

Jeremiah:
An Example.

C. E. S.



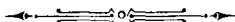
LONDON, W
W BLATCHLEY, 27 LANCEFIELD ST, QUEEN'S PARK.
Printer & Publisher.

One Penny

1906.



JEREMIAH: AN EXAMPLE.



OW instructive it is to remark the instruments God uses wherewith to accomplish His designs. As His resource when all had failed, by which He could show Himself just and yet the Justifier of them that believe in Jesus, surpasses all that man has conceived, or could have dreamt of, so often, when He works, the instruments selected are just those which man would have rejected as utterly unfit for the purpose. But these very instruments, when taken up and adapted for the object God has in view, display His power and redound to His glory. Of this Jeremiah is a striking instance, who, naturally timid and retiring, is yet made by the Lord as bold as a lion, and able to do and to brave that from which the stoutest heart might well have shrunk.

To testify against evil, to expose the wickedness of a generation, and to declare the sin of a people is ever an unwelcome task to a sensitive creature. It shrinks back

at the bare thought of it. And well it may, for what power has the earthen vessel in itself? But if the Lord is with it, if He deigns to use it, weak and fragile in itself, it can become in His hands "a defenced city, an iron pillar, and brazen walls" (Jer. i. 18). One thus situated is brought into opposition to the current thoughts and feelings of the world, making him clash with the opinions, maxims, and habits of those who, whatever they profess, are really opposed to God. "The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (Jas. iv. 4). It must, then, be a work of faith; and the work of faith attests the impotency of the creature and the power of God.

For if confident in its own strength, and assured it can overcome by its own power, it seeks not elsewhere for assistance; but, if the task assigned is felt to be too great, it can only go forward in the strength of another. And if it then turns away, and looks only to God, it walks by faith. And the walking by faith is the going contrary to that which nature would dictate, the incurring that which worldly prudence would avoid, and the doing that which regard to personal comfort and ease would counsel the individual most strongly to leave alone.

Weak and timid as a child is Jeremiah as presented to us in chapter i., when the prophetic commission is announced to him: "Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child" (ver. 6). Such are the first accents of the future prophet which burst on our ears. He stands aghast at the task assigned him—"A prophet unto the nations"! "I am a child," he says. Did not the Lord know that? Assuredly He did, for He had already said, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest out of the womb I sanctified thee; and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations." His commission now delivered to him was clearly no afterthought. The One who sends him forth

to the nations had formed him from the belly, and sanctified him from the womb for this very work. This announcement, so comforting and cheering to one who has learnt to trust the living God, failed to support Jeremiah. He was occupied with his weakness. He saw that ; he felt that. He could give no heed to the words, " I formed thee ; I sanctified thee." He urged objections : " I cannot speak : for I am a child." His youth he thought a reasonable hindrance to compliance with the divine mind. His inability to speak is in his eyes a fitting reason why the Lord should not send him. Yet God had ordained him from the womb for that special work.

How often is similar conduct displayed by God's children. God calls ; His servant objects. There is a difficulty discovered which God has overlooked ; an obstacle it is which must prove an effectual hindrance to compliance with His will. Such an one cannot speak, for he is a child. As with Jeremiah, so with Moses at an earlier date ; personal inefficiency was urged. Had God made a mistake ? How could He ? He had formed each of them for his work. It is well to be thoroughly sensible of our own weakness, and to feel that we cannot do anything of ourselves.

But it is never right to make our sense of weakness an excuse for disobeying God. " When I am weak," says Paul, " then am I strong." Now God had called the prophet to his office, however unfit he felt himself for it. Doubtless, humanly speaking, he was unfit. If men had been selecting a suitable instrument, it would probably not have been Jeremiah. Jesse never thought of presenting David before Samuel. Samuel thought Eliab was the man of God's choice ; but till David came they could not sit down to meat. And when he came the Lord's anointed stood before them. His training and experience as a shepherd fitted him to be the leader and ruler of Israel.

In objecting, then, Jeremiah was wrong. Conscious of God's express command, objections could have no place. Besides, what good was gained? Could he turn aside the Lord from His purpose? Sooner or later he must obey. Jonah, dismayed at the work given to him to do, attempted to fly to Tarshish to escape its execution. He could delay the commencement of his service by his disobedience; but he could not change God's counsels concerning him. Go he must, and go he did, and then found God had gone before him. Israel in the wilderness shrunk from conflict with the nations in Canaan. The war was delayed for well-nigh forty years, but had to be encountered at last; and the enemies their fathers feared to meet, the children successfully overcame.

Jeremiah endeavoured, but in vain, to change the mind of the Lord: "The Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it?" (Isa. xiv. 27). The prophet's failure, however, gives occasion for the manifestation of the Lord's graciousness, who allows His servant to reason with Him—not to change God's mind, but to be overruled by assurances of His help and protection. "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord" (Jer. i. 7, 8). If his being a child is no valid objection to his employment as a prophet, neither is his inability of speech to be any hindrance for the work. "And the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (9, 10). What a commission is here! To nature most appalling; to faith God's will, and that is enough.

But his work does not end here. He might have discharged the office of prophet to the nations without once coming into contact with the subjects of his prophecies, by sending them to the different nations by the hands of messengers, as he did in some cases (chaps. xxvii. 3 ; li. 59-64). What follows, however, cut off all hope of seclusion. He must face men, prophesy against Judah, and announce judgment against Jerusalem : "Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee : be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee ; but they shall not prevail against thee : for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee " (i. 17-19).

From this there could be no escape. If he drew back, the Lord would confound him before them. If he went forward, it would be to incur their hatred and to encounter their opposition. "They shall fight against thee." To stand still, then, was impossible. To retreat was out of the question. To go forward was all that was left him. And "I am with thee to deliver thee " was the only thing to which he could trust. But that was the word of his God.

His message was to be one of reproof and of judgment, though many precious promises were mingled with the announcements of coming wrath. There are some who take pleasure in predicting evil and in looking for judgments to overtake their adversaries. Had Jeremiah been one of that class, he might have found his difficulties in some measure counterbalanced by the pleasure of foreseeing the confusion and the misery of his oppressors. But he was a man of a different stamp. In accordance with the spirit of the dispensation under

which he lived, he could pray for the punishment of his enemies (xv. 15). Yet we find him grieved to the heart at the evil he was the medium of predicting (iv. 19-26 ; viii. 18 ; ix. 1 ; xiii. 17). In no way, then, was the office of prophet congenial to his nature. He shrank from conflict with the wicked : and when uttering the word of the Lord, foretelling the punishment and misery coming on his people, his gentle soul was pained, and the *spirit of intercession*, which arose from the depths of his heart, was only checked by repeated injunctions from the Lord to refrain (vii. 16 ; xi. 14 ; xiv. 11 ; xv. 1).

From the beginning to the end of his ministry he is obliged to face the ungodly part of the nation, and even to enter the king's house and therein deliver messages of woe. He is continually put forward, and made by the Lord to take a most prominent place in his country's history. How does he comport himself in this, to him, unwished-for position ?

His first public acts are to press home on the conscience of the nation, if possible, a conception of the enormity of its guilt. From chapters ii.-xii. he is occupied with this, which may be summed up under three heads—general corruption, idolatry, and covenant-breaking. From ii.-vi. he unfolds their general corruption, crying in the ears of Jerusalem. The Lord had only done them good from the earliest years of their national existence. They had requited Him with the blackest ingratitude, having forsaken Him, the fountain of living waters, and hewn out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns which could hold no water. From the Lord they had turned to Assyria, and, when that failed, they had looked to Egypt for help. Their glory they had changed for that which did not profit. Idolatry was established, with its concomitant vices, for which the prophet reproves them (ii. 27 ; iii. 9 ; v. 7-9). The Lord's word was disbelieved (v. 12). They were rebellious. All classes were corrupt. Providential dealings

had no effect (iii. 3). "As a fountain casteth out her waters, so she (*i.e.*, Jerusalem) casteth out her wickedness" (vi. 7). No shame could be seen on their face, no blush crimsoned their cheeks (15). Reprobate silver would they be called, because the Lord had rejected them (30). Among such was Jeremiah placed as a tower and fortress to know and try their way (27).

From vii.-x. the prophet is sent to speak to the men of Judah, in the house of the Lord, to shew up their abominable sins carried on whilst calling out: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these" (vii. 4). They were hypocrites. They could steal, murder, commit adultery, burn incense to Baal, and come to the Lord's house, saying they were delivered to do all these things.*

Their idolatry is then denounced. But in this they were not alone; the heathen were guilty of it likewise, therefore a message is sent to the latter by the "prophet to the nations," announcing (in Chaldee) that the gods, who have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these heavens (x. 11). After this we have the contrast between idols and the Lord God brought out (12-16); and judgment is prayed for on the heathen; "for they have eaten up Jacob, and devoured him, and consumed him, and have made his habitation desolate" (25).

But if Judah was guilty, in common with the Gentiles, of idolatry and of the vices in its train, there was a sin peculiarly their own. They had broken the covenant. This is next charged against them (xi., xii.) God had therefore forsaken His house; He had left His heritage (xii. 7). Prayer for them is now of no avail (xi. 14).

* Not delivered over to do them, but saved by the observance of ordinances in order that they might be free to do them. So Revised Version gives it, "We are delivered: that ye may do all these abominations" (verse 10).

Yet afterwards the Lord will be gracious. The nation shall be restored (xii. 15), though in the meantime those who have provoked His anger will suffer for it.

These three heavy charges having been pressed on them, the prophet is next shown, under different figures, the certainty of the Lord's then rejection of His people. The girdle marred at the river Euphrates (xiii.) is explained to mean the bringing down of their pride. God "will dash them one against another, even the fathers and the sons together" (14), He will not pity, nor spare, nor have mercy. By the occasion of a dearth the prophet learns again, when desirous to intercede, that the Lord will not accept it now, and even if Moses and Samuel stood before Him, He would not hear them. The sword, the famine, death, or captivity must be the people's portion, and nothing now remains for the faithful but separation from the ungodly (xiv., xv.) The two next chapters (xvi., xvii.) bring out in full relief how far the separation is to be carried; not merely separation in heart, but in act (xvi. 1-8). Difficult, indeed, must such a path ever be, but the faithful are strengthened by the assurance of blessings to those who trust in the Lord, and by the mention of the curse which should follow those who trusted in man (xvii. 5-8).

The potter's vessel is next used as an illustration. Marred in the potter's hand, it illustrated God's right to deal with people as He pleases; and the potter's earthen bottle, broken by the prophet in the valley of the son of Hinnom, in the presence of ancients of the people, and ancients of the priests, foreshadowed the certainty of the people and of the city being broken before God (xviii.-xix.) Then in xxi.-xxiv. the fortunes of the royal house are the theme. First its punishment is announced; after that the future glory attaching to it is foretold. Shallum, Josiah's son, will return no more, nor see his native country again. Jehoiakim would be buried with the burial of an ass. Coniah, a despised

and broken vessel, should die in Babylon. Zedekiah, too, would be childless (lii. 10). Yet the family of David shall not be cut off. For "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In His days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely : and this is His name whereby He shall be called, Jehovah our Righteousness" (xxiii. 5, 6). But this was future, and is future yet. At the time Jeremiah lived, how different was the scene ! In the midst of unrighteousness of kings, prophets, priests, and people, this prophecy comes as a bright spot in the surrounding, deepening darkness. Before, however, it could be realised, and the reign of righteousness commence, a general judgment of the nations must take place. The cup, drunk first by Judah, was afterwards to be drunk by all to whom it was sent, and lastly by the King of Babylon, the scourge used of God in the prophet's day to carry out His purposes. (See chapter xxv.)

Another part of the book now commences. The sovereignty departing from Judah was to be transferred to Gentile hands, and all must submit to the conqueror, for so had God willed. The prophet is now placed in a very difficult position. He must exhort his countrymen still in Judæa, and those already in captivity, as well as the nations around the land, to accept the sovereignty of Nebuchadnezzar. Afterwards Israel would be restored ; be again governed by their own rulers ; and David, their king, be in their midst. This is the leading subject of xxvi.-xxxiii. From xxxiv.-xlv. we have illustrated the different ends of those who only profess and of those who practice obedience. Those who manifest profession only, without reality, are to be destroyed ; those really obedient will have life. Jonadab should never want a man to stand before the Lord for ever, and Baruch's life should be given him for a prey. The concluding

portion (xlii.-li.) is occupied with predictions against certain nations—some of them descendants of Ham, the others descendants of Shem.

Throughout his ministry we see Jeremiah brought prominently forward; the consequences to himself it is not difficult to guess. Four times was his life in danger (xi. 19-21; xxvi. 11; xxxvi. 26; xxxviii. 4-9. The hostility of the people was not confined to threats. Once was he put in the stocks (xx.), twice into dungeons, then kept in prison, when delivered from the pit in the house of Malchiah, till Jerusalem was taken (xxxvii. 16; xxxviii. 6, 13; xxxix. 14). The history ends with the prophet in Egypt, carried captive thither by Johanan and the remnant of Judah which had returned to dwell in the land (xliii. 5). Truly he was a man of woes. "Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me" (xv. 10).

What a place for him to occupy! From the thirteenth year of King Josiah to the flight of Johanan into Egypt, for a period of more than forty years was Jeremiah before his people, reproving them, and warning them of coming judgments. A good illustration of his boldness and faithfulness is afforded us in xxvi. 14, when his life was threatened by the priests, the prophets, and their partisans among the people. There is no drawing back, no cringing, no temporising. "As for me, behold I am in your hand; do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you." Death he is ready to meet; anything rather than to withdraw his words, or to refuse to utter what God had commanded. How different his words were to those that we have in chapter i. There he feared the faces of men (i. 8, 17); now he only fears God. He speaks as directed, and leaves the issue with the Lord. He suffered much.

He suffered from foreseeing the calamities which were coming on his country. He suffered in sharing her calamities when they came. He suffered from his countrymen, who rewarded him evil for good, and hatred for his good will. From the heathen monarch, the destruction of whose kingdom and the capture of whose metropolis he foretold, he received nothing but kindness (xxxix. 11; xl. 4). From his own countrymen, some bright examples excepted, as Ahikam and Ebedmelech, he experienced nothing but bitterness, hostility, and persecution.

We see in him the feebleness of the creature, and the strength which God can give. He failed sometimes. Who is there but One who could tread such a path without failure? But, if we refer to this, it is not to make a spectacle of human infirmity, still less to sit in judgment on the prophet. If any take pleasure in such a task, let them perform it, taking care that he that is without sin should cast the first stone at him. For us his failure, weakness, and natural timidity of character are occasions for portraying what the power of God can do; how He can fit the most unlikely instrument to human eyes to perform the greatest work, and how the agent, the least suited apparently for such a service, may be enabled effectually to perform it.

This leads us to the consideration of the secret of his success. He obeyed God implicitly, and brought all his difficulties to Him with the simplicity of a child. When first called to his office, he questions before he obeys; ever after he obeys before he questions. He learnt his lesson of obedience at the commencement of his ministry. Have we learnt ours? Grievous to him, indeed, were the messages he had often to deliver; but he gives them as received. Hence his boldness. Assured it was the word of the Lord, he goes forth to encounter the opposition of priests, prophets, kings, and people. No matter

who opposes, or who may threaten, he must speak—and he does.

See him in chapter xx., just after he had come out of the stocks, put in them by Pashur, the governor of the house of the Lord, for predicting the desolation of the city. He had felt the power of man against him for his faithfulness to God. When let out the next day, he repeats the unwelcome truth, directly charges Pashur with prophesying lies, and calls him Magor-missabib. Then see him before God: "O Lord, Thou hast deceived (or, persuaded) me, and I was deceived (or, persuaded): Thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of His Name, nor speak any more in His Name. But His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (xx. 7-9). Before men he is as bold as a lion, and the brazen wall and iron pillar. Before the Lord we see him pouring out his complaint, confessing his hesitation, and setting forth his troubles.

He unbosoms himself to God. This gives confidence. For the Lord, before whom, and to whom he speaks, was with him "as a mighty and terrible One: therefore," he says, "my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail: they shall be greatly ashamed; for they shall not prosper: their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten" (11). With this confidence he can sing unto the Lord, and exhort others to do the same, on the ground of deliverance accomplished, "He hath delivered the soul of the poor from the hand of evildoers" (13).

With Jeremiah the path of obedience was the only safe path, and he walked therein. Obedience carried him forward—faith kept him up. Obedience did not

lead him into an easy path—it did not put away difficulties—it seemed to create them ; but it always afforded a way of surmounting them. To go forward was the command to Israel at the Red Sea. Here their obedience was tested. To trust in the Lord to open the way, in this their faith was tried. So with Jeremiah, and with all God's people, the only safe principle is obedience on the ground of faith. Jeremiah went through difficulties, suffered imprisonment, had his feet made fast in the stocks, passed some time in dungeons, and sank deep in the mire.

He suffered this and much more, because he was obedient. He could trust the Lord, and therefore he could look every difficulty in the face, and go forward. Yet not (as we have said) that his faith never failed. In this very chapter (xx. 14-18) we have an instance of failure. Sorely tried he was ; and the natural feelings of his heart find expression. The principle, however, on which he acted was obedience ; and he found it, when acted upon, one which would stand the tests to which it was subjected.

Again, see him in chapter xxxii., when told to buy the field of Hanameel, the son of Shallum, his uncle's son. He does not understand it, yet he buys it according to the word of the Lord. After he has bought it, he asks the Lord about it ; and He, who always responds to the faith of His people, answers him with words of comfort, telling of the blessing yet in store for the nation, and for the places the prophet loved so well (36-44).

In all this there is much instruction for us. The prophet, when obedient, always found God faithful. God had promised that his enemies should not prevail against him. This always came true. They could oppress, they could threaten, they could imprison, they could attempt, too, his life, yet never could they take it. His opposers fell—he did not. Pashur should die in Baby-

lon. Hananiah must die the same year that he prophesied, and he died just two months after his assumed prediction (xxviii. 1, 17), because he taught rebellion against the Lord. Shemaiah, the Nehelamite, should not see the good the Lord would do unto Israel, nor have a man to dwell among his people (xxix. 32). But the Lord's promise to Jeremiah never failed: "I am with thee to deliver thee" (i. 19). Few though these words are, how much was conveyed by them! The presence of the Lord would be with him to deliver him. Into a strange land he would be carried. With the remnant of the people he would share the affliction of his nation. But who could break the iron, even the northern iron and brass? (xv. 12). The Lord made him a brazen wall, which could not be broken.

A man of sorrows he was. Yet he had a joy in spite of his circumstances, and even in the midst of his greatest trials. His joy was the word of his God. That which seemed to outward eyes the cause of his troubles afforded him solace in those troubles: "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart: for I am called by Thy name, O Lord God of Hosts" (xv. 16). But if the word received into his heart gave him joy, it was the instrument which separated him from the surrounding evil: "I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, nor rejoiced; I sat alone because of Thy hand: for Thou hast filled me with indignation." Personifying the faithful remnant, he expresses what they suffered. Grievous, however, as their position was, it was the place of testimony and the sphere of influence. What follows shows this: "If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as My mouth: let them return unto thee; but return not thou unto them. And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver

thee, saith the Lord. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible" (xv. 19-21).

We see, then, what the word of the Lord was to him ; according to it he walked ; from it he drew comfort and joy ; by means of it he was separated from the evil around him. What the Word was to him, should it not be to God's people at all times ? He went not by his thoughts, his feelings, his surmises. He walked according to the Word, as soon as he was assured it was the Word. Nothing more is required of us. It is to the Word, the doctrine that we are to give heed, the doctrine according to godliness—the word of God's grace. The Word of God separated him from evil. It will always act like that. Hence the trial which faithfulness causes. Comfort, however, there will be in the assured presence of the Lord with us, and the joy which the truths He has made known give to the heart which feeds on them.

How often is the bait held out of greater influence at the price of unfaithfulness. Too rigid conformity to the Word, it is said, offends some. A little relaxing, a little yielding to the opinions of others, will enable personal influence to have its full weight. Such are man's thoughts. How contrary to these are God's thoughts. This Jeremiah xv. 19 and 2 Timothy ii. 21 show : " If thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as My mouth." " If a man purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work." We cannot want more. This is influence indeed. Be as God's mouth ; a vessel meet for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work !

What opportunities for usefulness these words intimate ; of what influence to be exerted do they assure us. We shall be strong, we shall be influential, in proportion as we are walking by faith in childlike obedience to the Word.