

The Voice of Jeremiah

by T. Austin-Sparks

Jeremiah's ministry was a call to return to God and the consequences of rejecting Him, highlighting the contrast between God as the source of living water and human efforts to provide for themselves.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 36:22, Jeremiah 1:10, Jeremiah 2:13, Jeremiah 23:28, Jeremiah 25:12, Jeremiah 31:31-32, John 4:14, John 7:38, Acts 13:27, Hebrews 8:6

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Faithfulness in Ministry"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the prophetic voice of Jeremiah, who, despite facing rejection and apparent failure, remained faithful to God's calling. Jeremiah's ministry highlighted the contrasts between reliance on God (the Fountain) versus human efforts (the cisterns), the true Word of God versus false teachings (the wheat and the chaff), and the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant. Sparks illustrates that while Jeremiah did not witness the fulfillment of his prophecies, God's sovereignty ensured that his message would ultimately be vindicated through history. The sermon calls believers to recognize the eternal significance of God's work through His prophets, even when it seems unacknowledged in their time. The enduring relevance of Jeremiah's voice serves as a reminder of the importance of faithfulness in ministry, regardless of immediate results.

Transcript

"They knew not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath" (Acts 13:27).

"It shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it desolate for ever" (Jeremiah 25:12).

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, 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, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom..." (2 Chronicles 36:22, Ezra 1:1 onwards: see also Isaiah 45:1-8).

Here then is the vindication of Jeremiah. But he never lived to see it. Therein lies one of the most testing things that a faithful and greatly opposed servant of the Lord can have to accept. Jeremiah had to fulfil his ministry knowing that, so far as his own time and the people thereof were concerned, it would be an apparent failure; he would not live to see that part of his commission fulfilled - "To build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). How many of the servants of the Lord have been called upon to follow Him in this so

searching and testing path! They, as He, have had to do their work for a time to come. We observe the seeming failure of the Lord's own earthly life and labours when "He was crucified through weakness". We see the desertion, forsaking, discrediting, and discounting which marked the closing days of the Apostle Paul's earthly course. What a galaxy of lonely heroes of the faith compose the noble army of the "despised and rejected of men", upon whose costly ministry men passed the verdict 'It was to no purpose'! But if their ministry and labours had anything of God in them, that element is eternal and immortal, and it will live again: God will vindicate, and "the men of Anathoth" (Jeremiah 11:21,23) will be the ones upon whom history and eternity will heap the shame. The tears of the Jeremiahs will - as the Psalmist says - be kept in God's bottle. This is one of "the voices of the prophets" which, although not heard by dull spiritual ears, will be shouted for all to hear by the events of history. Ezra and Nehemiah, and Daniel's visions in fulfilment, will be the answer to Jeremiah's rejected ministry.

Cyrus may be a pagan, having no personal knowledge of the Lord, but his irreligious solicitude for God's interests will declare for all time that, while Jeremiah may be ignored or discounted, the God who called and appointed him cannot be so dismissed. If there is one voice that shouts from the book of Jeremiah it is the voice of Divine Sovereignty. The whole book is contracted in the Lord's words to His servant in the Potter's House: "Cannot I do with you...?" (Jeremiah 18:1-11). The Sovereignty of God is a difficult thing to be against. Ask Jerusalem and the Jewish nation about that in the year A.D. 70 when the sovereign words of Jesus Christ as recorded in Luke 19:41-44 were so literally fulfilled.

So much, then, for the inclusive 'voice' of Jeremiah. But what were some of the things that our Prophet had specifically to encounter and cry against? We can put these into a phrase. He cried concerning certain basic and fundamental contrasts. We point to three:

1. The Fountain and the Cisterns

This is a contrast that the Lord vehemently called an "evil" - "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). Let us be duly impressed - before we pass on - with the Lord's judgment upon this alternative procedure, it is Evil! The Lord says that it is a fundamental evil.

There are several features of these alternatives.

(a) The feature of the One and the many: the one Fountain; the many cisterns.

Here we have a voice of the Prophet which, having been missed, has resulted in - not only Israel's undoing - but, largely in that of organized Christianity, and is not absent from evangelical Christianity. It is a matter to which the Bible gives the most serious attention, and upon which the New Testament is very largely built. It is no less a question than that of the all-sufficiency of God or - alternatively - the many devices of men. It is just the exclusive and final fulness of God or the independent or plus resource of human effort. This is the inherent principle of the One Fountain or of the many hewn out cisterns. Into what a lot of Christian work and activity this issue has become real! From the dawn of man's active relationship with God there has been this incorrigible propensity of man to "put forth his hand" and lay it possessively or controllingly upon God's things. Probably this is Satan's (Lucifer's) sin which led to his fall, and was the very nature of his 'tempting' and deceiving Adam. That is why God calls this 'evil'. It is the evil of dividing God's place; of insinuating man's independence, and implying man's ability. It is at the heart of humanism, of autocracy, of dictatorship. It is the essence of that so oft-referred to symbolic term in the New Testament - "the flesh". It is the principle of the 'uncircumcised heart', which - like the 'uncircumcised

Philistines' - insinuates itself in the things of God. It is full of significance that it was not until David came fully and pre-eminently to the throne that the Philistines were finally subdued. Theirs was a hand against the throne. Not until Christ is absolutely Lord will this tendency to self-assertion be overruled.

What the many "cisterns" represent in their form and nature is just legion; too many things produced by human strength, intelligence, and ingenuity to tabulate or catalogue.

There is a very serious and solemn precautionary reason why, after having given the command and commission to His Apostles to go into all the world, He added "But, tarry ye... until ye be clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49); "He charged them not to depart... but to wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). The world-commission must never be taken upon any kind of natural energy. The Holy Spirit alone, and that as a definite bit of personal history, is to be the source of God's work.

(b) Another difference is indicated in our text.

The cisterns of religious man's hewing can "hold no water". Perhaps the emphasis should be upon the word "hold". They are 'empty' because they are leaky. They have to be repeatedly and continually filled artificially. Their hewers are involved in the arduous task of finding and replenishing the resources. They get something and it leaks away, and dryness demands more and more human effort to defeat it. What a true description of all that comes from man putting his hand upon God's work! His are indeed leaky cisterns. On the other hand there is the Fountain. Full, final, inexhaustible, and ever fresh, never stagnant.

"The water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life" (John 4:14).

"Out of him shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

What a thing it is to have an opened Heaven, and never to have to hew out a message, a discourse, a ministry, an enterprise! It was against this weary, disappointing, laborious life that Jeremiah testified, and his "Voice" must be listened for in this matter today for an evil thing has limited the life of the Lord. Fulness is always a mark of the good pleasure of the Lord.

2. The Wheat and the Chaff

"What is the chaff to the wheat, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 23:28 AV).

The first contrast which gave point to Jeremiah's ministry had to do with the source of the life of God's people; the second had to do with the ministry to them and the teaching. This challenge and interrogation direct from "the Lord of Hosts", as the context shows, was directed to the false Prophets. "I have heard what the prophets have said", etc. (verse 25 onwards). The Prophets claimed to have a vision, a dream, a revelation from the Lord, but it was as empty and unreal as chaff.

What are the characteristics of chaff? The answer to the question will prove whether the ministry is of man or of God; whether it is false or true. Note that the immediate connection here is that of the Word of God, and what is indicated by the whole paragraph is that there is much that claims to be, and is affirmed to be the Word of God which is not so. Between that which is offered as God's Word and the true Word there is all the difference, as between chaff and wheat.

(a) Chaff is so light and unsubstantial as to be carried away by any wind and not found again. Spiritual weight is in minus quantity. It is the ministry (?) to please itching ears. It is wholly superficial, without depth. There is nothing solid about it and there is no 'body' in it. Pretty, clever, and wordy, with facility of speech, diffuse but powerless.

Jeremiah was very strong against the men who offered such light stuff to a needy people.

(b) Together with this aspect goes the fact that chaff deceives. It has an appearance of wheat and is associated with it, but it is not it. It may be a pretence and not the reality. It has the language, the phraseology, the terms, but it is different, it misleads. It is something on the outside and will not stand up to reality.

(c) Chaff is not food. It will never satisfy. It will not nourish. Spiritual malnutrition will result from such a diet. There is no nourishment and building property in it. Hungry souls look up and are not fed. They are famished for bread. The kind of people, as to their spiritual measure will show what they have been fed on.

The real Word of God is different from chaff in all the above respects. It is effective. Note what immediately follows our text. A series of other contrasts is implied.

"Is not my word like as fire? saith the Lord." It burns, it melts, it purifies, it tests.

"And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" Sooner or later the word truly given by God will undo all resistance and self-assurance. Jesus said: "The word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). True ministry of the Lord builds, satisfies, abides, and - in time or eternity - determines.

The final admonition in ministry as in the "voice" of this Prophet is "faithfully" - "Let him speak my word faithfully".

Jeremiah was himself as great an example of this as any man before or since. It cost him dearly. Rejection, ostracism, smiting, the muddy dungeon, shame, reproach, loneliness, and much more; but God vindicated him in history, and, say what you will about his 'melancholy', his pessimism, he is - as we have said - as near to the Lord Jesus as a "suffering servant" as any man has been. His sufferings had their fruit in 'the remnant that returned', and he has an honoured place in the New Testament. (See our next 'Contrast'.)

3. The Two Covenants

"Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel..., not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers... which my covenant they brake" (Jeremiah 31:31-32).

The immensity of this "Voice" of the Prophet can be detected, if not comprehended, in that Christianity and the whole dispensation from the first to the second advents of Christ are built upon and constituted thereby. The Letter to the Hebrews is a comprehensive delineation of the nature of this dispensation, and at the heart of that Letter lies this very quotation from Jeremiah. (See Hebrews 8:6, 9:15, 12:24.)

Moreover, it was to this that Jesus referred when He said "This is the new covenant in my blood." Surely Jeremiah is vindicated! The context of Jeremiah 31:31 is that of "the Branch" and that "Branch" is called

"Jehovah-Tsidkenu" - the Lord our Righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16). Upon this all our salvation - in Christ - rests. It is too vast to even approach here.

What we are immediately concerned with is the contrast of the two covenants. For the Old we have but to read the Letters to the Romans and Galatians, and to see the deplorable situation that the Jews were in in the days of Christ's earthly life. One word covers a many-sided condition which was just terrible; that word is 'bondage'. That is how the Old Covenant resulted in life - or existence. Why? Because it was all on the outside! It was a structure built upon the sinking sand of human weakness and depravity. Its demands only exposed the helplessness of human nature. In its presence the convicted cry of one man was the cry of all men: "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?" (Romans 7:24). It is a long and heart-breaking story of man's failure because of man's nature. Righteousness is the big issue. Which means God having all that He has a right to in man as to character. And man just cannot rise to it. But he has got to! and that is the trouble. God has got to be satisfied or man is condemned. Well, that firstly is the whole case for justification and glory.

Here, then, enters the New Covenant, the terms of which are forecast by Jeremiah. There are two aspects of this: one the nature, the other the Means.

Jeremiah 31:33 - quoted by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it." We supply the italics - "inward parts... their heart". In this dispensation everything is inward. This determines whether the Christianity is true or false. This is the great terminal point represented by the Letter to the Galatians. As to the Means - note the capital M - the Apostle Paul has two great words: "God... who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"; and note, the context of that statement is the Old Covenant - 2 Corinthians 4:6: and "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

The Means is Christ within by the Holy Spirit.

This was a saving revelation to Jeremiah. The book bearing his name is just about as hopeless a revelation of man's miserable state as could be. Well might the Prophet weep and cry out in mortal distress! But it is not eternally hopeless. The "Branch of Righteousness" will be 'raised up' - "The Lord our Righteousness". What a 'voice' of a Prophet! 'Every Sabbath, but they knew Him not.' Hopelessness doubled and confirmed because of hardness of heart, pride, prejudice.

God uncover our inner ears!

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