

JEREMIAH'S EXPERIENCES AN EXAMPLE

We know something of the comforts and advantages of the Truth. Sometimes we may be tempted to think we know more of the other side --- the distresses and mortifications and drawbacks connected with its profession. We may think there is extreme truth in the saying of Solomon, "In much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." When such may be our mood in the changeful experiences and conditions of human nature, we cannot do better than act on the exhortation of James, who says, "Take, my brethren, the prophets for an example of suffering, affliction and of patience." We are enabled to do so this morning from the reading of Jeremiah (Chp.20).

Here we have the prophet in a very extreme state of affliction: "in the stocks" (v.2). None of us have been in the stocks. It is a form of penal infliction that has long gone out of use in Great Britain and some other countries, but here and there the stocks are to be seen as a relic of the past; and we may form some idea of the bodily suffering undergone by those who were put into them for even the short space of twenty-four hours as Jeremiah was (v.3). Hands and feet locked into holes in a wooden frame compelled the unhappy victim to sit in one position on the ground in a public place all the time. We may be subject to disadvantages and annoyances on account of our faithfulness to the Truth, but we have nothing of this sort to endure. I imagine a single night in the stocks would make us feel our tribulation to be very light indeed. Yet here is an actual prophet of God, with the word of inspiration in his mouth, subjected to this extreme humiliation and distress.

At whose hands? Here is something to think of, at the hands of the "chief governor of the house of Yahweh" (v.1). One would expect barbarity from a heathen; from the head caretaker of the holy temple of God, it would be natural to expect something else. It was from God's own people that the prophets of God received their trouble. It was Jerusalem that killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent from God to her, down to God's own Son, "with wicked hands crucified and slain." Need we wonder at the opposition of religious people to the Truth? It distresses some people greatly to find the curate or the vicar, or the rector or the dean or the bishop denouncing the Truth as detestable heresy. It need not distress in the least. Even if those professional ecclesiastics had the divine origin which they imagine; even if they had been originally appointed of God, as the Levites were; even if they had the authority of the anointing oil of the sanctuary upon them, it would be no new thing for an order of men originally divine to be so far astray from the spirit and purpose of their calling as to set themselves in opposition to the will of God and His faithful messengers, for here in Jerusalem was the whole hierarchy of the priests against Jeremiah. But how much more easily borne is the opposition of the clergy when we realise that they are an entirely and human artificial order of men, whose "call" is not of God but of man: who owe their position wholly to maternal ambition or social exigency or individual aspiration under the operation of a false system. "I have not sent them, yet they ran," said God concerning the false prophets. So He would certainly say of the clergy did He speak now as in the days of old, and as He will speak again very shortly.

Why did "the chief governor of the house of Yahweh" proceed to such extremities against Jeremiah? Because, as we read in v.1, "he heard that Jeremiah prophesied these things." What things? The things going before which are all summarized in the last verse of the immediately preceding chapter: "Thus saith Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Israel, behold I will bring upon this city and upon all her towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have hardened their necks that they might not hear my words." The people of

Jerusalem, instigated by the religious leaders, persecuted Jeremiah for speaking the Word of Yahweh, which was distasteful to them. Is not this the present posture of affairs as regards the Truth? What is our offence against the religious community but just this, that we declare the word of the Lord in opposition to the traditions and ideas that are palatable to the people? We seek to bring them under the influence of the Word of God. We have no other aim—no other interest. We seek to induce them to abandon the lying traditions of men and to embrace the authenticated verities of God's own revealed Truth; and for this we are hated and rejected with a bitterness of animus quite equal to that which led to the killing of the prophets, and quite equal to the repetition of the old sanguinary barbarities, if the nature of the times admitted of it. Well, we look at Jeremiah and take comfort. If an original medium of God's living voice was so treated at the hands of God's actually chosen people and appointed priests, we need not be alarmed or surprised at a similar unfriendliness manifested towards the mere retailers of that Word.

It may be said, we have no message, and therefore cannot rank ourselves with the original purveyors of the Word. This is only partly true; in large part it would be a mistake. Every man has a message who has received the Truth in a full enlightenment and a full assurance of faith. Are we not commanded that if a man have ears (that is, capacity to listen discerningly), he is to hear what the Spirit said to the ecclesias by John in Patmos? And did not the Spirit say, "Let him that heareth, say, Come"? What is this but an authorisation and an injunction to deliver the invitation that has come from heaven to men to become partakers of eternal life? A man's standing in this affair depends upon his ability to discern and realise the situation. As Jesus said of another matter, "all men cannot receive this saying," so all men cannot perceive their day and their calling and their opportunity in this matter. They think the work of the Truth is not for them; that it was an affair for the apostles, and has been done; and that no man now is under any special obligation to send around the message. We should be disposed to regard such a view as proof that those holding it are not among those who have "heard" the Word to saving effect. Jesus says, "Ye shall know them by their fruits." Now if any man profess to have accepted the invitation of the Gospel, and be insensible to the obligation which the Lord has laid upon such to "Say come," it shows that the soil of his mind, in which the good seed has been sown, is not of a fertile quality, and that consequently he is an unfruitful servant. There are hundreds of forms of fruitfulness; but it is a bad sign if there is sterility here, where lies the beginning of all life spiritually—viz., the proclamation of the Word of the Lord.

We have to note that Jeremiah was authorized to declare (verse 4) to Pashur, the leader of the opposition against him, that he would shortly be a terror to himself and his friends in the particular share he would have in the troubles at that time impending over Jerusalem: "I will give all the strength of this city and all the labours thereof, and all the precious things thereof, and all the treasures of the Kings of Judah, into the hands of their enemies which shall spoil them, and take them, and carry them to Babylon. And thou Pashur, and all that dwell in thine house, shalt go into captivity, and thou shalt be buried there, thou and all thy friends to whom thou hast prophesied lies"—which came to pass shortly after the delivery of the message. These things were not written with an exclusive application to the day of their occurrence. They adumbrate (foreshadow) the principle and the method of God's procedure in all cases where His Word is operative. There are probably many now living of whom the same things are true in the special relations of the time of the end. They reject the testimony of God, and "prophesy lies" to the contemporary generation and flourish for the time being in a great and swelling prosperity which inflates them to an arrogance quite equal to putting all the troublesome Jeremiahs in the stocks, and worse, if they had the power. What but a terrible experience awaits them in the great upturn which at the Lord's coming will

remove their foundations from under their feet and convict them as ungodly scorners and blasphemers, notwithstanding the popularity and sanctity of the position which meanwhile they maintain in the eyes of the world? Nor will the grave be a screen to them from the righteous judgement of God, should they come within the line of that responsibility which the light creates, of which God only can judge. Though they peacefully pass away amid the sumptuous accessories of wealth, and be interred amid the honours and regrets of their generation, they will open their eyes at the return of Christ to behold and share in that “judgement to come,” which Paul made so prominent in all his exhibitions of the truth. There will be modern, as well as ancient, instances of Christ’s declaration to the Philadelphian ecclesia: “Behold, I will make them, of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but do lie, behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee”(Rev.3: 9).

Jeremiah was deeply and bitterly exercised by the hostile attitude of the people to whom he delivered the word of God. He gives expression to his feelings in a way that at first sight may seem a little difficult to understand: (verse 7) “O Lord, Thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: Thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily; everyone mocketh me.” It is evident that Jeremiah expected a different result from this. He expected to be attended to and influential in his words, in accordance with what God had said to him. But in this Jeremiah was mistaken. Granted that the words addressed to him sounded as if they meant a triumphant course for Jeremiah right away through from the commencement of his work. They meant this in God’s sense, but not in the sense that Jeremiah put upon them. They meant that kingdoms would rise and kingdoms fall in accordance with the Word he should speak, and not at all in accordance with the words that the false prophets, who were popular in Israel, would speak, and they meant that, notwithstanding the extreme opposition he should encounter on account of his words, the plots of his enemies to stop his mouth would all miscarry, and he would be found at the finish of the storm unprevailed against, while his enemies should be blown to the four winds. And so it came to pass: for though Jeremiah was “in derision daily,” and “mocked” by “everyone,” his word had the power of divine purpose in it, and was of such weight that the king on his throne sent to him secretly when he was a prisoner in the hands of the princes to get his advice (Jer.37: 15,17); and though they intrigued against him, and at last shut him up in prison, and even cast him into a miry dungeon that he might perish, God was with him and protected him from their enmity, and at the last, when his enemies perished miserably at the siege, or were put to the sword when dragged as captives before Nebuchadnezzar at the close of the siege, Jeremiah was an object of favour at the hands of the officers of the king, and emerged in safety from the sea of trouble through which he came in the doing of the work appointed to him. God’s promise to him came to pass. The suggestion that God had deceived him relates only to his own disappointed expectations. There may be something for us to apply to our experience here. God had made promise that He will supply our needs if we seek first the Kingdom. If we suppose, as we are liable to suppose in the childhood of our faith, that this means abundance, and an abundance supplied to us in a way that will save us all forethought and trouble, we shall be disappointed, because there are other objects that God has with us—objects of self-abasement and trial of faith—requiring that we shall know what it is to be the poor of this world, and to have a taste of the purifying tribulation “whereof all (the children) are partakers.” These objects must be realised in the process of our daily experience. God will fulfil the promise to supply our needs, but not in a way that will interfere with these objects, nor in the form or to the extent we might imagine to be necessary. We may be tempted to exclaim with Jeremiah sometimes, “O Lord, Thou hast deceived me,” but the fault will lie with our own misinterpretation, and not with any failure in His Word, which is impossible. “Neither tribulation, nor distress, persecution nor famine, nor death, nor nakedness, nor peril,

nor sword, can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” His love may require these very severities to secure for us a place in the haven of everlasting rest and joy at last.

Jeremiah was inclined (verse 9) to abstain from any further declaration of the words of the Lord in view of its evident uselessness, and the fact that it was only a cause of trouble. We may sometimes share this feeling, but if we let reason reign, we shall be exercised as he was, and feel His Word like a burning fire shut up, which will give us no rest till it have free and constant vent.

The chapter closes in a despairing strain: “Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow?” “Cursed be the day wherein I was born; let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed.” This is human weakness. The record of it is useful for all the children of God who have come after Jeremiah. It is an evidence to us that the prophets were men of like infirmities to ourselves, and, further, it enables us to realise that the waves of darkness and despair that may sometimes overwhelm us in the extreme weakness characterising the earthly nature we now possess, are not for our destruction, nor even tokens of reprobation, but are simply part and parcel of the evil through which we are passing to the Kingdom and glory of God.

Even in this very chapter, Jeremiah is able to burst out, as with a gleam of strong light in the darkness, “Sing unto the Lord: praise ye the Lord, for He hath delivered the soul of the poor from the hand of evil-doers.” And we know, on the authority of Christ, that a high and a glorious place awaits him in the company of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets.” So even now in the midst of the burden and groaning of this evil state, the cloud lifts ever and anon, and reveals a vision of reality that enables us to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and give thanks to His name. And we may look forward with anticipation not unfounded that our faith and work will be accepted in Christ, that our sins and shortcomings will be forgiven, and that we shall be invited to a place in the glorious inheritance of the saints in light!

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