

JEREMIAH'S CONFESSIONS

Jeremiah 11:18-20:18

Throughout Jeremiah 11:18 to 20:18 are to be found extraordinarily frank expressions of Jeremiah's personal struggles. They provide a more intimate picture of his inner life than that of any other person of the Old Testament era. In these passages it is revealed that the prophet was a man like unto us, yet valiantly pressing toward the light he could see.

The confessions of Jeremiah reveal that he was undergoing tremendous inner conflicts. It seemed that God had no real concern for him (20:7). Life brought him only misery and wretchedness (20:18). God had apparently failed him in his most desperate hour of need (15:18). When he tried to quit preaching he could not, for the word of God burned like fire in his bones and could not be confined to his own heart (20:9). In other words, he was miserable when he preached, and even more so when he did not. How could he find a solace for his grief?

Jeremiah left this record of the torment of his soul that we may not only escape his errors but win his victory. His trying experiences can help us understand our own.

I. THE REASONS FOR HIS PERSONAL CONFLICTS

1. Inactivity

Although Jeremiah was called to preach in 626 B. C. and preached boldly during the next four years (chaps. 1-7), there is no record of his activities after 622 until 609, when he appeared at Josiah's funeral. The situation was no longer desperate, as it was when the prophet first was called. It appeared certain that it would one day reach that stage again, but meanwhile Jeremiah waited, watched, hoped, and had little to say.

With the coming of Jehoiakim to the throne, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The time had come to reiterate the words of doom. Being seventeen years older than when he was called, Jeremiah had lost some of his youthful recklessness.

Churches, after a period of great activity, are tempted to settle back for a rest. Once this has happened, it takes a miracle to get them moving again. Rigor mortis begins before it is suspected. Men work hard all their lives in order to enjoy the years of retirement; yet as soon as the time arrives and they settle down for a well-earned rest, their health starts to trouble them for the first time. Often they would live longer if, freed from some of the ordinary tensions, they continued an active and useful life.

After thirteen years of comparative inactivity as a prophet, Jeremiah was having trouble shifting into high gear! Man is not yet equipped with automatic drive. He must keep in practice.

2. Enforced Loneliness (16:1-21)

There are some people who enjoy being alone, but Jeremiah was not that kind of person. He longed for nothing more than to spend pleasant hours in good company (9:2). Perhaps a certain dark-eyed damsel had already caught his eye. None of this

was for him, however. It would not be right for him to marry and bring children into such an evil time (16:2). They would only see grief and calamity (16:3-4). He was not to attend funerals because it was senseless to grieve over the death of a departed loved one, since he was so much more fortunate than those who were left behind. The living were the ones over whom to weep since such dire tragedy lay ahead for all (16:5-6).

Neither was he to frequent weddings. It would not be fitting to participate in such merriment, since nothing but disaster lay ahead for the devoted couples (16:9).

In addition to the prohibitions placed upon him by God, as Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed his message the people began to ostracize him. It is one thing to separate yourself from your community by choice and quite another to discover that you would not be wanted if you chose to appear. The lonely soul always validates the original observations of the Creator himself, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

3. The Attacks of Those He Loved (11:18ff; 18:18-20)

Jeremiah's friends did not stop with avoiding him, however. They began to persecute him, sometimes with that cruelest of weapons, their tongues (18:18), but just as often with determined efforts to destroy him bodily (11:21). Jeremiah was in great peril. This fact was revealed to him by Jehovah. When a plot was formed against his life, Jeremiah made his appeal to God and was answered by the declaration of the Divine knowledge of the plot, and of the fact that the severest punishment would be meted out to the men who were plotting against his life. What made it doubly difficult was the fact that these were those whom he loved, whom he had counted upon as friends if trouble came. Those who first sought his life were either his boyhood friends from his home town (11:21) or the very people for whom he had earnestly pleaded before God (18:20), trying to persuade God to spare them.

An eminent administrator once told his listeners that it is a well-established pattern that the people who receive most of the executive's attention will be the ones who will eventually work for his downfall. It was David's intimate friend Ahithophel who betrayed him to Absalom; Judas was traitor to Jesus; it took Brutus to destroy Caesar. Whether it is Caesar, Jeremiah, you, or I, there is no dismay so great as that occasioned by the point of the assassin's knife in the hand of one thought to be a friend. To be destroyed by one's enemies is not too surprising but we are never prepared for betrayal.

4. Prosperity of the Wicked (12:1-3)

It was difficult enough for Jeremiah to face the rejection of those he loved and the adversity that was its consequence. His burden became unbearable, however, when he noticed that, on the contrary, wicked men were prospering all the more. Was God truly in command in his world? Why did he plant them so firmly that they grew and multiplied? If the lot of the righteous is difficult, the way of the transgressor should be harder. Yet the opposite is too often true. As the good man falls, the wicked ascends to power.

Why is it that some of the best people suffer the most while the worst often live out their days in honor? Jeremiah poured out his vexed and troubled soul in questions to God. He asked, "Why do the wicked prosper?" He said, "How long shall

the land mourn?" God's answer indicated that the things which Jeremiah had seen, and the trials through which he had passed, were as nothing when compared to those which awaited him.

God answered Jeremiah's question about the prosperity of the wicked by asking him a question, "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5). At first glance that does not appear to answer Jeremiah's question. The prophet had not asked God to tell him what he, Jeremiah, would do under certain given circumstances, but he wanted to know what God was going to do, and why He permitted men to do what they had done and were doing. Yet there was profound meaning and satisfaction in the answer that God gave.

God's answer to Jeremiah's questions was in the form of a double metaphor. The first is borrowed from the field of battle -- "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?" If a man has not been able to battle successfully with the infantry, what will he do when he has to fight against the cavalry? The other metaphor is borrowed from a journey. If the traveler has been wearied by the ordinary incidents of his journey, the heat and the fatigue of it, then what will he do when he comes to the Jordan River, when it overflows its banks?

Jeremiah did the right thing in taking his trouble to God and talking it over with Him. He not only talked to God but he let God talk back to him. Jeremiah told God that the outside opposition was too much for him. God's answer was equivalent to this: "If in the easier tasks, the outside opposition, you are ready to quit, what will you do in the severer tests, the inside opposition? You've got to deal with treachery and hypocrisy and opposition on the inside yet. Your brethren and the king and your fellow preachers and princes are yet to try you as God's messenger."

Gentle, sensitive, sympathetic, shrinking Jeremiah, lovable and loving, wearied with the world's wickedness, continued to do the work of Him who sent him. He did not hesitate to proclaim God's Word to the people. He endured their opposition, sought their welfare, prayed for their forgiveness and continued to preach against their sins. When the judgment of God fell upon Israel and the nation went into exile Jeremiah went with them. He shared with them the penalty of their disobedience. No wonder that the people of Christ's day saw a likeness between Christ and Jeremiah (Matthew 16:13-14). The fact that some thought Christ was Jeremiah come back to earth was a great tribute to the prophet. How much like Christ are we?

If you do not have an adequate faith in God, what will you do when the race of life is hard? What will you do when the strain is greater than the measure of your strength? What will sustain you when Jordan overflows, when the great crises of life come? Life has both major and minor trials. These minor trials in a way prepare us for the greater trials to come. If in the time of the smaller trials you have been troubled and shaken, then how will you do in the swelling of Jordan, when the great trial comes? This question was addressed to Jeremiah, and through him to us, not to alarm us or discourage us, but to prepare us and strengthen us for what is to come.

What should we do when life tumbles in?

1. Remember it as it was before.

Dr. Albert Beaven wrote of the overwhelming sorrow which overtook Mrs. Beaven and himself in the loss of their little seven-year-old daughter. They were stunned, dumb with sorrow. Then it dawned upon them that they were letting the two weeks of her illness and death make them forget the seven years of happiness and fellowship. With this thought they began to relive the years which God had given them together.

2. Begin rebuilding.

For some reason God wanted a new and better structure for your life. Life is full of rebuilt plans. Life tumbled in for Saul of Tarsus and he became Paul the Apostle. Paul's life later tumbled in. Never would he have known the grace and power of Christ as he did had his life not tumbled in.

3. Help others out of their tumbled-structures.

God enables us to gain help in order that we may give help.

4. Believe that it is for our good.

Things do work together for good to those who love God even though they may not perceive the good or it may not be immediate. To those who trust in Christ the voice of sweet assurance says, "When thou passeth through the waters I will be with thee and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee."

5. The Nature of His Call

It was inevitable that Jeremiah would have serious personal problems, for his call to prophesy reveals a man who was at war within himself. The man who proceeds to serve God because it is his duty but with an inner recoiling from such a path always finds rough sailing ahead. Of course it is better to follow God from a sense of duty than not to follow him at all, but such an attitude is a poor substitute. Until God's will for us has become our own personal desire, the struggle for supremacy within us will continue.

The man who proclaims that he is in the ministry not because in it he finds fulfillment but because God has drafted him against his will, in effectiveness will fall far short of the man who gives himself to preaching because there is nothing else he prefers before it. Jeremiah started his career of prophesying because it was commanded of God. He would have preferred another walk of life. Whenever anything went wrong, therefore, he would be all the more convinced that God had laid his hand on the wrong man. Such an inner conflict was not likely to contribute toward the prophet's peace of mind in times of adversity. In fact, it resulted in a soul at war with itself.

II. JEREMIAH'S REACTION TO ADVERSITY

When his contemporaries began to reject and persecute him, Jeremiah responded in the three ways that usually characterize the behavior of a man who is so treated.

1. Desire to Escape Responsibility (9:1-2)

The prophet's first desire was to get away from it all. His was not a desire to become a hermit, for he did not want to get away from people. Jeremiah was a man who loved others and liked to be with them. Accordingly his desire was not to be alone but rather to be rid of any responsibility for the future welfare of others. If he could just run an inn in the wilderness! Then he could be with people constantly, yet not be responsible for them except for the one night they stayed with him. They could talk and laugh, and then he could even preach to them a while. Tomorrow, however, they would go on their way, and he could be rid of any worry over how they had responded to his words. A new group would come in, and he could face the challenge of a fresh opportunity to witness.

For the dedicated man there is not such relief possible. Nor can a dedicated man afford to run away. Many a man leaves a difficult situation only to turn his back upon greatness.

The reason why Jeremiah was forced to continue even with the certain prospect of failure was the fact that anyone else would also have failed. If there had to be a failure, why should he not be the one? Christians have too readily today allowed the success psychology of a worldly society to determine their actions. They too often think that unless they win the recognition of their contemporaries they have fallen short. Yet the very meaning of the cross is that its way leads to rejection by men but exaltation by God.

Jeremiah, like any troubled soul, longed to get away from responsibility. However, the dedicated man that he was, he never left his post of duty.

2. Self-Pity (20:14ff.)

When things go wrong, one of the most certain reactions is to feel sorry for oneself.

Adversity invariably leads to our feeling sorry for ourselves as the most unfortunate of all people. Jeremiah was no different. His lowest moment came just after he had suffered the indignities of the public stocks. Helpless before the insults of his enemies, Jeremiah had been cursed and spit upon all day. No wonder he was discouraged. Not only did he want no one to remember his birthday but he pronounced a curse upon it for being of all days the most unfortunate (20:14). The prophet depreciated loudly the worthwhileness of his existence. All that he was due to experience was pain, sorrow, and shame, until he eventually wasted away. Why be born into that kind of existence?

All the more credit to Jeremiah that he survived his ordeal alone. He was made of sterner stuff than some of us.

3. Curses of His Enemies (12:3; 18:21-22)

The typical Old Testament saint hated his enemies with all the intensity with which he hated sin itself. Jeremiah was no exception. He called upon the Lord to select them for slaughter the way the shepherd separates the sheep for market (12:3). He prayed that the children of his tormentors be delivered up to famine and sword and that their wives be bereaved both of husbands and sons (18:21-22).

How was it possible that a man so close to God could have such feelings as these? There are several matters to be considered. First, even after Christ has come to reveal the necessity of love, we Christians still have difficulty loving one another. They found it impossible to hate sin but love the sinner.

Further, Jeremiah's offer of love had been spurned (18:20). The prophet had earnestly prayed for these people and tried to help them. They had returned evil for good. There is no hurt so deep as the wound resulting from rejected love.

Also it is evident that the Old Testament saint's attitude was colored by his thinking about the after-life. Jeremiah gives little evidence of having a strong faith in life after death.

The average Hebrew writer believed that God rewarded a man in this life, whether for good or for evil. He did not have our comfort--that the wicked will get his due reward in eternity. If he did not receive it here and now, then the justice of God had failed. When Jeremiah prayed for God to destroy the wicked, he was pleading that justice should be done.

Finally, it is apparent that Jeremiah himself never laid unfriendly hands upon any man. The prophet did not allow himself to raise the sword against another, although that one might give him provocation. His tongue was his sword. The rest he left up to God. To take the law of God into our own hands is one thing.

III. THE DIVINE RESPONSE TO JEREMIAH

1. The Worst Yet to Come (12:5f.)

God informed Jeremiah that this was no time for him to become discouraged, for the long haul was yet ahead. He had just been running with the footmen. If he let them weary him, he would never be able to keep up when the time came to race with the horses.

If Jeremiah became disheartened in peaceful times, how would he ever endure the future stresses of life? God was saying to the prophet, "Cheer up, Jeremiah. The worst is yet to come."

There is not too much comfort in such counsel, but it does give fair warning to the man of God. He must not let down his guard, for the good fight of faith is never done. Each skirmish today prepares for the tougher engagement tomorrow.

2. Jeremiah's Fundamental Problem (15:15 ff.)

It is in this passage that Jeremiah betrayed the basic reason for all his discouragement. In four verses (15:15-18) he used the first person (I, me, my) sixteen times! His fundamental problem was that he was too concerned about what he himself must endure. Thus, in effect, God said to Jeremiah, "If you change your ways, I will restore you, and you can be my prophet (stand before me)."

Jeremiah was in danger of losing his place in the service of God. Unless he got his mind off himself and his own frustration, he was finished as a mouthpiece for God. He must learn to distinguish between the precious and the common (vile) or he could not continue to serve (15:20). Anyone can talk like Jeremiah had been talking. It is quite common to hear men complaining because life has not treated them according to their liking. Jeremiah must rise above this and start proclaiming the precious truths of God rather than bemoan the adverse treatment he had received.

IV. THE RESOLVING OF THE INNER CONFLICTS

It is gratifying that the personal tensions that characterized Jeremiah's earlier ministry were resolved in his later years. The solution was reached in the only way possible to faltering man.

1. Settled in Prayer

Although Jeremiah's complaints were numerous and vociferous, it is remarkable that these were always directed at God, not to man. Whatever problems were his, he did not take them to his neighbor but to his God. Unlike Job he did not criticize to his companions the injustice of God, but always directed his words to the one who had put him in the path he had been forced to follow. In other words, his complaints were prayers.

To Jeremiah prayer was not just petition or thanksgiving but was marked by an intimate sharing of his secret soul. Whatever his tensions, he would bring them before God. Always he would discover that the Lord was a sympathetic listener, although frequently he was instructed to change his attitude, which was what he needed to hear. Although God expected him to bring his doubts to him, he nevertheless would never be satisfied until the questionings were resolved.

2. The Complaints Cease

After chapter 20, the complaints abruptly cease. Upon his knees the perplexed man of God had found his inner peace. Whatever might come, he would be able to face it with assurance in the providence of God. Having outrun the horsemen, he was ready for the horses!