

NOTES ON THE PROPHECY AND LAMENTATIONS OF JEREMIAH

“The Weeping Prophet”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

THE FINE GOLD BECOME DIM

(Lamentations 4)

Of a deeply spiritual character is the grief expressed in the lament of the fourth chapter. It is not now the temporal sorrows of the people of Judah and Jerusalem that occupy the prophet's mind, but their unhappy estate as away from God and no longer a testimony for Him in the earth. The past and the present stand out in vivid contrast. In days gone by, what grace has been manifested in them! Now, alas, how utterly fallen have they become!

“How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!” (vers. 1, 2).

Failure has characterized every dispensation since Eve reached forth her hand and took of that which God had forbidden.

Every fresh trial vouchsafed by God to man has but given occasion for the further manifestation of the incurable evil of his heart.

- Under conscience, from Adam to Noah, corruption and violence filled the earth.
 - Under government, from Noah to Abraham, he forsook the true Governor of the universe; and not liking to retain God in his knowledge, worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator.
 - Under promise and law, from Abraham to Christ, he violated every precept and broke every pledge; and at last, his awful Course of willfulness and rebellion culminated in the crucifixion of the Prince of Life.
 - Under grace, the present dispensation of the Holy Spirit, he has turned that very grace into lasciviousness, and corrupted every truth committed to the Church.
- If the long period from Abraham to Christ be subdivided into the numerous sections into which it readily falls, then each of them becomes a witness to the same sad failure.
- The days of the patriarchs witnessed the treachery of the sons of Jacob, and the resultant descent into Egypt.

- The wilderness was a forty years' record of God's faithfulness and man's unreliability.
- The days of the Judges but confirmed the same story;
- The history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel emphasized still more the deceitfulness of the human heart.

From time to time God wrought in power and grace, giving revival and blessing; but soon the people wearied of His law, and gave themselves up to doing their own pleasure, "**till there was no remedy,**" and Assyria and Babylon swallowed up the favored people.

"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our admonition."

Israel's history has often been duplicated by that of the professing Church; for "**as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.**" Only, in Christendom, the corruption has been even more detestable and the departure from God even more glaring.

God, blessed be His name, has never left Himself without witness; and, as in the past dispensation, so in this, has ever and anon worked in power bringing about special awakenings, thus rousing those who were sleeping among the dead to renewed activity and true-hearted judgment of what they saw His Word condemned.

But how soon the manifested energy of the Spirit declines, because of a settling back into the old ways, or worse ones, of the next generation.

What is predicted of Israel in Joshua 24:13 has had its counterpart again and again down through the centuries since the ascension of the Lord Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

"And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the Lord that He had done for Israel."

But the generations following soon relapse into formality and worldliness. The fine gold soon becomes dim, and the freshness of early days passes away. Yet it need not be so. If careful to maintain a good conscience before God; if watchful as to the first beginnings of departure from the place of communion; above all, if prayerful and dependent, the dew of youth need never be lost: or, if so, it will be but to give place to the more mature grace of a Spirit-filled old age. This is equally true of movements as of individuals; only the difficulty there is greater, because movements are composed of individuals, and only by each unit going on with God can the mass do so.

In Judah's case it had, as has been made solemnly patent, become far otherwise.

"The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold," were esteemed as earthen pottery. The glory had departed. There was no power to nourish the young. **"The daughter of my people,"** complains Jeremiah, **"is become cruel like the ostriches in the wilderness,"** who leave their offspring to shift for themselves.

In vain the children cried for bread; no man gave to them; while the tongue of the babe cleaved to the roof of its mouth for thirst (vers. 3,4). Unspeakably sad is the state of God's people when their assemblies are not like nurseries where new-born babes and young saints can find nourishing food such as is suitable for them. It is to be feared the needs of the lambs are often forgotten; and, alas, oftener still there is nought to feed them with because all is parched and dry. If older saints are living for the world, it is small wonder that the babes languish and succumb at last to the withering influences about them, so far as their joy and testimony are concerned.

Because of their own famished condition, the mothers of Judah could not nourish their children. **"They that did feed delicately are desolate in the streets; they that were brought up in scarlet embrace dunghills"** (ver. 5); so that their punishment seemed to be even greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, while with Judah the agony was long continued.

"Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was of sapphire; their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick" (vers. 7, 8).

In order to understand what the prophet refers to in these verses, it is necessary that one be somewhat familiar with the law of the Nazarite as given in Numbers, chap. 6. To many of our readers this edifying portion of Scripture is familiar; but as it may not be so to some of them, it may be profitable to turn aside for a little to consider what is there set forth.

The Nazarite, as his name implies (from a root, meaning *to separate*), was one who was in a special sense separated to the Lord his God. All Israel were redeemed to be the people of God; but all were not Nazarites. All Christians, however, as Nazarites, are called unreservedly to devote themselves to the Lord. It is to every saved one that the apostle addresses himself when he writes, **"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable (or, intelligent) service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God"** (Romans 12:1, 2).

It will be seen that actually this is far from being true of all believers, nor perhaps of any of them at all times. The Lord Jesus was the true Nazarite, separated to God from His lowly birth to His death of shame upon the tree. We are called undoubtedly to **"follow His steps;"** but it is sad indeed to realize how few maintain the Nazarite character. There were three chief things in which the Nazarite of old was peculiar.

(1) In Numbers 6:3, 4, it was written, **"He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink."** It is clearly specified that he was to partake of no product whatever of the vine tree, **"from the kernels even to the husk."**

(2) In ver. 5 we read, **"All the days of the vow of his separation there shall come no razor upon his head."** He was to let the locks of his hair grow long like those of a woman.

(3) Again, in ver. 6 we are told, “**All the days that he separateth himself unto the Lord, he shall come at no dead body.**” It is particularly stated that he was not in this respect to make himself unclean even for his father, his mother, or any of his kin.

Each command has a distinct lesson in it.

Wine, in Scripture, *symbolizes joy* (Judges 9:13; Psalm 104:15). The Nazarite must forego wine. This world cannot minister to the joy of those who walk with God. Many Christians seem never to learn this. But such is the fact; and the sooner it is learned the better. The Nazarite is not without joy; but his are deeper, purer joys than this world’s vines can offer. The wine of earth may stimulate and excite the fancy, thereby causing a thrill of pleasure for the moment; but it can never produce that deep-toned joy which characterizes the one who, like Enoch, walks with God. “**The joy of the Lord is your strength**” (Neh. 8:10), but it comes down from heaven. No plant of this sin-cursed scene produces it.

Secondly, the Nazarite allowed the hair of his head to grow. According to I Corinthians 11, long hair is the proper covering for the woman, telling of her place of subjection in the present order of things since the fall (Genesis 3:16; I Corinthians 11:4-15). If the man has long hair, it is a shame unto him; but it is a glory to the woman, for “**her hair is given her for a covering.**” The long hair speaks, then, of the place of dependence. In the Nazarite we see one who has voluntarily surrendered what man would call “his rights” and his independence in order to be wholly in subjection to God. The Lord Jesus is the great exemplar in this, as in all else, for He could say, “**I came not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.**” This was the more remarkable in Him, as He was the only man who ever had title to do His own will: but He voluntarily surrendered that title; and humbling himself, became the dependent Man in the fullest sense. In the same way must the man of God lay aside his own thoughts and inclinations to make the will of the Lord supreme in his life.

Thirdly, the Nazarite was not to be defiled by the dead. So the believer who would devote himself to the Lord is called upon to walk apart from all the defiling influences of this scene. Hearing the word of Jesus, “**Let the dead bury their dead, follow thou Me,**” it should be his to turn aside at once from everything that would grieve the Holy Spirit and dull his spiritual sensibilities, in order to be the Lord’s alone. It is quite possible to be a Nazarite at times, and not at others. The balance of the chapter shows the solemn result of defilement. If brought into contact with death, all the days of his separation that went before would be lost, because his separation had become defiled (vers. 9-12). He could only be restored to that place of special blessing and privilege, as well as of responsibility, by bringing the prescribed offerings, which set forth the cross and the Holy One who hung there.

Not until the days of his separation were over, was he to shave his head and be free to eat or drink of the fruit of the vine. For the believer this will only be when the wilderness journey is over and the glory is entered. Then, with the Lord who loved us, we shall drink the new wine in the Father’s kingdom, where pure joys, unsullied by sin, shall be the portion of our hearts forever.

Having before us the truth which the Spirit of God would impart concerning the Nazarite, we turn to the 7th and 8th verses of our chapter with a tender and sad interest. The past days of devotion to God are contrasted with the awful failure of their present condition. **“Her Nazarites were purer than snow: . . . their visage is blacker than a coal.”** How terrible the declension! Judah’s godliest and goodliest sons, once her proper pride, are now unknown in the streets, so changed are they by famine and pestilence. Their lot was even harder than that of those who had been slain with the sword, for **“these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field”** (ver. 9).

There is no hint of intentional defilement on the part of the Nazarites; but the dead were everywhere, and to escape becoming unclean thereby would have been impossible: they share in the afflictions of the nation of which they form a part. In a still deeper sense is this true of those who, through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, are members of the Church, the Body of Christ. **“If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.”** The sin of Christendom is, in a way, our common sin; we are all in our measure accountable for its failure. It becomes us, therefore, not to spend our time pointing out for reprobation, or holding up to ridicule, the evils and follies into which our fellow-members may have fallen. Rather be it ours to confess our share in its sin and consequent ruin, and look to God for His mercy for revival and blessing.

In Jerusalem’s distress, the fearful predictions made by Moses (Deuteronomy 28:56, 57; Leviticus 26:29) were again fulfilled, as they had been on several occasions in the past (II Kings 6:26-29). When **“the hands of the pitiful women”** could thus be stretched forth against their poor starved children, it is clear that the famine had done its worst (ver. 10). Therefore the next verse declares that **“the Lord hath accomplished His fury; He hath poured out His fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof. The kings of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the world, would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy could have entered into the gates of Jerusalem.”** But it was **“because of the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, who have shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her”** (vers. 11-13). In His righteous anger God had brought Zion to the lowest depths, else, what could the nations have done against her? It will be remembered that in Jeremiah 5:1 the Lord promised to pardon the city if even one person was found in it who executed judgment and sought the truth.

“They have wandered as blind men in the streets, they have polluted themselves with blood, so that men could not touch their garments. They cried unto them, Depart ye; it is unclean; depart, depart, touch not: when they fled away and wandered, they said among the heathen, They shall no more sojourn there. The anger of the Lord hath divided them; he will no more regard them: they respected not the persons of the priests, they favored not the elders” (vers. 13-16).

The false prophets and false priests had put the just to death, or driven them into banishment. These faithful men **“had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth”** (Hebrews 11:36-38).

God's witnesses were despised and hated by the very people to whom they sought to minister.

- Isaiah, according to Jewish tradition, was sawn asunder.
- Elijah's life was sought by Jezebel and Ahab;
- Obadiah had to hide the prophets of the Lord in a cave;
- Amaziah endeavored to intimidate Amos (Amos 7:12,13);
- Jeremiah was imprisoned on several occasions, and would have been left to die in the pit but for Ebedmelech;
- Baruch's life was declared forfeited.

Thus, in a later day, Stephen could ask, **“Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before the coming of the Just One, of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers”** (Acts 7:52). In rejecting those sent of God they rejected the Sender: therefore the woes that had come upon them.

Egypt is evidently referred to in ver. 17, as a **“nation that could not save us.”** To the last Zedekiah and his ministers counted upon help from Pharaoh, but in vain. God had said that Egypt was a bruised reed, and so it proved to be.

The keen eye of the ever-present Babylonians they could not escape. The steps of the men of Judah were noted. They did not dare show themselves in the streets. Their persecutors were **“swifter than the eagles of the heaven”** on the mountains and in the plains they pursued or laid wait for them (vers. 18, 19). The king had been captured, despite his effort to escape with a few devoted retainers. **“The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was taken in their pits, of whom we said, Under his shadow we shall live among the heathen (or, nations)”** (ver. 20). Not till the true **“Anointed of the Lord”** comes, will there be a ruler under whose shadow His people can dwell in perfect security.

Edom had rejoiced in the day of Judah's calamity. The cup should soon pass to her. She must be made drunken and naked because of her exultation in the downfall of the city of God, and her manifold iniquities (ver. 21). The punishment of the daughter of Zion was accomplished. Restoration in place of captivity should soon be her Portion, but Edom's judgment was just about to begin. **“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”**

~ end of chapter 30 ~

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