

Service and Sovereignty

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the interplay between serving God and recognizing His sovereignty in our lives, as exemplified by the prophet Jeremiah.

Scripture: Ezra 1:1, Isaiah 64:8, Jeremiah 1:5, Daniel 9:2, Zechariah 2:4, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 1:29, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 1:9

Topics: "Service", "Sovereignty Of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the intertwined themes of service and sovereignty in the life of Jeremiah, illustrating how God calls individuals to serve despite their feelings of inadequacy. He highlights that true service requires a deep passion for God's people, coupled with a profound awareness of one's own limitations, as seen in Jeremiah's hesitance to accept his prophetic calling. Sparks further explains that God's sovereignty governs the lives of His servants, ensuring that their purpose aligns with His divine plan, even when they feel unqualified. The sermon encourages believers to recognize their unique calling and the importance of relying on God's strength rather than their own abilities. Ultimately, it reassures that God's sovereign hand is at work in every believer's life, shaping them for His purposes.

Transcript

Reading: Jeremiah 1:1-12

Our meditation is to be on the matter of service and sovereignty, and I think I can best say what is on my heart by dividing that in this way - (1) The Service, (2) The Servant, (3) The Sovereignty.

The Service

First, then, the service. When we come to consider any of the great servants of the Lord in the Bible, it would be very natural for us to react in this way - that they were raised up in a very special and outstanding way by God to fulfil a great historic purpose in the course of spiritual history, that they stand alone, in a unique position, and that for us in any way to place ourselves alongside of them or in the same category would be sheer presumption. There is a sense, of course, in which that is a right reaction. It would be quite wrong if we were to assume that we were anything like these men in their measure and ministry. At the same time, there are those things of spiritual meaning which are common to all service for the Lord. There are spiritual truths and principles which govern every one, the very least of the Lord's servants in common with the greatest; and what I shall have to say will be in connection with that which is

as true of you and of me in principle as it was of Jeremiah or of any other outstanding servant of the Lord.

But of course we do have to allow for differences in the particular aspect of the service of the Lord to which we may be called. This service for which Jeremiah was chosen and raised up was perhaps the most difficult form of service ever given to man to fulfil. It is comparatively easy to preach the 'good news' of the grace of God to the unsaved, as compared with ministering the full thoughts of God to His own people who are away from those thoughts and are proudly ignorant of what those thoughts are - proud of their tradition, their past, their history; proud of the position to which they have come as something on this earth, fixed in a religious mould, spiritually blind and ignorant, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof, having a name to live and yet being dead. To come to such a people in the deadly formality of their religious routine and to seek to show the fuller thoughts of God is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks ever committed to man. If there is one thing which comes out quite clearly in the story recorded in these prophecies of Jeremiah, it is how intensely difficult it is to fulfil a ministry like that.

To get some idea of how strong a situation Jeremiah had to meet in that formalism and spiritual death, let us remind ourselves that Isaiah had fulfilled his ministry, and less than a hundred years before this had been slain by the very fathers of the people to whom Jeremiah was sent. If tradition is right and the fragment in Hebrews 11:37 applies to Isaiah, he was "sawn asunder". What a great prophet he was! What a wonderful ministry he fulfilled! What a lot the people of God owe to that ministry! Nevertheless he had suffered thus at the hands of the people: his ministry had had that effect: suggesting that it was a fairly strong situation that Jeremiah had to meet. Then, of course, men like Hosea, Amos, and Micah had long since finished their ministry, and when you remember all that they had to say and still you find this condition which is met in the prophecies of Jeremiah, you must conclude that if all those men had failed there must be something present that would make the stoutest heart faint at the contemplation of having to deal with it. That is the background of Jeremiah's ministry, and in such discouraging conditions he stepped forth to utter among that people the fuller thoughts of God concerning them.

That was the service to which this man was called, and whether it touches us or not will depend upon whether we have any real concern that the people of God, and all who come to know the Lord, shall come into the fulness of the Divine purpose and thought for His own people. The temptation is not infrequently present to leave the people of God just where they are, and write them off as either hopeless or not needing our attention. 'Let us get on with the business, of getting people saved. The state of the Lord's people is so confused and so deadly that we had better leave it and turn aside and start on fresh ground somewhere else.' There is something behind a temptation and argument of that kind when you really come up against a situation like this. But here again the Lord did not take that course, nor does He ever take it. He could have fully and finally renounced the whole thing, and started on altogether virgin soil; but no, if God has committed Himself, then whatever He may have to do, He will at last get, even if in a remnant only, an expression of that which is more fully according to His original mind.

But to that service and ministry can come only such as are going to know nothing less than a life-long crucifixion to all interests but that one thing - that God may be satisfied. So much, then, for the service.

The Servant

As to the servant; when the word of the Lord came to him Jeremiah was evidently not a novice, not just a youth; he was already of the priestly house and doubtless had some experience on the practical side of temple service; he knew something. But when it came to preaching - that is, to being a prophet to the

people and to the nation - he felt himself altogether unqualified; indeed, he would have said, disqualified; and his instant reaction to the call of the Lord was, "Ah, Lord God! behold, I know not how to speak, for I am a child". The word 'child' there does not necessarily imply what we commonly take it to mean. It is the same word that the angel applied to Zechariah - "Speak to this young man" (Zech. 2:4). Jeremiah said, "I am a child" - 'I am young: in this realm of things, I have neither experience nor qualification'. But it was just there that the Lord found his qualification, not his disqualification.

Now, we must be very careful to make a discrimination. We find the Lord urging to service, calling for labourers; He wants prophets, He calls for servants, and desires them to be tremendously eager, earnest, zealous. But at the same time He wants to find in them a very real hesitancy - something which would say, 'I cannot'. How are we going to reconcile these two things? Until we have done that, we shall make some mistakes and be in a dangerous position. You see, there is all the difference between a passion for souls and a passion for preaching. A great concern for the spiritual life of others is one thing; but a great concern to be teaching others is quite another thing. No one would ever say of Jeremiah that he was not stirred to the very depths of his being with a great concern and passion over the people of God. He has come down in history by the name of the weeping prophet. You cannot read his 'Lamentations' without feeling that this man, to the last drop of his blood, is impassioned over the spiritual state of God's people. At the same time, with it all he is hesitant, he would hold back. Those two things must be found together in the servant of the Lord, whatever the service. There must be on the one hand a deep-rooted passion and fire of spiritual concern over the situation which exists and which has to be met and dealt with; at the same time there must be just as deep a consciousness of the utter unfitness for such work on the part of the servant or the vessel himself or herself. Our eagerness to preach may, after all, actually spring from our own self-sufficiency, our own conceit, and in the sight of God that is the greatest disqualification for service. Our disqualification does not consist in our own inability and insufficiency but in our own idea that we can. Anything in the nature of conceit, which simply means, having the resource in ourselves, disqualifies in the sight of God.

Jeremiah was a priest by birth, by training, by upbringing, but he was no ecclesiastic, he was no professional priest; in the right sense he was a very natural man. Read his prophecies, keeping him in view with the object of seeing what kind of a person this is that you are dealing with in Jeremiah. How human he is! There is nothing put on, nothing in the nature of professional service. He would repudiate all titles. If he had been a dignified ecclesiastic, it would have been an awful thing to be treated as he was. Just imagine such a person being let down into the filth of that pit, and, after being left there for a time pulled up with the aid of filthy rags! Ecclesiastical dignity would not have stood up to that! But it was otherwise with Jeremiah. And God is wanting people - not professionals, not experts; just people. And that comes out here beautifully, right at the beginning. "Ah, Lord God... I know not how to speak; for I am a child." But the Lord knew something more about Jeremiah than he knew about himself.

The Sovereignty

Now we pass on to this which, after all, is the thing that I feel most constrained to say - a word about the sovereignty behind all this. Jeremiah was to minister regarding sovereignty, for it was the sovereignty of God that was in operation at this time in so many and such manifest ways. Perhaps the outstanding example of that comes in chapter 18 of these prophecies - the story of the potter's house and the vessel. "I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he was making a work on the wheels. And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel,

cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord". 'Have not I sovereign rights to do as I will? If the house of Israel fail me, then out of that clay I will make another vessel'. This is the operation of sovereignty. Jeremiah all the way through was to be a minister concerning the sovereignty; therefore he had to be the personal embodiment of that sovereignty, and this first chapter brings that into view.

"Before I formed thee... I knew thee, and before thou camest forth I sanctified thee; I have appointed thee a prophet unto the nations." Here was Jeremiah's place in God's foreknowledge. It was only at this much later time that Jeremiah was made aware that sovereignty had governed his very birth and his life right up to this time. He would have regarded himself as merely one in the millions of people born into this world, with nothing special about his birth, or of special Divine intention in his life up to this time. He has come to manhood, with so far nothing very conspicuous of God's hand in his history. But here at length God breaks in and says, 'Jeremiah, before you ever had a physical being you were in my knowledge; before you came into this world, I had already set you apart; I had designed you as a prophet for the nations'. And that would certainly carry with it this, that however Jeremiah was constituted naturally, and whatever had been his experience in the years of his life up to that time, there was something behind it not recognised by him which was all related to the purpose which God had foreseen, foreknown and fore-intended as to Jeremiah.

My point is that Jeremiah did not know anything about that until the day that God came to him and gave him his commission. And then, from that time, he began to realise (and perhaps, then, only in an imperfect way) that there was something more bound up with his being in this world and with the way in which he had been brought up than ever he had imagined - that there was a Divine sovereignty there which was being exercised according to Divine foreknowledge. I have said that that Divine sovereignty had something to do with his very constituting, and yet it is just there that we may find some difficulty. Jeremiah himself did. 'I cannot speak! Thou callest me to be a prophet, and a prophet must be able above all things to speak, but I cannot. Lord, Thou hast made a mistake, Thou hast picked the wrong one; I am not constituted for this thing to which Thou hast called me; Thou dost need a different kind of person'. The Lord most definitely repudiated Jeremiah's suggestion that He had not had a hand in his constituting.

How is it explained? There is only one way of explaining it. There is one all-governing consideration with God, and that consideration governs all His activities. If there is any truth at all that Jeremiah after all was born as God intended him to be born, and made as God intended him to be made, and was the kind of person that God wanted for this work, there is only one explanation, and it is everywhere in the Bible. It was and is that all should be of God and not of man, that there should never be any room or ground whatever for glory to go to the servant, the instrument, the vessel. All the glory is to come to God. God is governed by that always. He, then, will deliberately choose the weak things, the foolish, the things which are not. That is Divine sovereignty - "that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). That is the most hopeful ground for us all. If that is true, then there is hope for us, there are possibilities for the Lord where we are concerned; and if we have not come there, we may as well understand from this moment that we shall never bring very much glory to God until we have become thoroughly broken vessels.

So much has been made of the natural gifts and qualifications of certain servants of the Lord - of Paul in particular; but the Lord's handling of Paul was such as to make him very hesitant to say anything about himself. He was broken; yes, he was shattered. Paul would say more than anyone that, if anything was done, it was the Lord Who did it, not Paul. Whatever of gift there may be in the background, remember that it is the Lord who will account for anything at all of good that is done.

So we find that Jeremiah in his very self, in his very origin, and in the whole course of his life, was compelled to rest for himself upon the God of resurrection. That is what it meant. If there is to be anything at all in this service, it has to be like something that is brought out from the dead. 'I cannot!' 'Cannot' is the word that lies always over a grave, over death. Ask anybody who is dead to do something! What is the word that lies over resurrection? 'Can!' But God is the God of resurrection. Jeremiah was constituted on that basis. His very being was because of the God of resurrection; his very ministry also. Follow him through his story; again and again it was as though the end had come; but no, it had not. By Divine, sovereign intervention he went on and on. When royalty and leaders had been carried away from Judah, when thousands of inhabitants were away there in captivity, Jeremiah is still carrying on his work with the poor of the flock in the land.

Then we read Ezra 1:1 - "That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia". Years afterward, Jeremiah still lived, though he was dead; he was still influential, though he had passed from the earth. It is the God of resurrection in action. That is the sovereignty of God.

And what was the fruit of Jeremiah's ministry? Well, Daniel says, "... understood by the books the number of the years whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah..." (Daniel 9:2). Daniel had been reading Isaiah and Jeremiah, and because of this he started to pray. The great ministry of Daniel was produced by the understanding which he got from Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the result was the remnant returning - the sovereign action of God in relation to Jeremiah's ministry.

"I have made thee a prophet unto the nations"; not only to the nation but to the nations. Now here is Babylon, and Cyrus, king of Persia; Babylon, Persia, all coming under the sovereign power of God through the word of Jeremiah. Tremendous, from a child!

I have said that Jeremiah may stand in a special historic relation to the great purposes of God, but the principles hold good. We may not be Jeremiahs, Isaiahs, or Pauls, but we are called to serve the Lord's interests, and there may be very much more sovereignty behind our lives than we are aware of. It may be only as we go on that we shall become conscious that the Lord evidently brought us into being for something - that there is something stirring in us that gravitates in a certain direction which is prophetic of how we are to serve the Lord.

We find things taking shape in a certain way, with a corresponding deep exercise of our hearts about that. We come up against our own lack of qualification, our own unsuitability, and we are thrown right back upon the God of resurrection. We find that the very fact of our being thrown upon the Lord for everything is a sovereign act, with a view to safeguarding everything for the Lord. It is the safest thing, and perhaps one of the greatest evidences that things are of the Lord, when we feel, on the one hand, that we must, out of an inward compulsion, serve the Lord, and yet, on the other hand, that if there is to be anything at all for the Lord it must all be of His doing.

You may take it that if there is anything about us of confidence in ourselves that we can do it, that we are sufficient, God in His sovereignty stands off and leaves us alone till we come to our senses. It is a safe place, to know that everything must be of the Lord. It is a part of His own sovereign work of grace in us. But it is a very comforting thing to know that when the Lord has purposes He wants to fulfil, He sovereignly acts, even in secret, in relation to these purposes, so that even a birth which looks simply like one of the millions of births is a singled-out thing in the sovereignty of God, with an object; that the upbringing, the

training, which has nothing so very distinctive about it as making important the person concerned, is nevertheless all a part of design; and perhaps in later years we shall see that there was more design than we imagined in what looked like a life without very much design.

Faith must turn to God in that way and believe that He knows from the beginning all about us, that He knows what He wants where we are concerned; and if we are really crucified men and women, the purposes of God will take their course. But let us note well that there is the vital turning point. Whatever we may have sensed before, until that day comes when the self-element gets right out of the way, until all the sense that we can do it and want to do it is thoroughly smitten and we are in the place where we really know that if there is going to be anything at all it must be of the Lord, nothing can really arise.

But when that day comes, then all that purpose which has been waiting stored up will begin to break out and take charge of our lives in a new way, we shall know that we are girded by God for something - not perhaps what we would have chosen. It may perhaps be for the most difficult thing ever given to anyone to do. Jeremiah would have escaped it a thousand times if he could have done so, but he could not; and in this very holding on his way we see but one more expression of the fact that once the Lord has set His hand to do a work, He will sovereignly carry the vessel of that service to full accomplishment so long as the vessel remains suitably yielded in His hand.

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