. The priests could no longer endure his reproofs. He had said, *"This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant."* Priest, prophet, and people came in a violent mob against him in the court of the temple, and seized him (Jer. 26:8). They carried him before the princes, who had the executive power, and demanded his death. Jeremiah could only say in reply (v.12), *"The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words which ye have heard. Now therefore, amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God. As for me, 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 bring innocent blood upon your heads; for of a truth the Lord hath sent me unto you to speak all these words."* The princes were touched by his modest and pathetic appeal, and refused to sanction his death, and for that time he escaped. Later on, however, even the princes themselves implored the king to give sentence for his death. The situation under which they did so was peculiar in this, that common sense seemed to be all on the side of the princes, and all against Jeremiah. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had invaded the land, and had laid siege to Jerusalem. The inhabitants were busy on every hand concerting measures for defence, and at such a time as this Jeremiah received a command to say, *"He that abideth in the city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence; and he that goeth out and falleth to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live; for I have set My face against this city for evil, and not for good, saith the Lord, and it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire."* The princes came to the king and said, *"This man weakeneth the hands of the men of war in speaking such words, let him be put to death."* The king said, *"Behold, he is in your hand."* So they took

Jeremiah and gave him over to death, as they supposed, by lowering him into a pit in which there was mire at the bottom, in which Jeremiah sunk.

Such a message was certainly an extreme test both to Jeremiah and to the inhabitants of the city; but if we can realise the divine point of view, we may see that it was admirably suited to the situation. The city was on the point of being destroyed, and was, in fact, destroyed within 18 months or two years; but here was a last opportunity, after generations of disobedience, for any amongst the inhabitants who feared God, to deliver themselves by faith and obedience (the two great conditions of acceptance always). To go forth into apparent death would deliver them; to stay in apparent security would destroy them. It was parallel to the words of Christ, *"He that saveth his life shall lose it, but he that loses his life shall preserve it."* Many, in fact, did go out to the Chaldeans and were allowed to live, while those who tarried behind perished in the siege.

But think of Jeremiah, a messenger of God, sunk in ignominious mud and darkness, apparently a poor recompense for the delivery of his message; but, in fact, faithfulness was thus put to the test; for it requires no great faithfulness to do a work that is rewarded on the spot with honour and emolument. That horrible mud and the chills in his bones will be amongst Jeremiah's brightest memories when the work of God is complete. He will have no regrets about that pit when he is seen with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom. He could not have lived in such a situation; the time had not come for him to die, for his work was not yet done; so a friend was provided in Ebedmelech, the Ethiopian, who obtained the king's authority to bring him up with ropes. Look at Jeremiah just out of the pit, a sad sight for the servants of God, besmeared with mud, and chattering with cold. Let us learn that the service of God is not disproved by being hard. Jeremiah would be quickly cleaned and re-clad, but his troubles were not over. The siege was in progress; the heavy thuds of the battering-rams could be heard against the walls.

Food was in great scarcity, and nobody was in good spirits. By-and-by the city was captured. God had said to Jeremiah that he would be cared for in the end, but this did not interfere with his being chained amongst an indiscriminate crowd of captives, and wearily marched to Rabbath, where Nebuchadnezzar was encamped. Arrived here, he was discovered by Nebuchadnezzar, and his release ordered, and money given to him, and permission to go back among his people. But not then was his trouble over. The people, seeing his words had come to pass, were naturally deferential to him, and applied to him for direction as to their future proceedings. They strongly wished to go down to Egypt, as a land of peace, to get away from the terrors of war, and they consulted Jeremiah on the subject. Jeremiah submitted the matter to God, and received instructions to order them to remain in the land; but this the people disregarded and went down to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. There we lost sight of him, except insofar as he makes himself visible in the "Lamentations," that were evidently written about this time.

These lamentations are deserving of being seriously pondered from this one special point of view, namely, the experience of evil as a corollary of divine service and approval. The natural man is so liable to assume that prosperity must necessarily accompany men divinely used and approved. This assumption is doubtless the natural result of the revealed fact that at the last it shall be well with them that fear God. The mistake lies in applying the finishing result to the process by which the result was reached. Jeremiah was a faithful servant of God, and yet he had to write this, *"I am the man that hath seen affliction. He hath led me and brought me into darkness, and not into light. He hath builded against me, and compassed me with gall and travail. He hath set me in dark places, as they that are dead of old. He hath hedged me about that I cannot get out. He hath made my chain heavy. Also*

*when I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer. He hath enclosed my ways with hewn stone; He hath made my paths crooked. He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces; He hath made me desolate. He hath filled me with bitterness. He hath made me drunken with wormwood. Thou hast removed my soul far off from peace; I forgot prosperity. I said, my strength and my hope is perished from the lord, remembering mine affliction and my sorrow, the wormwood and the gall.”*

Tradition says that Jeremiah was sawn asunder by the Jews in Egypt. That would at least end his sufferings, and prepare him for the joyful release that awaits all the children of God at the appointed time. The sorrows and horrors of the night will all be forgotten when the morning dawns. For the joy of that morning the sorrows are a preparation, grievous while they last, but working a work that cannot be dispensed with. We may take the prophets as a lesson on the subject that it is eminently profitable to study. In this age our sufferings never can be like theirs, but still to the last it must and will remain true, that “*many are the afflictions of the righteous.*” They are inseparable from the evil state of things through which the righteous are called to pass, and they are indispensable to the result that God proposes to work in them in preparation for the age of glory. We must, therefore, act on the advice that God gave to Jeremiah, and to many others besides, “*Be strong and of good courage; gird up thy loins. Speak unto them all that I command thee. Be not dismayed at their faces. Set thy face like a flint. Contend earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints. Be faithful unto death.*” What if you have to wade through a sea of trouble? It is “*that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, may be found unto praise and honour and glory, at the appearing of Christ.*”

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