

A Burning in the Bones

by Ray C. Stedman

In our studies in Jeremiah we have been learning with increasing interest what a Christian can expect to go through in the final years of a nation's collapse. God willing, we may avoid this in America -- I hope we can. But as we have been going through this book we have seen that we are living in times very parallel to the days of Jeremiah in the kingdom of Judah. In the midst of shocking moral decay, increasing international threat, and the failure of national leadership, God nevertheless patiently taught and toughened this prophet to meet the conditions which, increasingly, he was going to encounter. And this is what he has designed to teach us today -- to meet the conditions of a rapidly worsening world.

In Chapter 20 we get Jeremiah's first actual encounter with physical attack. This is the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim the king, and Nebuchadnezzar is on his way to Jerusalem. The armies of Babylon are already marching. The king has heard of the approach of the Babylonians, fear has gripped the hearts of the inhabitants and of the king himself, and Jeremiah is sent by God to give a final word of warning before the judgment actually falls. What a testimony this book is to the patience of God! For at this point the prophet has been conveying this message for twenty-two years, and still the judgment has been held off. But now at last it is about to come, as the nation remains obdurate and stubbornly unrepentant. Chapter 20 actually begins with Verse 14 of Chapter 19:

Then Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the Lord's house, and said to all the people: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words." {Jer 19:14-15 RSV}

Now Pashur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord. {Jer 20:1-2 RSV}

Here he was in stocks! This was a very surprising development, and a revolting one, to the prophet. For saying what he had been saying all along, he now suddenly finds himself with his back bleeding and raw and sore, his arms and legs imprisoned in stocks which held him in a most uncomfortable position, crouched over and unable to move, facing a long, dark, cold, lonely night. By this time Jeremiah was accustomed to assassination threats. But this was an official action taken by the chief officer of the temple, and it indicates how the opposition to the prophet was hardening at this time.

Now I want to skip forward to Verses 7 and following, because, here, in poetic form, we have the thoughts of Jeremiah while he is in the stocks, waiting for what would happen on the morrow. This is a remarkable account of what the prophet thought while he was imprisoned. He was, to say the least, a profoundly perturbed prophet! Here we get another look at the honest humanity of this man, at the way he faced circumstances just as we do, with fear and despair, alternating at times with faith and confidence. This is an account of vacillation between despair and faith. Any of you who have ever found yourself in unexpected trouble for doing the right thing will be able to identify with Jeremiah the prophet at this time, as he fluctuates between bitterness and faith, between despair and praise. Let us look at the prophet's dilemma. The first thing he feels is that God himself has deceived him:

**O Lord, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.**

Here is a bitter cry in which Jeremiah actually charges God with having lied to him, and with having taken

advantage of him because he is bigger. Have you ever felt like that toward God? Well, I hope you didn't say it, because of course that is on the very verge of blasphemy. But I have said it! And I think perhaps some of you have, too. Jeremiah is probably thinking back to the promise with which he began his ministry, recorded in the first chapter. God had called Jeremiah as a young man and set him to his task, and Jeremiah had objected:

**But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a youth';
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."
Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." {Jer 1:7-10 RSV}**

Jeremiah, remembering those words, is saying, "What happened, Lord? What happened to your promise? You said you'd be with me to deliver me, but here I am in these miserable stocks, held a prisoner, my back bloody and sore, having been beaten, and they're threatening my life. You said you'd deliver me! Lord, you've deceived me!"

Well, that is the way the heart can easily feel toward God, isn't it? Like so many of us, Jeremiah took these promises rather superficially. He read into them certain assumptions God never intended. He assumed "to deliver" meant "to keep him from all hurt". But God did not say that. Jeremiah saw himself in rather heroic terms, and though he shrank from that call, yet he foresaw no pain or personal injury to himself involved at all. He saw himself as going and declaring the word of God to a people who needed it, but with God setting a wall about him, giving his angels charge over him, keeping him safe through it all. But now he seems to have absolutely no protection, and so he charges God with lying.

That, of course, is the one thing God cannot do. God cannot lie. He cannot be faithless to his promise. No way! And yet Jeremiah feels, as many of us have felt, that God has failed his promise. I do not know how many times people have said to me, referring to the word of God, "Well, I know what it says, but it doesn't work!" That is just another way of saying, "God has deceived me; God's a liar!" And that was the prophet's predicament. The second thing he found was that people were mocking him:

**I have become a laughingstock all the day;
every one mocks me. {Jer 20:7b RSV}**

His message was unpopular. And though the people could not answer the keenness of his logic, they did the only thing they could do -- they began to ridicule his person. That is always the refuge of petty minds. When people cannot handle a logical argument they begin to attack the person, and try to destroy him personally. And so they laughed at Jeremiah, poked fun at him, ridiculed him. Mockery is hard to bear, hard for the human spirit to take, and this was getting to Jeremiah. Third, he discovered an unbearable tension within himself:

**For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long. {Jer 20:8 RSV}**

Just a few chapters back, in Chapter 15, he had cried out in an ecstasy of glory,

**Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart; {Jer 15:16a RSV}**

Now he is saying "Lord, your word is a reproach and derision to me. I wish I had never heard it!" And he

wants to quit preaching, but he cannot:

**If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot. {Jer 20:9 RSV}**

How he is torn with this inner tension -- of fear and a dislike of proclaiming the truth, because it only subjects him to ridicule and scorn; and yet when he resolved to quit he found he could not, because the fire of God was burning in his bones and he had to say something. Do you know anything of that? Perhaps not with respect to public preaching -- we are not all called to that. But have you ever felt that you just had to speak out? Some injustice, some moral perversity, some scandalous conduct, some loveless hypocrisy was occurring, and you just could not keep quiet about it. And yet you knew that if you spoke out you would only get into trouble, and nobody would thank you for it -- you would only upset the status quo and create strife -- but you could not contain yourself. Did you ever feel that way? That was what Jeremiah was experiencing here -- this tremendous struggle within himself against the proclamation of the Word of God which only created more trouble. The last thing he mentions is the sense he had of living in an atmosphere of total insecurity:

**For I hear many whispering.
Terror is on every side!
"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"
say all my familiar friends,
watching for my fall.
"Perhaps he will be deceived,
then we can overcome him,
and take our revenge on him." {Jer 20:10 RSV}**

There is not a person he can trust, not a one. Even his familiar friends, those he ate with, visited with, talked with, even they are whispering against him. There is terror on every side. Even the walls are bugged! There is no one he can trust. Friends are highly suspect. Even God has deceived him. That is vivid description of the way our fears can seize our mind and distort reality to such a degree that we believe God himself is faithless to us.

That is an accurate description, if you like, of a satanic attack, for that is exactly what this is. When we begin to look at our circumstances, something within us seizes upon them and begins to make everything look utterly black and dark.

If you have ever been in this predicament you know that it is nonsense to try to convince yourself intellectually that these things are not so. It seems to be madness to deny what appears to be the reality of the situation. It looks exactly that way. Everybody is telling you that is the way it is. But this is a lie. It is a distorted fantasy, not real at all. But that is what the natural mind does to us when we try to see life on our own and judge it. It twists things all out of shape, conjures up all kinds of lurid and gruesome spectacles which appear to be actual realities.

So faith comes to Jeremiah's rescue and begins to strengthen him. Faith counterattacks to uphold the tottering prophet. In Verses 11-12, he says,

**But the Lord is with me as a dead warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble, they will not overcome me.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonor
will never be forgotten.
O Lord of hosts, who triest the righteous,
who seest the heart and the mind,
let me see thy vengeance upon them,**

for to thee have I committed my cause. {Jer 20:11-12 RSV}

That is the right thing to say. Jeremiah is now fighting back against the assault he is victim of. He begins now to reckon on reality, to count as truth what God had made known to him. That is the way to handle any frightening situation. You can be almost sure that the way you see it is not really the way it is. This is what you have to remember. It appears to be that way, but it is not that way. Your mind is being assaulted, your thoughts twisted and distorted by a naturalistic view of things. And the only answer is to begin with God, the unchangeable One, the One who sees things the way they really are. Start with him and with what he has told you, and work from that back to your situation, and you will see it in an entirely different light.

This is what the prophet does here. He starts with God. "The Lord is with me [that is the first thing to remember], and he is a dread warrior [he knows how to fight, how to repel assaults] ; therefore my persecutors will stumble [their plans are not going to work out], they will not overcome me. [In fact,] they will be greatly ashamed, for they will not succeed." Faith reassures him that this is what will happen. And this is the correct view, because this is what happened. And so he cries out, Verse 13:

**Sing to the Lord;
praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hand of evildoers. {Jer 20:13 RSV}**

That sounds like the account of the incident in Acts 16 when Paul and Silas, thrown into the dungeon and thrust into stocks at Philippi, began at midnight to sing praises to God, because their faith was fastened onto God and his greatness, and not upon their circumstances. And this is what Jeremiah learned to do -- to sing praises to the Lord.

It would be great if we could end the account here. But Jeremiah is a very human being, and so he does as we often do -- he sinks back into even greater despair!

**Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man
who brought the news to my father,
"A son is born to you,"
making him very glad. {Jer 20:14-15 RSV}**

He starts to curse the day he was born. It must be about three in the morning now. Up 'til midnight he had been doing fine, but the last hour or two he has been scrunched over in this cruel position, his feet are hurting, his hands are hurting, his head hurts, his back is raw and bloody, and he cannot scratch or soothe it in any way. So the situation gets to be too much again, and he begins to curse the day he was born.

**Let that man be like the cities
which the Lord overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the womb;
so my mother would have been my grave,
and her womb for ever great.
Why did I come forth from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame? {Jer 20:16-18 RSV}**

Have you ever said that? "Why was I ever born? I wish I'd never been born!" Well, what can help Jeremiah now? He does not tell us any more of what went on through the long, long night. But if you turn back to Verse 3 and read what happens the next morning, you will see a different man:

On the morrow, when Pashur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The Lord does not call your name Pashur, but 'Terror on every side.'" {Jer 20:3 RSV}

That was what he himself had experienced during the long night: "I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side!" The name Pashur means a "cleaver" or "splitter," a "divider." That evidently was the kind of man Pashur was, always dividing people up, creating factions. Jeremiah says, "God is no longer going to call you Pashur, but Terror on every side", i.e., undependable, a frightening kind of man whom nobody dare trust. "Your leadership will be ignored, for no one can trust you."

"For thus says the Lord: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. And I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon; he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall slay them with the sword. Moreover, I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies, who shall plunder them, and seize them, and carry them to Babylon. And you, Pashur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity; to Babylon you shall go; and there you shall die, and there you will be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely." {Jer 20:4-6 RSV}

Now he is as steady as a rock. What happened? Well, we do not know; we can only surmise. But I suggest that sometime through that long dark night, the burning in the bones of the prophet, the word of God, triumphed over the tremblings of his heart. The Word began to prove itself true. Jeremiah discovered what many of us have discovered in the hour of pressure, what the Word of God tells us -- "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world," {1 Jn 4:4 KJV}. Jeremiah began to think back upon that Word, its power, what it had accomplished in the past. And somewhere faith came to take hold of this struggling, weak, toppling man and strengthen him, so that when Pashur came in the morning he was ready to meet him, look straight in his eye, and tell him the message God had for him.

I thought of a verse in Paul's letter to Timothy as I read this. It seems to gather this up for us beautifully. For Paul wrote to Timothy, in an hour of great turbulence in the world of his day, and said, "Timothy, if we are faithless, he [Christ] remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself," {cf, 2 Tim 2:13}. Perhaps Jeremiah remembered what God had said in Chapter 1: "Jeremiah, I am watching over my word to perform it," {cf, Jer 1:12 RSV}. So even though it may take a while, even though things do not go right at first, do not be shortsighted and blame God, for he will "watch over his word to perform it."

Prayer:

Thank you, heavenly Father, for this reminder of your faithfulness to the prophet Jeremiah, and your faithfulness to your promises today. Keep us from trembling in faith. Keep us from charging you with falsehood. Keep us, Lord, from weakness. But even when we are weak, thank you for the forgiveness and the healing that you manifest in our lives. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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