

THE TEMPLE SERMON

7:1-8:3; 26:1-24.

It was not an easy task to which God called Jeremiah, when He commissioned the prophet to go and stand near the entrance of the Temple, where the various types of humanity were surging by, and see if he could not influence them to conform to the will of God. Jeremiah was not anxious to undertake this exceedingly difficult task, because the people were not right with God.

Everywhere he looked Jeremiah could see signs of national decay. All seemed to be covetous. The religious life of the people was at a low ebb. There was much unrest and anxiety because a strong foe threatened to attack at any time. It was not the danger from without that filled the heart of the prophet with fear, but his distress sprang from the spiritual apathy among his people.

With a clear picture of their wretched condition before him, Jeremiah exhorted the people to repent and get back into the old paths of truth and virtue. Recognizing that a path is not necessarily right and best simply because it is old, Jeremiah challenged the people to discover which among the old paths are the good ways and to walk therein.

The good way may not be attractive. "There is a way, which seemeth right unto a man but the end thereof is the way of death." It may seem good for a boy to quit school at the quickest moment possible, simply because he wants to earn money, but he may find himself in the ranks of the unskilled with no future before him. The good way may not be popular. By asking for and walking in the old paths one is enabled to enjoy soul rest. The only place where soul rest can be found is in Christ.

The public religion of Jeremiah's day was organized hypocrisy thoroughly divorced from morality. Men whose lives were a violation of almost every law of God came into the Temple to satisfy some superstitious longing. It was the fixed purpose of God to destroy the Temple since it had become a symbol of false religion.

False prophets were saying that Judah represented the Lord's own people, that Jerusalem was sacred in His eyes, that the Temple was dedicated to Him and that He could not possibly allow it to be overrun or desecrated by invaders. They forgot that it was already desecrated.

Jeremiah stood in the shadow of the Temple to say that all of this did not give them any security at all unless their character and conduct are acceptable to God. Theft, murder, adultery and hypocrisy are inconsistent with the worship of Jehovah. The prophet insisted that true religion is a personal walk with God.

The Temple was inviolate only so long as the people were true to God. Obedience had always been more important than sacrifice. All the commandments of God were being broken. Yet the people thought that they could commit sins and crimes and be acceptable to God as long as they attended the Temple services and brought their offerings. Thus the Temple had become a den of robbers, a place to which they could flee and find safety from the wrath of God. Jeremiah taught that no place is so sacred that it cannot be destroyed when the people who congregate there defy God.

Listening to Jeremiah were the religious leaders who had been telling the people that all was well between God and Israel, and that as long as they came to worship and brought their sacrifices they had nothing to fear.

Concerning the book of the law, Dr. J. Campbell Morgan set forth the following truths for our benefit:

The laws contained in this particular book had to do with personal life, with property, and with the State. Now in these chapters of Jeremiah we have a revelation of the fact that the people in their actual conduct were holding these very laws in supreme contempt. Evil practices of every kind were rampant; the poor were oppressed; justice was not being administered. While this was so, the people were not only trusting in the fact that the temple existed, as we saw in our previous meditation, they were also boasting in their possession of the law. They said, "We are wise, and the law of Jehovah is with us." The prophet referred to this vain boasting, and in one sentence revealed the secret of the failure of the people as he said, "But behold, the false pen of the scribes hath wrought falsely." In other words, the people had received through their teachers false interpretation, and this was due to the false living of the scribes themselves. Jeremiah charged these men with covetousness, with the practice of injustice, and with creating a false sense of security in the mind of the people as they said, "Peace, peace," when there was no peace. The result of all this in the life of the nation was that of false national conceptions. The people were placing their confidence in policy, in might, in wealth; and were neglecting lovingkindness, and judgment, and righteousness.

All this enables us to see the force of this particular text. In it the prophet focussed national teaching of the most important kind. He revealed to these people and to nations for all time, three matters: first, false national securities; secondly, the true elements of national strength; and finally, or rather centrally, the true secret of national greatness.

False national securities. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches." The true elements of national strength; "lovingkindness, justice, righteousness." The secret of national righteousness; "Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he hath understanding and knoweth Me ...saith Jehovah."

Every nation has something in which it glories, that in which it takes pride, and ultimately that in which it confides. To discover what that is, in which a nation glories; to discover what that is, in which a nation puts its confidence; is to discover the inspiration of all its activities, and the reason of all its attitudes.

Let us consider these false securities to which the prophet referred. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." In this word the prophet warned the nation against glorying, or taking pride, or putting confidence, in human wisdom. The wise man is the man who has the faculty of perception, and who employs that faculty. Wisdom here therefore is the understanding and the knowledge of things and of affairs; and in this particular application the prophet referred to political wisdom, political acumen.

Now, said the prophet, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom"; let not the wise man take pride in his wisdom; let not the wise man put confidence in his wisdom. And why not? Because human wisdom is necessarily partial. It is partial in its observations. It is therefore and necessarily partial in its deductions. Consequently it is uncertain.

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." His wisdom may be of the highest possible to the human mind. He may be diligent; he may be sincere; he may be honest in his

attempt to discover the facts. His capacity for understanding may be keen, and his devotion to the exercise of that capacity may be constant; nevertheless, not in that human wisdom does a nation find its strength, for it is for ever partial.

Let us pass to the second of the warnings; "Neither let the mighty man glory in his might." Here again most evidently the thought of the prophet was that of material force, both defensive and offensive.

And why not? Wherein is the weakness of material force? In the first place, material force is weak because it is limited to its own kind. Material force is only strong against material force; it has no power to resist moral force. Consequently, its strength is determined, not by itself, but by the strength of that to which it is opposed. It is negatived by other kinds of force.

And again: "Let not the rich man glory in his riches." Now what is wealth? The idea undoubtedly here is that of material possession. Things possessed, of the kind which other people need. I did not say that other people ought to have those possessed by their fellows. There are material things that do not constitute wealth, because there is no value in them to other men. Again therefore wealth is that which procures other things to the man who possesses it. "Let not the rich man glory in his riches."

And why not? Because material wealth is only current in the material realm.

Over against these false confidences, he named the things in which God Himself takes delight; and consequently the things which give Him delight in men and in nations. They are the things which He Himself exercises in the earth; and therefore in so far as men exercise them, they fall into line with Him, and find the true secrets of national strength. What are they? Lovingkindness, justice, righteousness.

Lovingkindness is the stoop which is prompted by love. It is the bending down, and the bending over, which is love-inspired. Lovingkindness is not merely an attitude of mind; it is the activity that springs out of an attitude of mind. It is love in action. Lovingkindness is not love in action toward those who are on a level with the lover; it is always love in action toward those to whom the lover must bow and bend and stoop to reach them. Lovingkindness is the stoop prompted by love toward all who lack. Lovingkindness is pity; lovingkindness is patience; lovingkindness is power communicated to those who are in necessity of any kind.

The next element of strength in the national life is that of justice. This follows lovingkindness, and indeed results from it. What is justice? Justice is the administration of affairs in strict equity; it is government according to truth; it is that adjustment of relationships which is equitable and right.

What is righteousness? Absolutely, it is found in God, and is straightness: God in action, no perversity, no iniquity, no crookedness. Relatively therefore, righteousness is conformity to God in action. God's attitudes and activities are righteous. Righteousness in a nation is conformity to those attitudes and activities.