

# NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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## PART ONE THE PROPHECY OF JEREMIAH

### CHAPTER ONE

#### A VESSEL CHOSEN AND FITTED (Chapter 1)

The account of Jeremiah’s call to the prophetic office is very instructive and deeply interesting.

The thoughtful reader feels at once how intensely human was the man, how condescendingly gracious the Lord. On the part of the servant there is naught but backwardness and trembling when commissioned to be the bearer of the Lord’s message to His backslidden people. It would be at best but a thankless task; for people away from God, yet proudly ignorant of their condition, do not, as a rule, show much gratitude to the man who seeks to turn the light on and manifest things as they really are. It is, generally speaking, a far more pleasant and agreeable task to preach the gospel to poor lost sinners than to minister to the needs of wayward saints. None but a man who is himself very low before God can accomplish it successfully. If I would wash my brother’s feet, I must stoop to do it.

But in this, as in all true service, one’s reliance must be upon God, who never sends a messenger without putting in his mouth the word he is to speak; and never bids one undertake a service for which He does not qualify the servant.

So with Jeremiah. His confidence is to be in the God of resurrection, who had before made a dry stick to bud, and blossom, and bring forth almonds, and who delights to take up the foolish, the weak, the base, and the despised things, and use them to confound the wise, the mighty, and the noble, “**that no flesh should glory in His presence**” (I Corinthians 1:26-29).

This is the secret of His so acting.

Worship in His presence all can, and should, who have been brought to Himself through sovereign grace; praise and adore Him they freely may; but glory before Him they shall not. All must own that they are but vessels of mercy, who have nothing which they have not received, and He must ever be the Giver, for “**it is more blessed to give than to receive.**”

*It is impossible that the saved sinner should have the more blessed part.*

It is not, therefore, brilliant men whom He depends on, nor men of self-sufficiency and self-confidence, but it is ever His delight to fill the empty vessel and then use it to suit Himself. **“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us”** (II Corinthians 4:7).

Looking, then, a little carefully into this preliminary chapter, we note that Jeremiah was evidently quite a young man (“**a child**,” \* he says, ver. 7) when the word of the Lord came to him, in the days of the godly king Josiah - himself but a youth, as it was in the thirteenth year of his reign, and he was but eight years of age when he succeeded his wicked father Amon as King of Judah (II Chronicles 34:1).

*\* This is the same word that the angel applies to Zechariah - “Speak to this young man” (Zechariah 2:4).*

The prophet’s ministry covered a period of over forty years under the kings; and when royalty had departed from Judah and her princes, and thousands of her people had gone into captivity, he is still found at his post standing for God among **“the poor of the flock”** left in the land, looking forward to the destruction of the very power to which he had previously urged submission, and which had been permitted to desolate the Lord’s heritage.

Of his early years, before his divine call to publicly proclaim the word of the Lord, we have no authentic record. Scripture is silent regarding him, save for occasional references (II Chronicles 35, 36) to his later ministry, corroborating, if corroboration were needed, his own account in the books before us. His father’s name, Hilkiyah; his service, that of a priest; his home, Anathoth of Benjamin - these he tells us in the first verse, but details there are none.

Men may be curious to know of the training and early life of those afterwards celebrated; but God makes no attempts merely to satisfy idle curiosity. In divine things all counts for nothing until the soul really begins with God.

That memorable time in the case of this young priest (that is, the time when he consciously had to do with Him) was evidently about the date above mentioned. Like John the Baptist, he was sanctified even before his birth, and ordained to be a prophet, not merely to fallen Judah, but to the nations. We do not know, however, that he was aware of his exalted mission until this time.

There had already been a measure of revival and blessing in the land; outwardly, at least. Just a year previously, Josiah had commenced to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the remains of the idolatrous worship which Manasseh, though humbled and repentant, had not been able to remove, and which the infamous and unhumbled Amon had but furthered and endorsed.

The book of the law had not yet been recovered; nor was it until some seven years later (II Chronicles 34).

That precious volume was still hidden (where, doubtless, some faithful one had only too safely stored it, in the dark days preceding) in the still unrepaired house of the Lord. In His own time, He who caused it to be written and who watched over it would see that it was brought forth. Till then, and even in connection with it later, He would speak through a prophet.

*And right here it may be well to note Jeremiah's place in connection with the other prophets whose writings we have.*

It was probably about a century since Isaiah had, if tradition speaks truly, been sawn asunder (see Hebrews 11:37) by the fathers of those who now professed to worship the Lord at Jerusalem.

- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, and Nahum, all of them for a time at least contemporary with Isaiah, had long since passed off the scene; leaving the nation apparently as hardened as ever.
- Zephaniah and Habakkuk were both still living, though we have no mention as to whether it was their privilege to **“speak often one to another.”**
- Ezekiel and Obadiah were also his contemporaries during his later years - Ezekiel only among the captives in Babylon.
- Daniel prophesied subsequently in the palace of the conquerors. He, it will be remembered, was a student of the writings of his great predecessor, and from this book learned of the appointed seventy years' duration of the captivity.
- Jonah had been much earlier than any (II Kings 14:25), but we know little of the nature of his ministry beyond his mission to the great Gentile city of Nineveh.
- The remaining three minor prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were the bearers of the Lord's message to the remnant restored to their land.

Between Jeremiah and the last a period of about three hundred years is generally assigned.

We turn back now to our chapter. Just how the Lord spoke to Jeremiah we are not informed. Abruptly he is told: **“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations”** (verse 5).

It is the divine sovereignty that is at once brought before him. He is given to understand from the first that it is the eternal, omniscient, omnipotent Lord with whom he has to do. The natural man may shrink from this, but how the soul of the saint delights to dwell upon it! **“Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world.”**

Nothing ever takes God by surprise. Consequently, with Him, there can be no after-thought.

All was foreseen long, long before its actual occurrence; everything was provided for. Satan, sin, and their attendant evils, have in no wise interfered with His purpose, **“who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will.”**

Where had His grace found manifestation, had not sin been permitted? All the glory of the Cross must have had no place if the serpent's entrance into the garden of delight had been denied. Evil, dreadful as it is, is but the dark background that throws into relief His wondrous purposes of love and grace.

It is well for the soul of the believer to grasp this and rest upon it. However much one's spirit may be chafed and fretted and vexed by abounding iniquity, it is well to remember that there is One who abides in eternal peace - **"the peace of God."** Not that He is indifferent to the evil; but He sees, as we cannot, how blessedly all shall yet result to the glory of the Son of His love.

How different must have been our thoughts of Him had our guilt never given occasion for His emptying Himself of His dignities to become a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death! We should never have known Him as Man had not sin necessitated for us a Mediator. Had He sovereignly chosen to become such, though we needed Him not, we could only call Him Lord and not know Him as Saviour, whose precious blood had redeemed us to God: how little could we then have appreciated Him! It is our deep and bitter need which has revealed to us the heart of God. Very different must have been Adam's thoughts of Him when forbidden the tree, and when clothed by His own hand in coats of skin.

Nor need anyone who has learned God in the person of Christ fear to dwell upon His electing love: it is but the assurance of his eternal safety. Others, who as yet cannot call Him **"Father,"** need not question whether they are shut out from a share in it; for His word to all is, **"Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."** Drink, and you shall know that the draught was prepared for you, as though no other needed it.

The Lord's word to Jeremiah brings before the mind a lovely passage in the 139th psalm. Space forbids quoting it in full, but we may cull from it what seem its choicest portions, commending it all to the reader's quiet meditation when time and opportunity afford.

After the acknowledgment of the divine omniscience as to his present condition in verse 1-5, and the divine omnipresence in verse 7-12, the heart of the singer is absorbed in the contemplation of the thoughtfulness of the divine foreknowledge:

**"For Thou hast possessed my reins: Thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise Thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are Thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in Thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them. How precious also are Thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with Thee"** (vers. 13-18).

With confidence may the trusting soul turn to such a God, and pray, **"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"** (vers. 23, 24).

Such might well have been the answer of Jeremiah to the word of the Lord assuring him of His interest and care, long, long before he could in any sense respond to it; but instead, he exclaims, **"Ah, Lord God, behold, I cannot speak; for I am a child"** (ver. 6).

But what difference could that make to One who had known him thoroughly even ere He had formed him? He could make no mistake in His choice of a servant. Had not He Himself made man's mouth? And would He now, who had all resources in Himself, cast His ambassador upon his own? Ah, that would be altogether unlike God.

Like Moses in Midian, Jeremiah had not yet learned Him aright, nor had he learned himself. The great lesson of no confidence in the flesh and of full confidence in God had to be put before him. The former, one might think he had in measure learned already; but had he truly done so, he would not have been disheartened when he reflected on his inability. It was simply natural backwardness: the flesh itself was not really denied. Otherwise he would neither have been troubled if he lacked ability, nor exalted if he possessed it. Without it, God was enough. With it, God must still be all, or it would avail nothing.

In the answer of the Lord, it is He who assumes all responsibility. The servant has but to obey. He will attend to the question of power; and, as we say in New Testament language, of "gift." "**Say not, I am a child**" (ver. 7). In short, say nothing about self at all.

In spiritual things a giant has no more place than an infant. What he was or was not, was of no importance. How well had the apostle Paul learned this, to say in 1 Corinthians 3:7, "**So then neither is he that planteth anything**" (and it was himself who had done so in this case), "**neither he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase.**"

"**Thou shalt go to all that I send thee, and whatsoever I command thee, thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces, for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord.**" This settled everything. As of a later prophet, we read, "**Then spake Haggai the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message, unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord**" (Haggai 1:13).

The remnant then were in the state Jeremiah was in before, weak and fearful; but immediately upon the proclamation of such a message, we read of a stirring of the spirits of the leaders and of all the people.

It has often been noticed, too, that the last that Mark records of the risen and ascended Lord is His working with those who went forth preaching; and He it was who confirmed the word with signs following. Thus, for service, if we enter into His thoughts, it ceases to be a question of our weak self or our strong self, and becomes one of Himself. The instrument may be feeble, but it is upheld and used by an all-powerful Hand. In Jeremiah's case, He who made man's mouth put forth His hand and touched the lips of the fearful servant, thus putting His own words into the prophet's mouth.

*This in fact is what constitutes a man a prophet.*

Isaiah's touch is unlike this, perhaps, in some respects. In his case he had been learning his vileness and innate depravity. The seraphim flew with a live coal from off the brazen altar of judgment, where the burnt offering (the blessed answer to all that man is) was going up as a sweet savor to God. Wrath having been borne by Another, it removes sin and terror from the self-confessed and repentant sinner.

- That touch, to Isaiah, spoke of cleansing.
- This, to Jeremiah, tells of power.

He who cleanses also fits for service: this is the double lesson the two prophets bring before us. Not that Isaiah was not fitted to serve: he was, as the subsequent verses show (Isaiah 6); but that is not what is there emphasized.

Jeremiah is then set over the nations and the kingdoms. He is commissioned **“to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant”** (ver. 10). That is, he must tell of judgment and desolation, of overturning and destruction; but great and terrible though the Lord’s vengeance must be, it is not judgment without mercy, for of restoration and recovery, of blessing and renewal, he is also to speak.

He that scattereth Israel will regather it in His own appointed time; heavy though the hand of affliction must fall upon the nations, yet the time will surely come when **“the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”** (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14).

*All this is assured in the vision that follows.*

The rod of the almond-tree is a symbol easily read in connection with Numbers 17.

It speaks of God’s Christ declared to be the Son of God with power by resurrection of the dead (Romans 1:4). It is as the God of resurrection, the One who intervenes when all the power of nature is at an end, that Jeremiah was to know the Lord. It is because He is such, that the building and planting is certain, though there be first the breaking down and uprooting. The almond, the Hebrews called *“the hastening tree,”* because of its early budding when the cold of winter had scarcely passed away. **“I will hasten My word to perform it”** is the divine comment on the vision (vers. 11, 12).

The word to Habakkuk a few years later (though, as previously noted, he was contemporary with Jeremiah) is, **“Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry”** (Habakkuk 2:3).

This, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews quotes, but changes the pronoun, and by the Spirit’s direction a Person is brought before us, and it reads: **“Yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry”** (Hebrews 10:37).

It is the Lord Jesus Himself who will bring in the blessing, predicted by the prophets, for Israel and the earth. It is that same blessed Person for whom we now wait for our full blessing in heaven.

The Rod of the hastening-tree, when He came in grace, was to Israel but as a dry stick, and worthless. Hidden away from the eyes of men, He has **“budded and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.”** He has been laid up in the sanctuary above. The rod in the ark tells of the resurrected Man on the throne. (See Numbers 17, throughout).

By and by (how soon none can tell) the once despised Jesus will appear in glory, and all nations will delight in His shadow and find strength in His fruit, while the eye will be gladdened with the beauty of His blossoms; **“for how great is His goodness, and how great is His beauty!”** (Zechariah 9:17). Till then, alas, there is the **“seething-pot”** (ver. 13), into which **“His own,”** who **“received Him not,”** have been cast.

This is, doubtless, akin to the smoking furnace of Egypt (Genesis 15). Of old, Pharaoh had been their oppressor. Nebuchadnezzar was now to be their captor (vers. 14-16), though the full scope of the vision goes on evidently to the gathering of all the nations against Jerusalem. The seething pot \* is pictured in all its horror in the last chapter of Zechariah.

**“Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city.”**

**\* Note also Ezekiel 24:2-14 in this connection.**

But when the flames are fiercest, and the people seem about to be utterly consumed, the Almond-tree will stand again where He stood ere He was laid up in the sanctuary-upon the Mount of Olives. **“The Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with Thee”** (ver. 5).

Having beheld the visions of the Rod and the seething pot - simple, yet how expressive! - Jeremiah is further encouraged and warned. He is to gird his loins as for arduous service. Standing before the Lord, he is to **“speak unto them all that I command thee”** (ver. 17). He had but One to please, and he is not to be dismayed at the faces of the opposers: lowering they may be, but he is made as a defenced city, an iron pillar and a brazen wall against kings, princes, priests and people, as he stands in the strength of the Lord. If afraid, it will be evidence that he has not yet done with flesh and blood, and he will be confounded before them. If undismayed, they may fight against him, but prevail they cannot, for **“I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”** This was to be his strength. On it he could rely. The promise is twice repeated, for God designs to give him full witness-he need have no fear (vers. 18, 19).

In the next chapter we find him in his public ministry. He has had to do with God in secret. He is now ready to face the people openly.

**~ end of chapter 1 ~**

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