

Faith in God in Hopeless Circumstances

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Jeremiah 32:6-27.

"There is nothing too hard for Thee."

"Is there anything too hard for Me?"

The field of Anathoth is a practical exposition of those words — the statement and the interrogation. We know the situation at the time from this chapter and elsewhere; the double imprisonment, Jeremiah himself shut up in the Court of the Guard, and the city surrounded by the invader. Then in that situation in some way the Lord registered in the heart of Jeremiah that this cousin of his would come and ask him to buy the field. We do not know how, but this we conclude, that Jeremiah became aware that this man, his cousin, would be coming to him with this request, and so it happened. For forty years Jeremiah had been prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem and the land and the captivity of the people. His commission was concerning the destruction and desolation of the land, so that Jeremiah was really in a very difficult set of circumstances. There is no doubt about the darkness of the outlook; it was very real. There was his own ministry which had gone on for all those years and that was now suspended. There was the actual situation at this time. He was a captive within a captivity. It was a very real challenge to faith. This was no merely hypothetical situation; it was an actual one. And the coming of Hanamel, his cousin, to him was as the redeeming kinsman, and one who had the right to redeem the inheritance, to save that inheritance, that field, from being lost to posterity, from going outside of the family.

Well, I do not know what Hanamel was thinking about at the back of his mind, but, taking the situation firstly as to the land and the prospects, one would conclude that in any case it would go outside of the family. The Chaldeans were going to take the land and overrun it; it was going to be destroyed and laid desolate, and from the natural standpoint, it was not the time to embark on this sort of thing, for redeeming at that time involved something very much more than just transferring from one part of the family to the other by a deed. Redeeming had the far greater meaning of redeeming from the Chaldeans and redeeming from his own personal situation. For what could Jeremiah do with a field at Anathoth when he was getting on in years and was himself in present peril of his life? He could not see a day ahead, and knew from all the years of his compulsory prophesying what was going to happen. To perform an act of redeeming in the midst of all that was a tremendous challenge to faith.

There is no doubt, of course, here as everywhere, a prophecy going beyond Jeremiah and beyond even Israel. It is not difficult to see that in the great divine scheme of things, here is a very practical illustration of something which took place years afterwards of an even far greater significance — I mean the redemption that Christ wrought. Christ knew that this whole world sooner or later was going into judgment and fire, to be consumed and purged. He knew that He Himself here was in a worse place than Jeremiah, but He performed the act of redemption. By redemption He secured the world unto a future glory. A mighty triumph of faith was His. One just says that, because, while this has practical values for us in our own lives, they are all set in the light of the so much greater things and undoubtedly the main interpretation is here. It is probably found worked out in the book of the Revelation. Here you have Jeremiah ordering the deeds to be put in a vessel and sealed to continue for many days. In the book of Revelation you have the seven seals and when those seven seals are being broken, then the Lord Jesus has come to the time to secure His purchased possession after many days. It is then that He is entering into His inheritance to possess that which He redeemed. Well, that is by the way.

We want to get the values for our own present practical help. Note how thoroughgoing was the transaction. Jeremiah did not act in any hesitation; he had no stipulations. He did it as thoroughly as though he were a free man and there were no Chaldeans at all round about. He carried it through thoroughly according to the law; one sealed deed that was to be, in the ordinary way, placed in 'Somerset House', the other an open document for all to read, a copy which could be looked at at any time in a public place. He carried it all through very thoroughly and properly. The point is that he is not doing this with that kind of hesitation that is uncertain. He does it with a thoroughness which indicates that he is certain as he does it. His faith is going all the way.

Then he has done it; and you know there are times when we are very sure that the Lord means a thing to be done. He has given us tokens, perhaps evidences, spoken to us in our own hearts, then confirmed in different ways and we know, and at that time we act accordingly and we do it as far as we can very thoroughly, and when it is done we get a reaction. The whole meaning of the situation, of what we have done, comes back upon us and we are almost frightened at what we have done, the path that we have taken. That is what happened to Jeremiah. He did it thoroughly in full assurance, and when it was all done and people had gone and he was left alone with the Lord in his imprisonment, he had a terrible reaction. It all came back upon him. He was now being tested by the position that he had taken. He turns to prayer, makes an affirmation: "*There is nothing too hard for Thee*", and then goes on to build up a case, perhaps to undergird his own faith. He takes the history of Israel and the wonderful things the Lord has done, comes right on to his own ministry and sees how even it is being fulfilled. What he has been saying all these years, the Lord is doing. The Chaldeans are there. He goes over it all, but it is all an interrogation. He has made a statement, but it is all an interrogation of the Lord. He winds it all up then: "*Thou hast said unto me, O Lord Jehovah, Buy thee the field for money, and call witnesses; whereas the city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans*" (v.25). It has come back upon him now at last. Then the Lord comes in and challenges him as to the very thing that he has said. "*Is anything too hard for Me?*" You have said that nothing is too hard for Me. Is anything too hard for Me? The Lord brings him back to his own position.

Now there are one or two things which arise from this which I think are of very real help to us, or should be. One is this, that the Lord does call upon us from time to time in the midst of humanly impossible situations, things which would naturally make impossible the thing that He calls upon us to do, He calls upon us to take practical steps in the presence of downright impossibilities, that is, in the presence of things which make the realisation of that step at present an impossibility, to secure that realisation in a coming day. The alternative to that is, 'Well, the situation is so utterly hopeless and impossible that it is no use, we must wait and not do anything.' We just flop down and say, 'We cannot do anything, it is quite impossible! Look how we are shut up, locked up, look how everything closes in, look what the prospect is.' We can only just sit still and wait and do nothing until the situation clears, and it has been in situations like that so frequently, almost invariably, that the Lord has called for some act of faith which is in keeping with the position that we have taken. We have borne a testimony, we have taken a position, we have made declarations as to the Lord's purpose and intentions, as to what the Lord wills, His great dispensation purpose, or it may be in some similar connection, we have a position with the Lord because the Lord has written that in our hearts, the Lord has registered that in our hearts as according to His mind and we have responded and taken a position and taken a stand and declared ourselves in that matter. And then the tremendous challenge of Satan arises which says that the realisation of the very position that you have taken is utterly impossible, the very thing for which you have declared yourself is out of the question. What you have said to be the Lord's mind is now impossible of realisation; it cannot be. Then it is a matter of whether we are going to abandon our position, yield to the hopelessness of conditions. That is the alternative, simply to let go, do nothing and wait until everything is favourable before we do anything

else, and at that time the Lord looks for some practical expression of faith which stands right over against the circumstances and secures that position unto a coming day, gets the title deeds in hand, does something very thoroughly, carries it through without any provisos, 'ifs' or 'buts' — rules that all out and does it. We may go through a bad time over it and have questions and faith may begin to wobble a bit. We may be brought back to our position again. The Lord says, in utterly hopeless circumstances, do you still believe? Is anything too hard for Me?

Over the Lord's work and the Lord's testimony, that kind of situation very often does arise; in the matter of a calling in relation to the Lord's purpose such a situation will arise more than once in life. But not only so — in our own individual lives and relationship with the Lord, He does allow positions like this to arise where naturally there is no hope, no ground of assurance, everything is threatening, and says, it cannot be! But over that at some time we had a transaction with the Lord, we felt that the Lord led in that direction, that was the Lord's will. We had no doubt about it at the time. After much prayer, that was the way the Lord led, and now everything says that it is a mistake, it is folly, it is foolhardy, it is altogether impossible, altogether beyond you. Everything says that, and we are challenged as to the position we took with the Lord, and in the midst of those conditions the Lord calls for a ratification in a very definite way in faith of the position taken with Him.

Now look again. Hanamel perhaps was trying to be a shrewd business man. He saw the way things were going and thought he would get cash in hand as soon as he could before he lost everything. I hope I am not misunderstanding him, misjudging him, but it does look very much like that. He came straight to Jeremiah who had been preaching about the destruction of the land and its captivity. Jeremiah was in prison and his cousin knew all about him and where to find him. But Jeremiah just lately had been striking another note in his preaching. There was a note of a distant hope. Whereas up to now it had been all gloom, judgment and destruction, there had arisen on Jeremiah's prophetic horizon a ray of light, a distant hope, and a note of hope had come into his preaching. The Lord would turn again the captivity of Zion. At that point Hanamel came. He, on his part, as I have said, was very likely just acting as a shrewd son of Israel.

But this meant two things with Jeremiah. Firstly, the challenge to the new note of hope. Jeremiah, do you believe what you are saying? In the light of these circumstances, in the light of all that you know is yet to take place, seventy years' captivity, do you believe what you are saying? Do you believe that hope, do you believe that light beyond, do you believe that, although today and for a time the realisation of your vision is utterly impossible, it will be realised? Do you believe it?

There are people who have surrendered to a hopeless position so far as the church is concerned. They talk about the hopeless ruin of the church and in doing that they surrender a large part of the New Testament. Do we not believe that the Lord can yet get a people, even if it is only a remnant, who are according to His mind as revealed, and become His hope? That was the challenge that came to Jeremiah. Did he believe that the Lord had His hope vested in a company that will return from captivity? They were the Lord's hope and in them the thing that the Lord had always shown to be His thought would be realised, that they would be the building the house, they would restore the whole testimony, that it would be realised. It looked far off to Jeremiah, but this coming, this challenge to buy the field, was a challenge to Jeremiah in this connection. Did he believe that, although the mass of the Lord's people of Israel would pass out, nevertheless in the midst there would be a company sooner or later that would be the vessel in which God would realise all His thought? Did he believe that? What was he doing to put his belief into expression, to prove that he believed it? Here is his opportunity. He was doing a thing now and doing it thoroughly on the basis of nothing being impossible with God, nothing too hard for the Lord. He was doing it now in the midst of such conditions.

The alternative is to surrender to the situation today as it is in the church and in the world and in circumstances and say, it is quite impossible, it is no use going on with this testimony; it is a hopeless situation, we must wait until the Lord does something. That is not what Jeremiah did.

There is another thing, maybe a small thing, but I think it is helpful. Hanamel did this perhaps on a very low level, an ordinary mundane level; it was a stroke of business he was trying to bring off. That was all with him, and it was something not very praiseworthy at that time, getting rid of his property because he saw that he would lose it in any case. But, while that was true from the standpoint of his cousin, Jeremiah looked at everything, even a thing like that, with this question, How does this stand related to God's throne? Things may be in themselves very ordinary and mundane, things that happen, that cross our path, that come our way, someone brought into our lives, across our path, in itself merely a matter of ordinary everyday business contact, but the man who is in touch with God, the woman who is in touch with God, who is always waiting on the Lord, does not look at it like that. Jeremiah did not react to Hanamel and say, You are shrewd, aren't you? You are trying to be clever, you are this and that and something else! Do you think I am going to be caught like that; you know quite well you are going to lose this field in any case, and you are trying to make good while there is anything going at all, you think you are going to catch me! Not a bit of it! He said at once, That may be true about Hanamel, but how does this stand related to the Lord's throne? Has the Lord something in this? I am suggesting that that is an attitude towards life and its incidents which may prove tremendously fruitful — not to look upon things that happen as just happenings in the natural, but to challenge every one in the light of the throne of the Lord. This very thing stood vitally related to the Lord's throne, although on the natural it was so very mundane. I do not think we are always alive to that sort of thing, people who come our way and things that arise. Where is the Lord in this, what has the Lord got in this? — not to take it at its face value at once and react to it as just something that matters or does not matter in a certain realm, but to ask what the Lord has in this. That was Jeremiah's attitude towards things, nothing happening by chance in the life of the one in the hand of the Lord. Where is the throne of God in this? The biggest disasters apparently and the smallest incident in our lives may stand very closely related to the throne of God in some very vital meaning. One man acts in his ordinary disposition and course of business, and doing so, planning, scheming, devising, or just going about his business, he comes our way. There may prove to be behind that something tremendous of the throne of God. That person does not know it, he has no sense of it, but it is so. He thinks that he is just acting in his business way. I do not suppose that the cousin of Jeremiah had any sense that he was doing anything at all related to the Lord in this thing. He was probably only acting in his own interests, but there proved to be behind that the sovereignty of God. The attitude towards life that Jeremiah took may prove to be a very fruitful thing in life.

Now, note this thing about Jeremiah again — the utter selflessness of faith. Jeremiah could not have been acting for himself when he did this. As I have said, he was getting on in years, he was a prisoner. The land, he knew, was going to be destroyed. What use did he have for the field? Seventy years captivity — he knew it. Where would he be at the end of seventy years? During the seventy years, what use would the field be to him? There was nothing personal about this. This faith was utterly selfless. What he did was as a testimony in his day to the faithfulness of God, and he had got to wait for his vindication till the afterward. He would not live to see it. His vindication would come after he had gone. The people of God would come into the values of his faith when he was gone. That is the nature of faith, and that is the real test of acts of faith. Are we going in faith to get what we want, something for ourselves, or is it the Lord's interests in view? That is the real test of faith, that the Lord should have what He wants. The Lord was wanting here, right in the heart of Israel, right in Jerusalem, right in the gate there, before all the elders and witnesses, a practical testimony to His faithfulness. "If my

covenant of day and night stand not, if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth; then will I also cast away the seed of Jacob, and of David my servant, so that I will not take of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; for I will cause their captivity to return, and will have mercy on them". You know how that has been fulfilled in Christ, David's greater Son, the everlasting King upon David's throne. It is fulfilled and in Christ all Israel shall be saved, says Paul (Rom. 11:26). But as a testimony to that in this dark and terrible day when judgment was there and increasing, Jeremiah took this practical step by which he set up a monument to the faithfulness of God. God is jealous for His own Name, His own faithfulness, His own testimony. He is looking for those who in utter selflessness and in hopeless natural conditions, will be true to the revelation that He has given, true to God and what He has made known of Himself.

"There is nothing too hard for Thee." We say that, and then it all comes back upon us because of the situation, and the Lord has to come back on our own words and say, is anything too hard for Me? I do not know what this says to you and the way in which it has been applied. It may not affect you very much, but take the conclusion of the whole matter, however it applies to us — and it will apply to us differently each one. It will apply to the ministry to which some of us are called, it will apply to the testimony into which we are standing, it will apply in personal ways also as to our own lives and situations, but it is one thing in its meaning. The Lord has put into our hearts something which we have had no doubt about as being His mind, His way for us. There was much prayer and we had assurance in our hearts that that was the Lord's way for us in life. It has been tested, we have gone through a lot with it, and then a situation arises which seems to bring it all into the realm of impossibility of realisation, circumstances are all against it, and the temptation is to question our original leading, to doubt the Lord about our lives, and to just sink down and accept the situation as an impossible one. It is at such times that the Lord looks to us to give a positive token of our faith in Him and to commit ourselves in some way in faith. We are involved by our faith in an act; self is ruled out and all selfish interests are entirely set aside, and it is the Lord's interests and the Lord's glory we have in view and we get through. The Lord comes back and while He challenges our original position with *"Is anything too hard for Me?"*, He goes on: As firm as the ordinances of the heaven and as my covenant of day and night, as firm as that is My faithfulness to you, with you, as sure as that will I be committed to the realisation of what I have revealed. The Lord give us strong faith midst very difficult conditions.