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Let Jeremiah Speak Today!

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IT is regrettable that a prophet of the stature of Jeremiah who has so much to say to our generation is virtually unknown among our people and not too familiar among our pastors. Here was a man who, as his name indicates, was "hurled into the life of his nation" (Baughman), in much the same way as Christians today are brought face to face with the problems of their country and community. This was a man who was "born to be at odds with and in opposition to the whole world" (Welch), just as the modern disciple of Christ finds himself in conflict with the world.

Many a minister today thinks of his preaching in terms of the statement that has been made of Jeremiah that "no prophet was ever more sure of his word, or less sure of himself" (G. A. Smith). The modern pastor will surely be drawn to Jeremiah when it is pointed out to him that "Isaiah exceeded Jeremiah in all those qualities which pertain distinctly to the *intellectual* side of the prophetic movement; but as an exponent of the purely *spiritual* side of this movement Jeremiah stands without a peer" (Buttenwieser). Neither layman nor pastor can afford to ignore a personality who has been called "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of the Hebrew prophets" (Bright).

For this reason the recent appearance of *Bible Commentary: Jeremiah* by Theo. Laetsch, D. D., Concordia Publishing House, 1952, should be welcomed by the serious student of the Bible. It is to be hoped that this volume, to which this article is designed to call attention, will help to stimulate interest in the prophet Jeremiah in all areas of the life of the church.

According to Laetsch's analysis the fourth year of the reign of King Jehoiakim (605 B. C.) is a pivotal point in the Book of Jeremiah. This was the year in which Jeremiah was commanded by God to put into writing the revelations which he had received. It was also the year in which King Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho in the great Battle of Carchemish. On the basis of references to this year in chs. 25:1; 36:1; 45:1 Laetsch finds three major divisions in Jeremiah 1—45: Jeremiah's faithfulness amidst personal conflict (chs. 2—25); the prophet's faithfulness despite pressure from without (chs. 26—36); Jeremiah's message of utter doom for Jerusalem (chs. 37—45). This division follows the chapter sequence as it has come down to us.

Another recent volume on Jeremiah by Elmer A. Leslie (Abingdon, 1954) follows a radically different approach. In an effort to let the reader understand every phase of the prophet's activity, Leslie attempts to re-arrange the contents of the book chronologically and interweaves his own interpretation with the words of the prophet. Some aspects of Leslie's book are quite commendable, but his division of the contents is confusing.

On the basis of literary types the contents of Jeremiah's book may also be divided into (1) Poetry, (2) Biography, (3) Prose, as John Bright has done in a recent article on Jeremiah (*Interpretation*, July 1955, pp. 265 ff.). According to Bright, the prophet himself had no hand in organizing the material in *Gattungen*; that was done by a collector who put the subject matter together on the basis of such criteria as common theme and common occasion. Evidence of various editorial additions is found in Jer. 36:32, "And there were added besides unto them many like words."

Be that as it may, it is the opinion of the present reviewer that Jeremiah's message for the church of today can best be presented on the basis of the prophet's fourfold activity as a *warnor*, a *confessor*, a *sufferer*, and a *comforter*. If Jeremiah is to speak to our generation, then it must be shown that what he warned against in his day still needs to be warned against today, that the inner conflicts which he experienced are still being experienced today, that because we still suffer as he suffered, therefore we still need the comfort which he had to offer.

JEREMIAH, THE WARNER

From the time of his call it was made clear to Jeremiah that he was to be a warnor of his people: the Lord appointed him to tear out and to pull down, to ruin and to destroy (1:10). Like a modern wrecking crew he was to break down all of the achievements of man, so that the will and way of God might prevail. His life's work, as Laetsch observes, was described in two words: "Stand! Speak!" (1:17.) He was never to soften the tone of his warning or make it less effective because of pressure from men.

The attitude of the people that he was to warn against was one which the modern pastor confronts every day: desertion and defection from the way of God. The Israelites had so many different ways of turning their back to the Lord that the prophet needed to be warning them about it constantly. And he used appropriate pictures. Israel exchanged her glorious God Jehovah for an *Ersatzgott* (2:11). She forsook this Fountain of living waters and dug broken and filthy cisterns (2:13).

The noble vine which God planted degenerated into a strange vine (2:21). She was like a "dromedary in heart" who in insatiable sexual appetite went from one partner to another (2:23; cf. 5:4).

The Lord had no trouble restraining the sea with a wall of sand, but He found that His people's fickle hearts were unrestrainable (5:23). Israel was to be as close to Jehovah as the girdle was to Jeremiah's loins; but as the prophet's girdle became unfit for wear when he left it in the river, so Israel became unfit for the Lord through her apostasy (13:11). She was so used to doing evil that to change for the better would be as hard for her as changing an Ethiopian's skin or a leopard's spots (13:23). Judah's estrangement from God was so deep-seated that it was engraved upon the table of her heart with an iron stylus and with the point of a diamond (17:1). The degenerate people under Zedekiah were comparable to a basket of very bad figs, standing in front of the Temple, which could not be eaten (24:2).

Judah's desertion from the Lord was epitomized in the attitude of King Jehoiakim, who showed his defiant attitude by cutting up and burning the precious manuscript on which Jeremiah had recorded his revelations from God (36:23). That this insolent attitude was very odious to the Lord is indicated by the fact that the prophet was forbidden three times even to pray for his people (7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

What made Israel's defection so much worse was the fact that the people went through the motions of religious worship and thought they were pleasing the Lord. In his famous Temple address Jeremiah pointed out to the people that the Temple and the sacrifices that were being brought in it had become stumbling blocks to them (7:14, 22). Because they had converted the Temple into a den of robbers (7:11) and regarded sacrifices as indulgences that would take away sin (11:15), therefore God would do away with Temple and sacrifice until the offense was removed (7:14).

The only route whereby Israel could come back to God was that of repentance (3:22). Any other approach was false and deceitful (3:10). Any other overture would prevent the Lord from treating Israel as His own son (3:19, 20). Israel needed to break up its hardened spiritual ground and to cut deeply into the fattened recesses of its heart (4:3, 4). It needed to forsake the heights of Baal and to cease its spiritual wandering and to turn to Jehovah in genuine repentance (3:23).

When Jeremiah beheld this strange phenomenon that a fallen people did not get up, that an erring people did not amend (8:4), when he

noted how even the scribes who recorded the Sacred Record perverted the texts (8:8), he was tempted to run off to the wilderness (9:2). "He might have become the patron saint of monasticism" (Laetsch) had he done what he wanted to do. But the Lord needed him as His warner. Instead of running to the wilderness, he was to tell his people to run through the streets of Jerusalem and see if they could find one faithful person there (5:1). Instead of shunning society, he was to seek out people.

As the gleaner searches for grapes that have been overlooked, so the prophet was to carefully glean the remnant of Israel (6:9). He was to serve as an assayer, or tester, who would find out the true character of his countrymen (6:27); he was to listen in on their conversations and find out whether there was any evidence of repentance in them (8:6). As the potter made a new vessel out of the one that was spoiled, so Jeremiah was to tell his people that there was still hope that the Lord would make a new people out of them if they repented (18:3-6), that the way of man is not in himself (10:23), that his glory should not be in wisdom, power, or wealth, but rather in the knowledge of a gracious, just and righteous God (9:23,24).

The above examples will suffice to show the pastor of today how much relevant material he can find in Jeremiah which he may use as a warner in his parish. He will recognize the need of such warnings because the tendency to forsake God is just as strong today as it was then. He will welcome the prophet's words of warning as guidelines for the preaching and counseling program in his own parish. For himself he will also be interested in some of the personal problems of this great preacher of old. These become evident when we look at

JEREMIAH, THE CONFESSOR

More than any other prophet, Jeremiah gives us a glimpse of some of the grave spiritual conflicts that raged within him during his turbulent ministry. In his confessions we find evidence of the same inhibitions, weaknesses, and temptations that beset us in our work today. Occasionally he is so overcome by his difficult burdens and responsibilities that he chides the Lord in words that strike us as being blasphemous. At other times he gives glowing testimony to the power of the Word of God in his personal life.

1. Footmen and Horsemen

When the priestly men of Anathoth found out how Jeremiah was preaching against the Temple and sacrifice, they plotted to take his life (11:19). According to the Targum, they planned to put poison

in his food. But the Lord prevented them by making the prophet aware of their evil designs. It was then that the prophet described himself as a gentle lamb that was to be brought to the slaughter and as a fruit tree that was to be cut down. He was willing to grant that the Lord was righteous, but he had a question: Why did those wicked people prosper (12:1)? Could he not see the Lord's vengeance on them? Could *they* not be slaughtered like sheep?

But instead of showing sympathy to His prophet the Lord gave him a challenge: In terms of war the men of Anathoth were mere infantrymen (12:5). If he was already weary from this skirmish with such light forces, how did he ever expect to confront the far more formidable cavalrymen? That meant that he was to gird his loins and be about his job! The same challenge certainly applies to servants of the Word today.

2. At Odds With the World

This confession has been called "one of the most moving" of all of Jeremiah's personal laments (Bewer). He bemoans the fact that his mother gave birth to him. He is in conflict with the entire earth (15:10). He pleads with the Lord not to let him die prematurely. He recalls that whenever he received a word of revelation from the Lord, he ate that word. It was the greatest source of rejoicing to him (15:16). But now that he is suffering, it seems to him that the Lord is deceiving him. He is acting like a deceitful brook which looks very inviting to the thirsty traveler but then proves to be dry (15:18). The prophet complains that he dare not join any group of merry-makers. He is forbidden to have a wife or a family, to go to a house of mourning to express his sympathy, to sit down to any kind of sociable eating and drinking.

How did the Lord react to this prophetic sassiness? He was very firm. He warned the prophet to repent or be dismissed (15:19). He told him that if he did repent, his only reward would be more work and responsibility in the service of his Lord. If he humbly sifted the precious from the vile, i. e., stopped speaking so insolently, he would not only be permitted to function again as the Lord's mouthpiece, but the Lord would also make him as strong as a brazen wall, so that he would never trim the Lord's word or compromise it in any way. — The lessons for the modern preacher are quite obvious. He, too, faces opposition, yet he has the Lord's Word to sustain him. In the loneliness of his calling, he, too, is often inclined to chide the Lord. And so he needs to live in daily repentance, so that the Lord may equip him properly to serve as His ambassador.

3. *The Deceitful Heart*

The prophet recognized the cause of the vile words which he had ventured to address to the Lord. He knew that they were symptoms of a disease which he shared with the rest of depraved humanity. He admitted to the Lord that the trouble was in his heart, that there was a depth of wickedness there that was difficult to fathom and even more difficult to cure (17:9). As the Lord alone could search the heart, so he alone was the Physician who could relieve the disease. Therefore the prophet pleaded: "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for Thou art my Hope" (17:14). Such an act of divine healing was the only thing that could make him loyal, that could prevent his running away from his job and being vindictive toward his opponents, that could enable him to speak with sincerity (17:16). Laetsch observes: "Here are three characteristics of a true preacher and pastor: obedience to God's call and command, refraining from venting one's own spite, sincerity in doing the work of the ministry" (pp. 165, 166).

4. *Out of the Depths*

Jeremiah proclaimed the Lord's judgment, but apparently it failed to come. This gave his opponents an opportunity to ridicule him. They challenged him to bring to pass what he had threatened (17:15). He sank into the depths of discouragement and frustration. Again he spoke to the Lord in a tone that bordered on the blasphemous. He complained that the Lord had seduced him the way a man seduces a maid, that the Lord used the force of a rapist to subdue him (20:7). He was so tired of preaching that he pondered the idea of giving it up; but he found that he could not keep silent because the Lord's Word kept burning like a fire in his heart and bones (20:9). Even his familiar friends watched for an opportunity to find fault with him and then to take revenge.

Driven to a state of desperation by the shame and persecution that beset him, this great man of God finally cursed the day of his birth and the man who brought the news of it; he wished that he had died in the womb, that his mother had been his grave (20:14-17). — One can only pray that the pastor of today may be spared the desperate struggles that this prophet went through. Still we must be ready to face similar crises. When they come, the confessions of Jeremiah are always available as a storehouse of rich pastoral experiences, as a veritable case history which the prophet of today certainly can study to great advantage.

JEREMIAH, THE SUFFERER

As his confessions show, spiritual conflict was a basic element in the prophet's ministry. But that is not to say that he was without physical suffering. In fact, there is much in his experience as a sufferer that reminds the reader of the greater Sufferer whose ministry was so similar to that of Jeremiah.

His own townsmen in Anathoth turned against him, as the plot to murder him indicates (11:21). When Pashur, the policeman, heard his sermon on the broken bottle, he not only struck the prophet but also put him into the stocks (20:2). In his Temple address Jeremiah told the people that if they did not amend, God would make the Temple a heap of ruins like Shilo. This so enraged his hearers that the unruly mob threatened him with death (26:8). With the help of Ahikam, however, he managed to escape with his life (26:24). As a part of his ministry he was constrained to put an ox yoke around his neck as a symbol of the subjection of the nations under Babylon (27:2). As if this were not enough of a humiliation, the pseudo prophet Hananiah pulled the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and smashed it in the presence of all of the people to show his defiant attitude toward the prophet (28:10).

During a break in the siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah tried to get out of the city to visit his native town of Anathoth, but he was intercepted by a guard (37:13). The guard turned him over to the princes who under King Zedekiah were not the prophet's friends. They beat him and put him into one of the dungeons under the house of Jonathan. The king, however, responded to Jeremiah's petition and had him transferred to the more livable court of the guard (37:21). There he was again free to speak, and he urged the people to desert and go over to the enemy. This time the hostile princes took him and let him down by cords into the miry cistern of Malchiah (38:6). While the sixty-year-old prophet was languishing in this muddy pit, "one of the finest episodes in the O.T." (G. A. Smith) took place. An Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-melech had pity on him and came to his aid. Using old rags and worn-out clothes, he and his men very gently drew the prophet out of this damp hole and brought him back to the guard's court (38:13).

At the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was at first released from the court of the guard by the Chaldeans and permitted to dwell among the people (39:14). Later, however, and apparently by mistake, he was put in chains and led to Ramah. There he was met by Nebuzaradan, the Chaldean commander, and not only released but given the choice

of going to Babylon or staying at Mizpah. The nobility of the prophet's character is reflected in his decision to remain with the remnant at Mizpah rather than to accept preferment in Babylon (40:6).

In the suffering of Jeremiah the church may see a reflection of its own life. When we look at the suffering of the great witnesses of God who have gone before us, we are strengthened by our sense of fellowship with them. We are shown, too, that very often our suffering is inconsequential by contrast with theirs. Above all, we are encouraged to take up our cross and follow Him who bore the suffering of the cross for us.

JEREMIAH, THE COMFORTER

If we remembered Jeremiah only for the sternness of his warnings, the honesty of his confessions, and the bitterness of his sufferings, we should be missing one of the most remarkable features of his entire career, namely, his message of divine mercy for the individual sinner. Among the great preachers of God's love, Jeremiah stands out between a very illustrious predecessor, Hosea, and a far more illustrious successor, Jesus. There was no one-sided emphasis on the wrath of God in his program. Rather the Lord told him: "Like as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so will I bring upon them all the good that I have promised them" (32:42).

This emphasis on God's grace stands out in the prophet's attitude toward the people who were carried away to Babylon in the first deportation of 597 B.C. They were exiles, to be sure, but still they were like the good and edible figs which Jeremiah saw in front of the Temple. The Lord promised that He would regard them with favor, that they would be His people, and He would be their God (24:5, 7). Jeremiah's famous epistle to these exiles (ch. 29) ranks as the first of those spiritual letters which became so popular at Paul's time. It also exhibits some striking allusions to God's love.

When the exiles were bidden not to hate their Babylonian masters, but to pray for them, this not only was the clearest Old Testament passage calling for intercession for the enemy but also paved the way for mission expansion and a program of world evangelism (29:7). The Lord remembered the plans which He had in mind for these exiled people: the future was theirs. Not evil, but hopeful and blessed times were in store for them; they would seek the Lord and find Him as long as they searched with all their heart (29:11, 13).

The section that is known as the Book of Comfort (chs. 30—31) "contains some of the finest poems Jeremiah ever composed" (Bewer). It speaks of such distress on the Day of the Lord that men will labor

like women in childbirth, but still there will be deliverance for the children of God (30:6,7). They will serve Jehovah, their God, and David, their Messianic King, whom the Lord will send them (30:9). They will have a great Prince who will come out of their midst and who will hazard his life in drawing near unto God (30:21).

In and through this Prince God will richly comfort His people. He tells them: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn you unto Myself" (31:3). They will yet plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria and go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord (31:5,6). Though Rachel weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted for them, the Lord tells her to stop crying because her work is to be rewarded; there is hope in her future; her children will certainly return to their own border (31:17). Ephraim is still God's dear son and darling child. Whenever the Lord speaks of him, He remembers him with kindness. His heart yearns for him, and He will surely have mercy upon him. (31:20.)

The Lord plans a new covenant with His people, a different covenant than that of Sinai. He is going to put His Law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts. It will not be necessary for every man to teach his neighbor and his brother the knowledge of God; for all of them from the least to the greatest will know the Lord. The Lord will forgive their iniquity and not remember their sin. (31:31-34.)

The agent through whom the Lord will bring restoration and healing to His people will be that Branch of Righteousness who will grow up unto David (33:15). He will reign as king and will execute justice and righteousness in His kingdom (23:5). His name will be called the Lord, our Righteousness. He will not only be righteous Himself, He will also impart righteousness to His people (23:6). Through Him Israel and Judah will be saved, because His name will be imparted to them; they, too, will be called the Lord, our Righteousness (33:16).

This concludes the epitome of the Book of Jeremiah. As a church we have every reason to let this prophet speak today. He addresses himself to problems that surely are crucial in the life of our church. His message conveys the twin themes of judgment and mercy in terms that will reach into the lives of our people. His experiences as a pastor will be a rich source of information and encouragement for our ministry today. Let us study Jeremiah and bring his message to our people. For such a program the new Laetsch commentary will provide welcome assistance.

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