

George Philip Bible Readings

Jeremiah

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1:1-3

Always remember that the life and ministry of the prophets have to be set into the historical sequence of the Books of the Kings. God's men do not speak and work in a vacuum. Never forget the rolling generations of history. Try to grasp the sweep and significance of the passing of time, because if we do not in measure understand the past, we will not grasp the meaning of the present, nor will we discern, with the eye of faith, the possibilities of the future. In reading history we must learn to trace the development of God's purposes of grace, salvation and glory, and realise that time belongs to God, not the Devil. God is marching on in victory, and the turmoil of history is the rearguard action of the defeated foe, Satan and his kingdom. Consider this list of approximate dates to help us to place Jeremiah's ministry.

- B.C. 2000 Abraham.
- 1280 Moses, and the Exodus from Egypt.
- 1075 Samuel.
- 1000 David, king over united Israel.
- 970 Solomon, and Israel at its peak, economically and politically.
- 930 The kingdom divided. Jeroboam defects with ten tribes and the northern kingdom of Israel is established with its capital Samaria. The two remaining tribes form Judah, with Jerusalem the capital.
- 722 After an unbroken succession of evil kings, Israel collapses as a nation and disappears from sight under God's judgment.
- 587 Fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the captivity in Babylon.

Beginning of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah.

A sweeping commentary on the sad end of Judah is given in 2 Chron.36:11-23.

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1:1-3

As far as we can assess, Jeremiah was born, a son of the manse, in 641 B.C. He was called to the prophetic ministry in 627 B.C. and continued that ministry right beyond the final carrying away of the Jews in 587 B.C., a ministry of over forty years. His birth took place during the closing (apparently repentant 2 Chron. 33:10-20) years of the reign of Manasseh, during which reign for half a century evil had been rampant within the nation. Manasseh's son Amon followed his father's earlier godless ways, not being moved by his repentance, but a grandson was born whose name was Josiah, and he was to play a significant part in God's purposes (2 Kings 21:1-2, 16-26; 22:1-2). In the year 640 B.C. when Jeremiah was seven years old (if our estimates are correct), Josiah, aged eight, came to the throne and reigned for thirty-one years. In the thirteenth year of that reign Jeremiah was called to the prophetic ministry. Five years later, the book of the Law of God was rediscovered in the House of the Lord (2 Kings 22:3-20), and we would like to believe that it was Jeremiah's ministry and influence that prepared the king for this significant moment in his career, although there is no mention of Josiah in the Book of Jeremiah and no mention of the prophet in 2 Kings. There were other influences operating in Josiah's life as is evident from 2 Chron. 34:3-7 where at the ages of sixteen and twenty there were already signs that the man was seeking after God and righteousness. This could have been the result of the influence of the last repentant years of his wicked grandfather Manasseh. It is never too late to change and the fruit of a radical repentance cannot be measured. Remember, God is at work before we become aware of His activity and intentions.

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1:4-6

During Jeremiah's ministry the circumstances of the nation were marked by apostasy, degeneracy and careless complacency and all these things will become evident as we go through the book. Not even revival stemmed the tide, and idolatry was never purged from the hearts of the people. It was a time that called for a spiritual giant to be the prophet of God, a man big enough to go on in faithfulness even when evidences pointed to failure. Such a man was diffident, sensitive Jeremiah, a man of sorrows indeed, and deeply acquainted with

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grief (8:18-9:2). You could imagine Jeremiah, a young and earnest believer, grieved no doubt by the superficiality of his priestly father and his colleagues (1:1), crying to God in prayer and asking that a mighty Elijah might be raised up to confront the nation with the word of the Lord. The prayer was answered and Jeremiah himself was called to be God's prophet. Why do we mostly assume that God will send someone else? That God is no hard taskmaster is seen in how swiftly, right at the beginning, He undergirds the man in his sense of weakness (not unwillingness) with affirmations of divine sovereignty and purpose. Jeremiah's parents were possibly unaware of the significance of their child, but his conception and birth were ordered by the all-wise, all-gracious, all-purposeful God. The call to ministry was not a new move but the fruit of preparation begun in the eternal counsels of God. This is how to look at life, and how to understand our conversion and call to service.

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1:4-6

We must consider this paralysing sense of insufficiency and incompetence that seems to make Jeremiah draw back from God's call. It is essentially unbelief (but remember the atmosphere of the nation) because it operates on the basis that God is making a mistake in His dispositions, which can never be the case. It is further the mistake of concentrating on the manifest demands of the call rather than on the immense privilege of being called to royal honour (Rev. 1:5-6). In confessing his weakness Jeremiah was in fact giving expression to that very disposition of heart that makes a man useful to God. It is when we are weak that we are made strong in the Lord of Hosts, and His strength is perfected in our weakness (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 2 Cor. 11:24-12:10). The Lord who calls us knows our personality, nature and capacity as well as our limitations, and knowing us, chooses us for specific service in prepared historical and geographical situations. Who knows but that someone reading these very words is ordained for service "for such a time as this" (Esther. 4:14). As we go through this prophecy we shall see the that it was the sheer sensitivity of the man that made him such an instrument of God. God does not call us in order destroy our personalities but to develop them in His grace and to channel all their potential to creative ends.

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1:7-10

There is clear determination and purpose in God's words to Jeremiah and He makes it clear that He personally accepts all the responsibility. All that the man has to give is the obedience of faith. Instantly a word of reassurance is given to quell incipient fear (8), not promising freedom from circumstances calculated to inspire fear but guaranteeing deliverance from such circumstances (John 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:11; 1 Cor. 10:12-13). God also gives a token of equipment for the specific service Jeremiah is called to undertake. The man is not sent out at his own charge nor is he required to speak his own (merely human) observations on the situation. He is given the assurance of a message from God for every specific situation. What Jeremiah is promised is the unfailing presence of the great God of faithfulness. At the same time the sheer extent of God's intentions must have stunned him (10), not least because the terms of his commission seem to be largely negative. It was to be a ministry of demolishing, and only in the long term was it recognisable as constructive. God's confidence in this man is vindicated over a spell of forty years, because at the end Jeremiah was still standing in and by the faithful word of God.

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1:11-19

The prophet is given two visions of assurance, one natural and the other supernatural. He is told to look at the dry rod of an almond tree which is the first of the trees to bear tokens of the awakening of spring. It tells of the activity of life stirring and breaking forth, and Jeremiah would remember this every time he saw the dry branch and the buds. It seems to speak of God hastening (AV) and watching over (RSV) His word to perform it. God is awake, alive to the situation and His word heralds His action. This is only the beginning. The vision of the boiling pot pointing to Judah from the north, about to pour out its contents, signifies the trouble that was brewing in the political and military stirrings of the pagan empires of Assyria (now tottering) and Babylon (about to become ascendant). This threat was going to become a reality and the invading enemy was to come right to the gates of Jerusalem, an unthinkable disaster in the minds of these proud Jews. God makes plain that this is no mere development of international struggle for the balance of power, but a direct and specific

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judgment on the moral and spiritual sins of the nation. God is not mocked and people are foolish if they make His delays in judgment an occasion for further experimenting with sin and godlessness. God declares that His activity in judgment is already begun (15) and He calls Jeremiah to be up and doing to proclaim not only judgment but grace and hope in the midst of judgment. There is a sobering warning to Jeremiah that he would be personally shamed and confounded if he refused God's commission. At the same time the colossal personal commitment of God to His prophet is renewed in the closing verses. When the battle really got going Jeremiah could be sure that God was right there in the thick of it with him. He could not be alone, even if he felt alone. God had given His word.

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2:1-13

Jeremiah's first sermon runs right down to 3:5, and in this first section God's charge against His people is that they have sinned against love, yet seem to have no awareness of the terrible thing they have done (6). But, in a wonderful illustration, God says He remembers how sweet it was when their first flush of love flowered into married love and how, with a great sense of belonging to God and being under the shadow of His mighty protection, His people followed closely with Him even when the way was hard (2-3). God asks what had gone wrong, and even asks if the fault lay in Him, for they have turned to worthlessness and blighted their own lives (5). It seems that in the hard days of battle and pilgrimage at the beginning the people manifested a glorious consecration, but in the days of rich blessing they grew careless and disaffected (v.7, cf. Deut. 8:11-20). This faithless leaving of their first love (Rev. 2:4) was found in every section of the people, especially the spiritual leaders who gave their allegiance to Baal (8). On the face of it Baal offers gratification with no stern demands but in reality robs, desolates, destroys and has nothing to give (12-13). In v.9-12 God says something very staggering by way of challenge to His people's deadened conscience. He points to the devotion and dedication shown by the heathen to their gods. Think of how men and women, having once made their choice and committed themselves, go hard after their chosen way and philosophy of life, mastering the party's line of doctrine, defending and propagating it with passion, and countenancing no defection or even qualification. But Judah, loved so deeply and blessed so richly, does not think like this, not even when the way of transgression has proved to be the hard labour of hewing out broken watering places that produce nothing. God, the fountain of life, is ignored. What madness and perversity there is in sin.

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2:14-31

These vivid verses, that need detailed study, declare the bondage and humiliation of sin (14-19) and the pride and degeneration of sin (20-31). This is what can come to a people redeemed and set free by the God of grace and called to share His glory. Note in the first section (14-19) that there is a total return to abject slavery and to the taskmasters they once feared (cf. Gal. 4:3-9). The people find themselves victims to the enemy, to circumstances, to their own natures and to powerful aspects of their own personalities that they thought had been subdued for ever. Added to this there is the inevitable perverse confusion that will try any and every remedy except repentance and returning to God. In v.20-25 the description of sin-crazed lives is terrible to read, especially when you remember it is referring to the people who bear God's name. The description speaks of a tawdry prostitute, a choice vine run to seed, a body so engrained with dirt it cannot be washed clean (20-22), but Israel denies it all and the people protest that they are not backsliding. The description goes on in terms of a crazy, erratic camel getting nowhere, a she-ass motivated only by the heat of instinctive passion, making herself available, and of men wearing out their shoes in pursuit of gratification even when they know it is futile (23-25). This is the madness of sin (Jas. 1:15; Rom. 1:21-32). There is no future in it. You pay all the time and end up destroying yourself. Idols multiply, more and more alternatives to God crowd in, nothing God says or does has any effect; and yet in trouble Israel expects God to do something to help. It will not be. Rather will Israel's sins be exposed. Their secret sins will be publicised and they will be shamed. It is the God of everlasting love who speaks like this. Can we understand His agony?

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2:32-3:5

This is not so much a call to repentance as a question asking if repentance is possible when such a brazen insensitive spirit dominates the hearts of the people. It is as if God is pressing home the fact that sin can in fact

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create a situation so confused and intractable that repentance is impossible. People can go too far and sin away their day of grace, and we comfort ourselves too easily at times with thoughts of the forgiving God. The first part of the passage makes plain how far from grace and from God backsliders can go. They are spoken of here as teaching wicked people evil that they had not hitherto known or practised. At the same time they protest their innocence and spiritual integrity (34-35). God must take them to task. Consider the vividness of 3:1-2, an illustration which may well be indicative of the moral state of the nation and the contemptuous attitude to the marriage bond. If the husband divorces the wife because she is in fact in the wrong, and she goes and co-habits with another, or several others, does this not mean she is making it virtually impossible for her to return to her first love? After all her affairs can she go back easily to her husband and say, "I like it best with you"? Will that make all well? Israel had played the prostitute with many, indifferent to what she was doing to her true love, and insensitive to the disciplines of providence. In v.4-5 there may be reference to easy words of repentance spoken of in times of religious commotion, often mistaken for revival. But look at God's concluding statement in v.5b. Consider Jer. 37:3, 7; Amos 5:14-15. We may not presume. Consider carefully 2 Chron. 7:12-22.

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3:6-11

Jeremiah's second (3:6-4:2) and third (4:3-6:30) sermons form a complete section in which the spiritual condition of the nation is portrayed in vivid terms, demonstrating the inexcusable nature of her sins and yet holding out the hope of forgiveness in the astonishing and faithful love of God. It is clear from v.6 that the reformation (a truer word than revival under the circumstances) under King Josiah had begun (2 Kings 23), bringing with it a cutting down of centres of idolatry, a reconstitution of public worship in God's house and a renewal of zeal for righteousness. But it does not seem to have been a radical, long-term work. Indeed, God describes it as a pretence (10), and to bring home the enormity of her sin Judah is compared unfavourably with her northern neighbour Israel, whose spiritual apostasy and idolatry are described with a terrible vividness in terms of physical adultery and moral decadence. There was a shamelessness about Israel's behaviour (6, 9), and she is described as a loved wife who had turned to repeated adultery. Yet God held on in hope (7) and would have taken her back again, but His love was spurned and Israel was sent away in final and irremediable divorce. Judah saw all this happening but failed to be sensitive to the spiritual and moral lessons of national affairs. This is the terrible blindness of sin. It leads to disaster and no amount of casual spirituality can conceal the issue. Indeed the people who are privileged with knowledge and blessing in the forbearance of God are more guilty than others when they fail to bring forth the fruits of righteousness in answer to the blessings of grace (v.11; Rom. 2:1-24). Being miserable about your sins is one thing, but repentance is another (2 Cor. 7:8-11).

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3:12-25

Here are both testimony to the fact that God delights in mercy and a declaration of the rebuke of God against those who, proud of their spiritual pedigree, refuse to answer the calls of God's grace (Matt. 11:20-24; 12:41-42). God's words to Israel are almost beyond belief in their promise of blessing in answer to genuine heart-repentance which humbles itself in the sight of God. The call in v.14 is really, "Turn back, you back-turning children," and this highlights the nature of sin. It is a turning of the back on the God who has committed Himself in love so that you can go after other lovers, whether or not they are able to give you the blessing of a satisfied heart. In the same verse God recognises that it will be only a remnant who will hear His voice and answer His call (Rev. 3:20-22), but to them He promises all the provision of grace for life and blessing. The reference to the Ark is difficult (16). It was no doubt in the Temple in Jeremiah's day and it had signified down the years the presence of the Lord among His people. At the same time it had made a clear differentiation between Judah, with the Ark, and Israel with the golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33). But just as these calves had been a stumbling-block to Israel, so the presence of the Ark had become in Judah a substitute for true worship. They trusted in the Ark just as many people trust in their church building. This is why, when a building or a tradition goes, the "faith" of many goes at the same time. But some are centred on the Lord Himself and they are pictured here as coming together to inherit God's future. Never forget that the unfaithfulness of people cannot cancel out the faithfulness of God nor His purposes of grace (Rom 3:3).

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3:12-25

In this tremendous appeal to His people to return, the abject sorrow of Israel seems to be used to highlight the obdurate indifference and complacency of Judah. In this context there is clear declaration as to the futility, deceit and desolation of sin, and it comes from the lips of Israel. This is how it must be with the prodigal in his experience of emptiness and contradiction of personality. It is while still in the humiliation of feeding the swine that he must resolve to return to the Father (Luke 15:18). But note in v.24 how this shameful abandoning of God has robbed the nation of all the blessing and benefit, material and spiritual, accumulated by the labour of a past generation of godliness. When this happens a nation is on the verge of spiritual bankruptcy, and hope for its renewal is limited. There are two reasons for this. The first is expressed in v.25 where those who find themselves "sold-out" because of sin tend to be so demoralised that they capitulate and lie down in their misery. Sin robs nation and people of the very capacity to make the effort to remedy things. "What's the use?" people say. Then in v.25b there seems to be an acknowledgment that their attitude to sin has not changed in spite of misery and in spite of sorrow for sin. Does this not indicate that "sorrow" can come too late (Heb. 12:17)? People can long for God's blessing but still have no disposition of repentance. A whole nation can go beyond the limit of God's forbearance (Heb. 3:7-4:13). Both Israel and Judah did.

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4:1-4

These verses are the end of the second sermon and the beginning of the third and the two belong together. There is no suggestion of easy repentance nor can there be repentance that is merely a tumult of religious emotion. To repent of sin is to be sorry enough to stop, and God requires that there should be visible evidence to confirm inward change. Remember the words of John the Baptist to those who were eager not to miss out on what appeared to be a religious awakening (Matt. 3:1-12). As we shall see later in the chapter the clouds of war were already gathering over Judah, but here God is saying that not only is there still possibility of repentance but that a true return to the Lord could yet lead to Judah being used as God's instrument of blessing to the nations. "But who can fight for truth and God, enthralled by lies and sin? He who would wage such war on earth must first be true within." (Hymn "O God of truth whose living word", Hughes). There is not unlimited time to consider our response to the call of God. Assuming Josiah's reformation had begun, it seems this word declares that beneath the appearance of spiritual renewal the hearts of the people were still married to the things that kept them from God. These were things God could not and would not bless, and until they were remedied God would make no advance. The agricultural metaphor in v.3-4 is very apt, being addressed to a situation of long-standing spiritual neglect. The seed of the word of grace that can bring a harvest of blessing cannot take root in concrete-hard hearts and lives overgrown by thorns of worldliness and sin (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23). The appeal in v.4 is to the effect that, being circumcised and so marked out as a people belonging to God, they are to cast away from their hearts and lives all that is a reproach to and a contradiction of that consecration. Undergirding all these exhortations is the fact that they are a people redeemed by God. They are not their own. Their destiny is in God.

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4:5-18

The end of the previous verses spoke of God's judgment about to come on the nation because of its sins. The events of invasion and defeat about to come were not to be regarded as fortuitous. It was judgment and it had already begun, for the foe from the north had entered Jewish territory and the people were hearing the alarm and fleeing for safety to the fortified cities. The impending invasion is spoken of as being like the hot desert wind that comes to blight the land, but the people are left in no doubt as to the military nature of the disaster. Astonishingly enough even the leaders of the nation are taken aback (9), for neither on the secular nor the spiritual level was such a happening looked for. The priests are too shocked to pray and the prophets can find no words to preach. This is indeed darkness and confusion. It seems that even Jeremiah was staggered (10) although some say the verse should read, "...then shall they say". It is also suggested that Jeremiah may be referring to words spoken in the time of Isaiah (Isa. 37:33-35) when the safety of Jerusalem was guaranteed by God's own promise. But the nation delivered at that time went on to presume on God's goodness and made use of His gracious intervention to indulge their own carnal unbelief. They could not be delivered this time. It could also be that Jeremiah here is still too optimistic regarding the influence and effect of Josiah's reformation and

the re-introduction of the Word of God to the nation's life. Such a renewal of ministry of the Word certainly indicates hope, but hope has to be realised and built upon in righteousness. A nation's repentance can be too shallow and come too late (cf. 6:13-14). Faith must not make superficial assessments.

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4:19-31

The invading army would come from the north and soon the warning of its approach would be sounded from the area of Dan and echoed from the hills of Ephraim, a mere twelve miles from Jerusalem (15) and the shock of this invasion explains the deep emotion of these verses. There is a revelation here not only of the prophet's heart but of the heart of God. His anguish of soul tortured him (19-20), the wrestling of his thoughts exhausted him (21), and the answer of God is given in terms of the justice of God (22). This is the story of the entail of sin and the end of a nation that had been richly favoured. To understand the tragedy of it we need the words of Jesus in Matt. 23:37-38. There was indeed desolation coming on Judah and Jerusalem and the descriptive language indicates almost total disaster and is reminiscent of the vivid imagery of the Book of Revelation. In v.23 we are reminded of Gen. 1:2, and v.28 makes us think of Gen. 6:5-7. Because God delays His judgments for His purposes of grace, people grow careless and believe that reckoning will never come. But it will, as is made clear in 2 Pet. 3:1-11 and also in Jeremiah's words. He speaks of coming events in terms of a woman's travail which, once begun, cannot be stopped or even delayed. But do not fail to grasp firmly the note of purpose and hope in v.27. It is a faint gleam of light in the darkness. It focuses the heart on God who refuses to be deflected from His purposes of grace which will yet, through Judah, bring forth the Messiah, Jesus Christ. But even here the gleam of light is shadowed by the attitude of those who would brazen out their defiance, flaunting it in the face of God (30).

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5:1-9

The corruption of Jerusalem undergoes relentless moral investigation in order that the righteousness of God's judgment might be made plain. Recall the similar investigation of Sodom when God came down to verify the reports He had heard (Gen.18:20-33). In Sodom there were not found ten righteous men, but in Jerusalem God questions whether even one righteous man can be found. The working man and the ruler alike (1, 4-5) have abandoned God even though they are still able to confess formal religion and even accurate theology (2). There is an impenitence and rebellion (3) that have led to a manner of life describable only in terms of the beasts and their instincts. The enormity of their sin is that it has been committed in the context of God's rich blessings (7). God's question in v.9 has only one answer. The people are unteachable and are marked by a total absence of gratitude. It is sobering for our own generation to note the indications in v.8-9 that national affluence had a great deal to do with the moral and spiritual disaster. Riches of all kinds are dangerous to those who would be part of the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:21-27) and it is a wise man who takes to heart the words of Prov. 30: 7-9. There is a tide in the affairs of men, and when it runs full in terms of iniquity there is no escaping the destructive consequences which come first as the natural outcome of people's own attitudes and choices and secondly as the direct moral intervention of the God of judgment. In every level of society our present generation is living with the harvest of the past twenty or thirty years and people do not like it and demand escape from it. It cannot be. The judgments of God are operating throughout society. The time for payment has come.

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5:10-19

God calls up the destroying enemy and yet places them under clear restriction from which they cannot escape. Never imagine that God allows evil unfettered operation in carrying out His holy judgments. This is the mistake that evil powers always make. They imagine themselves autonomous, but they are not, and their judgment will also come. This is how God answers the perplexity of Habakkuk (Hab.1:5-11) and the same truth brings peace to the Psalmist (Ps. 73) on a personal level. The picture in Jeremiah is of barren branches being stripped from the vine and both Isa. 5:1-7 and John 15:1-8 help us to understand the message. In Judah there was a spirit of complacency which simply refused to believe disaster would happen and there were plenty preachers to confirm people in their attitude. These were prophets without the word (13). What a devastating description! But God had a prophet whose words would be like living fire, and he was tender hearted Jeremiah. This is the

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kind of man God chooses to bring stern messages, and only the foolish say that such a man enjoys preaching judgment. Remember Jeremiah was part of the nation being judged; he loved his nation; and he lived through its days of desolation, serving it right to the end. Note the sinister, fear-inspiring description of the enemy to come (16-17). This was to be something new, and quite beyond Judah's capacity to understand and, of course, not knowing the language they would be quite unable to appeal for mercy if the worst came to the worst, which they did not think would really happen. Do people believe God is indifferent to what is going on in the world or do they think He is no longer capable of intervention? It is because of sheer unbelief that people are surprised by God's judgment.

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5:10-19

Individuals and nations are always sorry for themselves when judgment comes, and they are usually voluble in complaint, insisting that if there is a real God He ought to get them out of their difficulty. But this is not salvation nor is it any solution to the human predicament, as was made plain by one of the dying thieves in Lk. 23:39-43. Where there is no recognition of sin there can be neither repentance nor salvation, and this is particularly true concerning the nation. This is the burden of v.19, and it is of great significance when people begin to ask why certain things have come to pass. There is an answer from God, if people will only believe it. But if the spiritual diagnosis is rejected the people remain in darkness and the powers of evil continue to devour all the nation's vitality and capacity. This was no new teaching brought by Jeremiah but simply a restatement of the law of God in Deuteronomy 28:14-20, 33-37, 45-52, 62-67; 29:22-29. It cannot be otherwise in a world founded on principles of moral righteousness (Prov. 14:34; Gal. 6:7-8). On top of all these references it seems too much to mention Romans 1:16-32, but the passage is so contemporary we should know it by heart. It will help us to be realistic and to stand our ground in the confusion of national experience. There is still a further word of hope in Jer. 5:18. God is not yet purposing a final end. Even though the vine's branches are ripped down, a stump is to be left, and from that miserable residue there will come life again. Think of how little faith there was left in Israel when our Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. But there was faith, real faith, ready for God to work.

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5:20-31

The picture is so vivid it scarcely needs comment and the answer to God's question in v.29 is obvious. There comes a time when even people, whose righteousness is always defective, recognise that something has to be done to quell the seemingly uncontrollable forces of social evil. The opening of the passage describes God as the sovereign controller of the forces of creation. Winds, waves and tides may all surge and roar, but they cannot break loose from the bounds set by the mighty Governor. To the Jews the sea seemed to be a source of fear, possibly because they had no cause to be sea-travellers, and they found their comfort in the thought of their God's control over the waves (Ps. 93:1-5; 107:21-31; Job 38:1-11). But if God has set a mere strip of sand as the barrier to the waves (this is an illustrative not a scientific explanation) can He not quite easily remove the barrier and let disaster come? What is more, God contrasts the obedience of the elements of creation with the rebellion and refusal of His people. They are not merely backslidden, they are in open rebellion, and the result is the moral, economic, social and political chaos which blights the whole national life. The blessing of the Lord, which is life and peace, has been withheld (24-25) and inevitably, left to themselves, people make life hell for those too weak to defend themselves (26-28). Ruthless self-interest becomes the motivating force in society with a polarisation of conditions, the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. The orphans are forgotten, justice is corrupt, the prophets and priests can be bought and, most tragic of all, the people settle for that kind of existence as normal. Corruption is accepted as inevitable and the people become spiritless. Is there not a case for judgment (29)?

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6:1-15

The imagery here is all indicative of a comprehensive disaster from which there will be no recovery. The enemy from the north is ferocious (1), their effect will be like flocks of sheep that eat the pasture bare and then pass on (3). Forests will be hewn down and Jerusalem will no longer be safe (1, 6). The whole operation will be like the gleaning of the vines that leaves not a single grape (9). In v.7 there is reference to the mystery of

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iniquity (2 Thess. 2:7) and to the strange persistence of evil in the human heart (Gen. 6:5-6; Jer. 17:9). But remember that this is the operation of iniquity in God's own redeemed people. There was no need for it to be so, because the salvation of the Lord is a total victory in which His people can stand and conquer. The fascination of evil, the blind yielding to it irrespective of the cost in forfeited blessing, and the persistence in evil ways in spite of all gracious counsel are indeed the work of the enemy, Satan himself. We must learn to recognise the presence and activity of the Devil in all the conflict experiences of the people of God. One of the constant manifestations of the influence of the Devil is that God's own people acquire a distaste for, a deafness to and a neglect of the Word of God (10). Reading or listening to the truth of God becomes a weariness and a burden, and this is not an incidental condition as Jesus makes plain in Matt. 13: 10-17. We need to be very careful what we hear, with what attitude we hear, and with what condition of heart we listen to God speaking (Mk. 4:24; Lk. 8:18; Heb. 3:12). It is a matter of life and death, hope and hopelessness, and alienation from God (8).

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6:1-15

In the second half of this passage do not fail to see the loneliness of God and the sorrow of His heart as He views and shares in the sorry plight of His people whom He values more than can ever be expressed. It seems as if the Lord has only Jeremiah to speak to, and the prophet in turn is burdened because there is no one to share the load with him. There are similar words in Ezek. 22:23-31 where no man was found to stand in the gap. The same agony of loneliness is found in Ps. 69:20 which directs our thoughts to Gethsemane and the cry of dereliction from the Cross. There is no limit to the agony of love when it is rejected, and it is love that speaks the words of judgment here. All this Jeremiah shared. He loved his people (not more than God did) and he was part of their life and identity (not more than God was) but at the same time his commitment to God held his heart, and God was angry with sin and with persistent sinners. This is costly evangelism reflected in Christ's sorrowful cry, "I would have gathered you, but you would not," (Lk.13:34). We have the same recognition of a twofold influence of redeeming love in Paul's words in 2 Cor. 2:15-16. The same warm sun that melts butter hardens clay, and we see the principle operating in human experience. The sorrow of God and His prophet is accentuated by the false and superficial optimism of the preaching of so many who offer an easy peace without repentance or faith. But such a covering up of the wound sin makes, whether personal or in the body politic, simply guarantees a continuing festering of the poison, all the more dangerous because out of sight. If the wound refers to the breach between the people and God because of sin, then there is no cure apart from "peace through the blood of the Cross". (Col. 1:20)

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6:16-21

The words of Jesus in Matt. 7:13-14 and 10:28-30 are the best introduction to this gloriously searching appeal by God and they highlight the perversity of unbelief. How can people choose the fruitless labour and frustration of sin in preference to the easy yoke and satisfaction of God? The way of the transgressor is hard labour indeed (Prov.13:15 AV) for the sinner has to keep at it all the time in the hope of achieving pleasure. He dare not stop because the silence of inactivity would confirm him in his desolation of failure. This is one reason why our own generation is such a rat race of activity. In the rush of Israel's chaotic journey to judgment, God commands them to stand or stop at the cross-roads and consider the old and tried ways in which the people once found life and power in God. The time comes when we must stop in our tracks and consider where we stand with God. Then we must consider the ancient paths, the tried and tested ways of true discipleship and faith in obedience to God in His Word. Things are not necessarily good simply because they are new or novel, nor are ways necessarily good simply because they are old and belong to the past. The test of every path is the extent to which it conforms to the Word which God has spoken and to the Christ as He is presented in scriptural and theological terms. There is such a thing as "the historic faith" (Jude 3) in which we must stand, and all the talk about "new insights" must not be allowed to result in people re-writing the Bible and bringing forth a "new" Christianity. Paul has stern words to say on this theme in (Gal. 1:6-9, 11-12). In Jeremiah's time the people refused to return to the path of truth and God spelled out the consequences.

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6:22-30

Read yesterday's verses also to see the two-fold interpretation of the circumstances of evil that overtook the nation and led to its rejection as rejected silver. In v.19 the disaster is described as the fruit of their own devices. It is retribution following inevitably on their own chosen course of action, just as in our day the social diseases are the harvest of immoral living. People make their own beds and have to lie on them. In this kind of harvest principle there is always an increase or multiplication (Hos. 8:7), thirty, sixty or a hundredfold. While the evil crop of sin was coming to harvest, Judah had quite a thriving religious boom (20) but it had nothing of God's word in it. (What has happened to Josiah's revival?) Religious performance is never a substitute for moral obedience. Then God indicates the second element of interpretation which is simply divine intervention (21) and when this comes people are often incapable of understanding why this should happen to them. There are none so blind as those who refuse to see, and sin paralyses both the capacity and desire for sight (John 3:19). Sin also prevents individuals and nations being aware of the ultimate fruit of their chosen way which is portrayed in today's verses not merely in terms of invasion and loss of national sovereignty but in terms of spiritual rejection. In v.30 Judah is likened to rejected silver on which no competent valuer is prepared to put a hallmark. It is silver with no yield, no value, no use. It is cast away, disqualified, rejected (1 Cor. 9:27), having no further use (cf. Matt. 5:13).

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7:1-7

The section we now begin has a twofold emphasis. Chapter 7:1-8:3 centres on the Temple and chapter 8:4-10:25 centres on the Law. These two aspects of the nation's life were in the forefront of Josiah's reign and Jeremiah takes up the double theme of religious profession and moral conduct, insisting that these two cannot be separated. Chapter 26 seems to be a shorter version of this same sermon (or a very similar one) and the date given there (26:1) is the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, that is, after twelve years of religious reformation led by King Josiah. But a clear picture of that religious awakening is given in 2 Kings 22:3-5, 8-13, 16-20; 23:1-3, 21-23, 26-28. Now consider Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon" which, according to chap. 26, brought him the abiding enmity of the establishment. The Temple was repaired, rededicated, with crowds of people flocking enthusiastically to the services, all feeling that the world had taken a turn for the better. They were confronted by the prophet preaching from the steps of the building these searching words. They could not miss the message. Their religious enthusiasm was being denounced as fraudulent (and these were the people who had contributed to the Temple renovation fund). But they were also a people who trusted in the Temple rather than in the God of the Temple. Their attitude was that so long as the Temple stood and its ceremonies operated, then the nation was safe from all its foes. It is all very modern; religion without faith or morals; and it is worthless. Indeed it is dangerous because it breeds false confidence and tends to lead to blasphemy. It makes clear that faith that does not lead to reformation and purity of life is not faith at all.

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7:8-15

It is so easy to speak religious words, perform religious acts, and to feel in consequence that we must be rather holy and spiritual people. But God is not impressed. God, who looks on the heart, sees that the people's prayers and praises are in the category of vain repetitions (7:3-4; cf. Micah 3:11) and He rejects them in their religion as He did in Isaiah's days (Isa. 1:10-20) more than a hundred years previously. It seems certain that the people of Judah recalled God's deliverance of Jerusalem then and assumed that, of course, God would do it again. After all, they were His people and the city and the Temple were holy. God's mercy is glorious and undeserved, yet it is spoken of here as conditional (7:3, 5-7). Consider well the charge in v.8ff. Religious observance had become a drug that inoculated the people against the possibility of real dealings with God. Religion had become the substitute for faith and obedience. The people lived carnally as they felt inclined and then came to church "to make up for it", and in so doing made the House of God a hiding-place, and a sop for the conscience in between crimes. It is like people who say their prayers in the morning and then feel they are "safe" (saved?) to do what they please throughout the day. God speaks very plainly about the whole matter in v.11-15 (cf. Ps.78:52-61; 1 Sam. 1:3; 4:10-13, 21-22). There is no substitute for being honest with God. God says that He is watching (11).

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7:16-23

Religious ritual that does not engage the heart in love to God and the life in obedience to God's law is essentially pagan. It is also progressively anti-God and degenerates to a base physical level. The queen of heaven (18) is Ishtar, the heathen goddess of fertility and war, and whenever you find an obsession with sex and brutality you can be sure there is a situation of virtually irremediable spiritual apostasy. Note how whole families are indoctrinated into this way of life and pursue it with a blindness that leads only to confusion. God makes it clear in v.19 that He is not provoked into wrong reaction nor is He in any way deflected from His purpose nor His peace by this brazen carnality which is categorised as being quite deliberate. At the end of v.18 there is indication of a spirit of sheer defiance by people with a spiritual heritage who know exactly what they are doing. They are asserting their independence of God. They wish to be their own masters. Their choice has been made and whether they know it or not they are going to be held to that choice. This is how we must come to v.16, spoken to the prophet, and possibly communicated to the people. This is not the only occasion on which such startling words were spoken to God's prophet: cf. 11: 14; 14:11; 15:1. Consider Samuel's experience in 1 Sam. 12:23 and 1 Sam. 16:1. See also Zech. 7:11-13; Isa. 1:15. This is a different matter from that expressed in such verses as Ps. 66:16-20; Matt. 5:23-24; and Micah 6:6-8, where the theme is that of the hindrance of our prayers by those things which ought not to be in our lives (1 Pet. 3:7). God's word to Jeremiah indicates that there are people and situations that have passed beyond the boundary where prayer is effective on their behalf (1 John 5:16). We must not be quick to pronounce a verdict on situations which seem intractable, for it may be that God is urging us on in believing prayer because His purpose is to bless. But on the other hand we may not easily pronounce assurance of blessing because God's judgment may be already in operation. Prayer must be in the will of God. He cannot and will not bless that which has gone beyond His grace.

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7:24-34

The promise and possibility which introduce this passage (v.23) are reminiscent of 2 Cor. 6:15-7:1. But this simply serves to highlight the appalling unbelief and perversity of v.23-24, which theme was taken up by Stephen in his great review of the spiritual history of the Jews in Acts 7:1-3, 36-43, 51-53. It is a terrible indictment and a solemn warning to the effect that if God's people do not go forward they go backward, there is no standing still (v.24; cf. Heb. 10:35-39). Resisting the gracious pleadings, warnings and influences of the Holy Spirit can lead only to desolation, and one of the signs of this happening is the indifference of the people in respect of the ministry of God-given and God-blessed prophets (27). The preaching of the Word and the praising of God's name which should be such a means of grace and salvation to city and nation become an instrument of judgment. This is why we must pray for the preaching of the Word both before and after the actual preaching, so that hearts having been prepared might receive the Word in faith. There will be preaching, true biblical preaching carrying the unction of the Holy Ghost in many places every Sunday that will bring no profit at all to those who hear (Heb. 4: 1-2). Consider carefully the national diagnosis in v.28 and the issue of that situation in v.34, a picture of total joylessness. This is what people would have been left with but for the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ who came that we might have life and joy both now and forever.

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8:1-13

The first three verses which belong to the end of the previous chapter portray the ultimate insult of evil to dishonour the people of God in their backsliding. Even the tombs are violated as if the powers of the enemy seek to heap contempt on the past as well as the present. The picture is not so much that of the leering triumph of evil as the shame of the conquered, their abject misery displayed before the false gods they worshipped and by whom they are now cast off. This treatment of the graves seems to have been an accepted action on the part of the mightier power, as is seen in Josiah's actions in 2 Kings 23:15-17. In v.3 we have the ultimate depression indicated in 7:34. This is all there is left to those who turn from God to follow the Devil. The evil one, who is a liar from the beginning, has nothing to give. We are taught this by Scripture and it is confirmed by experience and by the testimony of others, yet like fools we persist in going the wrong way, pressing on and on even when things are getting manifestly worse, rather than return to God. This is the burden of v.4-7 which describe a natural or instinctive desire to take action to remedy mistakes. God says it not so with His people. Their hearts and lives are sore and sick and will always be so until they seek after their God, for whom they were made and

redeemed. But they will not do so. Part of the reason is that the teachers of the people have corrupted the Word of God (8), rewriting it and breeding a false sense of spiritual security, focusing the minds of the people on the Temple and religion rather than on God and obedience. This is indeed contemporary.

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8:14-22

Instead of the peace promised so easily by the false prophets, the people find themselves in the horror of war and invasion with all its accompanying terror. There seems to be some sense of regret in v.14-15 but nothing to make us believe the people are repentant. They do not think in such categories any more. Beginning in v.18 the prophet reflects the sore anguish of the heart of God, which anguish mounts up as he views the increasing grief of the people in their predicament. In v.19 God is aware that the questions of His people are implying culpability on His part. They are blaming Him for His inactivity. But He answers with His own questions, indicating that it is their sins which have driven Him away. The harvest seasons were passing and there was still no sign of deliverance (20). There was indeed a bleak winter of discontent ahead of them. But think of that verse (20) in terms of the passing stages and seasons of life, with the end drawing near and still no knowledge of God's salvation. What opportunities of grace people miss by sheer neglect. Gilead was famous for its balm or balsam with its healing properties for bodily ills. The question is posed, if God has provided for the cure of some ills, why is there no cure for the greater spiritual affliction that has smitten His people. There is a balm of healing and it is nothing less than the glory of God come down to men. The last verse of the passage has passed into religious vocabulary in a wonderful way that points to the Cross. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. The sore wounds of Jesus have healing power (Isa. 53:4-5), but it is recorded that when He came, His own received Him not.

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9:1-2

Right from 8:18 Jeremiah has been reflecting the grief of God Himself concerning the self-inflicted predicament of the nation. But whereas the suffering love of God (He has much experience of it) is able to look beyond the immediate distress to the ultimate issue, the prophet tends to be quite overwhelmed because he sees that the nation mourns its misfortunes but not its sins. His distress is wonderfully expressed in v.1, but there is an element of bitterness and personal reaction in it because the man wants to run away from it all. The whole situation seemed so intractable, so utterly devoid of hope, and so deliberately perverse and indifferent to every appeal of grace and wisdom that Jeremiah felt utterly desolate. He was shattered, as David was in Psalm 55:1-14. Hellish behaviour from rank unbelievers is to be expected, and in measure is easily coped with. But the wounds in the heart of the prophet and God were the wounds of friends. Little wonder the man sees the attractiveness of contracting out of this agony of disappointment to be alone with his God. Disappointment and the agony of unrequited love can paralyse as well as desolate and lead to this spirit of sorrowful resignation. We must guard against such poignancy of feeling lest it do harm psychologically as well as spiritually. God does not contract out of the situation, even though He is alienated from His people and His sorrow is not less than ours. We must not therefore be "godlier" than God. He keeps on loving in spite of all, and since we have been recipients of that sorrowing love (Rom. 5:6-8) we must show it to others. That is why true godliness will always be found near the hurt people of this grim and broken world.

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9:3-9

The spiritual health of a nation is declared clearly by the manner and content of its speech, not only in the general ruthlessness, corruption and lack of honour, but also in the virulence of speech against the prophets of God, a theme we shall find much about in the next chapters. But here, the main thrust seems to concern the corruption of society and the inevitable progression of sin. In v.3 (RSV), "They proceed from evil to evil they do not know Meand they refuse to know Me (cf.6) says the Lord." In spite of their name "Israel", which means prince with God (Gen. 32:28), they insist on living the life of the unregenerate, giving way to the natural propensities of their hearts which can lead them only away from God, and under His judgments. What else can God do? (7) It is the cry of Jesus in the gospels (Matt. 23:37- 38). It is indeed a moment of deep grief as the privileges of centuries give way to generations of judgment. The situations we are reading of here, spiritual, national, moral, psychological, economic and international, are not to be remedied in a matter of a few

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weeks. It is superficial thinking and certainly spiritually false to think of easy repentance and to give expression to casual confidence in God's goodness (Hos. 6:1-3). Sin affects the bloodstream of the nation and it can be a long process, even within the marvellous forgiveness of God, to purge out the evil virus and reinstate health. We need to remember this both in practical daily living and in the work of intercessory prayer.

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9:10-22

Since God is good and cannot ever be complicit with that which is bad; since He is righteous and must always stand over against that which is evil and corrupt; and since God is love and will not stand by and let His people destroy themselves for ever, He must judge and this picture of absolute desolation is inevitable. It is a first principle of the good news of the gospel that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold down the truth in the interest of unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). We dare not dismiss the comforting concept of the inviolable righteousness of God which is our shelter in the crises of experience (Gen. 18:25). The prophet sees the desolation that must surely come and he interprets and explains it in stark terms: "Because they have forsaken my law have not obeyedhave stubbornly followed their own heartsand gone after the Baals as their fathers taught them (what a charge!) therefore.... " (13-14 RSV). Note the solemnising connection between following their own hearts and going after Baal. Sin and spiritual defection are not nearly such simple things as people tend to assume. There is a basic link between the two which is portrayed rather frighteningly in the New Testament in such passages as 1 Cor. 10:18-21; Gal. 4:8-9; Eph. 2:2-3; Col. 1:13; 2:2, 9; 1 John 2:15-17. Evil is not a thing to be tampered with and moral evil can all too easily pass over into "spiritual" evil. God Himself is the only safety of His people, but if they will not have Him there is only the Devil left. Note how the judgment described here is not accidental nor merely circumstantial. It is the direct moral action of God.

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9:23-26

The first two verses declare that the most momentous thing in life is that a man should be right with God, the God who gives His personal testimony in v.24. Wisdom, might and riches are false securities because, no matter how extensive they are, they are still limited and temporary and tend to corrupt man by self-absorption. The truly wise man, far from being arrogant will always be supremely aware of how little he really knows, and that what he does know he knows only in part (1 Cor. 1:20- 21; 13:12). The mighty man, if he is wise, will recognise that he has no power except what has been given him for the purpose of God (1 Kings 20:11; Ps. 49:6-8; John 19:11; Ps. 62:11AV). The rich man will never have any peace of heart unless he can be detached from his wealth and see it supremely as a trust from God (Lk. 12:15-21). Paul's word to the proud Corinthians states the case with devastating simplicity in 1 Cor. 4:7. The only thing we can truly claim as our own is our sin, and our only individual personal achievements are our failures. All else that is worthy and fruitful is the work of God's grace. To recognise this is a wonderful release of spirit and fixes the heart upon God which is relief indeed after the monotonous repetition of man ... man ... man ... in v.23. Read Prov. 3:1-26 and Psalm 37:1-11, 23-25, 35-40. That is truth enough for one day.

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9:23-26

The description of the Lord Himself is given in wonderful terms concerning His activity. Loving kindness is the love which bends down to reach those who lack and to lift those who have fallen. It is limitless in patience, strengthens the weak and restores hope to the hopeless and communicates power to those who are in need of any kind. Consider the loving heart of God as expressed in Hosea 11:1-9; 12:4. God's practical habit is kindness, and it is also justice, that is, continuing administration of truth and security in all the affairs of His people. When we believe this, our attitude to the vicissitudes of life will be as described in 1 Pet. 2:23-25. How little do we in fact reckon on having such a great guardian of our souls. Then righteousness, which is found absolutely only in God, is straightness, without perversity or corruption. This is the God in and with whom there is never shadow of change (Jas. 1:17). Such a God can be trusted even in total darkness. He is altogether dependable. His righteousness defies all influences of destruction and to be allied to that righteousness (justified by faith, Rom. 3:20-26) is salvation indeed. This active God is all-wise, all-mighty and all-sufficient. He is El-Shaddai, the "enough" God. He knows us through and through and is consequently able to bear with us in

loving kindness. Because of His strength He is meek and gentle. He is all-sufficient, never failing and to know Him is life eternal John (17:3).

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9:23-26

The closing two verses declare that God will judge both Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, not according to an outward conformity to religion, but according to the heart (Rom. 2:25-29). The word here makes plain that religious rites and observances in themselves signify little, for even the Egyptians practised circumcision. The other nations named were blood brothers of Judah and also circumcised, yet Judah held them in contempt as being not in any sense God's people. But God gathers them all under the same condemnation, linking them with the desert people whose particular religious "badge" was the shaving of their hair at the temples, a practice forbidden to the Jews in Lev. 19:27 because it signified dedication to an idol. What God is saying is that all religious "marks" ranging from profound sacramental signs to mere lapel "stickers" are without significance apart from the inward consecration of the heart which is confirmed by obedience of life. It is the heart that matters, but of course, in days of decline of spiritual vitality and the lapse of moral standards, outward observance tends to be regarded as 'more and more important. Outward signs without the corresponding inner grace are no guarantee of fellowship with God (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15). It is the obedience of love that confirms faith and fellowship.

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10:1-5

When idolatry is not eradicated from individuals and nations it simply grows again, and this is what happened in Judah even after Josiah's revival. It is futile to cover up evil; it must be rooted out, and this is the explanation of much of the radical and apparently ruthless extermination of evil people and systems in the Old Testament. We see a spiritual message expressed in human and territorial terms cf. Num. 33:50-56. It is in this context that Jeremiah contrasts the idols of the heathen, which had such a fascination for the Jews, with the God of Israel who was in the process of being rejected. It was an age of superstition not faith, and when this is so people begin to make gods out of their own imagination. Even when people lose their consciousness of God they do not lose their sense of need of God and the making of idols is the result of that lost consciousness, not the cause of it. People in their proud rebellion may abandon God, but they have then to exercise all their dexterity in an attempt: to fill the "god shaped blank" (Eccles. 3:11 RSV) left in their hearts and lives. Man-made gods are likened to scarecrows set up in a garden to frighten away the "birds of the air" and Jeremiah scorns their impotence and incompetence. They can do nothing, although v.2 indicates that they do in fact bring an element of dismay even to their devotees. This is not surprising for while people may invoke "inferior deities", often understanding little of what they are doing, they certainly cannot control these "deities" once they are active. Those who begin to manipulate the "powers" of idolatry end up being manipulated. This is Paul's solemn word on the matter in 1 Cor. 8:4-7; 10:14-21.

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10:6-16

The folly of Israel turning to the gods of the nations is highlighted by this marvellous description of God. But before considering this, recall the persistence in Israel of this virulent unbelief right from the start (Ex. 32:1, 4, 8, 21-23; Acts 7:40-43). This was no new thing, but simply the evil heart of unbelief that leads men and nations away from God into bondage and brokenness (Heb. 3:12). Jeremiah draws the contrast between the inert, dumb idols that do nothing for men and have to be carried about as a burden (and an expensive one), and the living God who carries men, and who by the dynamic of His gracious power subdues the rebellion of sin in the human heart. Read, and let your heart be assured by the words of Isaiah 40:18-31 and Micah 7:18-20. The ultimate negativeness of false gods, expressed in v.11, serves to highlight the declaration of God's eternal power and divinity in v.10, 12. In v.16 there seems to be the two-fold affirmation that God is the portion of His chosen people and that the people are in turn God's portion. God gets us and we get Him. What a transaction! What a gospel: 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Eph. 1:18-19; Ps. 16:5; 73:23-26; Deut. 32: 9. It is by such thoughts as these that we begin to worship, which is simply to give love, homage and service to the One you value beyond price. Where your treasure is your heart will also be and you will certainly find time for this kind of fellowship in which mingled strength and tenderness make the heart both joyful and hopeful (Deut. 33:26-29).

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10:17-25

The picture is one we have become accustomed to on our TV screens. Crowds of panic-stricken refugees with their pathetic bundles of possessions stream along the roads. The whole experience is described in v.18 as being catapulted into exile, and in v.21 as a flock scattered because of the criminal neglect by the shepherds. There is a lament from the people in v.19-20 but it seems to be more resignation of a fatalistic kind than an acceptance of being under the mighty hand of God. In this situation Jeremiah becomes the intercessor for his people, pleading their cause in the presence of God. There is wonderful confession of limitation in v.23, for man can neither understand nor direct his own ways. All our hopes and expectations must constantly be submitted to the all-wise God whose ways are higher, better, richer and surer than our own. When we believe this we can trust God even in the dark (Prov. 16:9; 19:21; Ps. 37:23; Job 23:1-10). This gracious trustworthiness of God is the basis of the petition in v.24 where Jeremiah commits himself and his people into God's good hand and not simply into the furnace of affliction and the fierce pressure of circumstances (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11-13; 2 Sam. 24:10-14). In the hand of God, however sore at the time, there is hope in respect of the future because His wounds are for the healing of the people (Job 5:18). It is not for nothing that the Psalmist puts his times into God's hands (Ps. 31:15). At the same time Jeremiah looks further ahead and discerns more deeply the significance of events for he asks finally for the vindication of God's own people and for retribution on the manifest iniquity of that pagan nation that is presently being used, under God, for the chastisement of His people.

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11:1-5

It is always good for the people of God to be reminded that they are not their own, they are bought with a price, and consequently have no entitlement to live as they choose, imagining themselves to be totally free and independent people (1 Cor. 6:19-20). This is the word Jeremiah is given to declare to Judah, reminding them that apart from the gracious and active mercy of God they would never have been a people at all (1 Pet. 2:10), and warning them that if they continued to refuse obedience they would cease to be a people. They are left in no doubt that God's desire is to bless them (4b-5) and this is why they are challenged to depart from their sins and return to the life of obedience within the covenant of God's grace and promise (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). The call to obedience usually sounds stern and is indeed serious, but the cost of faithfulness must always be set in the context of having been delivered by God's grace from the "iron furnace" of Egypt. Most of us tend to forget just how miserable life and experience were before we were converted, and we need to ask ourselves if we really want to go back to that kind of worldly bondage. The call to obedience comes from the God who has done great things for His people (Deut. 4:20; 5:1-6). Jeremiah is commanded to remind them of these things and to bring them once again under the gracious influence of the Word of God so recently re-discovered, five years after Jeremiah's own call to the ministry (2 Kings 23:1-3; 2 Chron. 34:29-32).

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11:6-8

Jeremiah was not given a new message from God but was simply called to go through the nation expounding the Book of Deuteronomy. In some ways there was an open door of opportunity, because king Josiah was busy carrying out his campaign against established idolatry (2 Kings 23:4-15). But all was not quite so hopeful as it seemed and, if we are to cope with Christian service in a day of apostasy we need to be reminded, as we are here, that there is a strange and powerful persistence about sin and sinners. When evil is challenged face to face and confounded, it often withdraws, seemingly accepting defeat, just as the Devil left Jesus after the Temptation in the wilderness (Lk. 4:13). But it is unwise to assume that the defeated foe will not return again. He will! And he will come with the age-old temptations to doubt God's word, to be suspicious of God's intention of blessing, and to walk the way of disobedience (Gen. 3:1-5). The Devil is always the same and it is a testimony to the stupidity of human nature that we are taken in again and again. This is the story of the Jews in the Old Testament. They simply refused to learn that disobedience means disaster (1 Cor. 10:1-14). Read the devastating portrayal of Israel's folly in Judges 2:1-23 and do not fail to notice the residual problem of sin and unbelief. There is glorious forgiveness with God but people must still live with the fruit of their doings. This is

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a solemn lesson for each succeeding generation. Our present obedience or lack of it will, to a great extent, determine whether or not the next generation will grow up knowing the Lord or in ignorance of Him.

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11.9-17

In a day of reformation and change, when the Word of the Lord is once again being reinstated in the life of the nation, mere spiritual conformity is neither significant nor effective. It is not the same as the obedience of faith (Rom. 2:13; Jas. 1:21-22; Lk. 6:46; Matt. 7:21). It is obedience God calls for, not merely sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22) and God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Because this is so the Lord indicates to Jeremiah that there is a revolt or a conspiracy among the people of Judah (9). It is something quite deliberate and calculated and therefore inexcusable. They seem to have come to the secret decision among themselves to conform to Josiah's reformed attitude so long as the king was putting on pressure and general opinion was fairly enthusiastic. But, as soon as they felt it was safe, they were determined to go back to their old ways. It is both alarming and solemnising to think that while the tide of religious revival was apparently flowing strongly there was already operating secretly a movement away from God. The truth of the matter was that the people preferred any god rather than the God of their salvation. Such was the corruption and confusion that only judgment could purify the nation from the essence of all the shame they had brought on themselves (13). There is a climax of guilt which admits of no further intercessory prayer (1 Sam. 16:1; 1 John 6:16; Jer. 15:1). It is right that we should ask God to raise up a praying generation within the church but there is a time when prayer is too late to change the course of events, and we must see to it that we are in agreement with God in His acts of judgment as well as His acts of mercy and salvation. But note in v.15 Judah is still spoken of as God's beloved. His love never changes, but the loved one must leave the father's home because of the enormity of sin. It is indeed a sad day for the God of love.

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11:18-23

The plot against Jeremiah's life was in Anathoth, a town of prominence as a shrine from the time of David and Solomon, and it took Jeremiah by surprise. We know in theory at least that a prophet is not without honour except in his own territory, and we know also, as Jesus declared, that a man's foes will be those of his own house (Matt 10:36). But when the reality forces itself into our experience and we sense the bitterness of evil and its total lack of mercy, it is quite frightening. Note that it was Jeremiah's preaching that kindled the hatred of the men of Anathoth and their one desire was, by threats, to silence the Word of the Lord. This is often the experience of the prophets, but the general emphasis here is on the revelation the passage gives of the inmost feelings of the preacher's heart. Jeremiah was indeed a man of like passions as we are, experiencing as we do, doubts, fears, hurts, loneliness and desolation. But he is not alone, nor will God forsake him or allow evil unfettered sway over him. Jeremiah has still work to do and God's promise in chap.1:8 still stands even when the prophet's ministry results in resentment rather than repentance. It is precipitate to condemn Jeremiah for his apparent desire for vengeance and to explain it as natural reaction to such bitter persecution by his own townsmen. We must note two points. First, Jeremiah commits his cause to God (20: cf. 1 Pet. 4:12-19). Second, God consents to the prophet's plea for righteous intervention (Rom. 12:19).

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11:18-23

People's reactions to powerful spiritual ministry and the explanation of such reaction can have a long and complicated history. This was certainly the case in Anathoth, as is made clear in the following quotation from the I.V.F. Commentary. It should make us hesitate before making claims for our spiritual objectivity because we are all creatures of emotion and reaction. "Anathoth was the home settlement of the priestly house of Abiathar, close friend of David (1 Sam. 22:20-23), deposed by Solomon in favour of the younger rival house of Zadok (1 Kings 2:26, 27, 35), who from that time exercised priestly dominance in Jerusalem. Here then were all the elements essential to bitterness. Wrath is incurred in a village such as Anathoth whenever a son or kinsman departs from local sentiment, especially when it favours or appears to favour the opposite side. Thus when Jeremiah, bred of the Anathoth priesthood, supported, as a prophet, the deposition of all village sanctuaries (as for a time he almost surely did; (cf. 2 Kings 23:8), he inferentially willed the suppression of that shrine at Anathoth. It was a deadly hurt. Abiathar had borne priestly rank and privilege before the birth of Zadok! Love

can turn to hate, given adequate provocation. How bitter that hate was against Jeremiah can be inferred from the appeal he made to Yahweh's tribunal." We all tend to have very clear cut, and sometimes dried up, ideas about what God is doing, going to do, and how He is going to do it, and these ideas may well be more conditioned by our personal history in the past than our present spiritual perception. We need good spiritual hearing to listen to what God the Lord is saying, and we must guard against adopting attitudes that are more reaction than persuasion. Some people are in a morass in their spiritual lives because of reactions to reactions. This is psychological as well as spiritual confusion.

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12:1-6

This is one of a number of passages in Jeremiah that reveal in a very personal way the man's inner feelings and give us much indication as to how we should manage our personal life of devotion. No matter what is burdening the heart we should take it to the Lord in prayer and speak it out to Him in utter honesty. This is much more spiritual than bottling it all up inside us and we must never allow the Devil to make us feel that it is not "spiritual" to have doubts and unresolved conflicts about the life of faith and obedience. God knows our frailty and limitations as well as our potential (Ps. 103:13-14) and He is kind (Isa. 42:3). The prophet questions God about the prosperity and seeming impunity of the wicked and how this can be reconciled with the justice, sovereignty and victory of God. Jeremiah is deeply hurt, as well as perplexed, because these evil men he speaks of have the name of God often on their lips and yet they work against God and His prophet. The answer to his bafflement we can find in such scriptures as Psalm 73, but we must not feel superior to Jeremiah nor criticise him for seeming to be too sure of his own integrity (3). Remember the man's timidity and sensitivity and if you have been spared the pain of the fierce barbs of scornful criticism, be thankful to God. But remember also the assurances God gave Jeremiah in 1:5-10, 17-19. God never goes back on His word! God will never be deflected from His purposes of grace by our questionings, rational or emotional.

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12:1-6

When our feelings are dominated by hard thoughts about God's providences and dispositions the thing to do is, with the mind, to justify God before going any further. God is righteous. Never forget it! Remember also that the kingdom of evil is set against God and His Christ and operates through people. This will help us to keep from giving way to bitter anger with people because we recognise that the issue is greater than mere human conflict (Eph. 6:10ff). But note here that God does not answer Jeremiah's complaints and questions but rather urges him on to greater service in the future, indicating that fiercer battles are yet to come. It is almost as if God is saying to His servant, "Where is your faith?" It is too early for Jeremiah to be disheartened and what he considers to be major catastrophe God likens to "a little local difficulty". It may have been that Jeremiah (like Elijah on Mount Carmel) had expected too much immediate "success". It may have been that the man was too hurt, being taken unawares by the venom of even his own family and friends (Ps. 69:1-14, 19-21; Ps. 41:5-9; John 1:11; 7:5; cf. Matt. 10:35-36). But God has big plans for this man and extensive service waiting him, service far more significant in dark days to come than his present ministry in the time of Josiah. Crisis days were coming, full of darkness, and God's man had to be ready to face them, not preoccupied with thoughts of early retirement. So far he had raced with fellow athletes but soon he must compete with swift horses, and with the wild lions of the jungle of Jordan. God had chosen His man; was prepared to have confidence in him; and urged him not to listen to the plausible lies of unbelief but to trust his God for all that was yet to come. This is a deep lesson. The victories of present battles prepare us for the next stages of spiritual warfare.

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12:7-17

Commentators seem agreed that this passage should be dated in the reign of Jehoiakim, the second king mentioned in 1:3, when the nation had progressed further along the road to final ruin and captivity. The comment on him and his reign in 2 Kings 23:36-24:4 is brief and to the point. The nation was already floundering under pathetic and unstable leadership and the hand of the Lord was against them, although they refused to believe that it was God who was working their downfall. People will believe every explanation: chance, bad luck, international imbalance, anything rather than see God's hand in their misfortunes. But God is clear in His speech with regard to the value He places on His chosen people. He has loved them with an

everlasting love but, as in Jeremiah's experience, His very own have turned against Him. God is equally clear about what is happening to this people who roar defiance like a young lion and who are finding themselves victims of united enmity, just as a bird of different plumage finds the other birds uniting against her. The precious heritage of the Lord has been destroyed first from the inside by its own false shepherds, and in its careless indifference it is now invaded by marauding bandits. The sword of the Lord, once wielded in Judah's defence, is now the sword of judgment (12-13). Our trouble when we read our newspapers and watch news items on T.V. is that we fail totally to discern the sword of the Lord. Do we not believe that the judgments of the Lord are operating right across the face of the earth?

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12:7-17

The closing verses (14-17) are so astonishing we must study them again. The "wicked neighbours" are the surrounding tribes which harassed Judah and were instrumental in bringing about her downfall. They also, Syrian, Moabite and Ammonite aggressors, will be punished for their iniquity, for God is no respecter of persons, and they will be brought into subjection to the common foe, Babylon. But the picture of judgment is lightened by the light of God's grace, for God already looks beyond the time of judgment to the possibility of restoration. Judah is to be plucked out of the tyranny of the nations who have plundered her and the remnant of faith will be restored. The nations also will be restored and, if they will learn from Judah to acknowledge the Lord, then they will be made partakers of all the blessings of Israel. If not, they will perish. It is here that we begin to catch sight of the missionary call of Israel, set to be a light to the Gentiles, cf. Isa. 2: 2-5; Ezek. 36:16-23ff. But it is only when the Lord is sanctified in His own people that the outreach of evangelism to the uttermost part of the earth is accomplished. A holy church will not be inhibited in its missionary labours by the powers of this world. Think of our Lord's great prayer of consecration in John 17:13-20. We often say that our sinful wandering does us no harm. Even if that were true, and God does restore the barren years (Joel 2:25), the fact remains that our being adrift from God, unusable because of our sins, harms those who sit in darkness and whose only view of the Gospel is what they see (or fail to see) in us. Our Gospel can be hid (2 Cor. 4:3-4 AV.).

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13:1-11

This is the first of five warnings in this one chapter, the exact historical circumstances of which are obscure. The general background is that of the inevitability of exile, and the staggering impact of that can be understood if we try to imagine our own land over-run by invaders, which thing our people believe will never happen. The Jews felt the same, but it did happen, and it was given to the sensitive prophet Jeremiah to preach such a solemn, unacceptable message and he was often a lone voice in the nation. The message of Jeremiah here is given in the form of an acted parable and there is considerable debate as to the precise significance of the various details. There seems no reason to doubt that the linen waist-cloth is to be understood literally, together with the various things done to it. But a journey to the Euphrates (Perath) would have involved two hundred miles each way and would have taken the prophet away for a long time from his spiritual ministry. Some say the reference in v.4 is to the place Ephratha (Bethlehem) only a few miles from Jerusalem. Bypassing the details we have the explanation plain and clear in v.11. The loincloth was the garment worn next the skin and fastened most securely. In the parable it is never washed (1); it is hidden, covered, left for many days and finally dug up (7), exposed as having been spoiled and become worthless. The words "completely useless" (7, 10) remind us of Jesus' words concerning salt that has lost its savour (Matt. 5:13). The whole house of Israel and Judah had been bound to the Lord in a most intimate way for a personal possession, a garment of glory and with a destiny of service. But all God's hopes had been marred and soiled by the pride and disobedience of His people.

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13:12-14

People can wilfully misunderstand the plainest words a preacher can speak and this happened here. When Jeremiah spoke of all the bottles (wineskins) being filled with wine, they jested with him, suggesting it would be a good thing if the water jars were so transformed. But the wine was the wine of God's wrath which they would drink. "The people looked complacently for prosperity and joy, symbolised by the full wine jar, but the imagery of the wine jar rather is made to bear the warning that just as strong drink confuses a man's walk and

thought, so will Yahweh's judgment. He will fill the men of Judah with drunkenness and they shall dash against each other and be destroyed. Drunkenness is the dethronement of the alert mind essential to decision in an hour of crisis. The inhabitants of Jerusalem will have neither wits nor strength to defend themselves or to know friend from foe." (IVF Commentary) What a picture of confusion! cf. Isaiah 29:8-10; Ps. 60.3; 75:7-8. When the cup is full it must be drunk.

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13:15-17

These short messages of are very vivid and the prophet pleads with the people to subdue their pride and to listen to God's counsel. The picture here is of travellers in the hills when the road is getting darker, rougher, steeper and more twisting. Time is running out and the possibility of a safe arrival is becoming more and more remote. The day is far spent and the night is at hand. It is a cold and hopeless prospect so different from the glory of the Gospel which speaks of the night being far spent and the day at hand (Rom. 13:12). Imagine in v.16 a desperate traveller struggling on in the pitch dark straining to keep his eye on a pinpoint of light that marks his way of hope and safety. Think of his warning reaction if the light goes out and he is left with nothing. In this kind of spiritual situation the words of Ps. 23 take on a new meaning. Think of Jesus' words in John 11:9-10; 12:35-36. To walk with God in the peace and perfection of His will is indeed to walk in the light, to have fellowship with Him, and to have the light of life (1 John 1:5-7; John 1:4). The solemn thing about backsliding and being adrift from God is that everything becomes so dark you do not even realise you are in the dark. It is in His light that we see light (Ps. 36:9). If we want to know how God feels about His flock being taken captive, read Luke 15:1-7, remembering that the remainder of that chapter concerns the Father of the prodigal son. A true prophet, Jeremiah shares the tenderness of God's heart concerning the broken people. This is the only kind of man who can safely preach judgment.

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13:18-27

This fourth warning centres on King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah or Coniah), whose story is recorded in 2 Kings 24:8-16; 25:27-30, and to whom Jeremiah makes reference in various places in his prophecy. The fact of the young king being appointed by Nebuchadnezzar and left in charge when the Babylonians departed may have aroused a spirit of hopefulness, perhaps even confidence, among the Jews but it was to be short lived, for after three months Nebuchadnezzar returned and deposed the monarch and his mother, who both seemed rather proud of their position. They were to be humbled; even the cities of the south (19 Negev) furthest from the invaders' land would be taken, and even if the king had been as the very signet ring on the Lord's hand he would be torn off and cast away (Jer. 22:24ff). There is a terrible blindness about sin, personal and national, which at the slightest easing of the situation causes people to believe that the worst will not happen after all. But in v.20-21 the people are reminded not only of what they have lost (the flock is taken) but also that the very people whose favour they had cultivated had turned on them and become their taskmasters. They had devoted their energies to association with Babylon rather than God and now Babylon was their rod of chastisement. The very people on whom they had lavished their favours in God-forgetfulness would have no mercy on them. They would take what they wanted and, like all ruthless, immoral lovers, would cast their one-time mistress aside.

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13:18-27

True to human nature, the people felt themselves hard done by, receiving unjust treatment from God, and they asked why their lot should be so hard. Having asked the question they got their answer in very plain terms (22). They were told (23) that sin, whether crude or cultured, can become so habitual that possibility of change becomes impossible. "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." It is a solemn but practical lesson that must make us consider what we are in fact becoming as a result of the repeated choices we make and the attitudes we adopt. Tomorrow may well be already determined by the choices and decisions of today. This is the urgency behind the exhortation, "Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts," (Heb. 3:7-10, 12-13). Remember that the world we live in is not in any sense neutral (1 John 5:19) and our human nature is not neutral, for it is fallen, biased away from God (17:9), and we are ever in bondage to and in danger from what we are. That is why it is taking a hideous risk to sit lightly to or to depart from the God of our salvation. That is to go into hopelessness. Remember that there is

a spirit and person of evil who is constantly at war with us, seeking to deny us our inheritance in God's salvation. Left to ourselves, the present and the future are desolate and destructive simply because of the facts of the situation (Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21; 2:8; Gal. 4:3, 8-9). We cannot consider these references too often; we need their realism, not least to be persuaded that in the strong providence of God the sins of the nations find them out sooner or later. Apart from God the craving for the forbidden (27) becomes a merciless and inescapable judgment. This is Hell on earth.

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14:1-9

When famine comes, no section of the people escapes the blight (1-7) and if people have eyes and feelings at all they will not miss the solemn message of the "fallen-ness" of the whole order of creation. When life presses in like this, the most unexpected people begin to pray, and their words can sound astonishingly spiritual and genuine. But being sorry for the way things have fallen out is not the same as repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). It is never a light thing to impugn another's sincerity, but the sequel to this prayer signifies that God counted it non-valid in the same way as He recognised the repentance of the people to be a temporary reaction to a given set of circumstances, cf. Hosea 5:15-6:4. But note how theologically accurate people can be in prayer, even when there is no grace of repentance in their hearts. The people admit their backslidings and their lack of merit (they could hardly do otherwise). Then they pray in the name of the Lord and ask Him to act for His own name's sake. They base their prayer on the faithfulness of God and they recall His mighty deliverances of Israel in the past (8). It is almost as if they said, "O God, you have done it before, do it again," and they claim their identity as the people of God (9). Perhaps Jeremiah, who is the intercessor for the people, is recalling such passages as Exodus 34:5-9. Why should God be as an indifferent stranger, or a man with no rights? Why should He act as if He had no longer power or wisdom to save? Is He not still in their midst? What a prayer! If Jeremiah had been speaking for himself the answer could not have been denied.

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14:10-12

There is never any doubt about God's capacity to answer prayer and to work wonders for His people's salvation (Isa. 59:1-3). But there are other factors. There is no doubt ever about the presence of the Lord and His activity in human affairs (Ps. 139). But His intentions and activities are not necessarily for blessing, and in this case God is present for purposes of judgment. Jeremiah is speaking on behalf of the people (was it at their request?) and for the third time he is forbidden to pray for them (11, cf. 7:16; 11:14). This is not the time for blessing. God will remember, not His mercy and grace, but their sins (Hosea 8:11-14; 9:7-9). Even though the whole nation assembles to a day of fasting and prayer there will be no answer from heaven. Although the people hate the consequences of their sins (who does not?) they do not hate the sins that have brought the consequences, and the human heart being what it is, almost as soon as the pressure is lifted the people will return to their old ways because their hearts are so committed. The only thing the intercessors for the nation can do in a time like this is to pray for a spirit of repentance (Acts 5:31). But this means we must lift the whole political, economic and ecclesiastical situation from the level of mere historical materialism, and understand it in basic spiritual categories. Only the remnant of faith has the conviction to do this. In our nation at this time there is no voice of significance declaring that the predicament we are in has a spiritual explanation and solution alone. This is the measure of our national danger. We have not yet been commanded to cease from praying!

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14:13-22

If you have a church to go to where you know you will be fed by the living Word of God, do not fail to give thanks for the privilege, and to be exercised for others, because many will sit in God's house and at best hear nothing and at worst be fed on lies (Neh. 8:5-12). Jeremiah pleads before God that the sad condition of the nation is due to the false ministry of the prophets. Without doubt this is true, but when people so excuse their spiritual barrenness and consequent insensitivity, they need to be told that they are still responsible because true ministry was available for those hungry enough to go and get it (cf. 5:31). It is still a frightening thing to have an active ecclesiastical, and indeed spiritual, establishment that operates only to conceal from human hearts the real issues of God's kingdom. God is not unaware of this evil nor is he indifferent to it (Ezek. 34:1-10). Sometimes people are judged because of their deliberate refusal of the truth of God made patently clear (Rom.

1:18, 21, 28). Some are led to disaster by others in complicity with their own neglect (Hos. 4:6; 13:9). When God speaks of tears of sorrow over an erring daughter, Jeremiah is bold to press into God's presence with questions and prayers. It is difficult to decide whether Jeremiah is expressing his own anguished petitions or repeating the pleas of the people who, having messed up everything by neglect of God, are now "trying" God as the answer to their predicament. But we must remember that there was a remnant of faith within the backsliding nation and the words of prayer spoken here constitute a true expression of that faith. They plead the sovereignty of God, His faithfulness to His own covenant, and they confess their sins. They looked to God but they looked for the wrong answers. Deliverance from crisis is not necessarily the same as salvation.

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15:1

This one verse gives an affirmative answer to the question in 14:19. The people were being cast off, but it was in the context of God's far-reaching purposes, as Paul makes clear in Rom. 11:1-5ff. Still, it was a real rejection, radical and deliberate and not merely accidental, as God makes plain in today's verse which brings intercession to a close. In Ex. 32:7-14 and Num. 14:1-20 we are told of the prevailing prayer of Moses in a time of national crisis and possible rejection. In 1 Sam. 7:8-9; 12: 18-23 we read of Samuel's ministry of prayer, and Psalm 99:6 confirms the spiritual stature of these two men. But God declares that even if they were raised to life again and stood to intercede for Judah, their prayers would not avail. Such was the extent of the nation's backsliding. It could not be retrieved. Dare we refer here to the "helplessness" of faith? Consider Ezek. 14:12-21. God is going to send His own nation into oblivion, and seventy years would pass before light would begin to dawn and hope be kindled. But remember that even in the deep darkness of the captivity in Babylon, God had His men, Daniel, Ezekiel, and in due time Ezra and Nehemiah. Sometimes when God's cause seems far down and hope is dim, we need to be considering the babies being born. Who can tell what significant part they may yet play in the purposes of God's grace which cannot fail?

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15:2-9

Note first that it was in the time of Manasseh, before Jeremiah was even born, that the nation went beyond the line of God's forbearance and was destined for judgment. This is an important lesson because we often forget what has gone on in the past. And in our own day while we mourn our straitened circumstances (we have little real privation so far) we need to look back to the years of sheer irreligion, unbelief, indulgence, materialism and carnality that have been an affront to God. He is under no obligation to stand this kind of thing and though He may have been amazingly forbearing to the nation, the time comes when He says, "Enough!" In v.2 the people ask contemptuously (with an element of fear?) where they can go, still thinking of escape, because they are surrounded by the enemy. Whether by disease during siege, by death in fighting or by ignominious surrender they would end up under the dominion of Babylon. There was no escape. Without doubt there were cries of "No surrender," and certainly Jeremiah was branded as a traitor, selling out to the enemy. But the action was God's, as He states so clearly (6, 13-14). How slow we all are to think that. God might be the explanation of what is happening to us.

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15:10-21

"There is no loneliness like that of a soul that has outstripped its fellows." (Spurgeon) To stand alone with God and for God is a costly business, as Jeremiah here testifies. We do well to remember just how human God's servants are and how open targets they are for misunderstanding and criticism. Not even an inner persuasion that he is doing God's will and delighting in God's word can assuage the costly agony of his heart. He is "outside the camp bearing abuse for Him," (Heb. 13:12-14) and while such sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10) is accepted willingly, it has still caused many of the prophets to know desolation and depression. It is here that we see Jeremiah as a man of sorrows, despised, criticised and rejected by men, yet identifying himself with the plight and predicament of the people, and also identifying himself with the good will and word of God. In v.15 the prophet's dread of death (being taken away) seems to stem from a sense of estrangement from God, a feeling that God has forsaken him. But Jeremiah reasons as to why God should forsake him since he has delighted in the word of the Lord (16), even though that has meant a separation from his contemporaries (17) because he has become the spokesman of God's indignation. It seems to him that God has been less than

faithful and that there is no vindication of either the message or the messenger as God had promised there would be (1:17-19). The prophet is filled with doubt, and we must consider this again.

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15:10-21

Think of the desolations of spirit that have come upon the great men of faith in Scripture, such as Abraham (Gen. 15:12), David (Ps.22:1), or Elijah (1 Kings 19:3-4). There is no doubt a twofold explanation of this is to be found, firstly in the sheer humanity and natural weakness of men whereby they succumb to the lies of their feelings and the pressures of circumstances, and secondly in recognising that it has been a deliberate attack of Satan. We have not really mentioned the Devil in our studies in Jeremiah but we cannot doubt that the enemy will be present at such a time of significance in the work of God. We do not in any way minimise Jeremiah's suffering, for he felt deeply wounded by men and by God and he could not understand it. Think of our Lord's cry of dereliction from the Cross! In what sense had God forsaken Him? It was certainly not on account of failure! So it is with the prophet here. He is involved in a work, the dimension of which is greater than he has yet realised. For this reason, together with God's trust in him, the word addressed to Jeremiah is not one of comfort but rather exhortation. He is to return to his former dedication to the work in hand, given a reminder that God is every bit as faithful and trustworthy now as He was at the beginning (20-21). It may well have been that Jeremiah had allowed himself unconsciously to be infected by the spirit of complaint and slander against God that was current within the nation. It is not easy to keep oneself untainted by the world (Jas. 1:27) which always seeks to press us into its own mould of thought (Rom. 12:1-2). The only safety is in keeping our eyes steadfastly on God (2 Chron. 20:12).

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16:1-4

Before considering this rather unique instruction from God to Jeremiah let us recapitulate the situation. The prophet's ministry was by now well established and his preaching was with feeling, solemnity and hope. The difficulty of the national atmosphere is vividly expressed in 5:21, 31 and it is hard to preach God's truth in such circumstances. The essential godlessness of the nation is portrayed in describing God as a stranger with no rights whatever (14:8). God just did not come into people's thinking. He was an irrelevance and unacceptable. But the people had to learn the essential unity of history, not least in terms of cause and effect (14:10, 20). Jeremiah, amongst others, had to be told in plain terms of the limitation of prayer, in the sense that the time comes when calamity cannot be averted. When there is not enough righteousness in the nation the weight of evil swings over the balance and judgment comes. But because God is God there is hope for the people through the fiery experiences of exile. Our last two readings have spoken of Jeremiah's costly road which was not without blessing. But now it seemed it had all been for nothing, yet he must not come down from his solid fortress of obedience to God. Over against his doubts and fears he must place what he had already known and proved about God. He must see that the future does not rest in the hands of a decadent and rebellious people but in the remnant of faith. The direction is future and instruction is given to prepare for it.

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16:1-4

This first act of separation unto God was bound to cause questioning in a day when celibacy was very uncommon, and this must have given Jeremiah tremendous opportunity to bear witness to the spiritual crisis that had overtaken the nation. Remember how Jesus spoke of the Day of Judgment coming at a time when people were marrying and giving in marriage (Matt. 24:38) in the natural, God-ordained fashion. But human fulfilment in marriage is not necessarily the gift of God to all, nor is it necessary for satisfying and happy human life. God gives to some and withholds from others in accordance with His will and His purpose to bless. Never forget that marriage was God's invention. He instituted it and sanctified it (Gen. 2:18-24; Mk. 10:6-9; Eph. 5:22-32). The fact that God calls some, as he did Jeremiah, to sacrifice natural and legitimate fulfilment does not mean that all must go this way. Indeed, scripture warns against this imposition of celibacy (1 Tim. 4:3). But, as Paul points out in 1 Cor. 7:1, 7, 17, 25-35, there are far-reaching spiritual issues involved in human relationships and it is indeed tragic when human fulfilment in the will of God with all its sweetness and creativity becomes a distraction from holy service. We have already spoken of Jeremiah's sensitivity and can think of him as the kind of man who would have loved to be married. But in the wisdom of God and for holy

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purpose he was called to a life of loneliness. God said the days were coming when parenthood would be a thing of deep anguish and we do well in our day to think of what our children are growing up into. It will not be easy for them in a day when God's judgments are abroad on the face of the earth. Note that Jeremiah did not renounce marriage but was commanded by God. Those who similarly go forward into holy matrimony in the will and by the command of God must see to it that their marriage is kept "holy unto the Lord".

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16:5-13

In a day when social calamity was to quench every last vestige of human happiness and joy, Jeremiah was called to two further acts or attitudes of separation, both of them negative. He was told by God that in time people would not be able to evade the striking testimony of his life-style and in that day he would be God's messenger to interpret life and experience with the realism of faith. Jeremiah was first commanded not to join in mourning for the dead, because it would be better to be dead than alive. The living would have no joy in life and the dead would be neither remembered nor mourned. This action of the prophet must have brought not only social isolation but ostracism, and this must have hurt deeply because in fact he would be more grieved over human distress than most. He would also have to wait until time exercised its influence and caused this seeming indifference of his to begin to turn people's thoughts to God. But Jeremiah was also forbidden to enter into the jollifications of social life, not least to emphasise their futility in a day when spiritual issues were being worked out in terms of doom. We are familiar with Jesus' strictures on false piety and lugubrious spirituality, and we must guard our souls against that kind of thing. But at the same time does not the frivolity, inanity and worldliness of much of our lives deny the testimony we make to the effect that it is the things of eternity and God that really matter to us? There is such a thing as authentic Christian difference and separation and it is of the essence of witness.

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16:14-21

It is amazing to note that the people of Judah seem still unaware of and insensitive to the greatness of their sin which was bringing such misery to the nation. The note of hope inserted abruptly in v.14-15 seems out of place (it is repeated in 23:7-8) but it is not inconsistent with the solemn message of disaster. Rather it signifies Jeremiah's own grasping of the sure hope of the promise of God, which hope must undergird all true ministry. We must never be occupied with the immediate scene to the exclusion of the future triumph of God because we are saved in hope (Rom. 8:24) and that hope is ever the sure anchor of our souls (Heb. 6:19). God warns the people that they will find no hiding place at all when the day of sin's judgment comes (cf. Rev. 6:12-17). Running away from God has the same issue as being found by Him. God's eyes are on all the ways of men. They fall into His hands, which is of course infinitely better than falling out of His hands. The contrast between v.16-18 and v.19-20 is glorious in its emphasis on evangelism. Jeremiah himself glories in his God in contrast to his earlier defeatism and depression. It is almost as if he had just seen the marvellous issue of the present disaster, as the disciples eventually grasped the glory of the resurrection after the "defeat" of the Cross. The Gentiles would seek the Lord, abandon their worthless gods (which the Jews had taken up to their cost) and find salvation in God alone. Right then it was for Jeremiah "the day of small things", but the greater day was coming. God was determined about that, no matter the cost (21).

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17:1-11

In the first four verses Jeremiah again emphasises that the disaster which is overtaking the nation has spiritual cause. The sin of Judah is indelibly written in their hearts, their thoughts gravitate constantly to the idolatrous shrines, just as the magnetic needle turns to the pole. But God speaks very plainly in v.4 as the nation diverges more and more from the way of faith and obedience. Do we really believe this kind of separation is operating when we trifle with the forbidden? This is illustrated by the parable of the desert (5-6) which is not refreshed when rain comes to others. Why do we miss so much blessing when God is active? Again the principle is illustrated by parable (7-8). The man who trusts in the Lord will never wither (Ps. 1) because in spite of circumstances he will draw his supplies from the inexhaustible river of God. It is a wise man who recognises in a practical way the sinful propensities of the human heart which is sick, diseased and hopelessly degenerate. A new heart by a new birth is the only hope for human nature and this is the gift of God in Jesus Christ. The

outworking of this new heart-principle and the way of blessing are expounded by Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-16). If we knew our own hearts and the seeds of all sins that lie dormant there, we would walk much more closely with the Lord and take fewer liberties than we do. Whatever is wrongly acquired will be miserably lost. The worldling's pleasure is indeed fading, while the solid joys and lasting treasure of God abide for ever with His own.

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17:12-18

This is how to live and pray in a time of national crisis. The glorious affirmation in v.12 is the prophet's assurance and comfort in the day of darkness and suffering. Never forget about the throne which cannot be moved and the government which can neither be qualified nor usurped. God rules on high, almighty to save, and is prepared to prove to His believing people just how near, personal and saving His presence can be. It is in the shadow of God's throne that we find our security (Ps. 90:1-2; 91:1-16) and it is in that holy sanctuary that we worship and present our prayers. When the story of man seems as fleeting as names written in the dust (13), the man of faith rejoices that his name is written in heaven (Lk. 10:20). This is not escapism; it is the means by which faith counterbalances the unbelief and shame of earth's experience under the dominion of sin. It almost seems here as if Jeremiah could be likened to a weary man escaping from the pressures of life and sitting for a little time in the quiet of a great cathedral. This is something we need to do in terms of being still in order to know that God is God and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). In a generation when everything has been reduced to the "ordinary" and when noise seems the inevitable background to the whole of life, we must find a place of "sanctuary" even if it is by the kitchen sink, in a country lane, or ten minutes in church before a service starts.

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17:12-18

Note the phrase "from the beginning" (12) for it points to the unbroken continuity of the purposes of God down through the centuries of time. The course of history, from man's viewpoint, has surged and fluctuated but the one fixed point is, has been and ever shall be the throne of God. This is the hope of our souls, sure and steadfast, and in time of stress, as with Jeremiah here, it becomes the basis of our prayers. The prophet's experiences as God's spokesman have wounded and shattered him, and he cries to God for healing. Clearly the people have slandered the man for his message (15), mocking him for the sternness of his words about judgment, because it did not seem as if judgment was coming (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1-10). It seems as if Jeremiah was accused of being morbidly preoccupied with judgment to the point of desiring it. But this is slander (16) for he had spoken only what God had given him to speak. What worries the prophet seems to be a feeling that God is somehow leaving him to "go it alone" and it is this sense of the absence of God that frightens him. In v.18 we do not have a plea for vindictive revenge but simply for vindication by God of His own message. In a day of apostasy we must recognise that the way of faith and that of unbelief are diametrically opposed. There is no reconciliation. Unbelief must yield. The trouble is that unbelief is inordinately proud and stands its ground even to destruction.

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17:19-27

At first sight this word which makes the fate of the city dependent on the keeping of the Sabbath is startling. As Jeremiah knew only too well, there can be a formal and empty observance of the law of God which is legalistic hypocrisy, focused on man, and without spiritual significance. There can be a sabbatarianism which never touches the heart and which leaves people far from God. But at the same time we must recognise that the Sabbath was instituted as an ordinance of creation (Gen. 2:2-3) and thus sanctified long before the giving of the Law (Ex. 20:8-11). To honour the Sabbath with the obedience of the heart is to concur with God in His order of things, but to dishonour the Sabbath is to assert human will and independence over against God. In this attitude man forfeits the "rest" that is promised to the people of God, a rest that is grounded in the finished perfection of God's labours. The issue of the keeping of the Sabbath is one of great spiritual moment, and we need constantly to take ourselves to task as to what use we do in fact make of this sanctified day. It is not a matter of making it a negative institution which results in dullness and boredom, especially for children, but making it a day that is freely, gladly and happily given over to doing God's will rather than our own. Why should people insist on the

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self-willed determination that nothing should ever be allowed to interfere with their personal pleasure or profit? This is to make man god, and dethrones God. The call here is not for the formal cessation of work to keep the Sabbath, but a call for a return to the Lord and a yielding of life in obedience to His holy will, which is life, peace, joy and hope.

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18:1-11

To understand this glorious illustration of the sovereignty of God we need to recall what has gone before in 14:10; 15:1; 16:18; 17:4, all of which references speak of a forfeited heritage and the seeming denial of the promise and purpose of God. In 17:9 we see the apparent hopelessness of the situation and in 17:23 the deliberate nature of persistent unbelief. In yesterday's reading, concerning the Sabbath, we considered the open affront to the Lord and the public rejection of His covenant in the contemptuous desecration of the special day even in the holy city of Jerusalem. This was no light matter about a secondary rule of religion. It was at the heart of God's dealings with His people (Ezek. 20:10-24). But refusal of God persisted in leads only to the disaster of judgment and when a nation is in this predicament, some sure word of interpretation is needed to keep the remnant of faith from despair. That word is now given and it concerns the sovereignty of God in His purposes and in His powerful providence, whereby He brings to pass His perfect will right through history on a personal, national and universal dimension (Eph. 1:11. If we do not think on this level our God is indeed too small.

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18:1-11

The sovereign God makes use of a "visual aid" to teach the prophet the confidence of faith needed to cope with his ministry in an evil day. Workmen of God need to learn what God is like and also to grasp the confidence and competence of His methods. God makes the vessels as He wills, for the purpose and function which He ordains, and there is a wide range of types of vessel for different function within the one house (2 Tim. 2:19-21; cf. Rom. 9:19-24). Jeremiah can recognise that the master-potter knows his "design" before he starts, chooses the material accordingly and, when the vessel is spoiled by the emerging of some hard flint in the clay, he is not prepared to produce a "reject" vessel but crushes down the clay and starts all over again. Out of a spoiled vessel that is good for nothing the Potter makes another vessel. Think of 2 Cor. 5:17. Out of very unpromising material comes a vessel of glory. The onlooker may not at first see what is happening but the purpose of the Potter's heart is worked out by the Potter's hands, through the process of the wheel that is driven by the Potter's feet. The loving purpose of the Potter is far greater and more glorious than we ever imagine (1 Cor. 2:9; 1 John 3:2). What is more, the hands and the feet of the Potter are nail-pierced. This is indeed Gospel news. In Matt. 27:3-10 the field of broken pottery was purchased with the price of blood!

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18:1-11

In the story there is to be seen the principle of the absolute sovereignty of God; the purpose that underlies the operating principle, for it is not indiscriminate. There is also seen the person of the Potter and it is here that the whole lesson becomes one of infinite comfort, for this Potter has made Himself known to us in the person of His Son, full of grace and truth. He is the one who bears with us in our infirmity, reassuring us of His trustworthiness when His actions perplex us (John 13:7). But over against this, God emphasises to Jeremiah the responsibility of man, especially emphasising the possibility of repentance on the part of those who have gone wrong (8). There is a word also to those who are richly privileged in the blessings of God. If they sit lightly to privilege it will be withdrawn, a withdrawal which is not necessarily permanent. God says He is devising a plan against His people (11): a reference to the exile in Babylon. But the picture is still that of the Potter and His wheel rather than the executioner and His axe. God must sometimes remove us from the locality and experience of blessing in order that His purpose of greater blessing may come to us. It is better to stay close to Him. There are fewer complications!

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18:12-17

"According to the Bible sin is against nature, against healthy custom, against the Law, and against God. There is no excuse for it, because it is not natural. Man was not created to sin against his Maker. It would have been unnatural for the snows of Lebanon to melt into nothingness. It would have been strange for the glacial torrents to disappear. This teaches how alien sin should be to man's constitution. It comes from a perversion of basic instincts for God, which turn, in wild infatuation and blindness, to delusions which cannot save or satisfy. It is hard to walk with God on the "ancient paths" of covenant trust and obedience. But in the long run, it is harder to be adrift from Him on the by-roads which lead nowhere. The final effects of abandoning Him will appal even the heathen who care nothing for holy things. For they will see the sobering truth that God also is against their enemies. Nothing remains for Israel but the hostility of her God. Jeremiah feared this most for himself (17:17). It was a reality from which he tried to save his own." (Rev. T. Swanston) It is good sometimes to ask the heathen in the land what they think of our religion. Considering the loyalty some of them give to their clubs, societies and sports they cannot be much impressed by the casual dedication of many who call themselves Christian.

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18:18-23

Two reactions follow the sermon in 18:5-17, one from the congregation and one from the preacher. The people decided to slander, smite and reject both the preacher and his sermons on the ground that what he was prophesying would never come to pass. They would have been best to reserve their judgment but, of course, unbelief is always in a hurry. The plotters were the leaders and teachers of the people and they hated the prophet, as their descendants hated Jesus, because His words exposed them and left them without excuse (John 15:20-25). This was the rejection of Jeremiah by the whole establishment of religion, who regarded this young evangelical as an upstart and as an unfortunate regression to "literalism" concerning God and His word. Jeremiah's reaction is deep and desperate because his heart has been lacerated. This may not excuse his strong language, but it certainly explains it, especially since the prophet has also been the mighty (secret) intercessor for the people before the throne of God (19-20). What Jeremiah learned, and it is a necessary lesson for all who would serve the Lord, was that he lived and worked in an alien world, enemy-occupied territory in a spiritual sense. Therefore his whole life and ministry were to be understood in terms of spiritual warfare, kingdom against kingdom (Eph. 6:10ff). In this world "evil for good" (20) happens constantly, and this is why we need a real God to rest in. It is very practical (Rom. 12:14-21; 1 Pet. 2: 20-23).

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19:1-9

The work goes on and so does the ministry of the suffering prophet who is only too aware that the main reaction to his preaching is the hardening of the hearts of the people. Now, a man motivated by feelings of personal hurt and vengeance, as Jeremiah seemed to be in yesterday's verses, will not continue to preach in this way. The prophet has cried to God (18:19-20) and indeed weeps over the desolation coming on Jerusalem. In the parable of the potter he has been shown both the crushing and the re-making which is long-term work. But the people, because of their unbelief, are shown only the immediate shattering and rejection. We must not think of impetuous judgment. Go back as far as 7:30-34 to read a previous indictment of the terrible fall into decadence of the people of God. When the godly backslide they often go far further down than the heathen. The Devil sees to that! The words of our passage are so radical that we almost instinctively react and feel that God would never do this again. But God's righteousness stands for ever. Read Prov. 29:1; Deut. 32: 34-43; 1 Pet. 4:17-19. God is the God with whom we have to do, whether we choose to or not. Jeremiah is not alone in feeling deeply and speaking powerfully in such a situation where he is called to be God's spokesman. Read Psalms 35 and 109.

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19:10-15

The sermon on the irrevocable judgment of Jerusalem is confirmed in action of prophetic symbolism in the shattering of the earthen (cheap and virtually worthless) flask. At the very scene of their sins the men of Judah, secular and religious leaders, have confirmed to them that the shattered pieces of their nation will not be

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mended. This is indeed rejection. Then from the ghastly place of idolatry Jeremiah returns to the quiet orderliness of the house of God and he preaches the very same sermon. There is a point of no return. Clay can be re-modelled for it is still soft, but pottery, hardened in the fire, is brittle and breaks under shock. There is a lesson here about personality and life, human as well as spiritual. As time goes on the possibility of change recedes. Granted glorious salvation can come to those well past youth and indeed far into old age, but for some the readjustment and redirection that issues in spiritual service may no longer be possible. We do well to consider just what we are doing with our lives and what we are becoming, if indeed we have not already become our permanent (eternal?) selves. Cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10. We recall the story told by an elderly Christian lady who confessed that she had known for years that she had been living God's second best. The last verse of today's passage calls us to listen to what God is saying.

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20:1-6

It is thrilling to read of the courage of faith of the mighty men of God, but we do well to read also of what they suffered as a result of their faithfulness. Pashur represented the official standpoint of religion to the effect that if Babylon did attack Judah, then Egypt would ally with the Jews (for Egypt's interest?) and Babylon would withdraw. Jeremiah's preaching of the truth of God was in direct contradiction of this policy. Of course he was regarded as being a menace to the morale of the nation and a danger to the religious establishment and its clientele, who were only too glad not to bring God into their thinking about national issues. The prophet was arrested, beaten and publicly humiliated, an official proclamation in fact that he was not a real prophet at all. But such treatment does not quench the spirit of a true prophet, and in the morning the chief officer found himself at the receiving end of a powerful sermon of denunciation. Time would confirm Jeremiah's word, which was in fact God's word, and in the crisis of national disaster people would point to Pashur and say that he was one of the priests who assured them that no such judgment would come. Being true to God is not only creative service, it is ultimate defence and vindication (Acts. 20:26-27). No one will charge the faithful prophet with holding back the word that was necessary for salvation and eternal hope. But there is also joy and blessing in faithfulness, no matter how painful it may be at the time (Acts 5:40-42; 16:20-34).

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20:7-18

It is not easy to be a lone voice for God. Persecution is costly but amused contempt is sorcerous to bear. Sorest of all are the fightings and fears within the man's own mind and emotions. He had obeyed the call and constraint of God almost in spite of his personal reluctance, having been reassured that his word would be with effective power and authority (1:4-9, 17-19). But his word has been rejected and there is no apparent fruit. Still, he cannot keep silent. But in speaking he simply invites more and more scorn and his whole inner being is in a state of turmoil, distress and despair. No doubt he is also afflicted by a sense of guilt, wondering if somehow he is to blame for the fruitlessness of the ministry committed to him. He fluctuates between despair and mighty affirmations of faith, but there is no joy in his experience at all. This can only be the work of the Devil, clouding every awareness of God, cancelling every assurance in God, and denying every aspect of purpose in his life. This is indeed depression and many a fruitful servant of God has known this experience, as did our Lord on the Cross. The answer to the question in v.18 is very clear. It was in order to be a significant messenger of the Word of the Lord. And that ministry of the Word was about to move into a new and significant sphere (cf. Ps. 126:5-6).

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21:1-2

"Through the experiences described in the first part of the book Jeremiah was now able to understand the purposes of God and to be His prophet to declare them. He saw that the end of the long history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had come. That which Samuel and David had built up; which Hezekiah and Josiah had endeavoured to revive; the temple of Solomon; Jerusalem itself; must all pass away, engulfed in one great catastrophe. What was to follow, and how were the promises of God to be fulfilled if there were no kingdom, no temple, no city? It was revealed to Jeremiah that the Lord was bringing in a new dispensation or method of rule and manner of manifesting Himself in the world. Authority was taken from Israel and put into the hands of Gentile powers. What Christ later called "the times of the Gentiles" (Lk. 21:24) was introduced, and

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continues to this present day (revealed to Daniel, Dan. 2). Judah was therefore no longer to resist the Assyrian invader, but to submit. But the doom of captivity pronounced was accompanied by the revelation of a definite, stated term, a limitation of the time of its continuance, and a promise of deliverance and restoration to follow..... The story is now carried forward into the days of Zedekiah the last king of Judah..... and the event now to be related is placed first because it brings into sharp relief the main subject of these prophecies, the tendency of what happened in former reigns being better understood in the light of the crisis to which it led up." (Broadbent)

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21:3-14

When Jeremiah was consulted about the national crisis (1-2) which threatened even Jerusalem, it was not a sign of his being respected as a prophet of God. The design was to trap him by recalling how, in the time of Hezekiah, Isaiah spoke words of glorious deliverance in an almost identical situation (Isa. 37). Isaiah being now dead was honoured as a great prophet, and if Jeremiah spoke differently he would be judged as setting himself against both Isaiah and God. But the situations were not identical, for the nation's sins had swung the balance over to judgment. The prophet's word from God is very plain. God Himself will see to it that the enemy does in fact prevail (3-7), and Jeremiah then addresses the people with equal plainness of speech advocating submission to Nebuchadnezzar. As you can imagine this brought on him the contempt and bitter enmity of the fierce nationalists whose pride considered that anything was better than surrender to a pagan enemy. But, undeterred, Jeremiah sets before the people, as others had done before at times of crisis, the choice of two ways. Either they submit in obedience to God's providence and live, or they resist unto destruction cf. Deut. 30:11-20; 1 Kings 18:21. Surrender meant life, resistance meant death. That is a spiritual principle.

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22:1-9

The challenge to righteousness issued to the royal house in 21:11-14 is continued here and we must note how this shy and sensitive prophet, raised up out of comparative obscurity, is called again and again to address the throne. It is made clear to the royal house that it is not privilege but justice that is the basis of both establishment and continuance. The more the privilege, the greater the responsibility, and in days of crisis when the great purposes of God are working out under His mighty, inescapable and often inscrutable providence, the more God's favoured people need to see to it that righteousness and truth mark all their ways. God is not prepared to trifle, and the glory has passed away from many a place and people simply because they have not done right by God (Isa. 52:11; Matt. 21:43).

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22:10-30

God is calling the nation away from preoccupation with its misfortunes to consider the causes of them. The dead king in v.10 is godly Josiah who started a revival but did not get the hearts of the people away from their sin and idolatry. The king going away (10b) is Jehoahaz (Shallum), deposed by Egypt after three months reign. Jehoiakim (13,18) was a man of extravagance, milking the people to increase his own station in life even though he was really a puppet king. His treasure was in his "stuff" and he was living for the wrong world. Such a ruler is a blight on a nation and no one mourns his departure. It was during this reign that the first wave of captives (including Daniel) was taken away to Babylon. The verses 20-23 are addressed to Jerusalem and then from v.24 the reign of Coniah (Jehoiakin) is spoken of, during which the second wave of captives went away, including Ezekiel and Mordecai (Book of Esther). What sorrow is in v.29! There are only two ways people can go, together with God or at cross purposes to Him. This is the issue of life.

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23:1-8

The shepherds referred to here are the political and secular rulers and leaders of the nation who are charged with great responsibility because they have exercised an influence totally against the best interests of the people. Like perverse and corrupted shepherds they have scattered the flock, caring nothing for them, so long as their own places of power were maintained. This is indeed godlessness and it is seen in our own day in the

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influence of many in places of power in education, communication and religion, whose deliberate aim is to undermine and annihilate all standards. But God is not mocked and He pronounces His curse of judgment on these people. Read the whole of Ezekiel 34 to sense the sternness of the Lord in respect of wicked men whose days are inescapably shortened, and also to see the immense value He places on His own flock. God is a serious God whose heart is everlasting love and He will not in the end be denied the fulfilment of blessing His people. But at the same time this sure intention of blessing does not eliminate the immediate and actual experience of the people who, as a nation and in consequence of their sins, must go into the judgment and discipline of captivity. Too many of the people have been willing to be led astray and this is culpable. But a remnant will be gathered from the wild places of dishonour and judgment, and over them the Lord will set shepherds (secular and spiritual) that He can trust with the well-being of His flock. God will see it through to blessing. But all will not be blessed. Many forfeit hope because of their sinful stubbornness. Have we a future?

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23:1-8

The second half of this passage which speaks so wonderfully of a Messiah to come makes it clear that the God of salvation is in no sense an inactive God and certainly not a decreasing God. What He is to do in the future will far exceed what has been known of His power in the past. The ultimate return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon will be spoken of as a deliverance greater than the Exodus by which they had first become a redeemed people. We need to grasp firmly the continuing element of hope in the Gospel emphasised in the words "the days are coming" (5) because we are in fact saved in hope (Rom. 8:24) and this hope is the anchor of our souls both sure and steadfast (Heb. 6:19). The prophet here looks beyond those godly leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah who were to shepherd the people when they eventually returned to build Jerusalem. The One to come is the righteous branch, a tender sapling shooting out of the forlorn stump of the tree (Israel) that has been hewn down and left in apparent hopelessness and uselessness. The king to come, who will rule in righteousness, is of the house of David, partaking of human nature like ourselves yet He is divine, "the Lord our righteousness" (Rom. 1:3-4). Other references to the Branch are Isa. 4:2; 11:1; Jer. 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. The One the prophet speaks of here is none other than Christ our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30-31). He is our salvation.

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23:9-22

Having declared God's word over against that of the secular leaders of the nation, Jeremiah now addresses the same word to the prophets and priests, the leaders of religion, men charged with the safe-keeping of the soul of the nation and the souls of the people. Jeremiah's broken heart reflects the grief of God at this terrible situation wherein the main hindrance to the acceptance of the Word of God was the preaching of the false prophets. These "holy" men were in fact profane men, devoid of God, and they created an atmosphere and attitude which not only made it easy for the people to sin but encouraged them to sin. In v.9-15 the lives of these false religious leaders are probed, and in v.16-22 their message is exposed as being devoid of spiritual truth and authority. God makes it plain that such men who abuse their office will not be held guiltless (12, 15) for their ministry will bring the active judgments of God. This needs to be remembered in our own day of empty and closed down churches and the increasing abandonment of even formal religion. This is the result of generations of preaching of liberal theology that has filled the minds of people with unbelief, persuading them that spiritual categories and eternal facts are irrelevant. The new generation of ministers are not impressed with nor heartened by what they have inherited in the churches from their fathers, ministers and college professors. If a man's ministry is simply his own word this is the inevitable result.

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23:23-40

The fate of the false prophets, and those who followed them so willingly and blindly, is now dealt with. Note how inexcusable these people are. Look back to v.13-14 where God speaks of the fall of Samaria because of its sins, and of how Judah refused to learn from the disasters of history but went the same way of spiritual and moral apostasy. When there is no authentic ministry in the nation there is indeed a terrible spiritual blindness and paralysis among the people. This constitutes a great spiritual challenge with regard to personal witness. If our Gospel is hid, it is hid to them who are perishing, though not yet finally lost (2 Cor. 4:3 AV). But false prophets do not go in for this kind of thing and choose rather to ridicule the whole idea of judgment, of the

salvation of souls, and of a "word from the Lord". That is patently clear from much of the preaching that congregations hear Sunday by Sunday. But God listens to what preachers say and, very significantly, what they do not say. Can anything be more terrible than a man who has believed the old fashioned gospel to the saving of his soul, but who refuses to preach that essential gospel to his congregation? God's passionate speech in v.25-32 is devastating. Straw and wheat are vivid metaphors. A sermon is only valid when it feeds the people. That is why it must be "main course" preaching and not simply titivating "starters" or interesting "afters". Note also how God insists that preaching should be concerned with objective truth and not with subjective experiences, whether dreams, visions or imaginations. God is exercised about preaching, even if preachers are not, because of what it does to the congregation whom He regards as "His people". It is sad when such a congregation prefers the words of men to the Word of God.

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23:23-40

The final section here (33-40) is a condemnation of religious pomposity and pious, spiritual phraseology. No preacher is entitled to say, "Hear the word of the Lord," if he speaks simply out of his own heart or out of the intellectual meanderings of those considered to be "leading scholars". Nor are we allowed to say, "May God bless the preaching of His Word," if in fact that given Word of God has not been dealt with in honesty, humility, sincerity and comprehensiveness. All who call themselves prophets are here forbidden to use the phrase "the burden (oracle) of the Lord", by which phrase they had habitually tried to give authority and credence to their speaking. God's word had been taken for granted, neglected, denied and perverted and so the free availability of "a word from the Lord" was no longer to be the privilege of the nation. There was to be a scarcity of the Word of God, a famine of serious proportion (Amos 8:11-12). People would have to learn to seek for a word from God with a new spirit of abject humility, recognising that things were no longer as they once had been. For too long specious spiritual talk had been used to cover up blatant unbelief of heart and moral corruption of life. This was no longer acceptable to God, and holy language was to be cut off. That, in our time, could well mean the closing down of churches, the disappearance of services, no hymn-singing, no religious discussions on T.V. or radio, no school or hospital services. When religion has displaced God, then religion must go. It was a burden that was hindering the work and it had to be cast off.

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24:1-10

This vision was shown to Jeremiah in the reign of Zedekiah (8) and specific reference is made to the fact that the second stage of the captivity had taken place (1). Keep in mind the four kings of Jeremiah's ministry (1:1-3) and so hold the historical perspective. First JOSIAH, during whose reign there was "revival" following the recovery of the Law in the eighteenth year of his reign, when Jeremiah had already been preaching for five years. Then JEHOIAKIM, during whose time the first captives were taken away, including Daniel and his companions (Dan. 1:1-4ff), after twenty-one years of Jeremiah's ministry. Then JEHOIAKIN (Jeconiah) during whose reign Jerusalem was taken and the cream of the population, including Ezekiel, was removed to Babylon, after twenty-nine years of Jeremiah's ministry. Then ZEDEKIAH, in whose time (587 B.C.) Jerusalem was finally destroyed, and Jeremiah was still preaching after thirty-nine years of ministry, which ministry he continued when he went to Egypt (Jer. 43:1-8ff). Throughout all these years of national collapse and disintegration Jeremiah was the spokesman of God and continued in faithfulness even though his word and his person were consistently refused and abused. The people refused to believe the Word of the Lord and consequently were determined to resist Babylon to the end. They were determined that deliverance would come by their own chosen way. This is why the vision was given.

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24:1-10

The previous chapter told of false ministry within the nation and it is not surprising that the people made a false assessment of and interpretation of the things that were happening. On the face of it the people, taken captive into Babylon, away from the locality and heritage of Jerusalem, had gone into disaster. But it is never safe to interpret a situation by its appearances. God looks further on than the immediate moment and His designs are far more extensive than we give Him credit for. His methods are also far more thorough than ours. It is made plain that the people carted away to captivity were the ones who would prove significant in the future of God's

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purposes while the others would prove useless and rejected. This was a stern word to Zedekiah whose heart had not in any way been moved to learn wisdom, let alone repentance, from all that had happened to the nation these many years. Read about his proud stupidity in 2 Kings 24:17-25:7; 2 Chron. 36:11-15. The astonishing thing was that the people still in Jerusalem with Zedekiah considered themselves "superior" to those who had been taken away captive. It is all too easy to consider (on the basis of past spirituality) that we are significant instruments of God when in fact we are rejected and the work of God has passed over into other hands which, although not appearing very important at the moment, will in time prove vital to God's cause and purpose.

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24:1-10

A last lesson has to be learned from this chapter especially since it seems that the whole section from chapters 21-26 was addressed to Zedekiah. Chapter 24 points back to the reign of Jehoiakim; chapter 25 goes back to the fourth year of Jehoiakim and chapter 26 goes further back to the first year of Jehoiakim. The lesson is this. Look back to when the nation first began to go astray and to when you personally first parted company with the Lord. That is the beginning of personal revival. For some of the Jews it took the terrible shock of failure and deportation to awaken them to repentance. It began to dawn on them that they had been taken away because of spiritual unfaithfulness. Such conviction can at times harden the heart into bitterness or turn the life away to be absorbed in worldly but profitable business, as indeed happened to many of the Jews in Babylon. Even when they got the chance years later to return to their land of promise and life they refused to do so. But there were some who learned the lessons of sore but gracious providence and for them there was a future of blessing. You can imagine how Jeremiah's prayers would be built on and inspired by the glorious promise of v.6-7. This is what he held on to as Jerusalem crumbled before his very eyes. With God there is a future. Without Him there is none.

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25:1-14

On the one hand this is a passage of immense comfort to ministers and missionaries whose labours and preaching of a lifetime have been rejected by a people of unbelief. Such are in the company of this great and gracious man Jeremiah, who could not in any sense be considered a failure or a weakling, even though he was capable of great suffering because of his sensitive nature. On the other hand this is a word of solemn warning and rebuke to a people who have heard the rich truth of God, full of the promises of grace, and who have yet refused to listen. It appears from Jer. 36 that this sermon was in fact committed to writing, read again and again until finally destroyed by an angry king, only to be re-written with further words added. The Word of God stands sure and cannot be disposed of by kings, scholars, ecclesiastics or false prophets. What God has spoken stands for ever. It is also true, as Judah and Jerusalem found to their cost.

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25:1-14

In this passage, in which Jeremiah is called "the prophet" for the first time, we see God the Lord as the governor of history and the guide of the destiny of His people and His work. A dark age of great desolation is prophesied (10-11) and its duration is to be long and yet limited to seventy years. Compare this with what is prophesied in Rev. 18:22-23 concerning the end of world history when all that is called "Babylon" will come to its terrible end of judgment. Little wonder the people of God are always called to come out from and be separate from complicity with God-rejecting Babylon, this world-order that neither knows nor wants God and His Christ (Rev. 18:1-4; 2 Cor. 6:14- 7:1). But never think of God as being under strain or pressure because of the sins and failure of His people. The dating of this passage is the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, and the very next year we find Daniel, in Babylon, interpreting the king's dream (Dan. 2:1). In due time, this very prophecy of Jeremiah led Daniel to recognise the coming near of a significant day in God's forward moving purposes and caused him to start praying with specific purpose and determination (Dan. 9:2-10ff). We need to know God's word if we are to be of use to the world in its tragic history. Jeremiah declared that Babylon's day of doom would come (12-14) and it came (Dan. 5:30-31). It could not be otherwise. God had spoken. Nebuchadnezzar was God's instrument for judgment and Cyrus in his turn was God's instrument for blessing and restoration. God is never short of servants. He raises them up for the very time they are needed, as He has spoken (Isa. 44:28-45:3; 2 Chron. 36:21-23; Ezra 1:1).

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25:15-38

This is a passage to be felt rather than scrutinised in detail. It concerns the irresistible and irreversible activity of God the Lord in judgment among all the nations. The day of the Lord has come, the day concerning which people had been so unbelieving, resting in false confidence. Judah is to be judged with Babylon as the instrument. Then in the outworking process Babylon would be judged by the nations. Then the judgment of the nations would come. It all takes time, but it is inevitable. In the judgment a special responsibility and guilt rests on the principals of the earth, the leaders of the nations (34ff). God works to bring to judgment all false rule and authority and to establish His own reign of righteousness. The government is indeed on His shoulder (Isa. 9:6-7). This is our comfort and assurance when the tides and tyrannies of evil surge apparently unchecked. When the cup of iniquity is full its retribution has to be accepted. None can refuse this cup (28). "Even Christ was obedient to the Father's will in drinking the cup of penal suffering for man. (Lk. 22:42)" (Harrison). In the end it is from the vantage point of the Cross that we must consider God's judgment. The Lamb slain is at the heart of the great white throne.

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26:1-6

This passage begins a section dealing with the personal experiences of the prophet at the hands of his contemporaries as a direct result of his ministry. It was becoming increasingly dangerous to be the messenger of God's truth, especially when the nation was becoming aware that here was a man who was not prepared to tailor his message to the prevailing nationalistic atmosphere of unfounded hope. It is not easy to call such a generation to repentance, because the pride of heart that led the people away from God was backed up by false and facile religion. This is clear from the "Temple Sermon" spoken of here (2) and recorded in detail earlier in 7:1-15, with God's observations on the situation detailed vividly in 7:16-20, 27-34. Little wonder, having been given such a word to preach, Jeremiah was urged to keep back none of it. No matter how apprehensive he might have been as to possible reaction he had no right to qualify or reduce the message. It was not his word but God's. This was Paul's own attitude in apostolic times (Acts 20:20-21, 26-27) and also in the charge he gave to his young ministers (2 Tim. 4:1-5). Note the realism of God in v.3, where He seems to hope against hope that there *might* be repentance and declares His willingness to avert the judgment and give new opportunity for blessing. This is what the New Testament calls the "longsuffering" of God (1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:9, 15). But the righteous God, who sees that sin can only destroy what is precious, is equally clear that judgment must come on the impenitent and disobedient. The Jews are told that their Temple, which they had virtually made into an idol substitute for God, will be abandoned (by God) and made desolate, as Shiloh was when the Philistines captured the Ark. God means business.

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26:7-19

The immediate reaction of the religious community to this kind of preaching was one of rage and indignation which caused them to enlist the aid of the secular authorities to put an end to it. Note that popular opinion consented to the actions of the "spiritual" leaders, failing totally to recognise that Jeremiah was in fact the spiritual guide of the nation. The kind of preaching that tells people they are God's people, regardless of evidences to the contrary, will always be more acceptable than the stark truth of a call to repentance. It could have been, of course, that the people had a fearful apprehension that Jeremiah might be right. If this was so we see the blindness and stupidity of unbelief which evades rather than faces up to issues of importance. The amazing thing is that the wild antagonism of the religious establishment simply drew attention to Jeremiah's message and their requested intervention by the secular authorities served to preserve the prophet and guarantee the continuance of his ministry. The Devil can never outsmart God! God makes the wrath of men to praise Him (Ps. 76:10AV). It was in the interest of justice not faith that the rulers acted, but it served God's cause. We see this in Paul's experience also (Acts 23:10ff and 23ff) and in his appeal to Caesar (Acts 25: 1-12; cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-4). God over-ruled in the case of Jeremiah bringing temporary safety, but leaving the man to walk on a razor edge of danger. The prophet walked that narrow road in faithful obedience. But do not forget the intensity of hate that must have pressed in on him from then on (cf. Acts 21:27-36).

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26:7-19

Note the similarity here to the trial of Jesus. Like Pilate, the rulers answered the priests and false prophets declaring that their victim was innocent. By this time the people were somewhat calmed and listened to the argument of the case. Jeremiah stated his case simply. He spoke from God and said God would do as He had declared. It is at this point that we must sense something of the testimony and influence of the prophet within the nation. Although his ministry had been rejected his personal integrity had made an impression. Note how the people as well as the princes now stood by the man's innocence. They recognised the voice of God through Jeremiah even if they still rejected the message and refused obedience to it. Then some of the elders, who had longer memories than impetuous youth or careless middle-age, recalled past spiritual crises in the time of Micah and Hezekiah, drew the obvious lesson from history, and pointed out the suicidal course these decadent priests and false prophets were leading the nation into. For a hundred years Micah had been honoured as a true prophet and his message had been every bit as stern as Jeremiah's (Mic. 3:12). Yet the very king had humbled himself under the Word and the nation had lived on until now. This was powerful argument, and the wolves who were after the prophet's blood were restrained, but not stopped, as tomorrow's verses tell.

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26:20-24

The priests and prophets make a further attempt on Jeremiah's life. They counter the example of the elders, which referred to Micah, of a hundred years previously, by speaking of the case of Uriah (about whom we know nothing), a contemporary prophet who, because of his strong ministry of judgment, paid the penalty of death at the hands of the king. Since few, if any, of us have ever faced death for the Gospel's sake, we are not in a position to criticise this prophet for fleeing the country. Elijah fled the scene for over three years after announcing God's judgment of famine (1 Kings 17:1-5ff.) and he did so at God's command. Uriah fled to Egypt (and that may have symbolic significance) and his action could be construed as sedition. It may have been for this, but more possibly in order to silence his ministry and erase his influence, that he was extradited from Egypt and executed. Sometimes God's men are saved from death, sometimes not (Acts 12:1-5). What would have happened if Uriah had stood his ground we cannot tell. But all was not loss. Elnathan, one of the arresting party sent to Egypt, seems to have been moved to faith because later we find him, still in a position of authority in government, pleading on behalf of the retention of the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies (36:12-13, 22-25). It was an ineffectual plea, but it was made, and who can tell but that some other secret disciple was strengthened as a result. Remember Nicodemus (John 7:50-52), Joseph (Luke 23:50-53) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-39). There are times we cannot do all we want to do for the testimony of God, but we must see to it that we do what is possible and suitable for both time and place.

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26:20-24

In this complicated and dangerous situation where so much centres on the key figures of the prophets and their enemies, consider, for our encouragement, the wonderful part played by a man who was a servant of the servant of God. Ahikam was to Jeremiah what Jonathan was to David (1 Sam. 23:15-18). Our Lord had the same quiet loyalty of service from some whose names we do not know (Matt. 27:55; Lk. 8:1-3). Paul had similar helpers, discreet and dependable for Jesus' sake (Rom. 16:1-4; 1 Tim. 2:16). Such service is often misunderstood and seldom valued except by those who are at the receiving end of it. They give thanks to God for friends like these. Ahikam had been one of the deputation sent by good king Josiah to Huldah the prophetess. It was his father who read the rediscovered book of the law to Josiah and then, in his official capacity as scribe, accompanied those sent to enquire of Huldah (2 Kings 22:18-24). One of Ahikam's sons, Gedaliah, showed later the continued friendship of this distinguished family to the prophet (Jer. 40:5-6) and, as we shall see later in our studies he paid a high price for his spiritual integrity. Ahikam's brother Elasah was involved in spiritual service (29:3) and another brother Gemariah was also a man of wisdom and conviction (36:25). It is virtually impossible to calculate the spiritual influence of a family brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. What encouragement and challenge this should be to parents and to all who pray for the rising generation. Who knows but that our children are marked out by God for such a time as this.

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By the time of Zedekiah there had already been two waves of exiles taken away into captivity and it must have been an encouragement to Jeremiah to know that in Babylon Daniel and Ezekiel were maintaining the same testimony as himself. There is a suggestion that chapters 27-29 were a pamphlet circulated among the exiles to teach them and to disabuse their minds regarding any possibility of an early or easy revival of their national fortunes. They had to learn to put their trust in God not in politics. Zedekiah was the last king of what was now only a semi-independent Judah and he ruled as a puppet of Babylon (2 Kings 24: 15-20; 2 Chron. 36:9-21). Judah had to learn that their own choices, sins, rebellions and backslidings had created the situation which now harassed and threatened them. What they had to accept now was the necessity of submitting to the disciplines of God as the only hope for a new beginning in the future. This future of hope was seventy years away. It is not easy to accept that spiritual and moral stupidity and pride can cause that kind of complication; but the sooner men and nations learn this the better, for the clearly stated designs of God cannot be turned aside. He never acts in haste but when He does act it is with thoroughness. This is the message of the thongs and yoke-bars given to the messengers from the five neighbouring kingdoms who came to Zedekiah. (In AV. the first verse names the king, Jehoiakim, but from v.3, 12, 20 and 28:1 it is clear that Zedekiah is meant.) These five kingdoms lay in the path of Babylon's march to Jerusalem and they were planning a combined resistance. But God had a word for them.

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In some ways this is a solemn word yet it is full of comfort. Men always have the tendency to take things into their own hands and to try to force situations to work out as they think best. This is part of human blindness and the deification of the human will. But God reminds nations here that He and He alone is the Creator of all the earth and the Disposer of all things. It is God who rules in the kingdoms of men, and He it is who raises up thrones and empires and in due time casts them down in accordance with His wise and perfect will (Dan. 4:17). Judah and her neighbours must accept that this is Nebuchadnezzar's time and he must carry all before him until his time runs out. To refuse to submit to his powerful yoke would be folly and disaster. All attempts at resistance however inspired and motivated would fail. No one should listen to false prophets, with their groundless optimism, nor to the speculators in prediction, for they are all liars. God had spoken. His word is confirmed by what had already happened. The first wave of the captivity was already history and men had to learn to read the signs of the times. But this requires a close walk with God and an attentive submission to the instruction of His Word. Apart from this, our "ideas" take over and lead us into confusion. Since God is God and rules over all, we need not lapse into terror when the powers of evil surge across the nations. The throne of God cannot be shaken and by faith His people can serve Him faithfully and fruitfully even under the yoke of Babylon, whoever Babylon may be. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God who can change circumstances so swiftly that men are left gasping in astonishment. It is the will of man that is sore and shattering. The will of God is life and peace for the yoke is easy with Christ (Matt. 11:29-30).

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It is always a grief to see people refusing the life-giving yoke of God's providential discipline because they can only hurt themselves. It is doubly grievous when you can do nothing to help them because they will not listen to you. The trouble with the king was that he listened to the wrong voices and there was less excuse for him than for the surrounding nations who had not lived under the gracious ministry of the prophets of God. There is a fatal fascination in "new" voices, particularly if they are enthusiastically optimistic as opposed to the Jeremiah type of ministry with its long projected view into the future. But the trouble with such voices is that they lead into ill-considered activity which serves no other end than to hinder the purposes of God. It is never justifiable or excusable to become party to such things. This was the word to the king whose position was precarious to say the least and to the priests and people beguiled by false prophets, who reiterated a message of unqualified hope and promised a swift reversal of misfortune and a return to God's blessing. When the messengers of God are adrift spiritually in any generation there will be a refusal to acknowledge how bad things really are; a

determination to believe that the worst will not happen; and an equal determination to remedy the situation by human manipulation rather than submission to God. We must be careful to walk by faith and not by the determination of our unteachable wills.

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28:1-17

The trouble with preaching is that many people hear only what they want to hear especially if they are more taken up with ecclesiastical buildings, furniture and procedure than with God and His truth. Jeremiah finds himself confronted publicly in the House of God by a prophet who contradicts his message of judgment in the most sweeping and scathing terms. According to this man, the worst is already past, there will be no more deportation, and the temple vessels already taken away to Babylon will be returned intact. He prophesies also that within two years the exiled king and people will be reinstated in their own land. This was the kind of "encouraging" preaching the people wanted to hear, whether or not it was true. But note how calmly Jeremiah replies. His "Amen", or "So be it", may have been spoken in a tone of disbelief or even scorn but it was his calm assessment of the future prospect that carried weight. He said simply that he was prepared to wait the two years to see whether or not the prophet's message would be fulfilled and then all would know who in fact spoke according to God: Jeremiah or Hananiah. This is something we need to learn, not least to save ourselves from ecclesiastical wrangling that can be so much waste of breath because people have no desire to face the evidence of facts. When things foretold actually come to pass, and religious establishments and nations collapse, the argument is concluded. Hananiah had a fierce reaction to the calmness of Jeremiah and was determined to "wipe the floor" with him and discredit both the man and his ministry (10-11). The encounter closed with the false prophet apparently having had the last word. But God always speaks last, confirming His word, pronouncing His verdict, and allowing history to testify to the truth (12-17).

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29:1-14

God's work takes time and we must address ourselves to it with the patience of faith and not with the shallow optimism of wishful thinking that declines to sit under the gracious instruction of the Word that comes from God. Of course, patience is not the same as the inertia of despairing disbelief, it is confidence in the expectation of God's tomorrow. It appears here that Jeremiah heard of the ministry of false prophets among the Jews already exiled in Babylon (Daniel and Ezekiel must have had a hard time of it), and he writes to them in urgent terms, sending the letter quite openly and through the accepted diplomatic channels, as if to reassure the King of Babylon that there was no insurrection planned by the Jews. Jeremiah urges the Jews in Babylon to accept their situation, to settle down in it, and in spite of the fulminations of false prophets to refuse to take the situation into their own hands. If they had, it would have been disastrous for it would have brought the wrath of the king of Babylon on the Jews, possibly to the point of extermination. Where then would the future, God's future, find the men and women needed for that further stage of God's work already surely planned? Think how narrowly the Jews escaped extermination in the story of Esther! Why is it that our first reaction to adverse circumstances is rebellion and a determination to change them at the earliest possible moment? Granted there is a time to resist the advance of evil power, as Hezekiah did, encouraged by the prophet Isaiah. But there is a time to accept, to submit and to begin to learn the necessary lessons of affliction. Psalm 137:1-4 tells of vexation under sore circumstances rather than the faith that looks to God for explanation, interpretation and, in time, intervention.

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29:1-14

There is a searching lesson to be learned from v.4-7, confirmed by such New Testament passages as Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-3; Titus 3:1. We are to pray for and give respect and loyalty to the state, even when its administration falls far short of what we would call Christian. What is more, we are to pray for its blessing and prosperity and we are to refuse to listen to the voices that counsel rebellion and anarchy. If we complain and say that the state is persecuting the church, then we must ask, as the Jews had to ask themselves, why the people of God are found in such dire straits. The root cause is sin and disobedience, but we have to go far back in the story to discover just where a people or a nation first went off the high road of holiness. God's ways are long-

term and very thorough. Never lose sight of v.10-14, especially v.11, with their glorious word of hope. Of course, it was the nation and the work and not these individuals (rather their grandchildren) who would experience all these blessings. At the same time, the present generation and its children had their part to play. God's persistent plan to bless His people is securely bound together with His people's attitudes and actions. When will we learn to seek the Lord with our whole heart? We must encourage each other to do so. This is the fellowship of the saints.

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29:15-32

The Jews in Babylon were rather proud of the new race of prophets raised up among them, and with such ministry among them they were not disposed to believe that God could really be angry with them. They concluded that they were as good as on their way back to Jerusalem to set the place on its feet again. No doubt the exiles, being the "cream" of the nation, despised the very ordinary people left in Judah. But the prophet points out that it would be disastrous for them to return because God was in the process of bringing judgment on the remainder in Jerusalem because of their persistent rejection of Him and all His words. When God is on the march there is no where to run to. Stand where you are and wait for the developing of His purposes of grace. But Jeremiah has strong word for the exiles and their adulation of these lying prophets. Link verses 15 and 23. Strange prophets indeed! They lived terrible lives and with their words they were leading God's people, in a time of crisis, into wrong and disastrous ways. But God knows! (23) He always does. These wicked liars would be dealt with by the king of Babylon and they would be remembered by the Jews as men who defied God and brought evil on the people. God is the One with whom men have to do. This can be a grim thought (Rom. 12:1-21) or a very comforting one (Zech. 2:5, 8), depending on your viewpoint.

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29:15-32

God is the great authority on what goes on behind the scenes and, as Jesus said, there is nothing secret which will not be brought out into the open (Lk. 12:2-3). We must be careful what we say or do in respect of God's work and His prophets. Shemaiah, in Babylon, had tried to invoke the authority of the High Priest in Jerusalem to put an end to Jeremiah's ministry. He seemed sure that there would be a general willingness to persecute Jeremiah, as there had been earlier in his ministry (20:1-2). But on this occasion the religious authorities sided with Jeremiah, as the secular princes had done in 26:16, and the letter was read to the prophet. Just why this happened in this way we cannot say. It may have been that the sheer integrity of the prophet and his ministry over the years was beginning to impress even the religious establishment which, through unbelief, simply did not realise the full scope of what God was doing. Perhaps we should see here a fulfilment of the word of encouragement given to Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry (1:7-10). In quiet soberness the word of judgment is spoken against Shemaiah because of his instigation of spiritual rebellion. He was to lose his place and share in the good purpose God was planning for the future. This is indeed great and irreparable loss. We must not trifle with what belongs to God because He sets such value on it. Do not fail to see here the activity of the Devil assailing a future work almost before its initial stages have begun. Always be faithful in prayer for ministers and missionaries at the start of their work. Foundation work is vital because, as in this case, it was to carry the next hundred years.

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30:1-2

These words introduce a section of four chapters just brimming with words of hope but, before our detailed study, a summary of the previous section is needed. Chapters 27-29 constitute a letter to the exiles urging them always to interpret experience by the Word of God and not vice versa. We must listen to the right voices, guard against false prophets with their deceitful hopes, and recognise that God takes time to move forward His purposes. Because of this we must humble ourselves under God's mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6-10) and learn to accept situations as they are even if we wish them to be different. We must learn to live with situations because God is working and we must not be surprised by trial and persecution (1 Pet. 4:12-19). Learn what God is like and learn to walk with Him. Leave the rest to God. Wherever there is an authentic work there will always be the activity of Satan. It has always been so and will be so to the end of time. In spite of this, regardless of present

circumstances, the man of faith stands his ground in God and looks with expectation to the future. Our hope in God is a sure anchor (Heb. 6:19). We are saved in hope (Rom. 8: 24-25), and we rejoice even when circumstances seem to make hope impossible of fulfilment. Some six years seem to have passed since the conflict with the false prophets (28:1; 32:1), Jerusalem is in the power of Babylon and Jeremiah is in prison. These are the circumstances of the words of grace and glory we are about to study.

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30:3-11

Jeremiah is commanded to write down all his sermons so that there will be in the hands of the people a continuing testimony to God's word and to the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping God. This book would be a guide and inspiration to generations to come and this thought indicates the emphasis of the passage. What Judah is experiencing in the sore travail that is shattering them is not disaster but discipline. These are not the pangs of death but the travail that is to bring forth new life. Hebrews 12:5-11 is a passage we need to know well. It explains much of our immediate experience in terms of the vast designs of God for our blessing. The language of the passage is vivid but God makes plain what He means. The first and continuing emphasis is on God at work *in grace for blessing* regardless of what appearances may suggest (3, 10-11a). But it is by a process rather than one cataclysmic event that new life is born and once that painful process begins it cannot be stopped (5-7). "The time of Jacob's trouble" has come, but the end of it is deliverance in order to be God's people, serving Him in gladness of heart. But we must look beyond even the restoration of the Jews to their land and see the issue in terms of spiritual and eternal factors. "Here is the sum of the matter: the old Judah travailed in Babylon, and a new nation was born; the new nation travailed in the land, and Messiah was born; Messiah travailed on the Cross, and a Church was born; the Church travails to bring men to the birth in Christ, and from these pains a 'new heaven and a new earth' will be born. Beyond that, there is no more travail." (Swanson)

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30:12-17

If the previous passage spoke of assurances of restoration (and how we need such reassurance) this passage speaks of the healing of wounds. This thought of the restoration of health, the recovery from brokenness and the reinstatement of life and personality is the glory of the Gospel. God does not merely save our souls, He heals us, gives us back life, strength, vitality and identity, and makes us real people with hope for the future and useful, creative function in the present. The picture given is of a fallen woman now abandoned by her "lovers" who had simply made use of her. She is left now with the brokenness and misery of her own chosen way of life. No one cares (Ps. 142: 4 AV), but God still recognises His own and makes the most glorious promise in v.17. How often we doubt God's motives and think He has pleasure in our hurt and misery. He deals with us as a Father must but it is for our blessing (Lam. 3:31-33; Job 5:17-18). It was desolating for Judah to identify the nation with what the woman was and what she had become, and to feel that the future could only be a continuing degeneration. It is hellish and hopeless to feel trapped, not by circumstances but by what we are, especially when we are aware of that within us which would rebel against all caution and go the way of evil. This is the wretchedness from which Christ delivers us (Rom. 7: 15-25) and it is while we are still in this brokenness and bondage that God commands His love to us (Rom. 5:8). God is indeed the Great Physician.

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30:18-24

The restoration promised by God in His grace is now described and it scarcely needs comment. There will be a spirit of praise, thanksgiving and rejoicing (19), for the restored people will not in any sense be a miserable remnant. How much we need to grasp the true dimensions of what we are involved in as the people of God. When the Jews did return to their land they had to be instructed about this because of their tendency to limit the glory of God to what they had seen and experienced in the past (Hag. 2:9; Zech. 2:1-5). God is bigger, His ways vaster, and His determination to bless His people far more radical than any of us have yet grasped. Even our imagination (sanctified for safety) cannot picture the extent of God's plans for blessing (1 Cor. 2:9 A.V.). We must live in the faith of this and refuse to let the Devil steal our hope from us. The best is yet to be and we must press on into it (Phil. 3:13-14). The Prince and Ruler who will govern God's people for their blessing will be of their own race and nature, one of themselves, not only a son of Abraham but a son of Adam (Matt. 1:1; Lk.

3:38; cf. Acts 5:31). This princely ruler given to the people (Isa. 9:6-7) is also appointed to draw near to God as a Priest on behalf of the people. He does not take this function of his own accord (Heb. 5: 4-6) and, being of the people, He is fitted and qualified to act for them with compassion and understanding (Heb. 4:15). It is the King who is Priest (Ps. 110; Zech. 6:11-15) and a people with such a great High Priest is the people of God and God is their God. When He begins a work He sees it through to the end (24).

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31:1-6

The explanation of the planned blessings spoken of yesterday is simply God's love for us. Why He should love us at all is a mystery and why He should love to such an extent is quite beyond our grasp. But we can and do learn something of God's love, its tenderness, strength, intimacy and desirability when we are led by God into long stretches of desert experience. In times like these, painful and lonely as they can sometimes be, there are few distractions and God gets a chance to reach and touch the hearts of those He loves. It is amazing how much the cares and pleasures and the legitimate toil of this world can preoccupy us, to such an extent that we just have not time or energy to be available for God. There are human marriages which end on the rocks because two people are so occupied with their respective interests that they take each other for granted. Love cannot breathe and grow in such an uncondusive atmosphere and it dies or is stifled. Many rediscover their love when circumstances of disaster and privation bring them together again. Such a rediscovery has exquisite blessing in it and this is exactly what the God of love is speaking about here. Read Hosea 2:14-23, then consider the phrase "everlasting love" which God professes for His people. It is love from vanishing point to vanishing point, ageless as God Himself, limitless in its scope, passing knowledge and leaving us floundering in our attempts to measure and comprehend it. We cannot drift or sink or run beyond its living active care. Whether we are aware of it or not that love is planning and preparing blessing for us. There is indeed "a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will." (Shakespeare)

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31:1-6

What better way is there to prepare for a Sunday than to consider again the amazing love and grace of the God of our salvation? We are commanded to do so in 1 John 3:1-3. This everlasting love is spoken of in terms of God's continuing faithfulness to His people; He is good and nothing but good to His own (Ps. 73:1). The word "faithfulness" (RSV) is translated "unfailing care" (NEB) and "loving-kindness" (NIV). It is a word that signifies God bending down to His children with the intention of blessing. It is a gentle, reassuring and strong word. It signifies not only what God has been in the past and what His present attitude is, but also His intentions with regard to the future. God has not only drawn His people to Himself in the past, He continues to do so, and declares that with loving kindness He will gently draw His people home again. Isaiah has a similar word to this (Isa. 54: 7-8, 10-11, 17). No matter how much His chosen ones have sinned and grieved Him, God still wants them for Himself and in love He works to purge them from all their sins. They will be God's virgin people, pledged to Him in purity (cf. Eph. 5:25-27). They will learn to enjoy their God in holy pleasure (4b) and they will be satisfied and blessed in His goodness (14) to such an extent that multitudes of prodigals will be drawn back to the Father's home. This is indeed love that passes knowledge (Eph. 3:14-21).

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31:7-14

In yesterdays passage when God spoke of Israel as a "virgin" we see how He held to the possibilities yet open to His children in spite of the stains, scars, contradictions and complications of sin. This is a great word for backsliders, especially when they have reached the stage of being disillusioned by the deceitful hurt of sin. There is in this passage, which is so full of encouragement, an exuberance of joy as the people begin to taste the sweetness of a new surrender to the Lord. When God turns the captivity of His people (Ps. 126), everything is so transformed that it is almost too good to be true. At this point the Devil will see to it that some will feel too bad and too broken to be included in such promised blessing. We must be careful that this is not just a form of inverted pride. In any case God points out in v.8 that even the weakest are included. It is not without sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8-11) although the sorrow is mingled with comfort (9). It is not easy to walk the road back to fellowship with God and to renewed service but God pledges Himself to sustain His children because He has in fact

delivered them from the hand and power of the enemy (11, cf. Col. 1:12-14). The picture at the end of v.14 is very beautiful. But it is not to be wondered at because we have a wonderful God.

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31:15-26

The first half of this passage seems to speak of the present sad experiences of Israel rather than their glorious future of hope. Rachel, mother of Joseph (and so of Ephraim) and of Benjamin had been buried near Ramah and she is pictured here weeping afresh, like a bereaved mother, over the exile of her children. She sorrows over the curse of sin and its price. This theme is taken up in Matt. 2:16-18. There is a desolation in sin which only God can remedy, and in Jeremiah God is seen as the One who wipes away the tears (Rev. 7:17) and speaks words of hope (16-17). But God is also shown as a father who shares in the anguish of his rebellious, disciplined, repentant child (18, 20. cf. Isa. 63:7-10). In v.20, where Ephraim is described as a favourite son, the central part of the verse could read: "As often as I mention his name his memory haunts Me. Thus does My heart yearn for him." Since that is God's attitude, how sweet it must be to His ears to hear His erring children pray, "Bring me back" (18). Think of Wesley's great hymn, "O Jesus, full of pardoning grace", especially the lines,

"Thou know'st the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit to restore;
O, for Thy truth and mercy's sake,
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.

Ah! give me, Lord, the tender heart
That trembles at the approach of sin;
A godly fear of sin impart,
Implant and root it deep within,
That I may dread Thy gracious power,
And never dare offend Thee more."

If the chastening of God and our own regrets produce prayer like that there is hope for the future.

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31:15-26

One of the frightening things about being adrift from God is that we get lost and, being lost, we lose our sense of direction, which leads to further lostness and eventually to a sense of demoralisation in which we lose the very desire to return. It is always dangerous to backslide, even if we mean it to be only a brief excursion into worldliness and sin. The prayer, "Bring me back," is a recognition that the first move in repentance and restoration always lies with the grace of God. "Turn me and I shall be turned," (v.18 AV, cf. Acts 5:31; 11:18). But this "given" repentance operates in the context of the proclaimed word of God's grace. This is why we must be attentive lest we miss God when He speaks (Rom. 10:14-18; Heb. 4:1-2). Israel is told to mark carefully the road away from God, because this will prove to be the way back. There will be a retracing of steps. The only remedy for departing from God is a return to God in penitence. The way of the transgressor is hard (Prov. 13:15 AV); he walks it in both directions! The second half of v.22 is difficult, but seems to indicate a reversal of experience as a result of the grace of God. The erring woman, instead of flirting with other lovers, will set herself to "compass" (AV), to win again the love of her husband. In days when the love of God is poured out on the returned prodigal religious terminology will have a new meaning, and when people say, "God bless you," it will mean something livingly wonderful. Pray for that day to come to our broken land.

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31:27-30

In order to divide these chapters into sections for study we do well to emphasise the recurring theme, "This is what the Lord says," (31:2, 7, 10, 15, 16, 23, 27, 31, 35, 38). There is a glorious persistence about God and this is our hope and comfort, even though at times it sets a deep spirit of awe in our hearts. The prospect of future days of blessing is very sweet to the prophet, almost like a dream (26), but when he awakens it is to stark reality though this in no way minimises the glory of the coming blessing which he has seen and proclaimed. The emphasis is on the careful and deliberate activity of God. This is what people have to learn to see in the ongoing affairs of both church and nation. Things are neither incidental nor accidental. All of us, like the Jews, are prone to blame anyone and anything for our predicament. This is the attitude God takes to task in v.29. The exiles were prone to feel that God was judging them unjustly and claimed they were the victims of the blunders of those who had gone before them (Lam. 5:7; Ezek. 18:1-9ff). Granted sin does perpetuate itself from generation to generation, but the children of sinful fathers need not capitulate to their circumstances and heredity, because God has provided for the tyranny of sin to be broken. This theme of each person, family and generation being responsible for its own sin was no new doctrine in Jeremiah's time, for it is stated in God's law in Deut. 24:16. We are all too prone to make excuses, but God is just.

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31:27-30

This note was originally written on the day of the General Election (1974) described as the most vital since the end of the war in 1945. The national predicament is great and we must learn to pray for all who rule whatever their political colour or philosophy (1 Tim. 2:1-4; Rom. 12: 1-7). At the same time we must get our eyes off men to focus them on God, not only to have hope but to have circumstances interpreted to us. In this chapter, as elsewhere, the Word speaks of the blessing of field flock and family (12, 24, 26) and the Rev. T. Swanston comments on this, "The new teeming life will infect all creation, the seed of man and beast abounding. Note the recurrence of a major theme in the prophets, that animal and inanimate nature are wrong because *human* nature is wrong. When Adam sinned, all creation fell with him. This is why God's spokesmen could preach eloquently on pastures withering for lack of rain, on wild creatures panting for air in the hot blasts of the sirocco, on shrivelled harvests and dried up water courses, on un-natural apparitions and disturbances in the heavenly bodies, on moons being turned to blood and stars falling in their courses. But when man's nature is saved, so is the universe! 'Earth and sea and stars and mankind, by that stream (of Christ's blood) are cleansed all!' Link these thoughts with Christ's temptation in the wilderness, when it is recorded that 'He was with the wild beasts' receiving their homage, their worth ship, as Lord of creation . Go to Romans 8:18ff. where Paul speaks of a creation with a 'sob at its heart', groaning and travailing, waiting the final redemption, the glorious liberation of the sons of God, in which creation itself is to be set free from its laws of vanity, futility and bondage." Listen to the outcome of the Election from that standpoint and do not be afraid of the travail to come. God is our hope. But His methods are radical.

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31:31-34

The promise of the tremendous transformation God is going to work in and for this sinful people raises a problem. In the light of past experience, how is it to be accomplished? They must be made a new people, with new hearts, and this is exactly what God says He will do. There had already been a covenant between God and his people to which God, having pledged Himself, remained faithful. But the people broke the covenant again and again, refusing to be, and to live the life of, a covenant people. They had God's law, with all its gracious intent, but it was external and objective standing over them to challenge, exhort and condemn as well as to bless. But it served to expose the weakness and inability of the people to fulfil the law no matter how much they tasted of God's goodness nor how often they felt gratitude for His benefits. They had their better times as a people and showed some of their possibilities in certain circumstances. But it was like the experience of some brought into contact with Christian grace, fellowship, truth and worship. So long as people are associating regularly with Christians they may well go straight and even change their manner of life. But detach a person from the restraints and encouragements of a Christian fellowship (which they have never really made themselves part of), let them go out into different company and circumstances where there are both the

opportunity and the temptation to give way to the baser impulses of human nature and things will be different. Association with and even imitation of Christian things are not the same as having a new heart. This is God's promise.

"A heart in every thought renewed,
And full of love divine,
Perfect and right and pure and good.
A copy, Lord, of Thine."

(Wesley)

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31:31-34

This passage is quoted in Heb. 8:6-13; 10:14-18. Read also Matt. 26:26-28, and 1 Cor. 11:23-26. What God promises to do here in Jeremiah is fulfilled ultimately in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the objective is expressed wonderfully in Rom. 8:1-4. God covenants or pledges to save and keep a people for Himself. He makes and declares this intention without consultation or qualification. God is committed. The blessing of this covenant will come to the people as they consent and yield to its terms. This yielding will not be by the law of command and constraint but freely and willingly with the consent of hearts made new. God does not in any sense lower His demands already made plain in the law which is a revelation of His righteousness. He refashions the hearts of men. They are born again from above (John 1:12, 13; 3:3-7), made new creatures with the very life of God within them (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20) so that they delight (as Jesus did) to do the will of the Father, proving that will to be life, peace and joy. God pledges Himself to be His people's God (33). It is a personal and individual matter which has the glorious element of fellowship in it (34). Within that fellowship and indeed undergirding it is the assurance of forgiveness. The love of sinning is taken from the people and the thought of it is erased from the mind and heart of God for ever. Read the words of Micah 7:18-20. Why should any ransomed sinner ever play false to such a covenant?

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31:35-40

In the first part of the passage the God of Creation swears by Himself to confirm the covenant (Heb. 6:13-20). So long as the created order of the world continues so long will God's promise hold good. After that there will be no need of promise because fulfilment will have come. God Himself is the guarantor of His people's salvation and perseverance (Rom. 8:28-30). Nothing can be surer than that. This is our peace. Even the gates of Hell shall be powerless against the Lord when He builds again His Jerusalem. The city spoken of in the final section of the passage cannot be a merely earthly Jerusalem. It must be the glorious, eternal city yet to be revealed (Rev. 21:9ff). It is a city or a work to be built securely, extended and sanctified unto the Lord. Even the places of pollution and darkness will be sanctified in that day. So vast is this concept that only the zeal of the Lord Himself can possibly accomplish it (Isa. 9:6-7; 40:1-5). This great God, so eager to commit Himself to His people, trusting them when they dare not trust themselves, is our God. The future is His and consequently ours (1 Cor. 3:21-23). Our times are in His hand, and we would not have it otherwise.

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32:1-5

God is always the God with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13) and we are never allowed to be mere spectators. However much we like to detach ourselves, assess current affairs both spiritual and secular, and pass our opinion as to the relative merits and demerits of individuals and activities, we cannot help being involved. That involvement will always be on the basis of culpable unbelief or saving faith, both of which have significant consequences. In these verses we have the story of the king who is strangely fascinated by the prophet and his message yet stands against both. Later in chapter 38:14-28 we will read of clandestine meetings at the king's instigation and an apparent desire to believe God's message. Of course the king may have been more attracted to the grace, integrity and stability of the prophet than to the prophet's ministry, and this is not faith. The one thing the king seems unwilling to do in today's verses is to commit himself in the trust of obedience to God. It was a critical situation. Zedekiah, who was only a puppet king under the dominance of Nebuchadnezzar, had succumbed to the influence of the nationalist politicians and had rebelled against Babylon (2 Kings 25:1-2). As

a result the army of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem for two and a half years, gradually reducing it to disaster and inevitable surrender. We are told in today's passage (v.1 cf. 2 Kings 24:18; 25:2, 8) that there was still one year to go before the final collapse. Jerusalem was under siege and Jeremiah was in prison at the king's command. But the king was not too sure of his own actions and he questioned the prophet (3-5), having a strong feeling that the prophet might be right. No doubt Jeremiah explained his preaching by saying simply that it was true. It was not a sermon that the king wanted to hear, and instead of reacting in faith he did what many people do in similar circumstances he decided to silence the prophet. He did not succeed (he even went to discuss things with the rejected prophet) but even if he had succeeded the events prophesied would still have come to pass. God is neither controlled nor hindered by men's temperamental reactions.

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32:6-8

We are all at times deeply concerned as to how we can know the will of God for us in specific situations. There is no easy answer to this and, apart from visions, voices and miracles of confirmation, which are generally speaking concessions to weakness rather than signs of spiritual strength, we have to confess that "we just know it is of God". This seems to be the case here with Jeremiah. He *may* have had a premonition of the visit of his cousin, Hanamel, or it *may* have been that he was expecting a visit from his relative since the "prison" seems to have been the "open" type. No doubt Jeremiah, man of prayer as he was, had been seeking God's mind on the present situation and expecting that God, who has a specific will for His children in all circumstances, would indicate the next step to him. It *may* have been that as soon as his cousin appeared the prophet "knew" that this was the beginning of the answer to his prayer (cf. 1 Kings 14: 1-6; Acts 10:1-23). In these references note how God is shown to be working at both ends of the situation and how Peter is uncertain and only gradually realises the sure guidance of God. In Jeremiah's story the man is obviously expecting God to do something because He would not leave His prophet "high and dry" with his work incomplete. But at the same time Jeremiah was a man who always used his head, reading the signs of the times and exercising the "understanding of faith" (Heb. 11:3; cf. Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 1:18, AV; 4:18; 5:15-17). When Hanamel came with what seemed a grossly selfish though legal proposition, Jeremiah knew his guidance had come.

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32:9-15

Jeremiah acted at once on what he was persuaded was the guidance of God, even though it seems to have involved him in the certain loss of seventeen shekels of silver, no small sum however calculated. Right through his ministry Jeremiah had insisted that God's present dealings with His people were not to be understood in terms of final extinction. There would be a remnant returning to the land (5:10, 18; 29:10-14; 31:8-14). But this fact is hard to grasp when the whole sky of experience is black with the clouds of disaster. It is doubtful if Hanamel had any grasp on this spiritual truth. The field he owned was already in enemy hands and when he made the offer of sale to Jeremiah on the basis of the laws governing land tenure in Lev. 25:23-34, he may have acted only on the basis of business ruthlessness assuming that Jeremiah, being in jail and likely to be executed, would have no use for any money he had. Any person with knowledge of the business world knows that to this day some relatives and "friends" have few scruples when profit is concerned. On the other hand the man may have been under pressure because of extreme poverty and assumed that, because Jeremiah had hope for the future, he was the one to deal with. Whatever the motivation, the transaction was settled, documented and sealed both privately and publicly. The sealed deed was placed in safe custody by Jeremiah's lawyer, Baruch, so that seventy years later there would be testimony to faith, and a confirmation of the dependability and trustworthiness of God and His word. The open copy was possibly stuck up on a notice board outside the office of the registrar of land deals, to give present testimony to faith in the person of Jeremiah who believed that God would do as He had said (Acts. 27:21-26; Heb. 11:6, 17-19; Rom. 4:18-21).

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32:16-25

Having acted in the obedience of faith, having committed himself privately and publicly, and now being left alone in the silence of inactivity (there was no action whatever that he could take) Jeremiah, true to his spiritual integrity, turns to God in prayer. It, is a magnificent: prayer of worship, centred on God (his soul magnified the

Lord cf.Luke 1:46) and having two emphases: the God of the people (17-22) and the people of God (23-25). But, we must not miss the significant fact that it is a prayer of questioning, for at the end Jeremiah expresses astonishment. He cannot fully understand God's ways and he is amazed at the methods of His providence. Jeremiah is very human (one of the reasons he was so much use to God) and for a moment he is so fascinated by the present fulfilment of God's warning about the nation's judgment that he fails to grasp the equal sureness of God's word regarding the future. This is astonishing in view of his own utterance of confidence in v.17. It may be that the prophet's awareness of the persistence and intransigence of unbelief on the part of the people clouded his confidence in God and so diffused a spirit of doubt in his feelings which overcame the convictions of his mind. If this is so then we must see here an attack by the Devil against the man who was so significant in this crisis stage of God's work. The last word in v.25 (AV and RSV) is the "Chaldeans"(Babylonians). But the last word is with God. It always is.

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32:16-25

In his prayer Jeremiah declares the greatness of God in creation (17), mercy (18), judgment (19), history (20), redemption (21), faithfulness (22) and determination (22-24). This is how to pray. It is prayer grounded in and stemming from the teaching of Scripture, because the man makes reference again and again to Israel's past experiences at the hand of God. It is prayer which looks to God and remains grounded in God, and this is how the great men of old prayed. They seldom knew just how far reaching the answers to their prayers would be. At this precise moment Jeremiah was not aware of the part his own experience would play in the fortunes of God's people ten decades later. We have seen how this prophet's preaching was recorded in written form (30:2). These and similar books of prophetic writing may have been read little by contemporaries, but in time to come these very sermons became the instrument of God by the Holy Spirit to kindle faith and prayer and to lead to revival. Read Daniel 9:1-19, especially v.2 with its -reference to Jeremiah. Read also Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9:6-38; 2 Chron. 6:12-42; and Acts 4:23-31. When you further consider the prayers of the apostle Paul recorded in his epistles and the great High Priestly prayer of our Lord in John 17, there is only one response we can make: "Lord, teach us to pray."

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32:26-44

The answer of God to Jeremiah is two-fold. He first of all states that He takes full responsibility for all the outworking of events. That is comfort indeed. Let not your heart be troubled because God goes before to mark out the stages of the journey and to provide resting places on the way (John 14:1ff.). Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you (Ps. 55:22). Then, having eased the burden, don't take it back again. There is no point in God and you both being burdened. Secondly God gives the prophet a vast, sweeping summary of His working in the present (28-35) and the future (36-44). This almost takes the breath away, because we have tended to reduce our God to a very limited deity restricted and confined by human unbelief and rebellion. God is greater than our puny thinking and the sooner we learn this, the sooner we will learn His peace and begin to live in hope. Because God is God there is a future for His people no matter how grim present circumstances be, even if these disastrous circumstances are the direct result of the sins of that very people. This is the word of the God of the Gospel.

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32:26-44

The reference to roof-top idolatry in v.29 indicates something of the open and blatant sin of the chosen people. They held to their name as God's people, yet they had mixed so much false religion with their God-given religion that they had become an offence to God. Over generations this religious and spiritual apostasy had become an accepted part of the life of the nation, so much so that there was great indignation against such prophets as Jeremiah who challenged this way of things in the name of God. Religious syncretism is a mighty barrier to spiritual revival, and this must be remembered today when unity of religion divorced from unity of revealed truth is all the rage. The mingling of God with idols is a process that is far from static and it soon becomes deliberate rebellion, as is made clear in Rom. 1:18-23. The process, once established, leads to moral declension and to further distortion of God's revelation (Rom. 1:24 ff). There is no end to this process, even in

Hell. It is this process of rebellion that God speaks of in v.33, a frightening picture. When infection has reached this stage and putrefaction has spread to the dimension of plague, there is nothing left to be done except the antiseptic process of fire. But it is not the terrible fire of final judgment, not yet. Through the fire and the subsequent long agony, this city and its people were to be saved for God's future. It would not be the same generation. Those then alive and those of generations still to be born would live and die in the dark days of God's displeasure, but in the fulness of the time a new day would dawn. How important that the remnant of faith should pray for the day to come!

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33:1-8

Jeremiah is still in prison and God is still answering his prayer with words of immense encouragement, messages of glory to counteract the desolations and uncertainties of immediate experience. This is not escapism but realism, for God is simply imparting to His servant truth concerning things that must surely come to pass (Rev. 1:1). We need the future and the eternal dimension if we are to understand and cope with the present. We must indeed be heavenly minded if we are going to be any earthly use! But God reveals Himself and His purposes only to those who are interested enough to ask about them (3). The people are again told that all their efforts to avert what God has ordained must fail. Then, in astonishing contrast, God speaks words of healing, forgiveness and restoration that are almost too good to be true. The two grounds of restoration are cleansing and pardon. First there is the removal of the stain, guilt and infection of sin. The great physician treats the wounds as well as their cause, and with the healing there comes an awareness of returning health. At the same time the sad shame of guilt is quenched and taken away. Then with the forgiveness of God there is the restoring of fellowship, the healing of breaches, and the beginning of the smile of pleasure. We need to be reminded that God wants us back and is prepared to go to all lengths, however costly to Himself and to us, in order to get us.

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33:9-13

The pattern of this chapter is three-fold. It speaks of the restoration of the people to the land (1-8), the land to prosperity (9-13) and the King to the throne (14-26). The dominant note of today's verses is joy for both God and His people. Sin, which had grieved the Spirit and cast such a gloomy, debilitating shadow, has been put away. But the poison affecting both people and land had to be purged away and that took the long years of captivity. God was not prepared to indulge in easy, temporary cures, but He declares that in the very place which had been reduced to shambles by His people's failure and rebellion, the triumph of His grace would be demonstrated. Think of how this is seen in the Gospel. Just as in man (Adam) sin and failure brought ruin and terrible disaster, so in man (Christ) the victory was won and glorious possibilities restored. The picture in this passage is one of peace, prosperity, permanence, life, joy and fulfilment. The land and the people are learning to glorify God and to enjoy Him. But that is not the end of it. A restored and revived people in their own appointed place are by the very fact of their presence and life an evangelistic witness that cannot be ignored. Nor will it fall to the ground, for the sheer desirability of the blessing of the God of Israel will draw the nations to Him. Remember all this is happening to and through a people and a land (a congregation and a church) that had fallen so far from grace that they had been cast off by God. What grace!

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33:15-26

The only safe national restoration and prosperity is that which comes by and is grounded in spiritual repentance and new birth. Any other prosperity will corrupt the heart and the last state will be worse than the first. This is why the passage now speaks of the King who reigns in righteousness and brings salvation to the people. It is by this God-appointed King that this glorious work of salvation is to be accomplished. In the note on 23:1-8 we said, "The One to come is the righteous Branch, a tender sapling shooting out of the forlorn stump of the tree (Israel) that has been hewn down and left in apparent hopelessness and uselessness." The King to come, who will rule in righteousness, is of the house of David, partaking of human nature like ourselves, yet He is divine, "The Lord our Righteousness" (Rom. 1:3-4). Other references to the Branch are Isa. 4:2; 11:1; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. The One the prophet speaks of here is none other than Christ our righteousness (1 Cor. 1: 30-31). He is our salvation! Of course the righteous king who brings salvation to His people is also the suffering servant of Isa.

53, spoken of as the root and offspring of David in Rev. 22:16. When Jeremiah speaks of "those days" and "that time" in v.15 he is referring prophetically to the whole coming of Christ from the beginning in Bethlehem to His death, resurrection and coming again. Note that it is now the city that is called, "The Lord our righteousness." The people are united with the King in His righteousness, clothed in divine righteousness, and that righteousness, given in grace, is worked out in reality to the praise and honour of God who gave it.

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33:15-26

The prophet is speaking of the days when the Son of David will have set up His throne (17) in a kingdom which will stand for ever and never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44). These prophetic words have partial fulfilments, then further and fuller ones, until finally all the hidden truth in them will be manifested. "Much of Jeremiah's testimony gave joy to Zerubbabel and his companions as they saw Jerusalem rising from its ruins and its temple and houses and walls appearing (Ezra/Nehemiah). Later the Maccabees (between the two Testaments) were encouraged to see a further fulfilment in their cleansing of the desecrated temple; at one commemoration of which Jesus Himself was present (John 10:22). The accomplishment of the words was carried further when Jesus the Son of David appeared, but they await their entire fulfilment when He shall come again." (Broadbent) The reference to the continuing Levitical priesthood must be thought of in the spiritual terms of the Gospel age, because the New Testament teaches the end of the old priesthood in Christ (Heb. 10:8-9). Christ has fulfilled all that was typified in the High Priest and the offerings of the old dispensation. In Christ we are made a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices now and in eternity (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 5:9-10). The last section of the chapter is a reiteration of the faithfulness of God. He can be depended on to bring to pass that which He has promised.

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34:1-7

This chapter is set in the context of the final stages of the collapse of Jerusalem. Zedekiah had been prevailed on by his political advisers who favoured alliance with Egypt and who believed that with help they could still evade the clutches of Babylon. (The details of all this will emerge in the later chapters as will some interesting facts about Zedekiah's softness of heart towards Jeremiah.) The prophet, having been strengthened by God's words of encouragement concerning the future issue of the present judgment, is once again the spokesman of God's unchanging truth. The first verse gives a frightening picture of the massive "world-wide" power of the empire of Babylon which was crushing all resistance. Then the king is told, as he was in 21:1-10, that God's word does not change and that resistance is futile. In v.4-5 there seems to be an acknowledgment of the king's weakness of personality and recognition that, in measure at least, he was the victim of politicians who manipulated him. He is promised a peaceful end with some to mourn his passing. But we must not forget the grim story of 52: 9-11. The tragedy is that events need not have been so grim and terrible. There was the way of escape declared in 27:12-14, 16-17. There was no other way. The second of the cities in v.7 was a mere fifteen miles south-west of Jerusalem, that is, on the Egyptian side from whence the king hoped for armies of deliverance. Read the comment on this in Ezek. 17:11-21.

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34:8-11

The faithfulness of God to His covenant and promises has been abundantly demonstrated. The worthlessness of Zedekiah's word has likewise been illustrated and it is the double-dealing of king and people alike that is spoken of here. Early in the siege they seem to have decided that the national situation called for some token act of consecration, just as in our time a day of prayer seems to be a good idea to impress God with our genuine desire and basic spirituality. The king and the ruling classes decided that God would be impressed if they released from servitude all their Hebrew slaves. It appears that in Jerusalem the law regarding the freeing of slaves on the completion of seven years' service (Exod. 21:2) had been ignored and Jewish slaves were being kept in perpetual servitude. But, these calculating men felt, this was not a good time to be taking liberties with God and so, in sheer self interest to buy the favour and help of God, they set the slaves free. They were not likely to keep the commands and terms of Deut. 15: 12-15! As it happened, shortly after this because of some political stirring and movement of military strength in Egypt, the armies of Babylon were withdrawn from the

siege of Jerusalem. Then, instead of rejoicing in the goodness of God and confirming their repentance and consecration, these wicked men, feeling the pressure was off, brutally took the slaves back again into slavery. Political necessity had constrained them to right action; political opportunism made them do the opposite; their spirituality was a mere facade, a factor in their carnal calculations, and an attempt to hide the fact that in practical terms neither God nor man mattered. Their religion was self-interest. Be slow to pass judgment. Only those without sin are in a position to throw stones.

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34:12-22

This is a passage that scarcely needs comment and it counsels us to be careful about making vows in the presence of God as these people actually did. Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-6 and Matt: 7: 21-23. It is all too easy to fool ourselves about our own spirituality and to be quite insensitive to the glaring defects of our lives in terms of obeying God's laws. Read the Ten Commandments again (Ex. 20:1-20). These men were taking God's name in vain and they were bearing false witness. By false repentance, deliberate disobedience and harsh inhumanity they were giving the pagan nations a false impression of God, and His name was being slandered in consequence. These men had forgotten that they were once slaves and owed any liberty they had ever enjoyed to the grace and kindness of the God against whom they now sinned with such heartlessness. It seems that this action of gross inhumanity in respect of the slaves caused the Lord to speak of His retribution in strong and fearsome terms (17-20). Jerusalem was to be removed from the protection of God and left open to the blasts of experience with no hope of deliverance. In v.18 the reference is to the Babylonian method of ratifying a covenant. The divided animal was the token of the curse that would come on the man who broke his pledge (Gen. 15:9-20; cf. 1 Sam, 11:6-7). God is not mocked.

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35:1-11

Historically this chapter and the next take us back seventeen years to the reign of Jehoiakim and would seem to fit in after chapter 26. Possibly Jeremiah is recounting here incidents from these earlier days when already there were sporadic raids being made against Judah's territory by the Chaldeans (Babylonians) (11). The Recabites were a religious community with a real family or clan loyalty. They had possibly moved south into Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom and with the beginning of Chaldean raids had moved into Jerusalem itself. They had been a nomadic people, travelling constantly with their flocks, and in order to keep themselves separate from Canaanite influence, Jonadab had instituted the rule of total abstinence (drunken orgies being part of Baalite worship) and had also prohibited the settled agricultural way of life. The Recabites were a pilgrim people marked out distinctly from others and they still maintained this distinction two hundred years after the time of their founder. There is a similarity here with the vow of the Nazarite (Num. 6:1-8ff) where the regulations seem to call for them to abstain from even the appearance of evil (1Thess. 5:22AV). When put to the test here in circumstances which could have led to their expulsion from the city, and which must have constituted a real temptation in these days of heightened feelings, these men stood true to their confession and loyal to their father's name. God's comment is found later in v.18-19. They were commended for maintaining their distinctiveness as people of God and not merely for being abstainers.

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35:12-19

It is clear from v.14 that the Recabites are commended by God for their unswerving loyalty to the word and will of their father, and by contrast the men of Judah are condemned, for they have refused to abide by the word of their God. As a direct consequence of the Recabites' loving loyalty, they are promised continued and continuing blessing, whereas, as a direct consequence of Judah's attitude there would come upon them, without qualification, all the judgment God had promised (16-19). The name of the Recabites is used to this day by those committed to total abstinence and this is indeed a commendable stand, especially in a generation which is increasingly cursed by strong drink. While Scripture does not specifically enjoin total abstinence (1 Tim. 5:25) it has to be acknowledged from social statistics that much of the actual misuse of alcohol has its beginning in what is called "social drinking" which, in its initial stages, has neither suggestion nor intention of over-indulgence. Although we may rightly claim liberty of opinion and action in this and other realms (and Christian

living is not bondage to rules nor slavish conformity to an accepted pattern) we must be ready and willing to forfeit our liberty should it place another person (possibly more vulnerable) in a position of dangerous temptation (1 Cor. 8:6-13). Learn from the Recabites that there is a loyalty to custom and tradition that is altogether commendable because principle is involved. But learn from Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees that there is a tradition that is quite idolatrous (Matt. 15:1-6) because it is a substitute for obedience.

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36.1-8

The clear dating of this chapter is significant. It was the time when Egypt was signally defeated at the battle of Carchemish and Babylon became the significant and virtually irresistible world power. It must have been a time when the nations, including Judah, trembled at the frightening possibilities of the future. At such a time people who do not rightly understand the human heart and its spiritual rebellion expect men and nations to be more open than usual to the Word of God. It was not so in Judah, as Jer. 25:1-7 makes plain. For twenty-three years this prophet's great and authentic ministry had been exercised in the land of mighty spiritual tradition, privilege and opportunity. But it had been discounted by the unbelief of the nation. Now the prophet is commanded by God (that is very important to note) to commit to written form the messages of his ministry in anticipation of a day that. *might* come when the people would be prepared to listen. In v.3 it is God Himself who indicates that there is no certainty in this matter, and this attitude of leaving the issue open until time proves it one way or the other is reflected in the utterances of some of the other prophets, e.g. Ezek. 12:1-3; Amos 5:15; Dan. 3:16-18. Faith does not necessarily speak with absolute assurance. We can know only in part. Time will tell, and both God's intentions and man's reactions will be made manifest. Jeremiah, debarred from going to God's House and preaching, obeys the command of God and expresses the hope that in due time when the word is read to the people they will hear, believe, pray and repent. Jeremiah may have been thinking of 2 Chron. 7:14 .Faith which works by love keeps on hoping against hope.

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36:1-8

"This fascinating chapter is one of the very few indications we have of how the Scriptures achieved permanent written form. We may take it that God in His providence caused this one incident to be recorded in order to teach us the sort of procedure which underlies all the prophetic books. In the main section of the narrative three cardinal truths stand out: firstly (v.4), the miraculous identity of the three sets of words: those intimated by the Lord, those spoken by Jeremiah and those written by Baruch; secondly (v.18), the accuracy of the transfer of the word from the prophet's mind and mouth to written form; and thirdly (v.23, 29-31, 32) the steadfastness with which the Lord stands by His word once given; it cannot be turned aside; on the contrary it is enforced, enlarged, and at the appropriate time fulfilled." (IVF Commentary) We do well to consider regularly 1 Pet. 1:23-2:2; 2 Pet.1:16-21; 2 Tim. 3:14-17. We are dealing with God-given revelation which God Himself caused to be recorded (inscripturated) so that His sure word would abide for the generations of men to come. God could not let His speech be distorted through "mouth to mouth" transmission. God has spoken and His word stands. It is a word that cannot be bound or restricted (Isa. 55:8-11; 2 Tim. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:12-18). But Scripture itself says some very staggering things about the Word of God as it is preached. Think well of such references as 1 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 10:8-17; 1 Cor. 1:18-21. The proclamation of the Word of God always creates a crisis situation. Take heed what and how you hear (Lk. 8:18; Mk. 4:24; Heb. 4:2). What you hear is the preacher's responsibility before God. How you hear is yours.

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36:9-19

Let your heart be thrilled by this story, not least by the fact that patience had a great part to play. Months went past in which no opportunity presented itself until in the ninth month a fast was proclaimed. This fast may have been appointed because of news of a significant battle won by the Babylonians. If so, the nation was having one of its bouts of "holiness", invoking God for national safety on a basis of sheer self-interest. No doubt the prophet discerned that the time was ripe (there is a time to speak and a time to be silent - Eccles. 3:7; Acts 27:21-25) and Baruch carried out his commission. It had an interesting reception. There were people of some significance disposed to listen. Gemaraiah was the son of Shaphan who had been Secretary of State under

Josiah, a man with some experience of spiritual revival (2 Kings 22: 3-8). This Gemaraiah was probably the brother of Ahikam who showed kindness to the prophet (Jer. 26:24). One man of an older generation can be the open door for a new proclamation of the Word in a congregation! It was a time when many significant people were gathered and Gemaraiah seems to have instructed his son to carry a message to the princes. These rulers in their turn were interested in what they heard, invited Baruch to come to them, treated him with respect (he may have been "upper-class" and this may have helped) and listened to the reading of the scroll. Possibly some of the princes were in sympathy with Jeremiah and were only too glad to hear what he had to say. The rulers had a two-fold reaction. They were disturbed enough to resolve that the king had to hear the message of Jeremiah and they were wise enough to give counsel for the personal safety of Baruch and Jeremiah. God moves in mysterious but marvellously effective ways.

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36:20-26

This short passage deserves to be read by itself with little comment. It is very revealing of men's hearts, of the power of unbelief, and of the power of the Devil to conceal from people their best interests and to impel them into judgment. What ever motivated the majority of the princes to communicate the message to the king, it is clear that the majority of them were not prepared to answer the challenge of the Word of God if it caused them to be at cross-purposes with their powerful ruler. They had been interested, moved and even disturbed (perhaps even a little excited) by the reading of God's word but that falls very far short of faith. There was no doubt about the king's attitude. With utmost deliberation, possibly remaining very calm in order to signify his contempt and indifference, he cut off the sections of the scroll as they were read and tossed them into the fire. Read v.24 very carefully and contrast his reaction with that of good king Josiah (2 Kings 22:8ff). No amount of pleading by wise counsellors had any effect. This was deliberate calculated rejection of the prophet, his ministry and his God. There was no fear of God before the eyes of these men (Ps.36:1). They resented this challenge to their position and persons and, disregarding every sign of warning in God's word and in the nation's circumstances, they took the attitude of Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?" (Ex. 5:2). This is what it means to have an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Heb, 3:12).

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36:27-32

Having made his demonstration of unbelief and contempt and, to his own satisfaction, having shown his power the king is revealed in his weakness and irrelevance. He wanted the prophet and scribe executed but he could not even find them because God had hidden them (26. cf. Lk. 4: 28-30; John 7:30;8:20, 59; 10:39). The king's insignificance is further exposed in the rewriting of the scroll and the prediction of the shameful, unlamented death of the wicked king. The royal house of Jehoiakim was finished and would degenerate into oblivion. But the word of the Lord would stand right through his and future generations, and the time would come, as we have already had occasion to refer to, when it would be read and believed by men such as Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Then, through yet another recovery of the word of God, there would be a re-birth of life and hope within the nation. This is in fact what is happening in our day in the reviving of interest in and desire for a word from God. It should make us pray as the remnant of faith has always prayed, that the word preached would meet with the response of spiritual and moral obedience. There is a stirring. Who knows but that we are come to the kingdom for such a time as this (Esther 4: 14).

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37:1-5

Unbelief has a capacity for being optimistic because it is willingly blind to the facts of a situation. The moment there is the slightest easing of the pressure unbelief assumes that all is now well. This is exactly what happens here. Jehoiakim's son reigned a mere three months and was succeeded by his uncle Zedekiah. He is spoken of as "reigning" although he was a mere puppet appointment of the king of Babylon. The king preferred to forget his real position and, exercising royal authority, went on his own godless way leading his people in their apostate life. They ignored both the spoken and written ministry of Jeremiah but at the same time sent and asked his prayers of intercession (cf. 21:1ff). It is almost unbelievable. The impudence of backsliders is one of the astonishing facts of experience. The explanation seems to be that Zedekiah was aware that the army of

Egypt had begun its march to fight with him against Babylon. The foolish king at once assumed all was well. He concluded that the prophet's gloomy forecasts had been merely human opinions. He also assumed (as proud people usually do) that the prophet would readjust his spiritual assessment to conform to "obvious" human factors and begin to pray enthusiastically for the future of the nation which was about to enter a new phase of prosperity. But the disappearance of surface sores does not signify the cure of the deep cancer of sin in the nation.

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37:6-21

When a people is set in their attitude, fighting against God, it is virtually useless appealing to them on the basis of evidence. This is one reason why we must learn to pray for the nation that a spirit of enlightenment may come in the midst of darkness. What we have in this passage is the shallow confidence and quick, ruthless anger of unbelief. Jeremiah spoke from God declaring that even if the army of Babylon was reduced to a few wounded soldiers they would still capture Jerusalem for the simple reason that God had given up the city to this judgment. There was a significant easing of the siege, even to the extent that the prophet planned a trip to Anathoth. The life of the city was almost normal, but the prophet had made it plain that when people are not right with God things are not right, regardless of apparent prosperity (Ps. 1 and Ps. 73). Given a chance, unbelief will always seek revenge on those who have rebuked it, and Jeremiah's actions were misconstrued, his explanations were swept aside, and he was arrested on a charge of defecting to Babylon. The prophet was obviously a well known figure and because of his faithfulness to God his person was constantly in danger. Note in v.15 how the princes are now full of fury against Jeremiah, a great change from what we read in the previous chapter. Consider well what might yet come to us if the powers which rule the nation decide that the Word of God is a danger to their policies!

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37:6-21

Suffering for Jesus' sake is a realistic rather than a romantic business, but the New Testament speaks of it as a privilege (1 Pet. 4:12-19; Phil. 1:27-30) and as an inevitable part of the life of faith (John 15:18-27; Acts 14:22). Jeremiah's place of imprisonment was grim and insanitary and it had a powerful effect on him, as v.20 makes plain. He was kept there until the siege was resumed and then the king sent for him privately to ask if there was any word from God. There was; and it was the same as before. During the interview Jeremiah appealed to the king on a personal level, knowing that he had now some sympathy towards both prophet and message. It would have been a blind and foolish man indeed who had not by this time recognised that Jeremiah's ministry no longer needed scrutiny or justification. It had its own authority and authentication. This was also the time for Jeremiah to challenge the king regarding the false prophets whose plausible words he had been only too glad to hear (19). Even though the king had not the courage to act on the basis of Jeremiah's words, he at least recognised his integrity enough to answer his plea (20) and have him moved to better quarters, with better provisions until, as the siege drew to a close, the food ran out. If Jeremiah's plea in v.20 was on a personal level as he shrank from another spell in the dungeon we, who have not suffered like this, have no right to criticise. If his appeal was to "Caesar" (Acts 25:11) so that his ministry might continue, then we must applaud his wisdom.

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38:1-13

When men are fighting against God, refusing the disciplines of His word and providence, they get both angry and weak. Jeremiah's ministry was having effect. He was appealing to the people who were more aware of the realities of the situation than the princes. We can well imagine that bread ran out in the poor homes long before it did in the palaces. It does not mean that the common people, any more than the rulers, were coming round to an attitude of faith. As far as the rulers were concerned this kind of preaching was simply undermining the morale of the population and they demanded that the king should take action. These men did not pause to consider whether or not the prophet's words were true. They were inconvenient words to politicians who were concerned only with the immediate short-term (as they thought) crisis. Perhaps they thought that once the military and economic "crunch" was past they could then give themselves to consider the spiritual, moral and

social problems. But this is not the way. If the foundations are rotten, the city collapses (Ps. 127:1). The weakness of the king is inexcusable although he does seem to have given permission for imprisonment only. His attitude (sentiment rather than faith) may have been that so long as Jeremiah remained alive God would not let things collapse totally. When the Ethiopian (Cushite) made his request it was granted at once. God has his men of faith and principle. He uses them when they are alive to the possibilities of the situation.

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38:1-13

Take time to consider the personal experience of the prophet incarcerated in this empty water cistern (6). It was probably pear-shaped, deep, dark and narrow at the top, possibly covered. Jeremiah sat in the mire, alone and growing weaker, possibly thinking his life, as well as his ministry, was over. Imagine the accusations of Satan and the clouds of depression the evil enemy would spread over the man's soul. In this context the wise kindness of the Ethiopian (12) is seen to be wonderfully tender and understanding. It is possible to help someone in so harsh a way that it simply increases the hurt. Now read Ps. 69 along with Lam. 3: 1-6, 13-15, 52-55. Jeremiah was indeed a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. No doubt he had many critics. They knew little of the man and his humanity.

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38:14-28

Like many another, Zedekiah was always seeking guidance but he never acted on it when it came. He was a habitual procrastinator who had always a number of secondary considerations which allowed him to postpone action (19, 24ff). Jeremiah knew that the king's word could never be trusted and in v.15 we must see the prophet giving the king opportunity at this late stage to obey the promptings of his heart. There is a kindness in the prophet's words right through the passage even though he does not water down the reality of the message. In v.19-22 Jeremiah urges the man to trust God for his future and reminds him through this vision that his reputation even among his own closest family was at stake. But more, it seems that Jeremiah was showing the king that the responsibility for the burning of Jerusalem would be his personally. It was all to no avail. He was agitated, distressed and afraid, but his eyes were on men, not on God. All he could rise to was a scheme of camouflage to protect both himself and the prophet. This was the end for the king. He never spoke to Jeremiah again.

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39:1-10

This passage tells its own story. The city fell as God said it would fall. True to type Zedekiah tried to escape from the inevitable. Right to the end his weak, indecisive heart looked to human effort for salvation. The last thing he wanted to do was to yield to God. The lying of the false prophets was contradicted. The folly of the politicians was exposed. The wisdom and truth of Jeremiah's ministry were vindicated. But it was too late for any of the people to do anything. Having refused to submit willingly to the will of God they were compelled to submit, under judgment. God is not, mocked. What feelings of awe the people must have had when they saw the princes of the powers of Babylon sitting in the gate of the city, the place of administration and judgment. This was their hour. Zedekiah learned that there was no escape from God. In obedience we may find His grace. In disobedience we can know only His wrath.

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39:11-14

God is a wonderful Master to work for and there is a kindness in His justice which is beautiful to behold let alone experiences. The poor people (poor in spirit) who were counted not worth bothering about by the Babylonians are left in the land to make a fresh start. Those who in a very real sense had nothing at all are now the only ones who have any thing (10). In like manner Jeremiah, God's faithful, suffering servant, is both vindicated and provided for as God had promised from the beginning (1:8, 18-19). The pagans from Babylon showed more respect (no doubt mixed with superstition) for this man of God than Israel ever did. Whatever reasons lay behind this the fact remains that God's servant was not left a victim of circumstances. Indeed, he seems to have been accorded a considerable status and certainly his word was to be taken notice of. It needs

little imagination to think what possibilities for witness to and evangelism among the Babylonians were now open to the prophet. It can be likened to Paul's experience in the household of Caesar during his imprisonment for the Gospel's sake (Phil. 1:12-14). Jeremiah's immediate overseer was one of his own race, Gedaliah, the son of a friend (2 Kings 25:22; Jer. 26:24). God does indeed move in mysterious ways but His methods and timing are perfect, not least in their tenderness. We have much cause to trust a God like this. Consider well Matt. 10:28-31, 40-42; 1 Pet. 5:6-11; having loved His own, He loves them to the end (John 13:1) and nothing has the power to separate us from that love (Rom. 8:31-39).

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39:15-18

It is wonderful to read about conversions when the whole work seems to have degenerated beyond hope of remedy. Ebed-melech, the African eunuch who has already featured in our story (38:7ff), is here confirmed in his salvation by a personal word from the Lord. Just how long God's Word and Spirit had been working in this slave's heart we cannot tell. Indeed, however accurately we think we can date our own conversion, as we grow in grace and learn to look back over life's experiences, we discover traces of God's working in our circumstances even though at the time we failed totally to recognise the true nature of these movements of grace. But the time comes when grace in the heart must manifest itself in both attitude and action. People must declare themselves for their own spiritual confirmation and for a witness to the world no matter how costly it may be. But God is quite clear as to His attitude: "Those who honour Me, I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30); "If any man will confess Me, him will I also confess" (Matt. 10: 30-33). No doubt Ebed-melech felt he had done very little and possibly thought the whole incident had been forgotten. But God does not forget those who put their trust in Him. Consider other examples of people slowly coming out into the open to confess Christ. Nicodemus was slow (John 3:2, 9; 7:50-52; 19:39). Joseph of Arimathea appears from nowhere (Lk. 23:50-53) and Gamaliel, with great tact, said possibly all it was safe or wise to say at that given time (Acts 5:33 ff). But all these men were ready at the time when the opportunity arose. This is what we must be (1 Pet. 3:15).

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40:1-6

This passage elaborates 39:11-14 and makes clear that Jeremiah was at first arrested and chained like the other captives, even though Nebuchadnezzar had given orders for this not to be done. Ramah, five miles north of Jerusalem, was the main staging post for sending off the batches of captive Jews to Babylon and it was from there, when all hope seemed to have gone, that Jeremiah was released. The words of the Babylonian captain are staggering and indicate that outsiders can sometimes have a clear view and understanding of the spiritual principles that bring a proud, historic people down to the shame of captivity. Is it possible that present day communist regimes recognise that the decline of the western nations is due to their apostasy from the Christian faith that made them nations of integrity? One of their spokesmen may yet say this as this Babylonian army man did! At this stage of the developing history of the Jews, Jeremiah not only had a reputation as an authentic prophet beyond the confines of his own nation (39:11-12), he had a continuing ministry. He was by no means finished. The destruction of Jerusalem ended his forty years ministry in the city but he continued to be God's spokesman for several years, finally in Egypt, where he ended his days. It is quite astonishing here to see "the powers that be", totally secular and anti-God in their philosophy, making it possible for spiritual ministry to continue. Jeremiah seems to have been quite clear about his guidance. He did not take the "open door" to Babylon but stayed with the remnant in the land. Of course, whether he knew it or not, God already had His men (Daniel and Ezekiel) in Babylon. They would be ready when the time came. God is confident. That is why we can be confident.

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40:7-12

This simple passage has an important lesson concerning the need for faith to accept the situations of God's appointment and not to rebel against them. Gedaliah was appointed governor of Judah by the king of Babylon and he was joined at Mizpah by Jeremiah. It may have been that the captain's advice in 40:5 was due to the fact that he recognised that the prophet was still in danger from angry Jews who resented both their circumstances of defeat and the prophet's ministry which they tended to blame for the whole national collapse. Mizpah (which

means watchtower) was a place of great history, being the centre from which Samuel had judged Israel and the place where he had called them to repentance (1 Sam. 7:5-17). No doubt. Gedaliah and Jeremiah regarded the place as a reminder to the people to humble themselves before God, but others may have thought rather of the God who fought for them and delivered them in spite of all odds. Whatever the case, there gathered to Mizpah some of the remaining princesses of the people (43:5-6), some of the peasants, and some of the army, officers and men, who had earlier escaped from the invasion of the Babylonian army. Gedaliah assured them all of asylum provided they ended all resistance (possibly some of them were guerilla groups) and settled down under Babylonian government. At least they would have one of their own race to stand for them in conversations with the deputations who would come from Babylon to gather taxes. Under God they were to accept the situation, re-establish agriculture (which they did successfully), and make a new life for themselves. This was blessing indeed for a people who had sinned so disastrously. But it was not to be.

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40:13-16

There is no limit to pride, especially spiritual pride, and the Devil is always at hand to see that the fullest possible folly is produced by it. Unbelief is blind but so is sentimentality. Gedaliah was undoubtedly sincere and just could not bring himself to allow the possibility that others might be motivated differently even when there was general recognition of the fact that evil was being planned. We are taught in the New Testament that love does not think evil and always seeks to think the best (1 Cor. 13:7) and without doubt those are sick emotionally and spiritually who are happy only when ferreting out other people's evil and rejoicing in it. But we are also taught to be wise as serpents, harmless as doves, to be on guard against false speakers, and to be wisely cautious as Jesus was who declined to commit Himself to those whose very enthusiasm was suspect (Jn. 2:24). It is not wise to like people so much that we are no longer able to look at them and their activities with objective detachment, which is the only way of safeguarding their long-term well-being. It may have been that Baalis had designs on the devastated territory of Judah. He found an instrument in Ishmael who, being of the royal house of David, possibly felt jealousy and anger at being denied the governorship. It may have been that Ishmael simply resented any suggestion of submission to Babylon and focused his enmity on Gedaliah. The heart of the situation may have been resentment at the protection and place given to the prophet and an attempt to get at him to silence his ministry for ever. Certainly it was a devilish scheme and Gedaliah was foolish and blameworthy in refusing to take it seriously.

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41:1-3

Those with a knowledge of Scottish history will be reminded by this passage of the treachery of the massacre of Glencoe when one clan, with secret government connivance, accepted the hospitality of another and during the night when all were asleep rose up and murdered them. It has happened down through history and found its expression finally in Judas who shared the most intimate fellowship with Jesus and then betrayed Him (Matt. 26:20-25; John 13:18). No man can sink lower than to use the guise of friendship and affection in the "fellowship" of faith in order to hurt and destroy the unsuspecting. God will not hold such guiltless. It seems that Gedaliah was unsuspecting right to the end, as were the Babylonian officials. We cannot but wonder where Jeremiah was at this time and whether or not his counsel was sought by Gedaliah. Certainly the prophet, from his long dealings with God over many years, would have been able to teach Gedaliah that some situations are to be accepted in the providence of God ("Serve the king of Babylon and live"), while others are to be discerned, exposed and dealt with because, if they are left to develop, they will lead to disaster and complication. To be able to discern the difference calls for consistent dealing with God as the basis of the whole of life and not just in times of crisis.

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41:4-9

When a person's heart is not right with God there is no limit to the ferocity of his hate, which will express itself in blind disregard of and indifference to any consequences or reprisals. Ishmael is here drawing on himself the wrath of the power of Babylon but such was his hatred of both Gedaliah and Jeremiah that no reasoning was of any avail. Like many another, having started on the road of blasphemy and cruelty, he found himself trapped

and compelled to establish his position by further murder. This was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles and a large company of Jews, with all the trappings of sorrow and repentance, came to the ruins of the Temple. They were met by a weeping Ishmael, who was good at religious hypocrisy, and they too were massacred. Ten men saved their lives by telling of a hidden hoard of food, so appealing to Ishmael's greed. It may well have been that once they had shown him the hiding place they too were killed. The unfeeling brutality and destruction of the whole situation is a testimony to the ruthlessness of the Devil when he is frustrated and exposed. But be careful to discern the facts of the situation. These pilgrims were without doubt sorry about what had happened to their nation, but were their thoughts spiritual and were their hearts turned towards God? In v.5 they were indulging in ritual specifically forbidden (Deut. 14: 1-2; Lev. 19:27-28). This is strange repentance! And in v.8 there is the first reference to stores of food hidden away during days of siege when their fellows were starving. There is no suggestion that they had any intention of sharing their food with anyone. What was theirs was their own. Now, when religious life and daily life are kept separate there is duplicity. Repentance that operates only in church on a Sunday is a fraud.

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41:10-18

The situation is marked above all by confusion and God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). He is the God of peace who brings peace and whose will is life and peace, bringing increasing liberty and simplicity (Rom. 12:1-2; Matt. 11:29-30). In a moment of cool assessment, Ishmael recognises the possibility of reprisals and departs in haste with his captives. Johanan, a man always on tiptoe and never afraid to take action, led the rescue, delivered the captives, but failed to catch Ishmael who, like many another evil-doer escaped the punishment of men. Whether in this life or the next he had still to meet the judgment of God (Heb. 9:27). Johanan and the Jews were still faced with a problem. They feared reprisals from the Babylonians and their resolve to go to Egypt was inspired by fear rather than faith. They reasoned as men, on worldly considerations with feelings intensified by what they had gone through. There was no thought about all the warnings they had received from Jeremiah right through his ministry urging them not to put their trust in Egypt. Like us they tended to forget spiritual lessons because they had not been learned deeply enough. What they were in fact doing was trying to run away from their situation, and that never works. What confusion marks the life of a people who have背离 (backslidden) from God. Even when the major crisis is past (in this case the final captivity into Babylon) and a new stage of hopefulness is instituted in the gracious providence of God, there are recurrences of confusion, irrational outbursts of folly, regressions into unbelief and despair, all difficult to live with because feelings are over-sensitive. This is a time to guard against the wiles of the Devil and passages such as Eph. 6:10-12; Col. 2:8,20-23; Gal. 4:8-9 will help to make us realistic.

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42:1-8

On the face of it this is a good sign because the people seem disposed to pray for guidance. But, it is prayer with their bags packed and their tickets booked for Egypt. What they in fact wanted was confirmation from the prophet that they were doing the right thing. They had taken a long time to ask for prayer and for advice, but their vow in v.5-6 seems to indicate that, at heart, they were quite sure about the outcome. Later in the story their determination to go to Egypt becomes evident and it is difficult to reconcile their apparent spirituality here with their wilful disobedience later. Perhaps the lesson is to be made aware of the magnetism of Egypt (the world), and all that is in it, operating contrary to God (1 John 2:15-17). The lure of the world and the fascination of the forbidden (Gen. 3:4-6) are ever with us, as is the enticement and risk of being out of God's will. We like taking risks. This is the proof of our stupidity and our unbelief. Note the words used: in v.3 "your God" and in 4 and 5 "your God", in v.6 it is "our God". Was this latter occasion a deliberate correction as if to suggest there was equality of status between themselves and Jeremiah? Always listen carefully to what people say. In v.2 these men are ever so humble and circumspect but in v.6 they speak of Jeremiah as if he was one of their paid servants being "sent" to God on their behalf. The prophet was greatly burdened and hesitated for ten days. This alone should have spoken to the people, but they were so committed to their own plans of self-interest that nothing registered.

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42:8-22

Read again v.2-6, especially v.4, and then read through without a break this answer to prayer which the people and their leaders were constrained to stand and listen to. It was a very plain word that allowed of no misunderstanding. There is no suggestion in v.10 that God repents in the sense of having regrets or even a change of mind about the disciplines of judgment He has brought on His people. Rather He declares that the discipline has worked its purpose effectively and that He now changes His outward and obvious way of dealing with His people. Babylon had scourged Judah but now they need not fear, because God was with them to bless them, if only they would go His way and not their own. In v.12 God says that He will awaken feelings of mercy in the king of Babylon so that the Jews might remain in the land. Note carefully how this indicates that all along it was God who had been inspiring both the actions and attitudes of Babylon. Along with this tremendous promise of blessing and hope for a people who had failed so miserably, there is given a solemn warning. God knows their hearts and their plans already decided on, and He makes it plain that Egypt will give no security or hope. Everything that they flee from will overtake them, but if they do not flee they will escape. The last section of the passage sets the issue as being all or nothing. The people are charged with being dishonest in their praying because they do not really want God's answer. When will we learn that God's will is life and peace? When will we learn that faith and obedience are one?

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43:1-7

This passage makes clear that these men could never plead ignorance. They understood only too well what God was saying and they did not find it convenient to believe, for the simple reason that it would have meant a change in their carnal, self-inspired plans. Like many others they "held down, or suppressed the truth in the interest of their unrighteousness," (Rom. 1:18-21). In the previous chapter the prophet has accused them of having "erred in their hearts," when they decided to "make it a matter for prayer," and the proof of their spiritual insincerity is clear and plain in today verses. Ill feeling and resentment against both Jeremiah and his close companion Baruch came to the surface and, in the most painful language they could find, they denounced God's messenger. What had riled them was possibly that they sensed among the common people an inclination to accept Jeremiah's message rather than their own advice. The leader of the insolent men was Johanan who, earlier (40:13; 41:11) had appeared to be such a decisive man working solely for the good and safety of the people of God. The man who had done so much at one :stage is now the instigator of rebellion against God. How sad! What a warning! Take heed lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief, departing from God (Heb. 3:12). Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall ... (1 Cor. 10: 12). Did Johanan really know what he was doing? Did he believe he was doing the will of God? Had he, and his colleagues, no sense of the fact that God was not with them and that they were motivated by a spirit of evil (Judges 16:20)? It is a solemn and far-reaching thing when people take decisions contrary to God.

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43:8-13

God saw to it that Jeremiah and Baruch, and possibly copies of the books of the sermons (Jer. 36:32), were taken into Egypt. The prophet had made no attempt to answer the slanders on his personal and spiritual integrity (43:2-3). When people are determined to do certain things words are a waste of time. Think of Jesus' attitude in Matt. 26:59-64; Lk. 23:6-12. There is a time for silence, not least because faith knows that God will always have the last word. Jeremiah's ministry was by no means finished and through him it is made plain that it is far more difficult to escape from God than people realise. Take time to read Psalm 139, not only for its searching ministry but also for its glorious comfort. Here Jeremiah carries out an acted parable and builds a stone platform at the entrance to Pharaoh's palace (which actual foundation was excavated by archaeologists in the nineteenth century). No one is allowed to misunderstand the prophet's actions for the invasion and conquest of Egypt is spelled out in clearest terms. The Jews, who had so deliberately run away from God, could only live out their days waiting for the disaster to come. They could not flee again. There was nowhere to go. It is always best to check the spiritual route maps before you start backsliding. It might well persuade you, with the help of such passages as these, to believe that staying with God in the centre of His glorious will is by far the best life for sinners. God is faithful. What he says He will do, He will do. You can depend on God. Some say that all this took place within a mere five years of Jeremiah prophesying it.

44:1-14

This chapter continues the plain speaking of the previous one. Nine hundred years after the Exodus the Jews are again in Egypt, spread throughout the land in considerable numbers as v.1 suggests. It appears that in no time at all they had adjusted themselves to their new situation and adapted themselves to the idolatrous practices of their new neighbours. Far from learning from the preaching of Jeremiah or from the disastrous disciplines of experience, these Jews simply exchanged Canaanite idolatry for Egyptian idolatry. They had learned nothing as to the explanation and interpretation of their national experience. It is amazing how churches and nations can live through cataclysmic experiences and never ask why these things have happened. The amazing grace and persistent love of God is seen here in that He speaks yet again to this stubborn and stupid people in an attempt to get them to grasp the truth that would save. In v.2-6 God reminds the Jews of what had happened as a result of their idolatry in their own land. History, especially church history, has much to teach us. Wilful forgetfulness (9) and pride (10) had been the major stumbling blocks in their lives. No doubt, as he preached this sermon, Jeremiah was aware of the entrenched powers of evil operating through the unbelief of apostate men and women (especially women, as tomorrow's passage makes plain). It is in situations like these that we come face to face with principalities and powers militant in their opposition to God and His kingdom. Always keep in mind such passages as Eph. 6:10ff; 2 Cor. 4:3-12; and 1 John 5:19. There *is* a war on, and when crisis stages are reached it is fierce indeed (Rev. 12: 7-17).

44:15-20

Here is an unholy situation seen on two levels. The women took the decisions regarding the spiritual activities of their families and their husbands were "persuaded" to concur. Even if the whole idolatrous business had been set in motion before the men were aware of it (what preoccupied them to such an extent?), they were bound by their own law to set things right (Nun. 30:6-7). There is such a thing as the divine order of the sexes and when it is flouted nothing but evil can come. The second level of ungodliness is seen in the total perversity with which these people, men and women, viewed and interpreted history. They pronounced with great conviction that when, in the promised land, the "queen of heaven" was worshipped then there was prosperity, peace and happiness but now, when such "fundamentalist" preachers as Jeremiah had frustrated all their "holy" expressions, there was nothing but misery and disaster. This is an example of people "believing the lie" (2 Thess. 2:9-12). It was this sensuous and sensual devotion to the goddess of fertility, love and war (in some cases) with a ritual that was depraved in the extreme that had brought the judgment of God on the nation. But the people simply refused to see it. There are none so blind as those who refuse to see. There was a beguiling and seductive fascination about this idolatry and it appealed to certain elements of fallen human nature. We do well to examine the nature and motivation of much of the contemporary advertising industry. Woman, in her elemental aspects, features prominently. Read again 1 John 2:15-19 and never leave the Devil out of your thinking.

44:20-30

There is a great dynamic force in this sweeping utterance of Jeremiah in which he simply re-states facts he had proclaimed right through his ministry. Facts are powerful things and in the long run, says Jeremiah, as these facts work out in experience, there will be no doubt at all as to who spoke the truth. It is not easy to speak like this to an obdurate people who simply do not want to hear, because to hear would have involved them in a change of their way of life. This is why some people say doggedly that they do not understand the preaching of the Gospel. They dare not understand because if they did they would have to part with their sins. They may plead they are too young, or too old, or they have intellectual difficulties, or that they know Christians who live bad lives. These are escapes. Read Paul's words in Rom. 10:18-21. This is the tragedy of God's redeeming love. But, note the solemn statement in v.25. God confirms these proudly blasphemous people in their choices; they are sealed up to live and die with their chosen sins. God is going to withdraw His grace from them and they will be "god-less" for the rest of their days. There will be no alleviation of the situation. Note the contrast between God's statement of intention here in v.27 with that in 1:12. In due time, within sixteen years, Egypt was

overthrown as God said it would be. God can be trusted to keep His word. The Devil has been a liar from the beginning (John 8:44). Choose you this day whom you will serve (Josh.24:15).

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45:1-5

Yesterday's passage contained Jeremiah's last recorded words and this short chapter recapitulates the story of an event that occurred in the reign of Jehoiakim (36:1-8), possibly as much as eighteen years earlier. Before trying to interpret the significance of God's word to Baruch, get it clearly in mind that Baruch stayed by the side of Jeremiah, loyal to the end. Perhaps we have to see here God's concern for one individual, the companion, scribe and biographer of Jeremiah. Baruch was obviously going through a bad spell and at such a time God is concerned to encourage, heal, rectify and restore rather than to condemn and reject. Recall the circumstances of chapter 36, with the rejection, burning and rewriting of the prophet's sermons. Jeremiah and his assistant had a hard congregation to deal with and did not have to seek their problems. Baruch may have been looking back to high hopes that had failed to materialise or looking forward to hopes doomed to be crushed. We must be careful when we face a time like this. Judas faced this same reaction and made disastrous decisions. He tried to interfere and so bring *his* hopes for the situation to fruition. The disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35, especially v.21) made the same immediate but superficial assessment of their situation, ignoring the testimony of both Scripture and the women who had been at the tomb. Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-4) also landed in depression that nearly destroyed him because he expected either the wrong things or too immediate a fulfilment of the right things. We must learn to consider all situations in the light of what God is doing, and if we are not sure of what He is doing, we must wait to see the emergence of His plans. This is wisdom. Precipitate reaction and consequent ill-considered action is folly, not faith.

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45:1-5

There is a possibility that Baruch, in v.5, is expressing a spiritual burden that he did not in fact feel to this extent. It is a constant temptation to do this and we must guard against it.

In its extreme form it leads us to be like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). We must not seek to go beyond the measure of faith (Rom. 12:3). We have limitations and God recognises them. So must we. God answers the man by saying that his sorrow is nothing compared to what God feels as He actively crushes to the ground that which He had built up over generations of loving and costly travail. Read such passages as Isa. 1:2-3; 5:1-4; Hos. 11:1-4, 7-9 and you will see the sorrowing love of God that will not let His people go. Yet this same God smites His people because it is the only way to separate them from their sins. Does Baruch know this kind of loving agony and disappointment? It may have been, in v.5, that Baruch felt he was due some recognition or reward for all he had done for the prophet and the work of God. But the reward is in the privilege of being allowed to share in such a work, cf. Acts 5: 40-42. It is as if God is counselling this man to be content with this, that he is with God, and that he will win through the disaster that is to come. This makes us think right through to heaven itself. The wounds will be seen to be well worthwhile then. Read Phil. 2:1-16; 3:7-14; and finally 1:19-26; 4:4-7.

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46:1

Chapters 46-51 contain prophecies against ten nations, spoken at various times in Jeremiah's ministry. These utterances are realistic, practical and spiritual, e.g. v.15 - Why ... Why ... Because. "The conviction that God exercised supreme control over individuals and nations alike is characteristic of the Hebrew prophetic spirit. At all periods of their activities the prophets felt they were participating in events which would have more than purely local or national significance. A lively interest in the behaviour of foreign peoples was one consequence of this attitude and at times it expressed itself in the condemnation of neighbouring nations. In this section of his writings Jeremiah stands in the tradition of other Hebrew prophets who proclaimed divine judgment upon pagan peoples (cf. Isa. 13-23; Ezek. 25-32; Amos 1:3-2:3)." (Harrison) We must always think in terms of God working His purpose out as year succeeds year, whether or not we in fact are able to trace the signs of His working in any given historical situation, individual or national. God rules in the kingdoms of men, whoever sits on the throne (Dan. 4:17, 25, 31; Habakkuk 1:11). But our consideration must be spiritual and not just

geographical, historical and international. The real issue is spiritual and all will fail who try to understand and solve situations on any ground other than faith. It is by faith we understand, not vice versa (Heb. 11:3). Read Matt. 4:8-10; John 12:31; 14:30. This is spiritual confrontation. Read Acts 26:18; Dan. 10:13; Rev. 11:15. This is victory. History, secular and spiritual, will always be conflict and victory but there is no doubt as to the issue. Read Psalm 73.

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46:1-28

This makes vivid reading. Egypt is dealt with first because as a nation it had always figured in a large way in Israel's experience and the Jews never forgot that they had been prisoners in Egypt, humiliated and trodden down until they cried in their agony to the Lord (Ex. 1:8-14.ff; 3:7). It was Egypt who had killed good king Josiah, deposed Jehoahaz, then set a puppet-king, Jehoiakim on the throne, imposing a heavy war indemnity on Judah. We have read of all these things in Jeremiah. There seemed to be no stopping Egypt for they expanded their power to the river Euphrates. But at the battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates Egypt met Nebuchadnezzar who inflicted a crushing defeat, from which Egypt never really recovered. The first part of the chapter describes the expansion of Egypt, like the overflowing Nile, and expresses the pride of the nation in v.8 (compare this with Isa. 14:12-14, the inspiration is the same). But Egypt is checked, its women called to come with ointment for the wounded, and a reminder is given that so far their country had been "virgin" (11), never violated. But her reputation is gone and neighbours have heard of the units of the army fighting against each other in their confusion (12). Why has it happened? God the Lord has had enough of Egypt (15). It is not only defeat, but invasion (13), cf. 43:8-12.

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46:1-28

Take up the hectic story realising that things move swiftly when God takes a dealing with a proud nation. In v.17 the Egyptian soldiers begin to say that Pharaoh is only a noise, sound and fury signifying nothing. What humiliation is at the heart of this downfall. Egypt is like a fine bullock but one gadfly stings her and drives her madly into flight (Babylon would not like the description 'gadfly'!). Her soldiers are like immature calves easily panicked. The army is like a frightened snake escaping into the undergrowth, but Babylon, like an army of woodcutters, will hew down all cover. Proud Egypt will be like a slave girl in the harems of the north. It is all God's doing and it does not stretch His power, let alone exhaust it. Then comes the amazing statement in v.26b. There is an "afterward" (later) even for Egypt. Judgment is not the final word. Egypt will not again be a significant power, yet there is hope. This is indeed mercy. Read Isaiah 19:19-25 and Ezek. 29: 13-16. Isaiah speaks of an altar to the Lord a witness to the Lord ... and the sending of a saviour and of Egypt as God's people. What wonders of mercy are hinted at here. Read Romans 11:33-36 and take time to wait before God in worship. That is the best preparation for listening to world news bulletins. It is the way to understand them.

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46:27-28

The message of these brief verses is very sweet. The comment on them is the same as on chapter 30 and we should look back to these notes. How often God says, "Fear not," to His people (cf. John 14: 1ff, which is command, not suggestion). The source of our comfort is in the fact that the purposes of God transcend and outlast history. When this weary and wicked world is finally gone, disintegrated as the result of its own folly, the "city of God" remains. Read 2 Peter 3 and let your heart be thrilled. Parents especially note the reference to children. The future lies with them and in a very real sense we are living now for the future generation. We need to interpret our experience along the same line as the prophets and martyrs of old did, sensing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that things are bigger and more significant than is yet evident (1 Pet. 1:10-12). As we grow older we may feel that time is rushing past and that our years are far spent already. That may be so. But God's time never runs out. "The slow watches of the night not less to God belong" and when we feel that nothing much is happening we may be very far from the truth. We should thrill at being part of that glorious God and His kingdom. We need to read Rom: 8:31-39; 1 Cor. 3:21-23; 15:51-38. Hallelujah!

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46:27-28

Remind ourselves that this glorious promise of grace and perseverance is set in the context of the clash of world powers. "Egypt is used in Scripture in a spiritual and typical sense. The conflict between Egypt and Assyria is also made use of in a similar way, to impart spiritual instruction. Assyria and Egypt, lying respectively north and south of Canaan, were both oppressors of Israel, but were also opponents the one of the other. Egypt, representing spiritually the world of sense, the gross, sensual world, is the, land or principle in which Israel was originally held in bondage. Assyria is the world of mind or intellect, the religious, political world. Egypt is of the race of Ham, Assyria of Shem. The conflict begins to be described in Gen. 14 where a league of northern, Semitic kings from Assyrian lands subdued for a time southern Hamitic kings in the land "like the land of Egypt," putting down grossly wicked powers, such as the Rephidim or giants, and the Sodomites, as the intellectual, moral world often deals with and curbs monstrous, flagrant, forms of evil. The struggle described throughout the later Scriptures has always its spiritual significance. Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon exhibit the capacity of the man of faith to walk in communion with God and be a witness for Him in any period and in any circumstances. Joseph's temptation in Egypt was fleshly; Daniel's in Babylon, religious." (Broadbent)

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47:1-7

The land of the Philistines lay between Egypt and Israel and right down through the history of Israel we read of the effect the Philistines had on the people of God. The cruel and carnal religion of the Philistines was always seeking to influence and persecute the worship in Israel of the God who had revealed Himself in truth and grace. This was a foe to be reckoned with. Joshua 13:1-3 speaks of the five lords of the Philistines and this race was down through the generations used by God to discipline and chastise the people of God. They were an evil people and the time of their judgment was bound to come, and when it did it was like a sweeping flood which both demolished and demoralised. The "sword of the Lord" in v.6 may suggest an angelic watcher, burdened with the sight of judgment, asking how long this activity of God will continue. Another observer (7) answers to the effect that what God has ordained of righteous judgment must be fulfilled. The three gods of the Philistines mentioned in Scripture, Dagon, Ashtaroth, and Baalzebub, are names that conjure up the darkness and devilishness of their religion. Generation after generation "Baal" tempted, enticed and seduced Israel away from God to the way of destruction. It is our poor sense of the powers of evil and their unalterable antagonism to God that makes us unable or unwilling to face the necessity for judgment. If we could grasp the fiendish depth of evil in the events of the crucifixion we would come nearer to reality. Our trouble is that we try to make the Cross "nice". It was not!

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48:1-26

Those who wish to study the history of Moab, and trace from it reasons why the judgment of God should come upon that people, can do so easily by reading the appropriate article in the IVF Bible Dictionary. For the purpose of these notes, intended for daily Bible study, we concentrate today on v.10-13 and the searching diagnosis of Moab's decline. They were a people who had been corrupted by ease. They had never been carried away captive, never shaken by disturbance, turmoil or upheaval, nor had they undergone that discipline of change described as being emptied from vessel to vessel. Had they been so they would have become different people but somehow they managed to evade all the disciplines of experience which would have been for their blessing (cf. Heb. 12:3-11). Consider those who manage to sit under a ministry for years and to share in all manner of activity related to God and who at the end of it are still basically the same people, unchanged; unsweetened, immature, having learned nothing and still living their lives motivated and governed by human and worldly considerations. It was in this way that Moab remained and indeed grew more and more proud and arrogant. But God was not prepared to let things go on like that any longer and He organised forces that would topple this proud people from their balance. Then they would be ashamed of what they had been and what they had become (13). They had no principles. Moab bribed Balaam (Num. 22-24); they taunted Israel (Zeph. 2:8-11); they were heartless and inhuman and through lack of kindness and consideration forfeited entrance to the courts of the Tabernacle (Deut. 23:3-4); they were proud of their pride (Isa. 16:6). It could have been otherwise. They could have been changed. But they resisted all the disciplines of grace and refused to learn.

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48:27-47

Note how Jeremiah makes use of the words of Isaiah mentioned yesterday. The Word of God always has a word for the contemporary situation and it is seldom vague. Moab exalted itself against the Lord (26, 42) and against: the Lord's people, rejoicing when Israel or Judah was found in difficulty. This indicates a deeply perverse and sick spirit, for what joy can there be in seeing another's catastrophe even if we feel they have brought it on themselves by their folly? God does not rejoice over Moab, but rather weeps (30-33) even though it is His own hand which is causing Moab its deep distress. This stern work of God's judgment had as its objective the separating of Moab from the sins that had blighted her. We must read here Luke 19: 41-44 where our Lord Jesus Christ, God manifest in flesh, having been rejected by His own people in spite of all His pleadings, warnings and works of grace, weeps over the city while at the same time pronouncing inevitable judgments. These were the people He came to save. There is a time for judgment (44) and the day comes swiftly, taking people unawares. But note the last verse. There is a gleam of grace and hope. There is a limit to judgment *as yet*. Remember when Jesus quoted a glorious passage from Isaiah he omitted the reference to judgment (Luke 4:14-21; cf. Isa. 61:1-2). The dark day is not yet. Today is the day of salvation.

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48:27-47

"Moab was a son of Lot and his shameful birth followed on the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19). Spiritually, the descendants of Lot exhibit the consequences of the character and course of Lot. He was a righteous man (2 Pet. 2:6-8)But he acted under the influence of others rather than through direct communion with God ... When faced with definite choice he chose (Gen. 13) not from the standpoint of doing God's will but of personal advantage. He and his descendants represent Christians who are chiefly influenced by their surroundings, and, though desiring to obey the Lord, will not do so if it involves loss to themselvesWhen David was in distress, persecuted by the king of Israel, he was able to put his aged parents into safe keeping with the king of Moab (1 Sam. 22:3-4), he being himself, through Ruth, of Moabitish descent (Ruth 4:17-22). This Moabitish woman, through her faith in the true God (Ruth 1:16; 2:12) and faithful conduct towards Naomi, is a type and foreshadowing of the Gentiles brought into the line of God's blessing through Christ (Matt. 1:5). It was revealed to Daniel (Dan. 11:41) that in troublous times to come Moab should be spared to become again a place of refuge for those in distress." (Broadbent) If there was hope for Moab even in this dark day of terrible chastisement and judgment, should we not be looking to God in the dark days engulfing our nation? It may be that God will have mercy, and it is mercy not justice that we must cry for. Read Romans 11 and ponder deeply the outworking of God's purposes of salvation. The ways of God are past finding out.

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49:1-6

Ammon, like Moab, was descended from Lot, and the evil infection of their origin remained with them (Gen. 19:30-38). What they were by nature they proved themselves to be in practice down through the generations and when, in such passages as these, we read of God's sore judgment on a whole people, we must remember what that people had been and had done. There are reasons for the judgments of history. Some of the bitterness of the American situation today stems from the evils of the slave-trade (and other inhumanities) of past generations, just as the anti-British spirit in many developing nations stems from the evils and pride of colonialism which have often left deeper marks than the benefits originally conferred. Ammon, like Moab, progressed as a nation at first but gradually was infected by idolatry which became increasingly degenerate and cruel, especially in the worship of their god Milcom (Molech) to whom children were offered in sacrifice. The particular evil spoken of here (1-2) is the action of Ammon in taking possession of territory that belonged to God. It was the action of proud usurpers who thought they saw a chance of pulling a "fast one" over the children of God. The tribe of Gad settled on the east of Jordan (Num. 32:1-5 ff) and in due time, being vulnerable to enemies, they were taken away captive before the general collapse of Israel. (Had they ever considered the long-term danger when they made their choice of territory?) Seizing their opportunity the Ammonites moved in and took possession of the empty territory and claimed it for their own. Greed is a terrible thing and it knows no mercy. It is mean and proud.

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49:1-6

There is something quite frightening about unbelief. Its sheer persistence marks it out as being inspired of Hell against all that belongs to God. In spite of the solemn word of judgment here in the time of Jeremiah, we find the Ammonites still harrying the holy work of God generations later during the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 2:10,19; 4:1-3, 7-9; 6:1-9). But there is no need for God's people to fear the enemy. God speaks clearly through Jeremiah saying that there will be a complete turning of the tables. In the name of God Israel, in spite of all her failures, will dispossess the evil powers that have usurped God's possessions. Some commentators suggest that v.4 should read "Why do you boast about your power, your diminishing power?" There is much spiritual food in such passages as these that tell of the victory that God ultimately gives His people (1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 2:14). If God be for us (failures though we be, His grace is greater than our sins), who can be against us (Rom. 8:31)? Perhaps it is the Devil's awareness of diminishing power and opportunity that makes him so angry (Rev. 12:7-12ff).

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49:7-22

A Bible dictionary would be necessary to study all the detailed references here to the country and descendants of Esau, which is Edom. The imagery is vivid and speaks of a total devastation and dereliction carried out by the God of judgment whom no man can call to account (19). The entire history of Esau is one of sad devaluation of that which is holy in the interest of that which is carnal and worldly, cf. Gen. 25:29-34; 27:30-41; Heb. 12:15-17. The story of Edom is one of bitter enmity against Israel together with a persistent lack of mercy, cf. Deut. 2:4-8; Num. 20:14-21. When opportunity came in the fall of Jerusalem, Edom was there shouting and exulting over the collapse of Israel (Ps. 137:7). Read Obadiah v.1-15 and recognise that behind the actions of God in judgment there is a history of wrongdoing which, in the long run, calls for righteous and radical intervention. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right (Gen. 18: 25)? We must stand on the integrity of God when there are things we simply cannot understand but which make us afraid.

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49:7-22

Passages such as this compel us to consider the apparent injustice of the complex historical situation of judgment. In v.12 there is recognition that men of faith and obedience are caught up in the rigours and consequences of the developing national situation every bit as much as those who are profane and faithless. The "innocent" (if that word can ever be used of fallen humanity) suffer in the situation brought about by the sins of the guilty. But the innocent are not "left" in the predicament, for in v.11 God makes Himself known as the father of the fatherless and the judge of the widow (Ps. 68:5). In v.14ff. it is made clear that Edom must see in the developing of the international situation not merely human treaties and agreements affecting the balance of power but the active and determinative intervention of God Himself. Edom, the nation that had been so sure of its power and permanence and had so inspired the nations with fear, will be seen in the shambles of demolition, to such an extent that others will recognise with awe that if this can happen to Edom it can happen to anyone (16-17). The picture in v.20 chills the heart. What darkness there is when God's plans and purposes are against us. What folly when our plans are contrary to the Lord! Long after Jeremiah's time the Herods of the New Testament were still set against God. They were sons of Edom. Does human nature never change? Not unless it is born again of God.

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49:23-27

It is never good that mere men should preserve in their minds and emotions for too long the memory of the barbarities of nations that have made war against them. We are too prone to bitterness and imbalance to deal with this kind of thing. God is incorruptible and wrong emotion never clouds or influences His judgments, but He has a long memory. Do not for a moment think God is cruel. It is not His judgment that should stagger us but the extent of His longsuffering (2 Pet. 3:8-9, 15; Rom. 2:2-5; 9:22-23). But the displeasure of God is no less a reality, and in speaking here against Syria, of which Damascus was chief city, the chosen policies and

deliberate cruelties of that nation are taken into account. Time and time again, when opportunity presented itself, Syria (Damascus) acted in utmost cruelty (Amos 1:3-5). This was a nation never sure which side it wanted to be on. She was either against Israel and Judah or taking Israel's side against Judah (cf. Isa, 7). Set between Israel and Assyria, Syria (Damascus) was subject to the fluctuations of war, and the chief cities, Hamath and Arpad, knew already what it meant to be over-run (Isa. 36:18-20). But Syria was a nation that knew something of the light of God's salvation, not least through the influence and testimony of Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5). Our Lord pointed out that there are times when people come to faith in Syria when none come in Jerusalem (Lk. 4:24-30). No people may feel superior.

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49:28-33

Kedar and Hazor were nomadic tribes somewhat difficult to identify. The first is probably to be linked with Ishmael and what seems to be a confederation or family of tribes in Gen. 25:12-18. If so, we see the seed of Ishmael set over against the seed of Isaac. The second tribe, Hazor, is spoken of in Joshua 11:1-15 as being in command of another confederation fighting against Joshua, seeking to prevent the Israelites from taking possession of the promised land. Without pressing the issue we can see here, as we see right through Scripture, the conflict and opposition of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Hell. That bitter relentless battle, which we know so much about in our own personalities and lives (Rom. 7:15-23) and which we can identify with the help of Scripture, is the same battle we see on the international, historical, universal and cosmic dimension. We will better understand passages of Scripture like these if we remember that in this world there are principalities and powers utterly and irreconcilably opposed to God. But they cannot and will not prevail. The particular message of v.31 is a warning against over confidence that comes from complacency.

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49:34-39

The significant point about the message to Elam is that after strenuous and costly judgment the future will hold restoration not extinction. This was an ancient kingdom, as the story of Abram and the confederacy of kings tells in Gen. 14. Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, was more than a match for the debilitated kingdoms of Sodom and of the cities of the plain but he, in turn, was put to flight by God's separated and sanctified man Abram. After the time of Jeremiah, Elam was brought under the dominion of Babylon (Dan. 8:1-2) but according to Isa. 21:1-2, 9-10, Elam, helped by Media, was to bring down Babylon. Very much later in Acts 2:9 we find Elamites specially mentioned among those who heard the Gospel on the day of Pentecost. In someways as we look at these prophecies about the course of the nations we seem to see only confusion, cruelty and even injustice. This is because our knowledge is so limited, our memories so short and our foresight so defective. What we can take from all this by way of comfort is the truth that among all the nations there is hope of a remnant of salvation. We must not limit God by looking for the fruits of His victory only from what we consider to be suitable and hopeful areas. God is bigger than we are in every way.

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50:1-3

These verses set the theme for the next two chapters which constitute one of the mightiest, most perceptive and far-reaching messages this great prophet ever uttered. After a lifetime of ministry in the will and word of God this preacher seems to have few if any converts and he had had the painful experience of watching an entire culture and a glorious spiritual heritage go down the hill into disintegration. But he stood fast, right to the end. Perhaps Hebrews 11:32-39 is the best and the necessary comment. Throughout the last chapters (46-51) we see that God is the God of all the nations and not merely the "salvation God" of Israel. He is not a spectator-God but one whose patrols of active superintendence go to and fro throughout the earth (Zech. 1:7-11). God is on the throne of human affairs. Whatever worlds may yet be discovered and by whatever processes history is developed to its conclusion, this fact remains, Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil.2:9-11). Right through Jeremiah's ministry the victory of Babylon had been prophesied and this evil power had been spoken of as God's servant to do His will upon a sinful people. The prophet had called the people to recognise the hand of God in all this and to submit to the disciplines of captivity as the only hopeful way of moving into the future. But now, speaking in the time of Zedekiah, when Babylon was at its height swallowing up the nations, this word was given

concerning the final collapse of the great empire of ruthless evil. It seems from 51:59 that the message was written rather than spoken. It was a word given to be ready when the time came.

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50:1-3

These verses which proclaim the doom of Babylon are to be linked with Revelation 17-18 in order that we might see that Jeremiah's prophecy had only a partial fulfilment and in fact pointed forward to an even greater spiritual Babylon, a great political-religious system which was to arise in later days and which would be brought to its day of judgment during the final stage of world history. Read Rev. 17:1-6, 15-18; 19:1-6, 9-11, 16-24 and see not only how final is this judgment but also how very mixed the reactions of men and nations are to the fall of this great empire of evil. Men's sympathies and motives are revealed in a time of crisis when abstract principles are brought to bear on the actual and practical affairs of life. In studying this oracle of Jeremiah's, keep in mind the pride of Babylon and her confidence in her "gods", remembering that, although we write off the gods of wood and stone which the nations worshipped, it is made clear in 1 Cor. 8:4; 10:18-20; and Col. 2:8 that behind these empty gods there are spirits of evil whose entire disposition is contrary to God. We will get lost in the intricacies of politics and history in these chapters if we do not remind ourselves again and again that we are not considering merely the conflicts between flesh-and-blood nations but between principalities and powers in heavenly places. Read Eph. 6: 10ff. It always helps Christians to keep a true balance in considering world affairs.

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50:4-5

As the clear purpose of God develops through the convulsions of history, and as the tables are turned on proud nations, we must seek to be responsive in terms of these two verses. It is easy when things go hard with us to lapse into self pity which wistfully looks back to the better and happier days (Ps. 137:1-6). It is also very easy to settle for a condition of sad remorse which is both negative and self-centred (2 Cor. 7:9-11). The only true spiritual response is to be persuaded of reality by the soreness of experience and to say like the prodigal son, "I will arise and go to my Father." (Lk. 15:11ff). Sorrow in itself is not enough. There must be a deliberate returning to the Lord. The tears spoken of may be those of shame together with those of pain occasioned by the long trek back from Babylon to Jerusalem. The way of the transgressor is hard and gets harder all the way along (Prov. 13:15AV and Jas. 1:15) The way of the transgressor is still hard as he battles back to God, but while we recognise that repentance is costly it may also contain a large element of relief. Remember that all the way home the prodigal did not really expect restoration to sonship. He felt that a place as a menial servant would have been well worth having. He under-estimated the love of the Father. So do we.

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50:6-7

"Lost sheep" is a sad and pathetic phrase that is immensely expressive. It speaks of all the foolishness of the prodigal together with the misery of that lost condition in which the man began to yearn for the sense of belonging which, having been lost, had generated fear in his inmost being. But here the blame and responsibility is laid at the door of the shepherds; the prophets, priests and ministers of God who had played false to the message entrusted to them and who had thereby become the main menace to the well-being of God's people. It is frightening as well as tragic to read that men who should have been spiritual shepherds had in fact led their flocks (God's flock) away from God into falsehood and bondage. Perhaps when the shepherds saw the mess they had caused they abandoned the flock in its predicament and concentrated on their own well-being. Read Ezekiel 34, even though it is a longish chapter, and then let your soul delight in Psalm 23. There are some things far too precious to contemplate losing. Guard against the voices you hear lest you be led away.

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50:6-7

We must consider v.7 because it typifies the arrogance of evil and makes us think of men such as Pilate who judged his own case and granted himself full acquittal when he said, after handing over to Hell the Man he knew to be innocent, "I am free from the blood of this just man." Babylon declared rightly that the root of

Israel's problem was simply that as a people they had forsaken their God and that all their misfortunes were a direct result of that spiritual apostasy. Pagans, of many kinds, are quite clear in their own minds about what happens when you play a false game with your god. This is why many are afraid to break loose from evil groups and practices. They fear reprisals, and in some cases their fears are fully justified. Even a social circle can "send you to Coventry", if you break its rules and soil its image! But the question here concern whether or not Babylon recognised herself as the instrument of God's chastisement. We cannot say. Perhaps she did feel in some way she was "helping God". But even though God uses evil, giving the powers of evil seemingly unlimited scope, as in the story of the Cross, He is never in any sense to be thought of as approving evil. He hates evil and is dedicated to bring it to judgment. The difference between God's activities and those of evil men is that God is always controlled and measured, never using a fraction of power and pain more than absolutely necessary, whereas evil knows no bounds or control, it never relents and always becomes quite ruthless. Evil is not concerned with producing good: God always is.

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50:8-16

First Israel is addressed (8-10), then Babylon is denounced (11-13), and finally the Medo Persian empire comprising some twenty-two different nations is called upon to sweep the Babylonian empire into oblivion. When God speaks and acts, His ways are very comprehensive. Nothing is left to chance and there is never the slightest suggestion that He will lack the power or resources to carry out what He has proclaimed. At one time Babylon had seemed invincible, set to last for generations, but with effortless ease God calls for another empire to bring it to the ground. If this oracle of Jeremiah was in fact written down in order to be produced and read at the appointed time, you can imagine the impact it would have had. If it was spoken when first given you can imagine the scorn, mingled with perplexity, it would occasion. But time and events confirmed the word of the Lord. What He said would happen did happen: It is always the way. In the first section, the Jews in Babylon are urged to be like the he-goats who tend to barge their way into the lead of the flock in their eagerness to get going. Such a call fits in to the opportunity spoken of in Ezra 1:1-5. When the time came many of the Jews were, to say the least of it, slow to respond to the call and opportunity. Even in captivity there had been a tendency to settle down, to make the best of it, and in the process to become far too comfortable. Think of our Lord's exhortations, "Be ye also ready," "Watch and pray," and Paul's words, "Lift up your heads for your redemption draws near." It is all very practical.

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50:17-28

Here again we have two messages set over against each other, the first addressed to Israel (17-20) and the second to Babylon (21-27). Note the vivid imagery when God proclaims the shattering of "the hammer of all the earth" (23) by the Lord who opens His armoury, brings out His weapons, and does His own work (25). Ultimately the whole kingdom of antichrist was brought down when the Mighty One of God came forth to do His work on the Cross. It was then that the kingdom and prince of this world were cast down for ever (John 12:31; Col.: 2:14-15). It was there at the Cross "in those days and at that time," (20) that there was the great fountain opened for sin and uncleanness (Zech. 13:1). This was the ultimate fulfilment of Jeremiah's word but even in its more immediate historical context it is still a glorious word of pardoning grace. In v.17-20 reference is made first to the captivity of the northern kingdom Israel, and then to the ravaging of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The panic and terror of the people is graphically portrayed in v.17. God says that just as Babylon finished off Assyria so Babylon will be finished off by a new power rising in the world. Then (19-20) God shows that He is able to look right through the confusion of immediate circumstances to His own glorious purpose, which He never loses sight of, namely the forgiveness and restoration of His people. Who is a God like this except the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Cf. Micah 7:18-20.

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50:29-34

When we are singing Christmas carols in our various places of worship some people wonder if we are being realistic or just escapist in a grim world like ours. There is a word here for us. Jeremiah pictures the clash of war and explains it in terms of the bringing down of the proud usurpers of the earth (29-32). He speaks of the

powers of the world (spiritual powers) that oppress and hold captive the chosen people of the Lord (33). But the prophet then proclaims with glorious certainty the truth of the Gospel. We have a strong Redeemer and a mighty Advocate to take our part, and the issue is not only deliverance but peace and rest in the earth. Almost without knowing it and certainly without engineering it we are at the very heart of things at Christmas, considering the statement in the Gospel to the effect that this Child who is born is set for the fall and rising again of many (Lk. 2:34-35). Jeremiah recognises that the power of evil Babylon will not release their captives voluntarily. But he sees a "close-kinsman" (Redeemer) coming who is charged with the duty and responsibility of redemption, the recovering of rights and the avenging of wrongs (cf. Isa. 41:13-14; 47:4; Lev. 25:5). This Mighty One we wait for to do us good and to work salvation for us is none other than Jesus, so named because He shall save His people from their sins.

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50:35-46

This daily reading was written originally for Christmas Eve. Is this too ordinary or too terrible a reading for such a day, so full of excited anticipation and, no doubt, a degree of exhaustion? Are we disappointed to be reading this because it is desolating or because it is realistic? What a world is described here: swords, diviners, warriors, chariots, drought, idolatry, waste, desolation and the surge of international warfare? We may well ask where Christmas is in all this. We have quite deliberately kept to the "ordinary" reading for today because the first Christmas Eve was ordinary in the extreme and life then was marked by these very things we are reading of, just as life today is cursed with them. The world would have been nothing but this but for the coming of the promised Redeemer. It is not sentiment we need for Christmas but power from on high to come right down into the human, historical predicament and to work salvation and transformation. This is what was promised to those who were being immediately prepared for the coming of the Saviour. Read Luke 1:14-17, the story of the forerunner, John the Baptist, and then Luke 1:26-33, 46-55, the story of Mary and her reaction to the great news from God. But do not forget to glance at Matt. 2:1-23 to see the rage of Hell in the fierce reaction of Herod, the cold indifference of the priestly hierarchy of the Jews, the earnest seeking of the men from the East and the quiet serenity of the star which speaks of Heaven's supervision over the whole business.

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51:1-14

Over against the coming of the Lord in grace and gentleness for salvation, we must set such passages as these which speak of His coming in final judgment. We must also recognise that the "last days" of history fall between the two comings of the Lord and we must learn to live as men and women who are prepared to meet their God. These two chapters are heavy going and we wonder why it was necessary for such a detailed and comprehensive proclamation of impending judgment. Is it not partly because God is here bringing into focus the long years of iniquity which have made judgment a necessity? Good and evil grow together until the time of harvest, but then there is separation and burning (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). The whole idea of retribution is foreign to contemporary thinking but we must grasp it if we are to be true to Scripture. God is not a spectator-God and His judgments are constantly operative in the developments of history. Cf. Gal. 6:7-9; Eph. 5:3-16; 1 Thess. 4:6-8. Note how Jeremiah's message again and again affirms that judgment is not a contradiction of mercy (5). God has neither forgotten nor forsaken His own because of His everlasting love (Jer. 31:3). Cf. Isa. 49:14-16; 43:1-7, 25. How we need to learn again the spiritual potency of the great statements of the Bible. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." Read the whole of Psalm 46 and learn to rest in it.

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51:1.-14

The exhortation in v.6 is of constant application. When we get immersed in this world's affairs and become involved in its conflicts and oppositions we run the risk of becoming so inextricably attached to it that we are in danger. We not only cease to know just where to draw the line, we become insensitive to the need for lines to be drawn. Then when some significant crisis breaks on us we find we have lost the capacity to distinguish things that differ and, more important, the capacity to take action to save ourselves from the fate of a doomed society and generation. This was the sad story of Lot in Gen.12:4;13:7-13;19:1-29. He began with Abraham,

gravitated towards Sodom, became a man of significance there, was infected and debilitated by its morals, was insensitive to angelic warnings and had to be dragged out of danger. Even then he compromised, not wanting to go too far away from what had been the scene of his earlier life, and the end of the story was shame. There is some indication in Jeremiah's words why this should happen. He speaks of a cup that makes men drunk (7), a golden cup that makes the nations mad. The spirit of the world (Babylon) is an evil spirit that appeals to the most disastrous inclinations of men (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). Think of what we have already referred to in Rev. 17-18. There is a hypnosis in evil which is frightening in its power, but there is something even more awesome. There is God's judicial action in His final intervention against evil spoken of in vivid terms in 2 Thess. 2:1-12. In apostolic evangelism we find the same note as in v.6 (Acts 2:40). The world will not be saved (8-10). Our task is to proclaim the wonderful works of God.

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51:15-19

This passage is virtually identical with chap. 10:1-16 and although we have already commented fully on the verses it is good to consider them again so that our minds might be lifted from the grim facts of experience to the greatness of our God. There is a grandeur here which thrills and comforts and reminds us of Psalm 24 which heralds the coming of the King of Kings for His coronation. We do not think enough about God in all the perfection of His attributes. Think of the definition of God in the Shorter Catechism. "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." In practical terms do we really think of Him as sovereign, worthy of worship and adoration, and altogether to be praised and obeyed? Is it not true that "our God is too small"? Do we ever take time to consider the glorious sweep of the utterance of God in Job 38-41, or Isaiah 40? Have we ever learned the constraint of God's greatness in both grace and glory that caused Paul to speak the wonderful doxology in Rom. 11:33-36? Think too of Habakkuk and his call to worship: "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab. 2:20). How much we need to learn what God is like. It is the starting point for many blessings.

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51:20-33

God is sovereign and if He so chooses He can at any time call on legions of angels to carry out His will (Matt. 26:53). He does in fact send forth angelic agents to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14). We must not in any way seek to eliminate the miraculous element from God's ordering of the affairs of world history, yet we must recognise that as a general principle He chooses to work through the natural processes of human activities. This means that God's ways will often seem complicated and even cumbersome, and many consider God to be slow in His working. But the slowness is not in any sense due to weakness but rather to mercy (2 Pet. 3:9, 15). There is an inevitability and an inescapability about the desolations of history described here, but we must not fail to recognise the divine element in it all. It is God who is doing these things; the nations are but His hammer. God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7). These are solemn thoughts with which to consider the passing of the years, but they are realistic. The turmoil of the nations and the inability of man to remedy the situation are impressed on us relentlessly by the news media. How long can it go on? Babylon is told here (33) that there is only a little time left. However reluctant we are we must be realistic, recognising that we are living in days when the judgments of God are simply delayed (2 Pet. 3:1-10). It is wise to be prepared.

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51:34-44

What Jeremiah prophesies here, as Isaiah spoke of earlier (Isa. 23), actually came to pass with shattering reality as the story of Daniel 5 tells so vividly. Secular history describes how over-confident Babylon was taken. The river Euphrates flowed under the walls and at both entrance and exit there were impassable gates. The plan of digging a channel to divert the river's course was conceived to permit the Persian army to enter the city by means of the dried-up river bed. On the very night of Belshazzar's feast the plan was completed and the conqueror marched through the supposedly impregnable gates of Babylon. It happened the very night that Babylon's evil reached a peak of blasphemy in the contemptuous use of the vessels from the Jewish temple (Dan. 5:2-4). But this capture of Babylon was not simply clever military strategy. As Isaiah 45:1-3 tells, it is God who opened the gates. There is no security of any kind anywhere apart from God, and it is a foolish people

who enter into a trial of strength with the Almighty. It is God who pleads the cause of the righteous and deals with the wicked in terms of impartial retribution. With what judgment you judge you will yourself be judged. These are the words of Jesus, and He speaks of a principle of increase (Luke 6:38).

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51:45-49

This note was written for the last day of the year which can be a bleak time, especially in Scotland, as people muster jaded energy in preparation for midnight and the surge of godless, escapist celebration. It is by and large an exercise of escapism and sentimentality, although we recognise the soreness of heart that many will know as memories of the past and fears for the future crowd into the mind. It is understandable that people should want to forget the grim world in which they live but its realities remain. Who can tell what the coming year will hold in terms of the outworking of the harvest of evil and the operations of the righteous judgments of God. There are two words in today's verses that constitute a great rock and refuge in which we can hide and from which shelter we can move forward in confidence in God. In v.47 we are told with great assurance of the victory of righteousness and the dispersal of the kingdom of evil and all its influence. In v.46 we have a foreshadowing of our Lord's words in John 14:1-6, 18-20, 27.

"Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while troubles last:,
And our eternal home." (Isaac Watts)

Read Psalm 90, and fear not.

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51:50-58

True comfort and encouragement always come by way of realism and facing up to facts. Wishful thinking deceives and when vain hopes have been dashed we can be left in a morass of disappointment, demoralisation and sheer negation. Life becomes hope-less. Faith does not run away from reality, although it must maintain its stand, refusing to be implicated in the manifest wrongs of the world which lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). We do not contract out of the world's needs and sorrows, for that would deprive the world of its salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16) and it would be a contradiction of the prayer and purpose of our Lord (John 17:15). Faith must get its eyes and heart fixed firmly on the things that are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18; Heb. 11:1-3, 8-10, 13-16, 24-25, 27). Remember the Lord and let spiritual Jerusalem come into your mind (50). In the days that are coming *even though* the powers of evil in the world mount up to a crescendo of wickedness (53), they will never for a moment be outwith the supervision and control of the God who stills the waters and commands the storms to cease (55). This is our confidence as we face another year which belongs to God and not to the Devil.

"Be still, my soul; thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and wind still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below."

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51:50-58

Note the different names for God used here in v.53, 56, 57. This is neither accidental nor irrelevant because the various names by which God is called in Scripture reveal different aspects of His character and activity. In the story of creation God is Elohim, the one supreme and true God. The name Yahweh or Jehovah, the Lord, is found early in Genesis and is the truly personal name of God. It was confirmed and expounded at the burning bush in Ex. 3:13-15; 6:3. God is El Elyon, the most high God, in the story of Melchisedek (Gen. 14:22), referred to as the possessor of heaven and earth. God is also El Shaddai, the sovereign all-sufficient God (Gen. 17:1); El Olam, the everlasting God (Gen. 21:33); Jehovah-jireh, the Lord will provide (Gen. 22:8, 14); Jehovah-nissi, the Lord our banner (Ex. 17:15); Jehovah-shalom, the Lord our peace (Judges 6:24); Jehovah-tsidkenu, the Lord our righteousness (Jer. 23:5-6); Jehovah-shammah, the Lord is there (Ezek. 48:35); Jehovah-sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts (1 Sam. 1:3). God is also the Lord God of Israel, the Holy One of Israel, the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7: 9-10, 13, 22). In Jeremiah's words in this passage God is the God of recompense. This is the God with whom we have to do. He is "Adonai", Lord of Lords, ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored. He is the God who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

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51:59-64

This passage tells us of a piece of prophetic symbolism with which the long oracle against Babylon is brought to an end. Zedekiah had been compelled to pay a visit to Babylon, possibly to pledge his loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. This was before his rebellion which occasioned his final downfall and deportation. Seriah, brother of Baruch the scribe (36:4), a faithful friend and supporter of Jeremiah, was given this important task. It is interesting to think of these two brothers both being involved in the work of God, and this fact may signify that in Israel, even in its worst days, there were whole families still loyal to God. Seraiah was the quartermaster of the company and, having much administration to attend to, would be able to move freely without suspicion. He was charged by the prophet to read to the exiles already in Babylon all the long message foretelling Babylon's downfall. Then, possibly because it would be met with cynical disbelief, he was to tie a weight to the book and cast it into the river for a confirmation that what God had said would come to pass Babylon would go down like that weighted bundle of paper and never rise again (cf. Rev. 18:21).

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52:1-16

The substance of this whole chapter has been dealt with on a number of occasions as we have gone through the book of Jeremiah and we comment on it now only in general terms. "The importance of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in the actual carrying out of the purposes of God, and also in the moral instruction it conveys to all men as to the consequences of departure from God, and of sin, is shown in there being a fourfold description of it in Scripture. It has also a prophetic value in its connection with the later destruction of Jerusalem after the Lord had been crucified there, and with the destruction of that mystic city 'the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified' (Rev. 11:8), 'that great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth' (Rev. 17:18). The four descriptions are in 2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 36; Jer. 39:1-14, and 52." (Broadbent) Zedekiah seems to have been a proud man given to wilful rebellion and rejection of all instruction. He lived under the ministry of a great prophet but refused to hear (2). He kicked against the disciplines of providence, learning nothing (3ff). He did his best to escape right to the end (7-8), and the physical blindness in which he ended his days was a symbol of the spiritual blindness which marked all his life.

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52:17-30

In the pillaging of the temple the two pillars at the right and left of the door are mentioned specifically. We have details of these in 1 Kings 7:21ff. giving their names which seem to have symbolic meaning. They seem to have referred to some of the promises of God to David, encouraging him as to the future course of his life and work. The name Jachin may mean, "God will establish your throne for ever," and Boaz, "In the strength of the Lord shall the king rejoice." (1 Kings 7:21) This signifies something of the tragedy of the fall of this chosen people and their work. It need never have been. All was forfeited because of persistent sin. "All (the vessels)

were carried away to Babylon. There they disappear until they are seen again at Belshazzar's feast (Dan. 5), and are later restored by Cyrus to the Jews returning to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:7-11). All these vessels are types of spiritual truths, which may be lost for a time through the unfaithfulness of the people of God and then recovered when times of reviving are given." (Broadbent) It was when Daniel studied well in these books of the prophets that he began to pray (Dan. 9). This is how revival begins.

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52:31-34

We have seen in the past two readings some real significance in studying this postscript to Jeremiah's prophecy (possibly written by Baruch). But what do we say about this last historical note which leaves us with a sense of sweet hope in the midst of tragedy? "Jehoiakin did evil in the sight of the Lord but submitted to Nebuchadnezzar according to the word of Jeremiah (2 Kings 24:9, 12), so that though he came into captivity yet in the place of judgment he found mercy ... The account of the same event given in 2 Chron. 36, after quoting Jeremiah, closes with the beginning of the restoration of Israel and Judah, and the account in Jer. 39 of the fall of the city closes with the deliverance of Jeremiah out of prison (v.14) and with mercy shown to an Ethiopian (v.15-18); 2 Kings closes in the same way as Jer. 52. So that each of the four accounts of this great judgment closes with words of mercy manifested in judgment." (Broadbent) One thing is clear. There can be no going back, no reversing of experience, no wistful longing for the days before the tragedy of sin and disobedience. The way of the Gospel is forward. God has spoken and His promise is gracious and glorious. "I will restore the years that the locust has eaten," (Joel 2:25-27AV). This is hope indeed.

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