

NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“LET US SEARCH AND TRY OUR WAYS”

(Lamentations 3)

In the sixty-six verses of this chapter, arranged in a triple alphabetic acrostic, as before mentioned, Jeremiah speaks for the remnant, describing his and their affliction, but manifesting unflinching faith in the goodness of God and calling upon all to search and try their ways and return to Him. Bearing upon his own heart the bitter woes of his people, as did the Lord Jesus, he recites his sorrows in a way that plainly indicates the utterance of the Spirit of Christ, who, as remarked in our introduction to Chap. I., was afflicted in all their griefs, passing through all in spirit with them. Jeremiah here may almost be looked upon as a type of that Blessed One; for to him also, as to no other prophet, could the title be applied, “**A man of sorrows.**”

“**I am the man,**” he says, “**that hath seen affliction by the rod of His wrath**” (ver. 1).

And he goes on to tell how he has been brought into darkness, but not into light: how God is turned against him, His hand being upon him in judgment every day. Under the weight of the divine displeasure, vigor and elasticity departed, and his bones were as broken (vers. 2-4). It is the expression of one who, himself well-pleasing to God, entered to the full into the sorrows of his people. Verses 5 to 17 continue his wail in view of the dire calamities which had fallen upon them.

Compassioned with gall and travail, set in dark places as in the tombs of the dead, hedged about and weighted with a heavy chain, he cried and shouted, only to feel that God shut out his prayer. Nothing could be more mournful than the gloomy estate thus pictured to the mind’s eye. The Lord had apparently forgotten, or was even become as an enemy. He had enclosed the ways of His servant, made his paths crooked, and been unto him as a bear or a lion waiting to take the prey. Made desolate and set as a mark for the arrow, the Lord caused the darts of His quiver to enter into His servant’s reins. Thus had he become a derision to all his people and their song all the day. In this how like Him who became the song of the drunkards! (Psalm 69:12). Filled with bitterness and drunken with wormwood, his teeth were as broken with gravel stones, and he himself rolled in ashes. His soul was removed far off from peace, so that prosperity had been forgotten. It is a doleful recital of a man entering into the sense of God’s displeasure because of sin.

But, though fallen, he was not completely cast down. True he said, **“My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord”** (ver. 18). Yet, as he remembered the wormwood and the gall, his soul was humbled within him, and he could say, **“This I recall to my mind; therefore have I hope”** (vers. 19-21).

Accordingly, an entirely different note is struck in ver. 22, and an exalted strain of joyous confidence is sustained down to ver. 36.

In place of complaining that his woes were greater than he had deserved, he justifies God, and gratefully acknowledges that justice has been tempered with grace. **“It is of the Lord’s mercies,”** he owns, **“that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness”** (vers. 22, 23).

How precious the faith that, at such a time, could so speak! And what tried saint can truthfully say otherwise? Only when the soul is out of the presence of God does it seem as if His chastisements were too severe, and in part undeserved. No self-judged believer ever yet failed to own that he was far from receiving the full reward of his deeds. Rather, it seems as though God’s grace leads Him to overlook even serious failure, and to correct but in part. **“His compassions fail not.”** The rod is never directed by a cold, indifferent heart. He feels as no other can for the people of His choice, the children He loves. Every morning witnesses fresh evidences of His loving-kindness.

In contemplation of these precious truths the inspired seer can declare, **“The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him”** (ver. 24). All else might fail, but He will abide. It is the confidence of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3:17, 18), and the abiding contentment of Paul (Philippians 4:11). Thus is one enabled to rejoice in the Lord, even when no other source of joy is left. He becomes the soul’s portion, as in Psalm 16:5, where we read, **“The Lord is the portion of my inheritance, and my cup.”** Little wonder that Psalm 23:5 asserts, **“My cup runneth over.”** How could it be otherwise, when He it is who fills it?

“The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord” (vers. 25, 26).

The reason the truths here taught are so little entered into is simply because waiting upon God is largely a “lost art” among Christians nowadays. The rush and hurry of the age; “the lust of other things;” in a word, the worldliness so characteristic of the present momentous period in the Church’s history, effectually shuts out all inclination to wait upon God, it is to be feared, for a large number of those who confess the name of Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Consequently, little or nothing is known, in a practical way, of His goodness in meeting felt need, and of His ability to satisfy the soul that seeks His face.

It is perhaps needless to say that when Jeremiah wrote, **“It is good that a man both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord,”** he was not referring to soul-salvation, but to deliverance from the troubles and perplexities of the way.

Nowhere in Scripture is the eternal salvation of the soul put before us as something to be waited for in patience and quietness. Again and again the contrary is distinctly stated. The prophet is not speaking of salvation in that sense. For light as to the salvation of the soul, we turn to the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John and the epistles of Paul, John, and Peter. These two aspects of salvation must be clearly distinguished. The Lord has nowhere promised immediate relief from sorrow and suffering. When in His righteous government He permits His people to be the subjects of affliction, it is well that they at once seek His face, and wait upon Him. It may not be His will to extract every thorn in the flesh; but if not, He will give to the waiting soul grace to endure, and that with joyfulness.

There is a “**ministry of suffering**” which all believers have to learn in a greater or lesser degree. “**It is good for a man,**” we are told, “**to bear the yoke in his youth**” (ver. 27). The result, if he is before God about it, will be to sober and humble him, and thus work out ultimate blessing. He may be called upon to sit alone and keep silence, to put his mouth in the dust, and, like his Saviour, to give his cheek to the smiters, but he can be assured of this: “**The Lord will not cast off forever**” (vers. 28-31).

As in Judah’s case, God may cause grief - deep and heartrending; but He will still “**have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly** (or, from His heart), **nor grieve the children of men**” (vers. 32, 33).

Not for His own pleasure does He chasten, but that we may be partakers of His holiness.

He is too loving to lay upon us one unnecessary burden: He is too holy to omit one needed stroke. Unrighteousness He cannot tolerate.

“**To crush under His feet all the prisoners of the earth, to turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High, to subvert a man in His cause, the Lord approveth not**” (vers. 34-36).

All His ways are equal. It is only man’s defective vision that makes it appear otherwise. When at last He takes us by the hand, and goes over all the path with us, letting the light of His own glory shine upon every step, we shall understand, as we cannot now, how just and true were all His ways as He led us through this scene. Nothing can by any means assail His people apart from His permission, for “**Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commanded it not?**” (ver. 37). It is a simple and elementary principle, yet which many are long years in comprehending.

Once let it be clear before the soul that God is immediately concerned in every detail of life, and one is delivered from being engrossed with the instrumentalities acting. This comes out strikingly in the case of David when cursed by Shimei. He will not permit the ardent Abishai to touch the offender, for he realizes that “**the Lord hath said unto him, Curse David,**” and he can therefore leave all in His hands, trusting that He will change the Curse into a blessing. Job too, in the early period of his testing, is a fine example of submission to the will of God; and, refusing to consider second causes, “**Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord,**” he asks, “**and shall we not also receive evil?**”

It is blessedly true, and most comforting to the soul to know, that, “**Out of the mouth of the Most High proceedeth not evil and good**” (ver. 38); but, on the other hand, He allows evil for our chastening; even, as in the case just cited, using Satan as an instrument to accomplish His gracious purposes.

In view of His holy and righteous government, “**Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?**” Surely it is far more becoming to say from the heart, “**Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord**” (vers. 39, 40). This indicates that the discipline is having its desired effect.

“**No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness (not necessarily in the case of every saint, but) unto them which are exercised thereby**” (Hebrews 12:11).

It is this godly exercise that is so sadly lacking. Afflictions come, and souls faint under them; or else they are despised, and a stoical, self-confident air is assumed, that ill befits the state of one under God’s hand. With most of us, it is to be feared, the first object is to get out of the place of discipline in any way that we can, apart from that breaking down before God which leads to the searching and trying of our ways. It was here that Judah so lamentably failed. When God sent the king of Babylon against them because of their sins, they turned to the king of Egypt for help, and that in plain defiance of the word of the Lord. But they had to learn in a practical way the bitterness of departure from God.

Thus, humbled in His presence, every false hope gone, the remnant search and try their ways, and the end of the Lord is reached. In brokenness of spirit they cry, “**Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens. We have transgressed and have rebelled: Thou hast not pardoned. Thou hast covered with anger, and persecuted us: Thou hast slain, Thou hast not pitied. Thou hast covered Thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through**” (vers. 41-44).

There is an important lesson here. It is useless to pray while persisting in sin.

The man who does not seek to walk with God has no right to expect anything from Him.

- “**Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thy heart.**”
- “**If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you**” (Psalm 37:4; John 15:7).

This is the key to answered prayer. Obedience gives confidence. It is impossible to ask in faith when Clinging to something that is grieving the Holy Spirit and dishonoring the Lord Jesus Christ. If prayer is not answered, if the heavens seem as brass, it is a solemn indication of a wrong state of soul, and should lead to self-judgment and the forsaking of every evil way. Because of the lack of this, Judah was brought very low. They were made “**as the offscouring and refuse in the midst of the people, All our enemies have opened their mouths against us. Fear and a snare had come upon us. Desolation and destruction**” (vers. 45-47).

Hard indeed must have been the heart that could contemplate their sorrows without being deeply touched. Jeremiah says:

“Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission, till the Lord look down, and behold from heaven. Mine eye affecteth my heart, because of all the daughters of my city” (vers. 48-51).

It was the manly grief of one who was not ashamed of tears when his people were under the chastening hand of the Lord. Censurable indeed would insensibility to it all have been.

Identifying himself with the erring ones, he continues to plead their cause, and invokes a recompense upon their persecutors. He was like a bird chased by the hunters without cause. He does not in this ignore the righteousness of God in visiting His people with judgment. On that side there was cause enough. But Babylon’s oppression of Judah was quite unwarrantable from the standpoint of human equity. Her wars were dictated by the greed of dominion and the lust of power. It often occurs that God permits sorrows to come upon His own by way of discipline, which, so far as the actual troubles are concerned, were not really deserved.

For instance, a saint may be falsely accused, and thereby caused extreme mental grief, while all the time he frets under the knowledge that he is guiltless of the cruel charge, and feels that he is wickedly treated. But this, when rightly viewed, would be seen to be but an opportunity to be a partaker of Christ’s sufferings. For was not He hated **“without a cause,”** and did not false witnesses rise up against Him?

Such circumstances, therefore, painful as they are to flesh and blood, are often a necessary part of the education of the soul. And if, at the time, we are conscious of having failed in personal dealings with God, it is used as chastisement, that we may be partakers of His holiness.

As one cast into a pit and left to die, the remnant call upon the Lord **“out of the low dungeon,”** and faith can say, **“Thou hast heard my voice,”** and **“Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon Thee: Thou saidst, Fear not”** (vers. 52-57).

How comforting this is! God is quick to respond to the first cry of a troubled soul when there is integrity of heart before Him. So the following verses celebrate His response in the hour of need. He has pleaded the cause of the soul of His afflicted one. He has redeemed his life. His eye has been upon all the wrong, and with confidence He is implored to judge the matter (vers. 58, 59). Into His sympathetic ear the story of the enemy’s heartlessness is told out, and to Him the whole case is committed. Recompense upon the oppressor is also invoked, which, as we have already seen, is not the spirit of the Christian dispensation, but of the law, where the principle of **“an eye for an eye”** prevailed (vers. 60-66).

To us who live in this dispensation of grace, our Lord’s instruction is to **“pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us,”** even as He, the Lord of all, could pray, **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”**

Grace is reigning; and having been taken up in grace we are responsible to manifest that same grace to others. But what we have here was quite in keeping with the dispensation of law, and will yet be suited language in the lips of another remnant, in “**the time of Jacob’s trouble,**” whose earthly deliverance can only be through judgment upon their enemies.

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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