

NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

(Chaps. 37-39)

We now enter upon what is more especially the historical part of the book.

Jeremiah's admonitory ministry was drawing to a close. Faithfully and fervently he had, ever since Josiah's day (that is, for a period of some thirty years or more), warned and pleaded and entreated his backsliding and treacherous people; but there had been no true response. They had put the Lord's word behind their backs and drifted further and further from His counsels. Now the judgment so long announced, while the Lord waited in longsuffering patience, can be no more delayed, but must fall with awful fury upon the devoted nation.

The words spoken through Hosea two centuries earlier must at last be fulfilled. **“I will go and return to My place till they acknowledge their offence”** (or, till they be guilty; that is, confessedly so), **“and seek My face: in their affliction they will seek Me early”** (Hosea 5:15).

In wondrous grace and mercy they had been spared the final blow thus far; but there is now no remedy. Nothing can turn aside the Lord's indignation. They must learn in captivity what they would not be taught in their own land.

In the 37th and 38th chapters we have a detailed account of the temporary withdrawal of the Babylonian troops upon the occasion of the Egyptian invasion. This for the moment raises the hopes of the people, as already noted in chap. 34. Jeremiah, having the secret of the Lord, assures them that the respite is but temporary and that the Chaldeans will return shortly and utterly destroy Jerusalem.

Then we find this honored servant of God seeking to escape from the doomed city. It is apparently a mistake on his part: though we would not criticize. He was worn in body and mind. His testimony was rejected. He himself was hated and persecuted. What more natural than that, feeling his work is completed, he should seek quiet and respite in his old home in the land of Benjamin? It was indeed a natural thing, but not a spiritual one; hence we find the Lord does not permit him to carry out his purpose. His apprehension results in a false charge and imprisonment. From death he is marvelously delivered.

Chap. 39 gives the fall of the city. The prophet is, however, favored by the conqueror. There was no need to flee to Benjamin. The hand of God is stretched forth to protect His servant in the woeful day. But we must look at all this more in detail, for it is of intense interest, and pregnant with instruction.

“And king Zedekiah the son of Josiah reigned instead of Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, whom Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon made king in the land of Judah. But neither he, nor his servants, nor the people of the land, did hearken unto the words of the Lord which He spake by the prophet Jeremiah” (chap. 37:1, 2).

We have already noticed that no chronological order is followed in the arrangement of this book. Rather, we have prophecies and incidents grouped together, and narrated in such moral order as to give us an ever-increasing sense of the departure from God, which culminated at last in His rejection of His once-favored heritage, and the pouring out of condign judgment.

In these two verses we have a succinct account of Zedekiah’s whole reign. It was eleven years of indifference to the Word of the Lord. This king personally was not so daringly impious as some of his predecessors. He realized in some measure the claims of God upon him and his people, but he never earnestly set himself, like Hezekiah or his father Josiah, to seek His face and to do those things that were pleasing in His sight. He was supine and frivolous - almost incredibly so, at so serious a time.

In the next verse we read of his sending Jehucal and Zephaniah the priest (whose acquaintance we made in chaps. 21, 29) to Jeremiah with the request, **“Pray now unto the Lord our God for us.”** It was a similar errand upon which Zephaniah had gone shortly before (chap. 21:1, 2). There is no word of repentance; no confession, or grief for Judah’s awful sin. The Lord is owned in a certain sense, and His aid is sought, but all is selfish; there is no prostration of soul in His presence. Pharaoh’s army had essayed to come out of Egypt to the relief of the Hebrew king, who had sent ambassadors beseeching him to **“give him horses and much people”** (Ezekiel 17:15).

Hearing of this move, the Chaldeans immediately raised the siege of Jerusalem and departed to give battle to this new enemy ere he could secure any real advantage (ver. 5). This to the Jews seemed a good omen and greatly revived their hopes. Now, if their long-neglected God would help them, they might achieve a decided victory, and by union with Egypt throw off the hated Babylonian yoke. This was not to be, however. In answer to Zedekiah’s request, the prophet replies:

“Thus shall ye say to the king of Judah, that sent you unto me to inquire of me: Behold, Pharaoh’s army, which is come forth to help you, shall return to Egypt, into their own land. And the Chaldeans shall come again, and fight against this city, and take it, and burn it with fire. Thus saith the Lord: Deceive not yourselves, saying, The Chaldeans shall surely depart from us: for they shall not depart. For though ye had smitten the whole army of the Chaldeans that fight against you, and there remained but wounded men among them, yet should they rise up every man in his tent, and burn this city with fire” (vers. 6-10).

Both in grace and in judgment God will fulfil all His word. For stubborn, willful Judah there can be no deliverance, because there is no self-judgment nor humbling on their part. It seemed as though some mad infatuation possessed the people. They “**knew not the time of their visitation,**” as was the case with their children in a later period. How strikingly analogous was their condition to that of Christendom, “**whose judgment now for a long time slumbereth not.**”

Men still love to deceive themselves with a vain optimism founded on the desires of their own deceitful hearts, ignoring the sure testimonies of Him who hath said, “**Vengeance is Mine; I will recompense.**” Teachers and people, or clergy and laity, as they are unscripturally designated, congratulate themselves on the great strides being made, as they affirm, by Christianity and civilization; but, alas, in how large a measure is it a mere Christless religiousness and a culture that in no sense affects the heart!

The departure from God and His Word plainly evidenced on every hand calls forth no confession of sin, no repentance; but, instead, men congratulate each other and boast of large-mindedness and liberality, while despising the ways that be in Christ, and the paths of scriptural simplicity.

Church and world are linked up in an unholy concubinage, and thus God is dishonored and His claims ignored. Surely the prophetic Word points to dire judgment to come upon the professing body, composed largely, as it is, of mere earth-dwellers who are strangers to the heavenly calling. It is a time when every faithful minister of Christ needs both grace and wisdom to “**cry aloud and spare not,**” but to show the people their sins.

We know the end of this empty profession, persistently dishonoring Christ’s holy name and Word, must be the subjection to spiritual Babylon, whose power is yet to be supreme on earth in matters religious, though but for a brief space, God having likewise already pronounced her judgment (Revelation 17, 18).

What God had decreed concerning Israel and Judah for their apostasy and forgetfulness of His Word was fulfilled to the letter. His declarations concerning a far guiltier Christendom shall likewise be carried out.

It was when Jeremiah saw that all hope of the people’s repentance was past, and that sure and certain wrath awaited them, that he essayed to leave the city, where he had ministered so long, to go to the land of Benjamin: probably to his own home. It is to be remembered he was a priest of Anathoth, a city belonging to that tribe. He was now considerably past middle life, possibly prematurely aged because of all that he had gone through, and his usefulness appeared to be over. It does not seem to be fear that actuates him. Through grace he is above that. It would rather seem to be a longing for rest after so arduous a life, with its sorrows and its disappointments.

Accordingly, taking advantage of the withdrawal of the Chaldean army, he endeavors to make good his purpose (vers. 11, 12). However good and right that purpose might appear, it is a step in advance of the Lord. It is never safe to plan one’s own way, or to seek an easier path for one’s self. In this instance the prophet clearly is acting in the energy of nature.

God has a service for him still, as will be manifested in due time, even after the rebellious city has been overthrown. Jeremiah, devoted servant as he was, erred in choosing for himself.

Even a Paul went to Jerusalem against the plain testimony of the Holy Ghost, drawn by natural affection for his kinsmen after the flesh.

So our prophet is for the moment turned aside from the path of implicit dependence upon God, led apparently by a desire for rest and quiet after his stormy life. He must learn, as every other, that it is not in man to direct his way. The Lord is not yet through with him. He has a ministry for the poor who are to be spared from the sword, and for all who are left in the land.

As a result of his effort to better his condition, he is misunderstood and brought into deeper distress.

He was in the gate of Benjamin when a captain of the ward, Irijah, apprehended him, saying, “**Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans**” (ver. 13). In vain Jeremiah protested his innocence and the utter falsity of the charge. Irijah refused to credit his explanation, and carried him before the princes. It is hardly to be supposed that these men really believed him to be guilty, but it gave them an opportunity to vent their hatred upon the man who had so often reproved them. He was ignominiously smitten, and, apparently without a hearing, was cast into prison, in the house of Jonathan the scribe (ver. 15).

From what befell Jeremiah we may learn it is always best to sit still when there is no command from God to move.

The best of servants and the most faithful men blunder when they take things into their own hands. Little as one may realize it, or mean it to be so at the time, this acting for one's self really implies lack of confidence in God's love and care. Faith can wait upon Him, assured that He is far too much concerned about His children to overlook anything that is for their good; hence it is quiet and restful amid all changing circumstances. Unbelief forgets God and suggests that we must act; opportunities are slipping away-something must be done, and at once. This looks, to the natural mind, like sound judgment and common sense; but, alas, how often, when acted upon, are things made not better, but worse! It is far preferable to wait quietly upon Him whose wisdom never fails, and who sees the end from the beginning, than to rashly venture forth in the energy of nature, only to be defeated in the very purpose one seeks to achieve.

That the king knew the prophet was innocent of the charge upon which Irijah had arrested him is evident from the remaining verses of the chapter (16-21).

Jeremiah was cast into the dungeon and into the cells - probably underground apartments, gloomy and damp. There he was allowed to remain for many days, neglected, and with no opportunity given to clear himself of the imputation of treachery. Eventually Zedekiah sent and took him out for a secret conference in the palace, and asked him, “**Is there any word from the Lord?**”

What a picture is here presented for us: the man on the throne and the man from the dungeon confronting each other, and the former is forced to own the superiority of the latter. The falsely accused prisoner has the secret of the Lord, and the haughty monarch is dependent on the prisoner to learn of the Lord's purpose. In reply to the anxious question Jeremiah gives the old answer. There is indeed a message from the Lord: it is the same so often given before, and unheeded. **"For,"** said he, **"thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon."**

There is no effort to palliate the terrible truth; no endeavor to win the king's favor by good words and fair speeches. The plain, unwelcome truth is declared; and then, with neither apology nor flattery, he pleads his cause before the king:

"What have I offended against thee, or against thy servants, or against this people, that ye have put me in prison? Where are now your prophets which prophesied unto you, saying, The king of Babylon shall not come against you, nor against this land? Therefore hear now, I pray thee, O my lord the king: let my supplication, I pray thee, be accepted before thee, that thou cause me not to return to the house of Jonathan the scribe, lest I die there."

Manifestly the army of the king of Babylon had again invested the city; the word of Jeremiah had proved true, and the false prophets had been put to shame. Convinced that injustice and wrong had been done the man of God, Zedekiah gives order that his circumstances be made more endurable, though he does not release him nor declare abroad his innocence. With the shame of supposed crime against his country hanging over him still, Jeremiah is taken from the dungeon and given a place in the court of the prison, with the allowance of **"a daily piece of bread out of the baker's street,"** so long as any bread remains in the city. Famine rations are being served out by weight. The end cannot be far away.

Among the king's ministers of state there were many, however, who entertained for the pessimistic prophet feelings far different to those of the monarch himself. It was reported to a few of these that Jeremiah had said to the people:

"Thus saith the Lord: He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live." It was also told them that he had declared, **"Thus saith the Lord: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which shall take it"** (38:1-3).

As we know, these prophecies had indeed been uttered. Almost the identical words are recorded in chap. 21:9, when Pashur, the son of Malchiah (or Melchiah, as he is there called), was one of the messengers sent to him by king Zedekiah. He is now one of Jeremiah's accusers, with three others, Shephatiah, Gedaliah (the son of another Pashur), and Jucal.

Again and again, on divers occasions, the fall of Jerusalem had been clearly foretold. Like his Lord, Jeremiah could say, **"In secret have I said nothing."** Openly, in the presence of the populace, nobles, priests, and the king, had he faithfully declared the truth of God regarding the doomed city. For this he was hated. His words seemed to put a premium upon what to the nobles and captains looked like treachery.

Burning with indignation against the man who so solemnly declared the utter futility of all their schemes and devices, they accused Jeremiah before the king, and urged that he be executed as a traitor.

“We beseech thee,” they pleaded, **“let this man be put to death, for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them, for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt”** (ver. 4).

How little can worldly men understand that true love for the people leads one faithfully to show them their sins and their danger!

Little indeed could these four accusers enter into the deep sorrows and anguish of heart that the “weeping prophet” had experienced on their account. Like Paul, the more abundantly he loved them, the less he was loved in return. It is one of the hardest trials a devoted servant has to bear when his good is thus evil spoken of, and his very affection mistaken for malice, because it makes it impossible for him to hold his peace and to permit the people to sleep on in their sins without lifting a warning voice. Yet, in some measure, such has been the cup that every truly godly soul has had to drink; and none ever tasted it so deeply and frequently as our blessed Lord Himself. It is of the false prophets that the world speaks well. The true are accounted as the offscouring of the earth.

In this case Zedekiah, ever a weakling, succumbs to the demands of his ministers. He consents to the death of Jeremiah in words that well betray his impotency, but which, like Pilate’s, in no sense lessen his guilt. **“Behold, he is in your hand: for the king is not he that can do anything against you”** (ver. 5).

Having obtained the royal consent, the four conspirators took Jeremiah and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah, which was in the court of the prison, letting him down with cords - a filthy pit, with no water, but offensive mire, in which Jeremiah sank, and was heartlessly left in this wretched plight. The object, doubtless, was to let him die, unknown to the populace, who might have had superstitious or conscientious scruples about making away with the man who professed to speak in the name of the Lord. Shephatiah and his associates would allow him to starve to death, alone and unsought, in this abominable, miry dungeon.

God had other thoughts, however, and would not thus permit His servant’s martyrdom.

The suffering and shame were all part of the discipline His love saw to be necessary, and He would not allow him to be spared the humiliation and anguish they entailed; but, like Job, his life was inviolable. In the prophet’s hour of need a friend is raised up of whom otherwise we might never have heard. He is a servant in the king’s household, an Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-melech - perhaps nameless, so far as our narrative is concerned; for Ebed-melech, translated, is simply *“servant of the king,”* and may not be a proper name at all. In this servant’s heart glowed a pity and a sympathy, as well as a recognition of the divine office of Jeremiah, to which the four accusers were strangers.

Like the young man in Acts 23:16 used for Paul's deliverance, here also God had prepared this His servant for Jeremiah's deliverance. Hearing that the prophet had been left to perish in the filthy pit of the prison court, this Ethiopian went boldly to entreat the king's favor, who was **"then sitting in the gate of Benjamin"** - the professed representative of the law, in the gate to dispense justice, when this inexcusable injustice had been perpetrated with his consent (vers. 7, 8). Earnestly and faithfully the eunuch presents the cause of the man of God: **"My lord the king,"** he pleads, **"these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for there is no more bread in the city"** (ver. 9).

Again, Zedekiah, a typical changeling, whose mind is controlled by the last man who gains his ear, reverses his judgment. Ebed-melech is commanded, **"Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die"** (ver. 10).

The king makes no confession of sin in thus having treated the Lord's messenger; nor is there a word of apology to the prophet for the indignities so unrighteously heaped upon him after his pledged word as to provision for his comfort!

It is enough for the Ethiopian that he has permission to relieve the loved prisoner's sufferings, and he hastens to deliver him. Thoughtfully and tenderly he provides from the house of the king, under the treasury, old cloths and rags, which he let down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah, with directions to put them under his armholes under the ropes (vers. 11, 12). Apparently a trifling thing this, but a loving heart directed it, and God has been pleased to place it on record where it will stand forever.

In that day when every cup of cold water given in the name of the Lord shall not fail of reward, Ebedmelech's **"old cast cloths and rotten rags"** used to lessen the pain of the man of God will be remembered and duly taken into account.

Thus protected, the weak and emaciated prophet is gently lifted out of the miry dungeon by the eunuch and his thirty helpers. Only once again is Ebed-melech mentioned, in the next chapter, for the Lord's commendation, ere he disappears from the scene until he takes his place with the host of the redeemed, when his good deeds will have their due reward.

Jerusalem's case had become desperate, and in his distress Zedekiah once more sent for Jeremiah for a secret interview. Knowing in the depths of his heart that this man, whom he had so shamefully treated, had the mind of the Lord, he said to him, **"I will ask thee a thing; hide nothing from me"** (ver. 14).

Fear now makes him desire to know what God had revealed; but, as his previous career had manifested, there was no true bowing of heart to that word when made known. A double-minded man was he, therefore unstable in all his ways. Self and selfish interests ruled in his heart, not the glory of the God of Israel. The well-merited and withering reply comes to him, **"If I declare it unto thee, wilt thou not surely put me to death? And if I give thee counsel, wilt thou not hearken unto me?"** (ver. 15).

Thus boldly does the prophet answer him. Cruel treatment had in no sense filled his soul with slavish fear. As God's free man, he speaks to the conscience of the king.

Secretly, the guilty monarch swore neither to harm him himself, nor, as before, to give him into the hand of the men who sought his life (ver. 16). Accepting the pledge, Jeremiah gives him the word of the Lord, saying:

“Thus saith the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If thou wilt assuredly go forth unto the king of Babylon's princes, then thy soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and thou shalt live, and thy house; but if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand” (vers. 17, 18).

For Zedekiah to accept the advice tendered so solemnly in the name of the Lord would mean a complete and unconditional surrender. The victorious Chaldean army had once more spread its tents around Jerusalem, and was carrying on the siege with vigor; the Egyptian army having returned in discomfiture to their own land. This was in itself an evidence of the truth of Jeremiah's predictions.

When the false prophets declared that Nebuchadrezzar's power was broken, he had insisted on the overthrow of Pharaoh's forces and the early return of the Babylonians to invest the capital once more. Zedekiah evidently feared him, and in a vague, uncertain kind of way realized that God was with him. But he was of the number of those who cannot stand the sneers or the anger of their fellows, though they can sin against their Creator unblushingly. It is natural to fallen man to be ashamed to do what is right, if contrary to public opinion, and to do evil with a certain kind of pride. Of this stamp was the unworthy son of Josiah. He **“loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”**

In his faltering reply to Jeremiah, he shows the smallness of his soul, as also the haughtiness of his heart. “I am afraid,” he owned, **“of the Jews that are fallen to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me”** (ver. 19).

What gross unbelief, when the Lord had just given the word that he should be spared if he surrendered; and what wretched pride that made the thought of mockery so bitter to the already ruined man!

Faithfully, even tenderly, the prophet urged him to obedience, assuring him that they should not deliver him up as he feared. **“Obey, I beseech thee,”** he entreated, **“the voice of the Lord, which I speak unto thee: so it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live”** (ver. 20).

On the other hand, he warned him solemnly that if he refused to go forth, he should be reduced to the degradation of seeing **“all the women that are left in the king of Judah's house”** brought forth in captivity to the princes of the king of Babylon, who should mock in their turn, and reproach him for his inglorious rebellion and its awful consequences. He, too, should be taken captive, and the city burned with fire; with himself alone to blame (vers. 22, 23).

The moody and well-nigh distraught king deigned no reply that would indicate whether he intended to bow to the authority of the Lord or not, but strictly commanded silence on the part of Jeremiah as to the purport of the conversation they had had together. If the princes importuned him as to what had taken place, he was to mention the matter of his request to be released from prison, but nothing more (vers. 24-26).

As anticipated, the princes did seek to know the drift of the conference, but he replied discreetly, as he had been bidden - the truth, though not all the truth - and they are satisfied to leave him in the court of the prison, where he remained until the fulfilment of his prophecies regarding the siege, for "**he was there when Jerusalem was taken**" (vers. 27, 28).

This terrible climax, to which all the previous portion of the book has been pointing, is reached in chap. 39.

The long-suffering patience of God at last gives way to judgment; the glory departs, and Jerusalem, whose name means "*the foundation of peace,*" or, "*founded in peace,*" is delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. What other city on earth has had a history so full of pathos and tragedy, and which so dreadfully belies its name? Yet the prophetic Word assures us that it shall eventually be established in peace, no more to be overthrown.

Nebuchadrezzar's siege lasted eighteen months, save for the brief respite when he withdrew his troops to meet the king of Egypt.

During this long period, how terrible the suffering of the inhabitants had been! Yet, in it all, there was callousness of conscience and hardness of heart, coupled with a complaisant self-righteousness most abhorrent in the eyes of the Lord. Trouble does not result in repentance, unless the soul sees in it the hand of God in government. Even in the awful days of the last great tribulation, when men shall be scorched with great heat, they will blaspheme the name of God and repent not to give Him glory; and when the kingdom of the beast (the Satan-inspired ruler of the ten kingdoms in that day) shall be full of darkness, they will gnaw their tongues for pain, and blaspheme the God of heaven, repenting not of their deeds (Revelation 16:9, 11).

It is a fallacy, that has become very popular to-day, that punishment of necessity results in repentance. Upon this is based the "larger hope" of men who try to persuade themselves that, in the judgment to come after death, God will be better than His Word, and that it will not be eternal in its nature, because leading those who are the subjects of it to self-judgment. Scripture holds out no such hope. There is not a single ray of light to illumine the future of the Christ-rejecter throughout eternity's unending ages.

"He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

Even on earth, where the Holy Spirit pleads with men, suffering does not always result in men's turning to the Lord in confession and contrition of soul; neither will it when time has ceased to be, and the Spirit has ceased His striving.

In the case of the men of Judah and Jerusalem, the last act of the fearful tragedy found them as hard and unresponsive as ever.

“In the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month, the city was broken up” (ver. 2).

How definite the date, to be remembered by the Lord forever! His heritage turned over to strangers, the sheep of His pasture devoured by the wild beast of the nations! That ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah’s eleventh year shall have its place in His heart evermore. Vainly had they sought to put far off the evil day. Long deferred in grace, while the Lord waited for some sign of brokenness of spirit, it had to come at last. And how brief the account of the fall of the one-time metropolis of the world: **“The city was broken up!”** What a world of anguish and sorrow is wrapped up in these five words! The details are all omitted, save in regard to Zedekiah’s vain effort to escape when redemption point * had been passed and it was too late.

** Many will remember that there is an insignificant headland in the Niagara river, just above the Falls, known as “Redemption Point,” because no boat, once past, has ever been saved from destruction. In men’s lives there is also a “Redemption Point.”*

The horrors of the sack of a great city by an Oriental army beggar all description. Neither age nor sex nor beauty avails to avert the cruel work of the blood-drunken conquerors. Death, shame and slavery tell the dreadful story.

Nebuchadrezzar was not present in person when Jerusalem fell, but his chief princes, **“Nergalsharezer, Samgarnebo, Sarsechim** (chief of the eunuchs), **Rabsaris, Nergalsharezer** (chief of the Mages), **Rabmag, will all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon,**” sat at the middle gate to direct the troops (ver. 3). It will be noticed that Rabsaris and Rabmag, left untranslated in the Authorized Version, are really not proper names, but titles. This helps to distinguish the two princes who bear the name Nergalsharezer. The second one was chief of the Magi, or the priests of the Babylonish mysteries. It is a similar title to the Roman Pontifex Maximus, and was sometimes borne by the kings of Babylon.

When Zedekiah and his men of war (their ranks sadly depleted by famine, pestilence, and battle) saw that all effort to save the city was vain, they fled, leaving Jerusalem under cover of darkness, **“by the way of the king’s garden, by the gate betwixt the two walls.”**

It will be remembered that strong walls separated the royal city, or the city of David, from the lower portion of Jerusalem. The palace and its environs as yet remained intact, though it was clear that their overthrow was but a matter of a few days at most, with no hope of succor. Zedekiah defended the stronghold to the last, and fled only when to remain would have been madness and a needless act of bravado. Stealthily the little company took the way of the plain, hoping to avoid detection. But all their efforts were in vain, for the Chaldeans pursued them and brought them to bay in the plains of Jericho. Those who could, forsook the king and fled to the wilderness (II Kings 25:4-6). He himself was taken captive. The word of the Lord by Jeremiah had declared it; now it is fulfilled.

Nebuchadrezzar was at Riblah (where Pharaoh-necho had bound Jehoahaz thirty-four years earlier) when Jerusalem fell. Thither, Zedekiah was hurried, that the conqueror might wreak his vengeance upon the vassal who had rebelled against him, violated his oath, and occupied his army for a year and a half in accomplishing his overthrow. The wretched man who had lost his crown and sceptre by refusing to heed the words of Jeremiah had to endure the anguish of beholding his own sons slain before his eyes, and then, that no other scene might ever efface that one to the end of his life, his own eyes were put out.

Then, ignominiously bound in chains, he is carried to Babylon. The word of the Lord through Ezekiel, concerning Zedekiah, though he may never have learned of it, had been, **“My net also will I spread upon him, and he shall be taken in My snare: and I will bring him to Babylon, to the land of the Chaldeans; yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there”** (Ezekiel 12:13).

See, also, chap. 17:12-21 of the same book, where what is related as history by Jeremiah is all foretold by the prophet of the dispersion. Thus minutely had the Holy Spirit made known, ere it came to pass, the evil that should befall Zedekiah, that when it had been literally fulfilled all might know that God had spoken. The palatial residence of the kings of Judah was razed to the ground in the conflagration that followed the taking of the city: nor was the temple of the Lord spared, as we learn from chap. 52:13. The sack of the city was complete. The walls were broken down, and the gates consumed with fire.

Well might the man who for so long had sought to turn his people’s hearts back to the God of their fathers cry out in the bitter anguish of his soul, **“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How is she become as a widow!”** (Lamentations 1:1).

Her judgment had come, because of her unfaithfulness to her Lord (ver. 8).

The remnant who were not put to death were carried away captive into Babylon by Nebuzaradan, chief of the executioners. Those also who had obeyed the voice of Jeremiah, and had gone out to the Chaldean camp before the sack of the city, were spared the pains of death, but sent captive to the queen city on the Euphrates, as the prophet had predicted. Step by step, down to the smallest detail, the word through Jeremiah was fulfilled (ver. 9).

Another prophet, Zephaniah the son of Cushi, had declared that even at this time a few of the lower class should be spared to dwell in the land. This too must be carried out. He lived in the days of Josiah, and may have known Jeremiah personally. He had said, **“I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord”** (Zephaniah 3:12).

How brightly shines this instance of the divine clemency in behalf of a few, and their true piety, in a day so dark, when the mass of the nation was utterly apostate. In accordance with this word, Nebuzaradan, unconscious that he was carrying out the declaration of the God of Israel, left a few **“of the poor of the people, which had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time”** (ver. 10).

Striking are the lessons here brought before us. It is the poor in spirit who are blessed - those who own their nothingness. These had nothing, and did not seek to hide their poverty; and the Lord gave them both vineyards and fields. The former tells of joy; the latter, of sustenance. Both were to be found in Himself, though all else had failed. He could still meet the need of any who would confide in Him. Such an one was the prophet Habakkuk, who, though at first greatly bewildered by God's governmental dealings with the people of His choice, learned the great lesson that the just shall live, not by sight, but faith, and could therefore sing, in view of the very destruction we have been considering:

“Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17, 18).

There is no day so dark but that the Lord will be the light of every soul that ceases from man and turns to Himself; no sorrow so great but that fellowship with Him will sweeten the bitter waters. In every trial He is near; in every hour of discouragement and gloom He abideth faithful still - **“He cannot deny Himself.”**

The little remnant left in the land might seem to be bereft of all that could make life worth living. But they had Himself, and they could call upon His name, knowing that if He had been faithful to His own holy character in chastening them for their sin, now bowels of mercy were moved for them when, in lowliness of mind and confession of their iniquities, they sought His face.

The Lord was looking out for the interests likewise of the now aged man who had witnessed for Him so long in the midst of a gainsaying people. In so doing He made use of what men call natural causes, as He often does to carry out His purposes. It had evidently been reported to Nebuchadrezzar how Jeremiah had ever counseled submission to the Babylonian yoke, and reproved the kings of Judah for breaking their oaths of allegiance. He therefore sent a special message to Nebuzaradan regarding the prophet, bidding him: **“Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm, but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee”** (vers. 11, 12).

It was a pompous company who went down to seek out the man who was the subject of this communication from the king: composed of the chief captain himself, together with Nebushasban, another chief of the eunuchs, the Pontifex Nergalsharezer, and all the princes of Babylon. They found Jeremiah in the court of the prison, where he still abode in confinement; none having, apparently, given him a thought when the city fell. Releasing him, they gave him to the care of a man whose father, on several occasions, had befriended him - Gedaliah the son of Ahikam - with instructions to carry him home and see to his welfare. Gedaliah had already been selected to fill the position of governor in the land. He gave Jeremiah liberty to go wherever he desired; **“so he dwelt among the people”** - evidently the poor who were left, as we have seen (vers. 13, 14).

He had already received a message for another man whom God had not forgotten. While still in the prison-court, the word of the Lord had come to him bidding him:

“Go and speak to Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, saying, Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring My words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee. But I will deliver thee in that day, saith the Lord . . . and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee; because thou hast put thy trust in Me, saith the Lord” (vers. 15-18).

Thus was the service of the faithful Ethiopian rewarded. God will be no man's debtor. The last clause gives us the secret of Ebedmelech's devotion: he had put his trust in the Lord. Though a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel, he was a child of God through faith; and faith in his case worked by love.

Various have been the shifting scenes brought to our notice in this section. May grace be given to lay all to heart and find eternal profit from our meditations upon it.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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