Jeremiah the Prophet

Our current daily readings (following the Bible Companion reading plan) take us through the prophecy of Jeremiah, and his message of warning against the sins and excesses of Judah. His message came direct from the Almighty: "Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth" (Jer. 1:9), but in addition to the words he spake, Jeremiah himself displays a character of faithfulness, and love towards the people of God. In our exhortation for today, we shall consider not so much the prophecy, rather the man Jeremiah.

From reading through the prophecy, and the people's response to it, it is evident that the people did not heed the words spoken to them. In fact, Jeremiah was told from the beginning that they would rather oppose him, and that he would need divine deliverance:

> "they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith Yahweh, to deliver thee" (Jer. 1:19).

Again, later, we read similar words:

> "I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver thee, saith Yahweh" (Jer. 15:20).

In our day, we lament the fact that few – if any – hear our words of preaching, but in Jeremiah's circumstance, he was to prophesy in the knowledge that his hearers would not listen to the message spoken, and that instead they would seek his destruction. But rather than to be despondent, he continued in his work and ministry, and spoke forth the words of the Lord in obedience to his commission. There is much that we can learn from the example of Jeremiah the prophet.

"Pray not thou for this people"

Jeremiah chapter 7 describes how that the prophet was to position himself "in the gate of Yahweh's House", the place which ought to have epitomized holiness, which the people would pass through as they went to worship. But because the people would not amend their ways, the prophet was commanded not to pray for them:

> "Therefore ***pray not thou for this people,*** neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: ***for I will not hear thee"*** (Jer. 7:16 see also 11:14; 14:11)

This is instructive for ourselves, in relation to those whose ways and doings are against the ways of Yahweh. From time to time we receive messages to pray for one worldly charitable cause or another, but the example of Jeremiah is that God will not "hear" such prayers, offered for the children of disobedience. The example of our master is also relevant:

> ***"I pray not for the world,*** but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine" (Jno. 17:9).

Neither Messiah, nor we, ought to pray for the world, whose aims and objectives are against the purpose of Almighty God.

There is another point of comparison between Jeremiah and Christ. As expected, the people refused to hear the words of the prophet, and Jeremiah describes his experiences thus:

> "… but I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter …" (Jer. 11:19).

And another prophet describes the Lord Jesus Christ:

> "he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought ***as a lamb to the slaughter,*** and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7).

Both Jeremiah and our Redeemer display the same example of patience in the face of opposition and affliction. Neither lifted up their voice in reviling those who opposed them, but both left the judgment to God, being willing to suffer for the Truth's sake.

FINDING THE WORD

Jeremiah chapter 1 and verse 1 describes how that Jeremiah was of priestly lineage, with his father being Hilkiah the High Priest. 2 Chronicles 34 records how Hilkiah found a copy of the Word of God within the confines of the Temple in the days of Josiah's reign:

> "when they had brought out the money that was brought into the house of Yahweh, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of Yahweh given by Moses. And Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of Yahweh …" (2 Chron. 34:14-15).

The chapter then continues to show that Josiah humbled himself at the find, and had it read before the ears of all the people. But the astonishing thing is that the Word was lost in the house of God! How could that have been so? This demonstrates the neglect of studying the word to the extent that the Word itself became lost. The Lord Jesus Christ told a parable of something lost in a house:

> "… what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Lu. 15:8-9).

Here, the missing silver represents a sinner who has become lost, and the finding of it, the acknowledgment of the sinner repenting, and being found. But again, the silver is lost within the house! There is an example here for us: we must seek to ensure that not one amongst the ecclesial house becomes lost. But if it does happen, we must seek restitution with all of the energy that we would use in seeking for lost treasure, till our brother or our sister becomes found. And then, we can rejoice with the angels in heaven that through repentance, a sinner is restored.

This, however, was not the case of the people in Jeremiah's day. Although through the work of Josiah, there was a temporary restoration, the hearts of the people remained inclined to their idols, as evidenced by the speed of their return to false worship soon after his death. But for Jeremiah himself, the discovery of the Word was of great significance, and he desired to absorb as much of it as he could:

> "… thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart …" (Jer. 15:16).

Again, we have an important example here, in relation to our approach to the Word of God. In Jeremiah's day, it had been all but lost, and access to it was difficult. But as soon as it was found, and Jeremiah had access to it, it was "the joy and rejoicing" of his heart. What of ourselves? Is Bible Study a chore, a duty, something which we need to do to prepare for talks? Or is it a joy to learn of the ways of the Almighty, that we might implement those ways in our daily walk in life? If the Word became lost in our day, how much would we really miss it?

THE WORD AS A FIRE

Jeremiah chapter 20 recounts how the false prophet Pashur, when he heard of Jeremiah's prophecy "smote Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of Yahweh" (Jer. 20:2). In the face of affliction at his preaching, Jeremiah determined not to preach any more:

> "For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of Yahweh was made a reproach unto me, and a derision daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name." (Jer. 20:8-9).

There are times when we can empathize with this spirit. Sometimes, to speak the Word can make us unpopular, and in some cases, can even bring persecution. To preach the Word can sometimes seem a thankless task, and

even pointless if we go unheeded. But Jeremiah gives us comfort and stimulus, that our labour is not in vain in the Lord. He continued:

> "but His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jer. 20:9).

Although he sought to desist from speaking the Word, that Word was like a flame burning within him. He could not restrain himself from letting it out. As another prophet expressed the same sentiments: "the lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord Yahweh hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos. 3:8).

Even so should that Word be within us. Burning in our hearts with a passion, and a zeal, that we cannot help ourselves from presenting it to those in whom we come into contact with in our day-to-day lives. Whether it be via the spoken word, or through a righteous example, our light must shine before men - a light which is brought about from the flame kindled within our hearts.

There is a need for us to speak **all** of the Word. There is a tendency amongst us to only preach those aspects of the Truth that are nice and palatable. Love, mercy, longsuffering, and faith are vital aspects of the Truth, which we can readily show to those around us without them being offended. But to speak of the judgment to come is less acceptable. Christ will come:

> "in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thes. 1:7-9).

But to preach this challenges those around us, provoking them to issue claims of arrogance, being uncharitable, and not respecting other people's "views". But it is also a vital part of the system of things styled the Truth, which the Apostles preached. Consider the example of Paul:

> "Wherefore, I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you ***all the counsel of God"*** (Acts 20:26-27).

And again, Jeremiah was commanded:

> "Stand in the court of Yahweh's House, and speak to all of the cities of Judah … ***all the words*** that I command thee to speak unto them: diminish not a word: if so be they will hearken …" (Jer. 26:2-3).

Let us do likewise.

Jeremiah chapter 29 describes how the prophet wrote a letter, the contents of which we do not propose to examine here. But it is significant to note who the letter was written to:

> "Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, ***and to the prophets,*** and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon …" (Jer. 29:1).

Notice here, that "the prophets" are specifically included as being recipients of the letter. The question arises: Which prophets? We would suppose Ezekiel and Daniel as being contemporaries with Jeremiah, but we know of a certainty that Daniel had access to Jeremiah's prophecy, for he directly referred to it in chapter 9 of the prophecy that bears his name. Most interestingly, this association appears to have brought about a deliverance for Jeremiah in a most unexpected way.

Jeremiah chapter 37 describes how the prophet was put into prison, and then the dungeon from which he was rescued by Ebed-melek, an Ethiopian. He was then put into "the court of the prison until the day that Jerusalem was taken: and he was there when Jerusalem was taken" (Jer. 38:28). The situation appeared to be dire: Yahweh had promised Jeremiah that the people would not prevail against him, yet here he was in the prison house. How could this be so? There was another promise of deliverance given to Jeremiah thus:

> "Yahweh said, Verily it shall be well with thy remnant; verily ***I will cause the enemy to entreat thee*** well in the time of evil and in the time of affliction" (Jer. 15:11).

Here, the marginal rendering is slightly different: "I will entreat the enemy for thee." How was this so?

Jeremiah chapter 39 describes the invasion of the land by the Babylonians, because of the people's refusal to hear the prophet's entreaties. But then we read in verses 11 and 12:

> "Now Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard, saying, Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee" (Jer. 39:11-12).

From this, it is obvious that Nebuchadnezzar knew about Jeremiah, and gave a commandment that he was not to be hurt. Again, we read in the next chapter of Nebuzar-adan's words to Jeremiah:

> "The captain of the guard took Jeremiah, and said unto him, Yahweh thy God hath pronounced this evil upon this place. Now Yahweh hath brought it, and done according as he hath said: because ye have sinned against Yahweh, and have not obeyed his voice, therefore this thing is come upon you" (Jer. 40:2-3).

Now we find that not only was Nebuchadnezzar aware of Jeremiah, he also knew that he was coming against Judah at the behest of Yahweh (notice how he used the memorial name!), because of their sins! Put yourself in Jeremiah's position: one moment with a bleak future in prison, the next the Babylonians find him, acknowledged that what he had prophesied was true, and gave him freedom to go where he pleased! But how did Nebuchadnezzar know of these things? We suggest that Yahweh "entreated" the Babylonian enemy for Jeremiah, by the hand of Daniel. Daniel we know, stood in the king's court, and at one point, he brought Nebuchadnezzar to worship before the God of the Hebrews (see Dan. 4). Daniel knew, and was familiar with the writings of Jeremiah, and it is quite possible that it was Daniel who entreated Nebuchadnezzar, so securing the deliverance of Jeremiah.

But in the chaos of the invading force, how was Nebuzar-adan to find one man amongst so many who fled before the invaders? Although humanly speaking, Jeremiah being cast into the prison seemed to suggest that God had forsaken him, it is quite likely that this had secured his deliverance. There he was safe within the prison until the victory had been accomplished, and the captain of the guard was able to find him there, waiting for deliverance in answer to his prayer, and Yahweh's promise.

DESPISED AND REJECTED OF MEN

From the prophecy of Jeremiah, it would seem that very few listened to the words spoken. When his written words were presented to the king, he cut it with a knife, and threw it upon the fire – like so many others who came after him. He was hated by those whose welfare he sought, and cursed by the false teachers he opposed. Like our Lord Jesus Christ, he was "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and aquainted with grief". Like Messiah, he was "taken from prison and from judgment" (Isa. 53:4, 8). Lifted out of the depths of despair, salvation was granted to him.

But though few may have heeded him during his day, who can tell how many have found inspiration in his example, and comfort in his words down through the ages? The Word of God continues to burn in the hearts of faithful men and women who, though a minority, speak it without compromise to those around them. In Jeremiah, we have a superb example of faithfulness in the face of both indifference, and persecution. Let us take it to ourselves, and resolve to live out the spirit of his ministry until the day come when our Master shall come to grant us life and liberty according to his promise.

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