

A CHILD OVER THE NATIONS

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Jeremiah 1

This title has nothing to do with a youth's conceited idea of his own importance, but the very reverse of any such idea, for it indicates how God selected a weak and insignificant instrument through whom He could bring His own throne to bear upon the nations. The rule committed to Jeremiah was a spiritual one, and God still seeks to influence and govern world events by spiritual means through a praying Church.

Jeremiah has a very real message for us in this connection. We can be helped by all the men of God described in the Scriptures, for they represent spiritual principles which are not limited to any particular time, but are eternal in their significance and abiding in their value. Jeremiah, however, seems to me to have a special application to the time in which we live; and as we study his story we can find how he illustrates a divine instrument which is nothing in itself but has tremendous throne influence on current affairs.

JOSIAH'S PASSOVER

One of the most significant and important events in his time was the re-discovery of the book of the law by Hilkiah. The first effect of this discovery was that king Josiah intensified his reforms and summoned a great national gathering for the celebration of the Passover. He himself stood to the Word of God, and all the people declared themselves ready to do the same. Jeremiah, however, a man who could never be content with the merely external, had his reservations; he did not believe in the downright genuineness of it all, so far as the people as a whole were concerned. And he was right.

Josiah himself was doubtless genuine, and meant all he said, but it seems perfectly clear that the people themselves were not wholehearted in their committal. The ground of Jeremiah's reservation was the "notwithstanding" of 2 Kings 23:26, which shows that the long drift away from God's requirements could not be reversed by a mere emotional outburst called revival, but needed something much more radical. So Jeremiah was not carried away by the good and apparently sincere movement. He had spiritual perception which pierced through the outward appearance.

Such perception can be painful. Jeremiah found that his discernment got him into trouble all along the line. His reserve was not due to temperamental or constitutional cynicism, as though he were one of those negative people with a critical and destructive attitude, even towards the best that is. No, Jeremiah was far too sensitive spiritually for this, and would have been only too glad to

have found something which did truly represent heart adjustment to God. He was a heart-stricken man, ready to weep day and night for the people's misfortunes (9:1). There is a great deal of difference between the passing of critical judgments, censorious attitudes, a discontented spirit, constant fault-finding, and the sorrowing heart of a man who truly suffers with God. It is easy to see faults and flaws; it costs nothing to criticise; but it is very painful to see with the eyes of God and to sorrow with Him over the difference between mere professions and what is genuinely according to His mind. Let me say that critical people are no use to God; He will give no anointing to them, for they bring in death and not life. Jeremiah represents an entirely different spirit. His suffering ministry seemed to pull down and root up, but it also had a positive building result. All this is made clear in the account which we are given here of his call.

JEREMIAH'S I CANNOT

Jeremiah's immediate and spontaneous reaction to his calling and commission was to say, "Ah Lord God, I cannot...". This may not sound very spiritual but actually Jeremiah's sense of personal inadequacy was an indispensable factor in his whole calling. The Lord knows whom He is apprehending and sending, and we can take it as settled that if Jeremiah had been a man full of confidence in himself, God would never have called him. This sense of personal weakness and emptiness is essential to God; this is where everything begins in a life marked out for divine purpose. If the Lord were doing some small things, partial things, He might have used a less empty vessel. There are people who enter God's service full of confidence in themselves, and in some measure they are used by God. Their usefulness, however, is very limited until they realise that God's full purpose requires that the work should be wholly of Him, with no room for man's sufficiency. Most of us begin before we have learned this lesson, but as we come more clearly into the light of God we realise that the height of the value of God's purpose in and through us, will correspond with the depth of our conscious dependence on Him. It is basic that God's servant should be aware of his own weakness.

Had Paul been asked to answer Jeremiah's confession, "I cannot speak..." he would probably have pointed out that God has chosen the weak and foolish things, and even the things which "are not" for His greatest works. Had he continued, however, with his own testimony, he would doubtless have described an experience in which he was given a new awareness of his personal inadequacy which made him more dependent and therefore more usable. "We despaired even of life" was the negative side of this experience, but its positive value was found in the purpose, namely "... that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead". The man who comes down to zero will find that God meets him at that point, for this principle of conscious personal insufficiency is one which God will insist on, and will take pains to establish in us, even at the cost of deep suffering on our part. While such an

explanation may be hard for some to receive, it may well be a comfort to others whose strange trials have made them inclined to fear that they can never count for God at all. It is always the Lord's way, to empty us of self strength so that we be endued with His power. Jeremiah's call suggests that it will always be "a child" whom God will set over the nations.

GOD'S I WILL

God's answer is always resurrection power. Jeremiah's perception made him dubious about the genuineness of the people's allegiance to God under the old covenant, but his ministry was far from being negative, for it was he who first propounded the glories of the new covenant. He may have felt as weak and insignificant as a child, but he had a big part to play in the history of God's people, and in fact when the seventy years of captivity had closed, his was the ministry of recovery for, "... that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus..." (Ezra 1:1).

Here, then, was the Lord's immediate reply to His servant's difficulty; He gave him a commission which was based on a vision. "What seest thou?" He asked Jeremiah, giving the prophet the opportunity to tell of the almond tree which was full of miraculous significance. Aaron's almond rod budded, blossomed and bore fruit in one night, so being a type of the Spirit of resurrection in priesthood. All the other rods remained dead, as would have done the rod of Aaron if it had not been given miraculous new life, and so become a symbol of Christ's fulfilling His priesthood in the power of resurrection. It was as if God was explaining to Jeremiah that his ministry was not going to be fulfilled on the basis of what he was or was not; the work would be fruitful by reason of the mighty power of resurrection life. So it proved, again and again. There was so much opposition that at one point Jeremiah determined that he would not speak any more. He found, however, that there was a fire - a divine fire - in his bones which set aside all his carnal resolutions to be silent and constrained him to speak anew in the power and victory of resurrection. How important it is for us all to have the fire in our bones!

Again, he was put into a dark dungeon so miry that it threatened to engulf him and would certainly have died there but for God's merciful intervention through Ebed-melech. At times it seemed to him that God was as a mighty man who could not save, but the Lord never disgraced the throne of His glory and Jeremiah was always delivered. The almond tree means that whatever may happen, God will always see to it that the end is victory by resurrection power. So Jeremiah not only survived but was the means of producing a God-glorifying remnant who emerged from their seventy-year grave in Babylon to come back to Jerusalem and to its true testimony. The vision of the almond tree was a private promise to Jeremiah: the fulfilment was for all to recognise.

The final assurance of this call gave the guarantee that Jeremiah would have a

charmed life until he had finished his God-given task. He did not die a violent death; he did not starve; but he lived on until the work was completed. The story is an amazing one, for he had to pass through indescribable vigours and perils, seeming to have every evil force against him. He ought to have died a score of deaths, but he survived every attack and lived on through forty-two dangerous years. So it was that he proved what we can all prove, and that is that frailty and inadequacy are sometimes the very qualifications for a powerful spiritual ministry.

FAITH'S AMEN

Unlike Daniel, Jeremiah was never made a ruler by men. He was, of course, a priest, and it was in terms of priestly ministry that he exercised his authority. He did not serve in association with the temple and its sacrifices, but he served in the secret place of heart communion with God. It was there, in that inner life of prayer, that he wept over the tragedy of the blind and stubborn people (13:17); there that he kept alive his vision of God's glorious high and eternal throne (17:12); and there that he found sweet dreams which were no airy optimism but substantial purposes of God (31:26). Even while he was shut up in prison he maintained his prayer watch with God and found fresh inspiration to ask for, and receive, the impossible (33:3). He ruled by prayer.

So fervent and persistent was this man's prayer life that there were times when God Himself had to tell him to stop (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). The last of these references seems to indicate that God did not want to silence Jeremiah, but only to forbid him from asking for a superficial amelioration of the people's lot and a return to the old order. Jeremiah understood this, and kept his prayers focussed on the future, and especially on the new day when Israel herself would seek God with all her heart (29:14).

Although Jeremiah was such a man of prayer he was no recluse. He witnessed fearlessly as well as praying. He wrote messages to the captives in Babylon as well as interceding for their good. He bought his nephew's field, and he visited the potter's house. He lived an active life, but his chief contribution to the current affairs in his day - and far beyond it - was through his ministry of intercession. He prayed before he spoke, and he prayed afterwards. When he had completed his business affairs, he turned to prayer (32:16).

He ruled for God. His prayers not only kept alive a flame of hope at a time when men were in despair, but in due time they rebuilt and replanted God's people in restored Jerusalem. More than this, they spanned the centuries to inspire Hebrew Christians when once again their holy city was destroyed (Hebrews 8:10), and still today they inspire us to take fresh note of the glories of that new covenant which turns away from dead religious observances to a living and personal knowledge of God by the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah's perception of the unreal did not stop at negatives but led on to this blessed prospect of

vital, spiritual union with God. It may seem fanciful to speak of a child over the nations, but was it not our Lord Jesus Himself who said, "Fear not, little flock: for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32)? Jeremiah's history may help us to understand something of how God is working with us so that this divine intention may become a reality.

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