December 3, 2016

Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter Chap. 34 - Jeremiah

Among those who had hoped for a permanent spiritual revival as the result of the reformation under Josiah was Jeremiah, called of God to the prophetic office while still a youth, in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign. A member of the Levitical priesthood, Jeremiah had been trained from childhood for holy service. In those happy years of preparation he little realized that he had been ordained from birth to be "a prophet unto the nations;" and when the divine call came, he was overwhelmed with a sense of his unworthiness. "Ah, Lord God!" he exclaimed, "behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." Jeremiah 1:5, 6.

In the youthful Jeremiah, God saw one who would be true to his trust and who would stand for the right against great opposition. In childhood he had proved faithful; and now he was to endure hardness, as a good soldier of the cross. "Say not, I am a child," the Lord bade His chosen messenger; "for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee." "Gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defensed city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee." Verses 7, 8, 17-19.

For forty years Jeremiah was to stand before the nation as a witness for truth and righteousness. In a time of unparalleled apostasy he was to exemplify in life and character the worship of the only true God. During the terrible sieges of Jerusalem he was to be the mouthpiece of Jehovah. He was to predict the downfall of the house of David and the destruction of the beautiful temple built by Solomon. And when imprisoned because of his fearless utterances, he was still to speak plainly against sin in high places. Despised, hated, rejected of men, he was finally to witness the literal fulfillment of his own prophecies of impending doom, and share in the sorrow and woe that should follow the destruction of the fated city.

Yet amid the general ruin into which the nation was rapidly passing, Jeremiah was often permitted to look beyond the distressing scenes of the present to the glorious prospects of the future, when God's people should be ransomed from the land of the enemy and planted again in Zion. He foresaw the time when the Lord would renew His covenant relationship with them. "Their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all." Jeremiah 31:12.

Of his call to the prophetic mission, Jeremiah himself wrote: "The Lord put forth His hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." Jeremiah 1:9, 10.

Thank God for the words, "to build, and to plant." By these words Jeremiah was assured of the Lord's purpose to restore and to heal. Stern were the messages to be borne in the years that were to follow. Prophecies of swift-coming judgments were to be fearlessly delivered. From the plains of Shinar "an evil" was to "break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land." "I will utter My judgments against them," the Lord declared, "touching all their wickedness, who have forsaken Me." Verses 14, 16. Yet the prophet was to accompany these messages with assurances of forgiveness to all who should turn from their evil-doing.

As a wise master builder, Jeremiah at the very beginning of his lifework sought to encourage the men of Judah to lay the foundations of their spiritual life broad and deep, by making thorough work of repentance. Long had they been building with material likened by the apostle Paul to wood, hay, and stubble, and by Jeremiah himself to dross. "Refuse silver shall men call them," he declared of the impenitent nation, "because the Lord hath rejected them." Jeremiah 6:30, margin. Now they were urged to begin building wisely and for eternity, casting aside the rubbish of apostasy and unbelief, and using as foundation material the pure gold, the refined silver, the precious stones--faith and obedience and good works--which alone are acceptable in the sight of a holy God.

Through Jeremiah the word of the Lord to His people was: "Return, thou backsliding Israel, . . . and I will not cause Mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger forever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God. . . . Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you." "Thou shalt call Me, My Father; and shalt not turn away from Me." "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." Jeremiah 3:12-14, 19, 22.

And in addition to these wonderful pleadings, the Lord gave His erring people the very words with which they might turn to Him. They were to say: "Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God. Truly in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, and from the multitude of mountains: truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel. . . . We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covereth us: for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God." Verses 22-25.

The reformation under Josiah had cleansed the land of the idolatrous shrines, but the hearts of the multitude had not been transformed. The seeds of truth that had sprung up and given promise of an abundant harvest had been choked by thorns. Another such backsliding would be fatal; and the Lord sought to arouse the nation to a realization of their danger. Only as they should prove loyal to Jehovah could they hope for the divine favor and for prosperity.

Jeremiah called their attention repeatedly to the counsels given in Deuteronomy. More than any other of the prophets, he emphasized the teachings of the Mosaic law and showed how these might bring the highest spiritual blessing to the nation and to every individual heart. "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein," he pleaded, "and ye shall find rest for your souls." Jeremiah 6:16.

On one occasion, by command of the Lord, the prophet took his position at one of the principal entrances to the city and there urged the importance of keeping holy the Sabbath day. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were in danger of losing sight of the sanctity of the Sabbath, and they were solemnly warned against following their secular pursuits on that day. A blessing was promised on condition of obedience. "If ye diligently hearken unto Me," the Lord declared, and "hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work therein; then shall there enter into the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and this city shall remain forever." Jeremiah 17:24, 25.

This promise of prosperity as the reward of allegiance was accompanied by a prophecy of the terrible judgments that would befall the city should its inhabitants prove disloyal to God and His law. If the admonitions to obey the Lord God of their fathers and to hallow His Sabbath day were not heeded, the city and its palaces would be utterly destroyed by fire.

Thus the prophet stood firmly for the sound principles of right living so clearly outlined in the book of the law. But the conditions prevailing in the land of Judah were such that only by the most decided measures could a change for the better be brought about; therefore he labored most earnestly in behalf of the impenitent. "Break up your fallow ground," he pleaded, "and sow not among thorns." "O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved." Jeremiah 4:3, 14.

But by the great mass of the people the call to repentance and reformation was unheeded. Since the death of good King Josiah, those who ruled the nation had been proving untrue to their trust and had been leading many astray. Jehoahaz, deposed by the interference of the king of Egypt, had been followed by Jehoiakim, an older son of Josiah. From the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah had little hope of saving his beloved land from destruction and the people from captivity. Yet he was not permitted to remain silent while utter ruin threatened the kingdom. Those who had remained loyal to God must be encouraged to persevere in rightdoing, and sinners must, if possible, be induced to turn from iniquity.

The crisis demanded a public and far-reaching effort. Jeremiah was commanded by the Lord to stand in the court of the temple and speak to all the people of Judah who might pass in and out. From the messages given him he must diminish not a word, that sinners in Zion might have the fullest possible opportunity to hearken and to turn from their evil ways.

The prophet obeyed; he stood in the gate of the Lord's house and there lifted his voice in warning and entreaty. Under the inspiration of the Almighty he declared:

"Hear the word of the Lord, all ye of Judah, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these. For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, forever and ever." Jeremiah 7:2-7.

The unwillingness of the Lord to chastise is here vividly shown. He stays His judgments that He may plead with the impenitent. He who exercises "loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth" yearns over His erring children; in every way possible He seeks to teach them the way of life everlasting. Jeremiah 9:24. He had brought the Israelites out of bondage that they might serve Him, the only true and living God. Though they had wandered long in idolatry and had slighted His warnings, yet He now declares His willingness to defer chastisement and grant yet another opportunity for repentance. He makes plain the fact that only by the most thorough heart reformation could the impending doom be averted. In vain would be the trust they might place in the temple and its services. Rites and ceremonies could not atone for sin. Notwithstanding their claim to be the chosen people of God, reformation of heart and of the life practice alone could save them from the inevitable result of continued transgression.

Thus it was that "in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem" the message of Jeremiah to Judah was, "Hear ye the words of this covenant,"--the plain precepts of Jehovah as recorded in the Sacred Scriptures,--"and do them." Jeremiah 11:6. And this is the message he proclaimed as he stood in the temple courts in the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim.

Israel's experience from the days of the Exodus was briefly reviewed. God's covenant with them had been, "Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be My people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you." Shamelessly and repeatedly had this covenant been broken. The chosen nation had "walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward." Jeremiah 7:23, 24.

"Why," the Lord inquired, "is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding?" Jeremiah 8:5. In the language of the prophet it was because they had obeyed not the voice of the Lord their God and had refused to be corrected. See Jeremiah 5:3. "Truth is perished," he mourned, "and is cut off from their mouth." "The stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their

coming; but My people know not the judgment of the Lord." "Shall I not visit them for these things? saith the Lord: shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" Jeremiah 7:28; 8:7; Jeremiah 9:9.

The time had come for deep heart searching. While Josiah had been their ruler, the people had had some ground for hope. But no longer could he intercede in their behalf, for he had fallen in battle. The sins of the nation were such that the time for intercession had all but passed by. "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me," the Lord declared, "yet My mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth. And it shall come to pass, if they say unto thee, Whither shall we go forth? then thou shalt tell them. Thus saith the Lord; Such as are for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for the famine, to the famine; and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity." Jeremiah 15:1, 2.

A refusal to heed the invitation of mercy that God was now offering would bring upon the impenitent nation the judgments that had befallen the northern kingdom of Israel over a century before. The message to them now was: "If ye will not hearken to Me, to walk in My law, which I have set before you, to hearken to the words of My servants the prophets, whom I sent unto you, both rising up early, and sending them, but ye have not hearkened; then will I make this house like Shiloh, and will make this city a curse to all the nations of the earth." Jeremiah 26:4-6. {PK 415.2}

Those who stood in the temple court listening to Jeremiah's discourse understood clearly this reference to Shiloh, and to the time in the days of Eli when the Philistines had overcome Israel and carried away the ark of the testament.

The sin of Eli had consisted in passing lightly over the iniquity of his sons in sacred office, and over the evils prevailing throughout the land. His neglect to correct these evils had brought upon Israel a fearful calamity. His sons had fallen in battle, Eli himself had lost his life, the ark of God had been taken from the land of Israel, thirty thousand of the people had been slain--and all because sin had been allowed to flourish unrebuked and unchecked. Israel had vainly thought that, notwithstanding their sinful practices, the presence of the ark would ensure them victory over the Philistines. In like manner, during the days of Jeremiah, the inhabitants of Judah were prone to believe that a strict observance of the divinely appointed services of the temple would preserve them from a just punishment for their wicked course.

What a lesson is this to men holding positions of responsibility today in the church of God! What a solemn warning to deal faithfully with wrongs that bring dishonor to the cause of truth! Let none who claim to be the depositaries of God's law flatter themselves that the regard they may outwardly show toward the commandments will preserve them from the exercise of divine justice. Let none refuse to be reproved for evil, nor charge the servants of God with being too zealous in endeavoring to cleanse the camp from evil-doing. A sin-hating God calls upon those who claim to keep His law to depart from all iniquity. A neglect to repent and to render willing obedience will bring upon men and women today as serious consequences as came upon ancient Israel. There is a limit beyond which the judgments of Jehovah can no longer be delayed. The desolation of Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah is a solemn warning to modern Israel, that the counsels and admonitions given them through chosen instrumentalities cannot be disregarded with impunity.

Jeremiah's message to priests and people aroused the antagonism of many. With boisterous denunciation they cried out, "Why hast thou prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant? And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the Lord." Jeremiah 26:9. Priests, false prophets, and people turned in wrath upon him who would not speak to them smooth things or prophesy deceit. Thus was the message of God despised, and His servant threatened with death. {PK

Tidings of the words of Jeremiah were carried to the princes of Judah, and they hastened from the palace of the king to the temple, to learn for themselves the truth of the matter. "Then spake the priests and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears." Verse 11. But Jeremiah stood boldly before the princes and the people, declaring: "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God; and the Lord will repent Him of the evil that He hath pronounced against you. As for me, behold, I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you. But know ye for certain, that if ye put me to death, ye shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city, and upon the inhabitants thereof: for of a truth the Lord hath sent me unto you to speak all these words in your ears." Verses 12-15.

Had the prophet been intimidated by the threatening attitude of those high in authority, his message would have been without effect, and he would have lost his life; but the courage with which he delivered the solemn warning commanded the respect of the people and turned the princes of Israel in his favor. They reasoned with the priests and false prophets, showing them how unwise would be the extreme measures they advocated, and their words produced a reaction in the minds of the people. Thus God raised up defenders for His servant.

The elders also united in protesting against the decision of the priests regarding the fate of Jeremiah. They cited the case of Micah, who had prophesied judgments upon Jerusalem, saying, "Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest." And they asked: "Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him at all to death? did he not fear the Lord, and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented Him of the evil which He had pronounced against them? Thus might we procure great evil against our souls." Verses 18, 19.

Through the pleading of these men of influence the prophet's life was spared, although many of the priests and false prophets, unable to endure the condemning truths he uttered, would gladly have seen him put to death on the plea of sedition.

From the day of his call to the close of his ministry, Jeremiah stood before Judah as "a tower and a fortress" against which the wrath of man could not prevail. "They shall fight against thee," the Lord had forewarned His servant, "but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible." Jeremiah 6:27; 15:20, 21.

Naturally of a timid and shrinking disposition, Jeremiah longed for the peace and quiet of a life of retirement, where he need not witness the continued impenitence of his beloved nation. His heart was wrung with anguish over the ruin wrought by sin. "O that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears," he mourned, "that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! O that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them." Jeremiah 9:1, 2.

Cruel were the mockings he was called upon to endure. His sensitive soul was pierced through and through by the arrows of derision hurled at him by those who despised his messages and made light of his burden for their conversion. "I was a derision to all my people," he declared, "and their song all the day." "I am in derision daily, everyone mocketh me." "All my familiars watched for my halting, saying, Peradventure he will be enticed, and we shall prevail against him, and we shall take our revenge on him." Lamentations 3:14; Jeremiah 20:7, 10.

But the faithful prophet was daily strengthened to endure. "The Lord is with me as a mighty terrible One," he declared in faith; "therefore my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail: they shall be really ashamed; for they shall not prosper: their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten." "Sing unto the Lord, praise ye the Lord: for He hath delivered the soul of the poor from the hand of evildoers." Jeremiah 20:11, 13. {PK 420.2}

The experiences through which Jeremiah passed in the days of his youth and also in the later years of his ministry, taught him the lesson that "the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." He learned to pray, "O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in Thine anger, lest Thou bring me to nothing." Jeremiah 10:23, 24.

When called to drink of the cup of tribulation and sorrow, and when tempted in his misery to say, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord," he recalled the providences of God in his behalf and triumphantly exclaimed, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him. 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." Lamentations 3:18, 22-26. {PK 421.1}

Next Mailing: **Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 35 – “Approaching Doom.”