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The Distress of Preaching God's Word in a Day of Apostasy - A sad lament by a preacher to his mother!

"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," Jeremiah 15:10.

This morning (July 19th) I read Jeremiah chapter 15 along with Judges 2, two of the chapters appointed for reading today for those who follow the Robert Murray McCheyne Bible Reading Calendar. Both these chapters highlight the tendency of God's people to depart from the ways of the Lord as He sets forth in His Word and to eagerly enter the paths dictated by their own depravity.

Well did the hymn writer say:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Judges 2:10-13 reads: "And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim: and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the LORD to anger. And they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth."

How quickly the departure took place! Even in the best of times, rebellion is never far beneath the surface of our hearts. "Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah." Psalm 39:5.

Serving the Lord faithfully in the midst of such a generation is no easy task. That which is beset by difficulties at the best of times becomes even more difficult. The Saviour said to His disciples: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves," Matthew 10:16. When opposition arises even from amongst the 'sheep' then things become really difficult. It was of this that Paul wrote. "In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren," 2 Corinthians 11:26. ". . . in perils among false brethren." That is the greatest of distresses to bear! He said to the elders of the most spiritual congregation referred to in the New Testament, the church at Ephesus: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them," Acts 20:28-30. How alarming this is! "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things." How close we are to rebellion! Like a volcano, it is secretly seething just beneath the surface!

Little wonder then that poor Jeremiah, who lived amongst such a rebellious people, laments: "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," Jeremiah 15:10.



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

I. PLEASE NOTE HOW JEREMIAH CLASSIFIES HIMSELF

"A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth."

His preaching gave rise to strife and contention. Being a man of like passions with others, he wishes he had never been born, rather than meet with so much unsought trouble.

The word 'strife' refers to a 'war of words' or worse. The word 'contention' means 'brawling' as a cantankerous woman or a drunk man. "It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop, than with a brawling (same word as contention) woman and in a wide house," Proverbs 25:24. "Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine," Proverbs 23:29-30.

That is a sad and burdensome reputation to bear around!

However, let the faithful preacher bear in mind the words of the Saviour.

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me," Matthew 10:34-38.

It is not that the purpose of God is to generate strife and contention amongst men but so contrary toward the mind and will of God is man's heart that wherever the Word of God is preached it will promote this reaction!

Calls for obedience to the ears of the disobedient are all but declarations of war! Sinful man will war against God and His faithful servants when he hears the message of God and blames God and His message for stirring up the strife!

Remember how it was with Christ at the very beginning of His ministry.

"And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way," Luke 4:28-30. They were vexed enough to murder the Saviour, so grieved and annoyed were they at what He said. Yet what He said was not in the least provocative or meriting such a response.

Jeremiah was close to the end of His ministry when he uttered these words just before the first siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

II. JEREMIAH WAS DEEMED TO BE MOST GREEDY AND HEARTLESS

"I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me," Jeremiah 15:10. Usury, or the practice of lending money at exorbitant interest rates, was unlawful amongst the Jews and therefore those who engaged in it were most hated and despised as being exploitative. Such was the 'publican' of the New Testament era. He was a despised being as is seen in the annoyance of the Pharisees at the behaviour of the Saviour toward them. "And it came to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his house, many publicans and sinners sat also together with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him. And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?" Mark 2:15-16. "The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!" Luke 7:34.

Jeremiah complained that he was classified as self-centred, greedy and heartless as a cruel money-lender!



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

Those who seek to be faithful to God and His Word in a day of rebellion and apostasy must also suffer so. Times have not changed. The preacher cannot expect any respect or regard from the people he must rebuke. He will be, as Paul said of himself and his fellow-apostles: "we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day," 1 Corinthians 4:13.

As I said, times have not changed!

This heavy burden is frightening for the preacher to contemplate. Consequently, many who are called to bear it, shy away from it. Moses did and so too did Jeremiah when they were first called.

"Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:10-11), And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee, (Exodus 4:1) And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue," Exodus 4:10.

Jeremiah manifests the same fears.

"Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the LORD said unto me, 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. Then 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," Jeremiah 1:6-10.

Fear of the price that such faithful preaching demands has hindered many in this present generation of believers to the extent of causing many preachers to avoid the very core of God's message for this day and side-stepping the issues of sin in the ranks of God's people today. Backsliding, worldliness, the ready adoption of the world's fashions and vain notions by professing Christians are not tackled head-on with pointed and forceful denunciations! Such preaching is far from that which the Lord commanded Isaiah to engage in. "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins," Isaiah 58:1.

All too many when speaking of sins that are all too common today hastily qualify their words by saying, what one minister was heard to say, "Of course this condemnation doesn't apply to anyone here!" That was a wickedly deceitful thing to say and likely provided someone with an excuse to continue in sin. Those stirred to any degree are hushed to sleep again and no one is annoyed with the preacher - except possibly those who see plainly the dreadful weakness and compromise in the preacher's words.

All too often sin is condemned in 'generalisations' which are so vague that no one feels that anything they are doing is being referred to!

There is thus an avoidance of reproach at the price of avoiding fully preaching God's Word. How dreadful is such a course of action!

Few today can say as did Micah! "But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin. Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity. They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest," Micah 3:8-12.



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

That is faithful preaching. None could say the prophet had not told the highest and the lowest in the land just what was their sin and what would be the cost of their rebellion.

May God raise up Micahs today.

III. DISTRESSING AS WAS THE REPROACH HE WAS CALLED UPON TO BEAR, JEREMIAH WAS NOT WITHOUT HIS COMFORTS

Whatever his ears heard from the mob, his heart heard sweeter words from the Lord.

"The LORD said, Verily it shall be well with thy remnant; verily I will cause the enemy to entreat thee well in the time of evil and in the time of affliction. . . . Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts," Jeremiah 15:11, 16.

The Lord makes a place of safety even in the darkest days for His faithful ones and the word which is so repulsive to the ungodly is most sweet and comforting to the faithful.

The preserving of His flock has ever been the Lord's purpose. "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Luke 12:32. To the very end of this age it will be so. "And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ," Revelation 12:13-17.

These words refer specially to the 'remnant' of believers in Jerusalem at the very close of this age but the principle at work here has ever been operating throughout the ages. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee," Isaiah 43:2.

Whatever his fellow Jews may have thought of him, Jeremiah could comfort himself that their opinion was not shared by the Lord. Nor indeed by succeeding generations of believers for has not Jeremiah become a 'Lionheart' to millions of those who share the Lord's opinion of His faithful servant? With what joy and wonder and admiration I studied his book in jail back in the summer of 1966.

Happy are all those who for the sake of fidelity to the Saviour have their names trampled in the dirt for it shall one day be held aloft in honour and praise.

Of course, Jeremiah is still mocked by the world for is not one who rightly warns of danger resulting from the folly of departing from God called a 'Jeremiah'!

What an honourable epithet for any to bear!

Such a label should not be shunned but rather with joy clasped to our breast as 'medals of honour' as did good old John Bunyan with the curses of men that fell upon his head.

"For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace," Psalm 37:9-11.

Rev Ivan Foster Rtd., 19th July 2018.