

COVENANT RENEWAL AND THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS

Excerpts from a conference by T. Austin-Sparks
and editorial comments

Chapter one INTRODUCTION

Chapter two PRICE, PRAYER AND PURPOSE

PREFACE

In this publication the editors have chosen to take excerpts from a conference held in Kilcreggan in August 1933 by T. Austin-Sparks and combine these with editorial comments on the Biblical texts that were used during this conference — mainly the book of Jeremiah — and some historical context. The reason for this approach is that the editors did not find the manuscript suitable for publication as a whole, but thought many of its passages were precious and edifying for the Church.

This issue contains chapters one and two of a total of eleven chapters. The quotations from the conference manuscript are marked with “ ... ” and a sans serif type face is used. The editorial parts are marked with [Ed.].

The editors owe Prof. Oded Lipschits a debt of thanks for providing historical insight from his book “The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem”.

INTRODUCTION

[Ed.] Can there be an analogy between Jesus' letters (through John) to the Churches in the province of Asia and Jeremiah's letters to the first group of Judean exiles in Babylon¹? Both letters call for repentance. And this repentance would not be just for the sake of making them good people again. It was for the sake of the presence of God in the midst of His people; in New Testament terms: the testimony of Jesus. In the book of Revelation repentance implies to overcome, that is, to persevere to the end. And that was what Jeremiah's message was to this first group of exiles. The exile would take longer than they thought (see Jer. 29), but God promised to be with them all the time and bring them back. It would take a while and a lot of prophesying by Ezekiel especially before that reality sank in. God present in Babylon? Impossible! Ezekiel himself was puzzled at first. Can it be that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple actually helped him to understand what was going to be God's New Covenant? "Don't even think of an ark in a temple anymore!" was God's oracle of promise through Jeremiah (Jer. 3:15-18). The New Covenant was going to mean God present among His people in an altogether different way, although it was a familiar way to the people of Israel. "Circumcision of the heart" was already bound up with the first covenant, according to Moses' discourses on the plains of Moab (see Deut. 30:6). And a prophet like himself would come, to whom the people would have to listen. God would be present in their very hearts by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, all the nations of the earth would be involved. But it would involve judgement as well. Even Isaiah knew that, a century earlier than Jeremiah. His prophecies of the return of "the redeemed of the LORD" go far beyond Ezra and Nehemiah's days. "Everlasting joy on their head" is not what we see in a man who desperately plucks

1. The deportation of the group to which Daniel belonged is not considered an exile.

his own beard or angrily plucks the beards of others, respectively. No, the return of the redeemed starts with the acceptance of the judgement in the cross of Christ. It is that which brings the ultimate change of heart. And then there will be the final return at the resurrection, when Jesus will establish His Kingdom on earth. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd and the Righteous Branch. It is all there in God's oracles through Jeremiah. It is the love of God in the cross of Christ, symbolised by the Passover lamb, that the people of God were to anticipate in Jeremiah's days and it is exactly that what the Lord, through the apostle John, urged the Church in Ephesus to remember and return to, their first love.

It is this end time aspect of the book of Jeremiah that inspires T. Austin-Sparks to give a series of eleven talks at a week conference in Kilcreggan in August 1933. The original title of the transcription is, "Jeremiah — a Child over the Nations". But Jeremiah seems to get a bit lost in the course of the speaker's argument. He focusses on the reinstallation of the Passover feast by king Josiah, an event that took place during Jeremiah's early days as a prophet. Jeremiah is not mentioned there, but his father Hilkiah the priest is. He was the one who had found the book of the Covenant during the renovation project of the temple that king Josiah had started. That Passover feast is a solemn moment in history on the one hand, but on the other hand a sad story of indifference and pretence. The majority of the Judean people just continue with their idolatrous lives.

This horrible feature of mixture is what God puts on Jeremiah's heart. And this is the element that T. Austin-Sparks picks up. His message is that the Church of our time needs a prophet like Jeremiah. In fact, the Church as a whole needs to have this prophetic ministry to the world. The Church needs to get rid of its syncretism, its idolatry. She needs to be filled with the Holy Spirit, that is, God present in the midst of His people, so that it can fulfil its calling to be "a child over the nations", to rule, together with and under the Headship of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ; in practicality, to spread the gospel. To get this message across, says Sparks, there is a need for companies of believers who give a good example. That will not be easy. These companies will experience similar hardships to the ones Jeremiah did. Their sufferings will in some way reflect the sufferings of Christ (see Jer. 11:19), but their power will be the power of the resurrection of Christ.

Let us imagine ourselves attending that conference at the Scottish west coast and listen to the speaker, T. Austin-Sparks.

"I have appointed thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord YHWH! behold, I know not how to speak; for I am a child. But YHWH said unto me, Say not, I am a child; for to whomsoever I shall send thee thou shalt go, and whatsoever I shall command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid ... I am with thee ..." (Jer. 1:5-8).

“Those verses contain what I think may give us the title for our meditation in these chapters if the Lord wills. I think we might put it in this form: *a child over the nations*. That will comfort some of your hearts at once. As far as I am able to discern the Lord’s leading it will be in the prophecies of Jeremiah; and as to the remainder of this book, it is all in outline in the first chapter.

I think I might here suggest to Bible students that a very helpful and profitable way of becoming possessed of the content of this book is to sit down with chapter one, analyse it, outline it, and then fill in the various fragments from the rest of the book and you will find that everything in the book has its place in chapter one. Sometimes the smallest fragment in chapter one embodies a very great deal of what remains in the rest of the book. That is a suggestion for your own work by way of introduction.

Now Jeremiah has undoubtedly a very real place and message for this present time. Jeremiah seems to me to have a special application to the time in which we live, and it is because of that that I believe the Lord is directing our attention to him and his prophecies, or to the significance of his life and ministry. And the fragment of this great theme, this valuable ministry which we will now consider, is the place which Jeremiah occupied in history. That will be introductory to everything else, and by that we shall see how up to date he is and how true to present conditions is his ministry.

Then as to the place of Jeremiah in history: we may say that he came on the scene or was brought into view by God when idolatry had reached its climax. As we know he came just on the edge of

the captivity and went into the period of the captivity. And the explanation of the captivity was, and is, idolatry. All the terrible associations of the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of the land, the carrying away far distant from their homes of the people, and all the sorrow and suffering through which they passed, all is explained by the one word, idolatry; idolatry fully developed, idolatry having reached the point where YHWH with His infinite patience, His infinite forbearance, such longsuffering as amazes us, has found it no longer possible to go on, such idolatry as has brought that infinite patience to an end and has exhausted the longsuffering of God so far as that particular phase of history was concerned. It is at the commencement of that time, when idolatry is coming to its inevitable issue that Jeremiah was brought on the scene.

Now there are one or two very significant events in the life of Jeremiah which throw a great deal of light upon things both as to his own time, and as to the present situation. One of the outstanding events of Jeremiah's life was the rediscovery of the book of the Law. I will not go over the whole ground of history leading to that. It will be sufficient to say that through the terrible misrule, the temple had become terribly dilapidated, and we might also say wellnigh destroyed. The walls had been marred and damaged, the roof and the chambers had all become something akin to a mass of debris. Josiah, who was about the same age as Jeremiah — they grew up together and were in close fellowship, working together although men of greatly differing dispositions and temperaments and not wholly understanding one another, yet having much in common in the Lord's interests — Josiah had sought recovery and restoration and had put certain reforms into operation, and in his good work had collected funds for the alteration of the temple. While they were at work in the temple clearing out the rubbish and putting things straight, Hilkiyah found the book of the Law buried beneath some of the debris. It had been hidden away secretly in the temple through the reign of one of the evil kings who destroyed every relationship to YHWH and went wholly over to idolatry; or perhaps it was in

the ark of the covenant which had been hidden away secretly in the temple. Anyway, Hilkiah found the book of the Law and came and announced this to Josiah. This rediscovery of the book of the Law was one of the significant and important events in the time of Jeremiah, because it would bring everything back to Exodus and Deuteronomy. In a time like that when everywhere idolatry was being manifested, the results of idolatry were very much in evidence, and Jeremiah's ministry was all gathered up into the judgments for idolatry, it is significant that there should be as it were a sudden divulging from some hidden, secret place, all that which had pointed right on to this very time. Read Deuteronomy and you will find there the Lord's own declaration that if they forsook Him and worshipped other gods, He would send them into the captivity of their enemies. And they would be taken back to Exodus: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." The whole principle of idolatry would be brought into a place of tremendous emphasis by the rediscovery of that part of the Word of God which particularly dealt with that subject and with the consequence of idolatry. It speaks of something more than a coincidence, a happening, an event. It seems as though the Lord Himself, brought up from a secret place at the end time of a dispensation, just when the full judgment of this thing was about to break forth, that which was His own standard. He put it over against this which existed, to show by contrast what His mind was. The Lord has secret ways of bringing people face to face with His own standard of things. This discovery of the book of the Law was like a bomb dropped into their midst, for when Hilkiah took it to Josiah and read it to him, Josiah gathered all the people together and had this book of the Law read to them, and he, in all the presence of the people, took a vow in which he committed himself to the covenant, saying for himself: "As for me, I take this position, God's position", and all the people stood with him and said "Amen" and there was that great celebration of the Passover. That was a very wonderful and important event in the life of Jeremiah which gave a peculiar strength to his ministry for which the Lord had raised him up."

[Ed.] The author goes on to say how the Lord at the opportune time calls His servants — and he emphasises that every Christian is a servant of the Lord — to challenge His people to show them in a very concrete, definite way, how far they have departed from His own standard of things. At the end of his life the apostle Paul realises that his ministry to teach, reprove, correct and train in righteousness by way of the Scriptures has to be handed over to the younger generation. He finds Timothy and Titus to be faithful servants he could entrust this ministry with.

“This should be a comfort to the servants of the Lord. For the Lord’s servants this has a very helpful suggestiveness and significance. It says this. The Lord calls, chooses, appoints; very often His calling and appointing is to something very difficult, as it was with Jeremiah, to a task that we would not jump at. A good many jump at the idea of ministry when they are young, but when they get older, they wish they had thought twice about it. They come to the place where Jeremiah started: “If only I could be excused”. However, the Lord calls.”

[Ed.] The author now shows how God supplies His resources to help His servants fulfil and back up their calling.

“Here was Jeremiah called to a task as difficult as any task to which a man could be called, from which every bit of his flesh shrank. There was no encouragement in this work, or very little, from the outside. But he responded. In obedience he gave himself to God for His purpose, and then at a critical time in his life when he was moving more and more deeply into the difficulties of his calling, when he was just about to meet some of the most trying aspects of his life work, the Lord caused the secret place to divulge that which would put a tremendous strength into his position, which would confirm him and mean a great reinforcement to his ministry. No one can tell how Jeremiah’s unacceptable messages were reinforced when the book of the Law was discovered. Here is a man not accepted, who is thought to be all wrong, a fanatic, to

have a mistaken apprehension of things altogether. And suddenly out from the unseen, God causes that very document which confirms every word which Jeremiah is uttering to emerge, so that the king himself collapses before that very document and calls all the people together. You see what a strength that was to Jeremiah. It is one of those fragments in the first chapter where the Lord confirms His servant in a remarkable and unexpected way. No one knew of the existence of that document. So the ministry of this man was greatly strengthened, and his position established, by this remarkable act of the Lord.”

[Ed.] The Word of God is the most important theme in the book of Jeremiah. The prophet is not a lifeless megaphone. The Word of God effects his own life. The Lord equips the prophet. He touches his lips. But the Word of God changes his life as well. The following passage may allude to the time that Jeremiah’s father found the book of the Law.

*“Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart,
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts” (Jer. 15:16, ESV).*

What a joy! However, the next verses show that the prophet is disappointed. Does he expect the Lord to intervene straight away and give a mighty national revival? The hand of the Lord keeps on weighing heavily on him. That terrible feeling of indignation does not go away. The pain remains. He may even have been literally sick (see also 17:14-16). He is hoping for happy, spiritually refreshing times, but he feels that the Lord is to him as a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. Jeremiah lets himself be dragged down into negativity. God does not do what he expects Him to do. The Lord’s answer must come as a surprise. Jeremiah needs some discipline himself (see also Jer. 10:13-14). It is a lesson that he will take along for the rest of his life and he has to keep on learning in an ever deeper way. A deep sense of weakness and unworthiness for God’s mission is essential to be able to fulfil it.

*“If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth” (Jer. 15:19, ESV).*

What a joy it is, indeed, when we learn to understand God’s Word, when we discover what God has to say to us in the Bible. How we need to read it over and over again! Diligently, reverently and prayerfully. How we need to let the Scriptures speak for itself, “utter what is precious”, instead of trying to use — or rather abuse — some verses out of their context to vindicate our own thoughts, “what is worthless”! “If you return ...” The author continues.

“The Lord has little ways of doing that sort of thing when His servants in faithfulness are seeking to go on in a task which is not easy. He just here and there comes along with something quite unexpected to reinforce their ministry and to show them and the people that He is with them. Of course it did not carry Jeremiah right through so far as the people were concerned but it was a great thing, this rediscovery of the book of the Law.

The first immediate effect of it was that Josiah had this great national gathering and intensified his reforms and held this celebration of the Passover, and stood to the Word of God, and all the people declared themselves as doing the same. That was the immediate result, but there was something which went alongside of it, and that was Jeremiah’s own reservation about the whole thing — I was going to say Jeremiah’s scepticism. This great national declaration did not satisfy Jeremiah’s heart. He questioned the depth of the thing; he doubted the downright reality of it.

And Jeremiah proved to be right. And that is one of the factors we have to take into account when we are looking at Jeremiah as a type of the vessel the Lord uses in days like this. A Jeremiah can never be satisfied with outward expressions, external declarations; he wants to be sure of this, that it goes right down to the substrata of the being; and it requires a vessel like that to do God’s work when things have gone so far away from God’s standard. There

exists a long drift from God's requirements and that long drift can only be bridged by a downright heart repentance. Jeremiah is the man for that."²

[Ed.] It is the prophet's duty to urge and exhort the people of God to return to the Word of God. God has raised him up to enforce and re-enforce the Covenant. In other words, the prophet's message is not new. What he speaks can be checked by the Scriptures. Jeremiah refers especially to Deuteronomy 30 and that is why brother Sparks says it was so important for him personally that the book of the Law was discovered. Now Jeremiah had firm ground to stand on.

The prophets also quote one another and allude to their past and contemporary colleagues. Daniel quotes Jeremiah's prophecy of the return of the exiles after seventy years. T. Austin-Sparks attaches great importance to the shift from Jeremiah to Daniel (see appendix for the historical context). The return of the exiles is the beginning of the period in history in which there is no Davidic king in Israel. It is the dark time of waiting for the moment that God restores the house of David. At the same time it is the time of the great preparation for the birth of the Messiah. It starts here, says Austin-Sparks, now the Word of God, through the mouth of Jeremiah and written down by Baruch the scribe, is officially rejected and therefore, so to say, it moves away from Judah to a Gentile empire. The author suggests that the burning of the scroll and Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 coincide². His point is that with the king's official rejection of the Word of God it moves from a local to a universal significance.

In Daniel 2:1 it says that in his second year Nebuchadnezzar had dreams. That must have been in 604 BC, in the same year that Jehoiakim burned the scroll, but earlier in the year. The scroll was rewritten. Probably Jeremiah took this version with him on his flight to Egypt. It has become known as the shorter version of Jeremiah (included in the Septuagint and the Eastern

2. The author could not have known the details about the destruction of Ashkelon by Nebuchadnezzar in 604 BC, which became known after the excavations of Ashkelon in 1985. It was in Kislev, the ninth month of the Jewish ecclesiastical calendar, that Nebuchadnezzar fought against Ashkelon, the same month as the fast and the burning of the scroll (see Jer. 36). So Nebuchadnezzar was not in Babylon at that time. But the point the author wants to make may still stand, the Word of God receiving universal significance after being rejected by the people to whom it first belonged.

Church Bible). A copy, supplemented by later prophecies by Jeremiah (see Jer. 36:9, published later as Masoretic text), was taken to the exiles in Babylon, where Daniel read it. From this point T. Austin-Sparks picks up his message.

“Nebuchadnezzar’s dream brought in the times of the Gentiles. That is, Gentile supremacy until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. You have the Word of the Lord presented to His people officially, then finally rejected by them, and the Lord causing the rule of the heavens to pass from the midst of those who were called to be His instrument of that heavenly rule into the hands of others so that the rule of the heavens was through the Gentiles from that time onwards and not through the Jews, because they officially set aside the Word of the Lord. That is a tremendous thing in the life of Jeremiah, giving colour at once to his ministry of very great importance. It changes a dispensation. “I have set thee over the nations.” You see, it brings in something that is not local but universal. It moves from what is merely national out into what is related to all nations. It gets away from this one dispensation into the next. His ministry changes a dispensation. In the hands of Jeremiah the Word of God brought about a tremendous change in the course of the ages.”

[Ed.] The author continues his message by applying this dispensational shift to our own time. Indeed, we find similarities. We hear John the Baptist and Jesus Himself calling for repentance and the announcement of the Kingdom of God. But the Word was rejected. To believe in Jesus meant the acceptance that mankind was utterly lost. There was no remedy. Judgement was inevitable. It was very hard to acknowledge that. A sacrifice was needed to redeem them and reconcile them with God. And a Saviour was needed to lead the people back to God through a new Exodus. The only appropriate judgement was the cross, the only adequate sacrifice was the blood of Jesus and the only One capable of leading the people back to God, into the inheritance of His Kingdom, was the resurrected One from the dead, the Saviour, Jesus Christ. What pain and shame they must have felt when it dawned on them what Christ had done for them and they said, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Three thousand people, Jews and proselytes from many different countries who had witnessed the coming down of the Holy Spirit believed and were baptised. And thus the Word spread rapidly. Those who believed were soon to be persecuted and in that way the Good News of Salvation was spread even further into the world. Believing Gentiles became fellow-heirs of the Kingdom of God on the same ground of God's free gift of grace in Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured into their hearts in the same way He was given to the Jews who believed in Jesus. The dispensation of the Holy Spirit had begun, leading the people of God towards the final ingathering at Christ's return. Now the Church of Christ, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, was called to be the vessel of the testimony, the presence of God in the midst of His people. It was called, like Jeremiah, to be "a child over the nations". T. Austin-Sparks continues:

“Oh the tremendous place that this child had, this one who said: “I am but a child”, a tremendous place he had in the history of this world. When the seventy years' captivity closed you have Jeremiah brought in. “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished (fulfilled), the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia ...” (2 Chron. 36:22). Movements are relative to the word which came from the lips of this elect vessel, this child over the nations. The Lord is governing history, national and international affairs, universal matters, through the lips of this child. And there is “a child” being formed today, which is going to govern the history of this world and change dispensations. A vessel in itself as insignificant as Jeremiah thought himself to be, but with which the Lord allies Himself, and He says: “I have this day set thee over the nations.” That is the present issue.”

[Ed.] What a tremendous calling the Church has, indeed! The author, putting it in his own words, says it is a calling to ...

“... bring in the government of the sovereignty of the heavens.”

[Ed.] It is a statement that echoes the words of the apostle Paul, “... so that

through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10, ESV). This one new man brought about by the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had enormous consequences for the heavenly realm. Before it was Jews and Gentiles, the archangel Michael against the prince of Persia, but now it was the Kingdom of God against the kingdom of darkness. It was the testimony of Jesus, the presence of God in the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles by the Holy Spirit, that put everything upside down. It caused antagonism, attacks from outside and inside the Church.

That is why that same apostle had to give warnings in that same document in which he expounded the nature, position and calling of the Church, not to commit idolatry, not to “become partners with them” — the “sons of disobedience”. “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Eph. 5:11, ESV). About idolatry the author says the following.

“We are now occupied with the significance of Jeremiah at the outset, his place in history; and that necessitates some brief consideration of idolatry because it is in connection with idolatry that Jeremiah is raised up. And we ask the question, what is idolatry? I suppose the average person would answer a question like that on paper something like this. Well, it is the worship of idols. That is what the dictionary says, but that is not a bit satisfactory. It immediately suggests poor dark heathens worshipping idols of stone, but that does not cover the ground of idolatry. We need to be clear about idolatry because it comes as near our hearts as to a poor unenlightened heathen. We can be just as guilty of idolatry as any untaught, uncivilized fragment of this sinful humanity. And in a comprehensive way let us answer the question by saying that idolatry is anything and everything which in principle, takes from, or tends to take from the utterness of God as man’s very life, and the absoluteness of God’s rights to man’s life. It is as well to have that by us and think about it. I underline the phrase ‘in principle’ because it need not have reached the point of being enacted. It need not come to the stage of being in concrete form; it need only be in principle. It does not have necessarily anything to do with

the forms which it takes. It is the principle of things that matter. Idolatry is a principle not a form. The dictionary tells you that idolatry is the worship of idols. Well that is merely the form that idolatry takes, but idolatry is something much deeper than that: it is a principle, and it is in the Scriptures never regarded as merely negative or passive. It is always regarded as positive and active because it is the work of an intelligence opposed to God.

It is not some *thing*; it is *someone*. Idolatry is the work of an intelligence, a personal intelligence; and that intelligence, that person is opposed to God and opposed to everything related to God's interests; and so idolatry is always regarded as positive and active and never just something which is there. And this work of the Adversary, this idolatry, which is his work, proceeds along various lines. There are firstly, of course, the open and blatant forms which it takes such as you have in two realms, one in heathenism, and secondly in the realm of atheism, open blatant idolatry. It takes God's rights from Him, denies that God is the utter and the absolute life of man and has all the rights to man's life. Atheism is another form of the expression of idolatry. It proceeds along the philosophical and rational lines. (All these terms need a good deal of explaining but I give them to you). There is a great deal of idolatry dished up in wonderful philosophical systems and forms and is produced along the lines of a very great deal of rational presentation.

Rationalism as it is called, leads to idolatry just as truly as does heathenism or atheism. Rationalism does not lead to God; it leads away from God. It does not acknowledge the fundamental principles of man's relationship to God; it denies them, and therefore in principle it is idolatry. Thirdly, this work of idolatry proceeds along what we may call cultural and aesthetical lines. Culture and ethics may be just as idolatrous as the opposite. You are wondering why all this should be said. It is extremely important that it should be said, more so today than ever perhaps. Idealism for instance, as we have it today from the cultural schools is idolatrous in principle. Why? Because it is a form of religion which is all in the direction of making man his own god and worshipping himself. The worship of

man. You see the direction of the thing? That is the end, and it is idolatry.

Then in the fourth place it proceeds along the line of what we may call the mystical and the psychological. A great many people are entirely incapable of discriminating between the mystical and the spiritual, and when you speak to them about the spiritual they think you are talking about the mystical, that it is the abstract. That is what they think, but it is in another realm altogether. One belongs to man's nature and the other belongs to the Spirit of God, and no amount of development can ever carry us over the gap that lies between fallen humanity and the humanity represented by the Lord Jesus in glory now. 1 Corinthians 2 stands among the Grecians. The Greeks were philosophers; the Greeks were mystics. The Greeks had a very keen aesthetic perception. The Greeks could probe all mysteries. They had a highly developed mystical sense and faculty, and it was that which constituted the danger at Corinth. These Greek converts at Corinth were bringing over all that and used it as the right of admission into the things of the Spirit of God, and were thinking they could get into the mysteries of the things of God by reason of that faculty, mysticism, which was common to the Greeks. And Paul says once and for all: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." There is a wide gap between the mystical aesthetic and the power of probing into the occult, and the Holy Spirit revealing the things of God. Men today do not recognize that difference and their failure to discriminate brings about these confusions, and that is why we should follow on to know what our ministry is in a day like this. This is idolatry. It makes something of man as he is and whenever you do that you make less of God, you take from God. The mystical and the psychological school says that there is that in man which can be the basis of his own salvation. What confusion. Some of the great movements today sweeping away multitudes of the Lord's own people are based upon that failure to discriminate between the spiritual and the psychological; because by certain

appeals and certain influences you can get certain results in moral elevation. You are deceived into thinking that it is regeneration, but it is nothing of the kind. It is idolatry in principle, making of man as having in himself that which is alone in God in reality.

So the work proceeds and the enemy pursues his course, but remember, all these are based upon religion, yes, including atheism; it is based upon religion. The very fact that a man has to fight in order to maintain his position as an atheist proves the case against him. A man for whom God really does not exist, and religion is nothing, does not bother about these things, but when a man has to fight to maintain that he is an atheist, he is giving his whole case away, and is in as hopeless a position as Saul of Tarsus was in fighting against the Lord Jesus. "I thought that I ought to do many things contrary ...". His very fight betrayed him. The vehemence of his antagonism showed the other thing was a reality and to be reckoned with, and it beat him in the end. And all these things are based upon religion. Religion can be the greatest enemy of God. Religion can be the enemy's greatest weapon against God, and usually is. Religion is no argument at all in favour. That a person is a religious person does not mean anything to God. Religion has done some of the most atrocious things that the world has ever seen, and even refined religion may be a long way from God's thought.

Idolatry is inherent in fallen man. It may not be recognized by all but it is inherent in fallen man. Someone in unregenerate days may be as far as they know their own hearts and natures, and as far as anyone else recognizes in them, anything but idolatrous in spirit, mind, feeling; it may seem to be all the other way. When that person becomes regenerate and the Spirit of God begins His work of quickening and enlightening, it is not long before that most beautiful life becomes conscious of an antagonism in its own heart against the Lord. Sooner or later it is manifest that deeper than they know there is that thing which does not yield to God. Called upon by the Lord to yield up its best, rebellion is discovered in the heart, a holding back from God which is never suspected; and it is long-established in the history of man. See Israel as your illustration. We

are saying some very strong things and will yet say some stronger. From the heinous cruelty and the obscene vileness of heathen and pagan religion to the finest of Christian worldliness the thing is the same, idolatry. A Christian? Yes, a Christian still holding on to a bit of the world, still being worldly in interest, is one with the heathen and the pagan in their most awful forms of idolatry, one with them in principle. Worldliness is that which comes under the government of the prince of this world to draw hearts away from God. Worldliness draws away from God. It takes from God. In principle it is the same as that most awful thing you shudder to contemplate, such as little children being burned alive in the valley of Tophet. And that took place in the days of Jeremiah. Here on one hillside was an altar erected to the gods who demanded that sort of thing; on another hillside an altar to YHWH, and the same people offering their sacrifices to both. Idolatry is the same in principle. Oh it is only a matter of degree. It is anything and everything that draws the heart away from God. Satan employs all his wit and cunning, his alertness, all his resources to get idolatry at work in principle in a secret way or an open way. Idolatry is his business. He is not likely to get enlightened civilised people to go the way of pagan heathen, but he has other ways of getting Christian people on the basis of the principle of idolatry. You can find it in the churches and widespread amongst professing Christians.

Now you see it is in view of that principle at work that the Lord raises up an instrument to testify against it, to make clear what the Lord's attitude toward it is, and then to pave the way for the Lord to get that which has no trace of idolatry in it. That was Jeremiah. Oh do remember that it is just as much idolatrous in principle to believe in man as having saving powers within himself as it is to worship the beast and the false prophet of the book of Revelation. The two things are one. What is the worship of the beast and the false prophet? The spirit of antichrist. What is the principle of antichrist? The worship of man, the superman; putting man in the place of God. That is the worship of the beast and the false prophet. You need not have antichrist manifested to be idolatrous. In heart you

have only to believe that man has in himself saving possibilities, that he can produce from himself the ground of his own salvation, in principle. It leads on to antichrist. We have got to get down to these things in these days of terrible deception. We have got to be very clear about this. The talk about the relics of the divine nature in man, that remnant of God in every bit of humanity which if only appealed to and nourished and taken care of will develop and gradually rise from his low level and come up — that is the Devil's lie by which he establishes idolatry. There is a great deal of that today.

The opposite of that is that there is absolutely no hope for humanity in any part or the whole, only in Jesus Christ and the work which He has accomplished in His cross. Take away from that by any means or degree and you have entered the realm of idolatry. That means that in the cross of the Lord Jesus the whole race has passed out from the sight of God in the death of Christ, as having no saving element in it. In the resurrection of the Lord Jesus God brings in something other, altogether other; it is a new thing, a new creation. And it is totally impossible for the old man to pass, by anything in himself, from the old to the new. It is God alone that can do that new thing. The whole force of resurrection is that when a thing is dead there is no hope whatever for that thing unless there is an act from the outside, from the other side. And so God regards the race as dead. Now appeal to a dead man to find in himself the ground of his own resurrection. Where is it? Appeal to a dead man to provide the wherewithal for a new life; can he do it? Take from the full significance of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and you are in the realm of idolatry. The resurrection says everything is utterly and solely and absolutely for God. God has first, continuous, and last place and He has to have that place. That is only touching upon another principle in Jeremiah, the way of recovery. Jeremiah introduces the great law of resurrection.

We can now see what will be something of Jeremiah's significance, the significance of his calling and his ministry, and then inasmuch as he came in at the end time of that dispensation to show how God would recover what was according to His mind, we

may look to see God moving in a similar way at the end of this dispensation when idolatry is so widespread and many-sided ...”

[Ed.] The author is not saying that in order to get rid of idolatry the world should be Christianised. God has raised up the Church to be a vessel which is so wholly and utterly of Himself as to truly be for Him an instrument of living out and preaching the gospel. Paul wrote to Timothy that the Church was to be “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). It is called to expose the true nature of things, to discriminate spiritually, to have discernment, so that it can warn people who do not have spiritual discrimination or discernment that they are going into disaster if they do not repent. The Church can only fulfil this ministry if it is stripped of every form of idolatry itself. The author pleads,

“The Lord would raise up a voice in this direction in these days, and raise up an instrument which is according to His mind.

So you have in general the view of what is before us in these chapters. The Lord enable us to hold strongly to Him; if this is going to count at all for Him it is not going to be easy ministry. We must co-operate strongly with the Lord and with one another so that we shall be brought into a clear place as to the state of things in our own day, and so that we shall have knowledge of the times and what the Lord would do in a time like this, and if it may be, we might be a part of His instrument for recovering the testimony that is altogether stripped of the very principle of idolatry.”

PRICE, PRAYER AND PURPOSE

Reading: Jeremiah 29:10-12; 2 Chron. 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1; Daniel 9:1-3.

[Ed.] Although prophets are sovereignly raised by the Lord, spiritual principles concerning the Church of Jesus Christ in general can be traced in their lives. We do not need to spiritualise their stories and prophecies to recognise that their lives are sometimes object lessons of spiritual realities. And in fact this is true of the life of every believer. By gracious declaration, indeed, solemn oath, God reckons the believer one with His Son, Jesus Christ. Paul explains in his letter to the Romans how this identification with Christ should — normally — have its effect both in a righteous way of living and the strength to persevere through sufferings. In other words, both our walk in the Spirit and our hope of eternal life, the bodily resurrection, are based on the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The behaviour, the conduct of a believer will reflect the basic principles of the cross, in loving sacrifice, service, self-denial, humility and purity. At the same time his life will show God's powerful vindication, the victory and authority of resurrection and an unstoppable determination. The believer looks away from himself — which by grace he may and should always do — fixes his eyes on Jesus and then, when he sees what Christ has accomplished for him in His death and resurrection, the only thing he can say is, "Lord, I love You. I will follow You. I want to be like You and I want to be with You in eternity!"

There is a remarkable gathering when Paul and Barnabas stop in Lystra on their way home. Paul had been stoned there and dragged out of the city. The angry mob thought he was dead, but when the disciples gathered around the victim, he came round again. And now he is preaching here again,

strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. Maybe a sour smile of self-mockery follows, with one hand pointing to his head still wrapped in a bandage and the other one in a sling. Was that a wise thing to do, telling young believers that they must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations? Well, they are witnessing an object lesson. The message is clear. Many years later he would summarise it in an unparalleled way, writing from a Roman prison to his friends in Philippi,

“That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philipp. 3:10,11, KJV).

And Paul explains in that marvellous letter how that same principle works in the area of Christian fellowship and unity. Down, down, down goes Jesus, on the way to glory.

Down goes Jeremiah, even into a muddy pit. But it is not his own story only. It is God’s story. When He sends His people into Babylonian exile, into death penalty, as it were, His merciful mind is already back in Jerusalem, preparing the scene of the cross of the Messiah and His resurrection.

“In this chapter we want to go to the opposite end of things from that which occupied us in the previous chapter. We were then concerned with the state of things as in the days of Jeremiah and we were speaking mostly about the nature of idolatry. We saw that it was in connection with the state of wellnigh universal idolatry that Jeremiah was raised up by the Lord to fulfil his ministry. And then that because of that condition, the Lord on the one hand made Jeremiah His mouthpiece by which He proclaimed the inevitable judgments which came in the captivity. Now we move to the end in view. The Lord’s end. The passages at the beginning of this chapter bring that thought before us quite definitely, that while judgment must come and there will be a setting aside by the Lord of a very great deal, the Lord is not in the long run cheated of His purpose,

and He does not abandon His intention but eventually He does secure that upon which His heart has always been set.

I want you if you can to visualize the whole course of things. You will first of all see the Lord presenting to His people what His thought and desire really is. That is brought to us so far as Israel is concerned in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Those four books are a comprehensive presentation of God's thought for His people. And to condense them into a sentence or two we can say that they make perfectly clear that the Lord's desire is to have for Himself a people who are utterly and absolutely His own, dependent upon Him, drawing all their resources from Him, and because of that being to Him a vessel and a vehicle of His self-manifestation in fulness, to provide Him with an instrument for the making known of what He is and of fulfilling His government in the earth and in the universe. That, briefly, is a summary of those four books. All that is in them can be gathered up directly into that; in a word, a people wholly according to God's mind, without mixture, revealing God and instrumentally exercising God's sovereign power in the universe. Well, that is where you begin, your first view of things.

The next is a brief realization of that in type which we have in the great crowning days of David and Solomon. It is but a brief period, and being a type of course it falls short of the spiritual anti-type, but nevertheless there is a wonderful manifestation of this thing at that time. There is glory and power, majesty and dominion and might, and there is a state of things which speaks so marvelously of the Lord's people coming into the fulness and the bountifulness of Himself. You see in David victory on every hand as the first thing. In all realms victory is established and enemies are put down. Then the material for the House of God is gathered, wealth and abundance of every kind; then Solomon builds and sets up the House in its glory and splendour and he himself reigns in that glory. The Queen of Sheba visits him and with all that she had heard of the wonderful splendour, her final note was that the half had not been told, and when she saw Solomon, his household, his table, and his servants there was no more spirit left in her. That is only a type,

and falls short of the antitype and what will be when a greater than Solomon comes to His place. But you get a beautiful representation of what was the thought and desire of the Lord. A people drawing all from Himself and knowing the fulness of Him and being to Him a means of government and dominion in all realms.

However, the illustration is fragmentary and passing, it is transient and wholly imperfect. That radiant morn passes away. Then you have idolatry setting in through Solomon — to think that even Solomon should have been guilty of setting up altars on the slopes of Olivet to foreign gods and offering sacrifices to the gods of the heathen; and that great day of golden glory passes and there sets in the dark period of Solomon’s successors, leading up to the time of Jeremiah. Then followed all the other prophets with the exception of Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi who were after Jeremiah, but the rest were contemporaries at one time or another of his ministry of forty years. A dark time. Idolatry brought in, in a new way by Solomon, became practically universal. The Lord raised up His instrument Jeremiah for the twofold purpose of declaring what must surely come to pass in the realm of the idolatrous; but then also looking on beyond all that and seeing the Lord coming into His own again at the end of that time, not now by all the people but by a remnant. And Jeremiah by his ministry brings in Daniel and Ezra. Daniel comes in by Jeremiah and he is the man who prays the remnant through, the man who fulfils the necessary intercessory ministry unto God’s purpose; and Ezra is the result of Daniel’s prayer, to bring back the remnant and to recover the testimony. These three are linked up. Jeremiah pays the price; Daniel fulfils the prayer ministry; Ezra brings back the remnant, builds the House. In principle they are one; they are three aspects of one vessel.”

[Ed.] To summarise, in the Biblical history of redemption three aspects of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ come to the fore: firstly the price He paid at the cross, secondly His High Priestly intercession at the throne of God for the perseverance of the saints and thirdly His return, the resurrection and the establishment of His Kingdom here on earth, reigning together with

His redeemed ones. The author pleads for a worthy representation of this ministry in and by the Church itself. Firstly a radical putting off of every kind of idolatry and everything that has the kingdom of darkness as its source is necessary. As Isaac Watts' says in his hymn,

*“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died ...*

*... Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.”*

And besides that, the putting on of everything that is embodied by the sacrificial love of Christ is necessary. The body of Christ derives its strength from its Head, the Lord Jesus, to build itself up *in love*, says Paul (Eph. 4:16).

Secondly, intercession. How important that is! In Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples He taught them that to be fruitful it was necessary to abide in Him, obey His Word, but also to pray (John 15). The life of the Church through history until the coming again of Christ is a life saturated with prayer, to maintain its position under the Father's sovereignty and to remain utterly dependant on Him.

Finally, the Church should be the gathering together where encouragement and exhortation is found to go on, to endure, to persevere, “all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25), to diligently keep on striving to enter into the final rest of the resurrection, whatever hardship may be encountered, to live a life of gratefulness for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. T. Austin-Sparks goes on:

“Then to get still closer to the whole matter. What kind of a vessel will be suitable to that purpose, and therefore necessary? Now you see we come to this point. A need for God to do something. The need for Him to have a vessel with which to do that something. And then by reason of what that something is, to have a vessel that is suited to that something. And if that something is, on the one hand to make clear what the state of things is, to bring it to light, unveil it, and on the other hand to secure the thing which stands

in direct contradistinction to that and represents what God would have, that vessel then must be absolutely free from the one state of things and full of the other. That is, that it must be completely separated from idolatry in principle. In other words, it must be a vessel the life of which is God utterly and absolutely; a vessel which has no element whatsoever in it that is other than God. That means that it must be emptied to the last dregs of the world and of the flesh. They are set against God. You say: Why do you not mention the Devil? Well, if the world and the flesh are gone he will have no place. The Devil can only have power and influence when he has got what is necessary to him, that is the world and the flesh. God's vessel must be emptied of the world in principle, and the flesh in principle. It must be emptied of that ground of idolatry and of those elements. On the other hand that vessel must be full of the Lord, full of the divine life, full of the divine glory. Do not misunderstand these terms. I am not thinking, when I speak of glory, of some radiance or light; I am thinking of spiritual and moral glory. That glory which is the expression of the graces of the Lord Jesus; the gifts of the Lord Jesus are the official side, the graces are the moral side, and the glory of the Lord is to be expressed in the graces of the Lord Jesus. If our lives were filled with love they would be filled with the Lord's glory. If we were full of joy, gentleness, kindness, compassion and longsuffering, that is the glory of the Lord. Grace and glory go together. "He will give grace and glory", and when He gives grace, glory is there; it follows. At present that is the kind of glory with which the vessel must be filled. That glory will shine out later on in fulness. A vessel full of the Lord and constituted according to the Lord's thought and mind after a heavenly pattern. Emptied of the one thing and filled with the other. That is the object the Lord has in view and which is on His heart all the time and it is that for which He is reaching out.

Well, that is the kind of vessel that the Lord will need. Now Jeremiah was what the Lord needed and he was also the instrument to get what the Lord needed. What will be the principles behind such a ministry — and now we begin a larger range of things. We

come back to chapter one and we find there quite a number of the principles which govern the ministry of this instrument. Let us look at one or two of them.

We are told that at a certain time the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and in the coming of that word he was called and commissioned. His immediate reaction to that call was: "Lord YHWH, ... I know not how to speak; for I am a child." Now whatever the Lord may have come in with as a rejoinder to that declaration, that is a very important and indispensable factor in the whole calling and commission. The Lord knows who He calls and who He commissions, and you may take it as settled that if Jeremiah had been a man who had every confidence in himself, the Lord would not have called and commissioned him. So the very first principle upon which you come, so far as the vessel is concerned, is the principle of personal weakness and emptiness.

We do not always begin there beloved. Many of us do not begin there, but as we have been brought more and more clearly into the light of God's supreme purpose, parallel with the unveiling of that purpose, there has been going on a deepening emptying, breaking down of self, breaking down to emptiness and weakness. It must be, for the height of the purpose will correspond to the depth of our personal conscious dependence upon God, and weakness is basic to this. Paul, so great a vessel of the testimony had to be emptied out until he would say: "We despaired even of life." Yes, but that is the negative side. The positive side is: "... that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead". That is God coming in at zero. That is necessary to every vessel in this realm. Well now, it may be a blow to some of you. It will be a comfort to others, I think. It is a very comforting thing to know that the Lord deliberately chooses the things which are not, and that is what He did with Jeremiah: "I cannot speak: for I am a child." If he had said that in the presence of Paul, Paul would have said: "He chooseth the things that are not." That is a principle which God will establish and take pains to establish through deep experience. Has He been doing that to you? He may have been bringing you to a place where

you have been growingly feeling that there can never be anything at all. That is the Lord's way.

The second thing which comes in is the law of resurrection. I delight to see that immediately the Lord has come in upon the humble confession of His servant and commissioned him, He gave him two visions. " 'What seest thou?' And I said, 'I see a rod of an almond-tree' " (Jer. 1:11). That is magnificent when you get the significance of that."

[Ed.] God does not give Jeremiah time to wonder why He shows him an almond branch. He immediately explains it, "... for I am watching over my word to perform it." God is playing with words here, the Hebrew word for almond branch, שָׂדֶשֶׁת (šāqēd), sounding the same as the Hebrew word for watching, שָׂדֶשֶׁת (šāqad). It is an encouragement for Jeremiah. God will not let him down. He will see to it that what He commissions Jeremiah to preach will soon come true. The Church nowadays has the privilege to know that God's Word spoken through Jeremiah was not only meant to come true in the prophet's own time. It has a much broader perspective and application. Apart from the many quotations of Jeremiah and allusions to his prophecies in the New Testament there is God watching over His Word in general. John says that the Word was God Himself and that in Him was life. In one word, God's Word is, "Let there be ..." and on His Word comes life. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son". Furthermore, in the same letter it says that the voice that once shook the earth will ...

"... yet once more shake not only the earth but also the heavens. This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of things that are shaken — that is, things that have been made — in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:26-29, ESV).

In other words, God's first Word was creation, His second Word is recreation, the resurrection of the dead and the establishment of the eternal

Kingdom of God. God's Word is resurrection. The Church is the people living by resurrection power and anticipating their final unification with the Son of God in bodily resurrection. T. Austin-Sparks suggests the following.

“You see what the Lord said to Jeremiah. “This ministry of yours is not going to be fulfilled on the basis of your own resources, on the ground of what you are or are not; the fruit of this ministry is going to be by reason of the resurrection life that operates.” We shall see that more fully as we go on because the remnant is undoubtedly the result of resurrection power, bringing them out of their living grave in Babylon. And the fruit of Jeremiah’s ministry was that, the power of His resurrection. That is something to go forth on, ...”

[Ed.] And then the author quotes from Ephesians 1:19-20,

“... the exceeding greatness of His power ... which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead”. This is the power, *“... toward us who believe”*.

The author passes on.

“The third principle here was persistence. The Lord’s rejoinder to His servant carried with it that what men of the world would say today, that Jeremiah would have a ‘charmed’ life until the Lord had done with him. And as you go through it is amazing. Forty-two years with almost every force in the universe set against him, dropped into stinking dungeons and pits and left to die; again and again wellnigh starved to death. Oh, the rigours through which that man had to go! Read again the price he had to pay. He ought to have died a score of times but he fulfilled ministry for forty-two years. That is not a brief period of ministry in these circumstances. This speaks of something more than a man’s personal endurance. This declares that God had chosen this man for a ministry and God saw to it that he fulfilled his ministry and nothing could kill him until he

had fulfilled it. God will see to it that his ministry is finished. The principle of persistence. "Daniel continued ..." in spite of the fires of Babylon and the lions' den and all the rest."

[Ed.] May we add yet another theme in the book of Jeremiah that deals with an indispensable aspect for a Christian congregation to carry on the testimony of Jesus, namely a right kind of leadership.

Apart from, but related to the division between Jeremiah's camp and the camp that is loyal to the house of David, a social division is spoiling God's testimony in Judah. The suppression and manipulation of the poor that was already prevalent in Micha's days is only aggravated when Pharaoh Necho II puts Jehoiakim on the throne. Necho's intention is not to show respect to the house of David, but to weaken its influence by demanding high taxes. Who pays for it? The farmers and shepherds of course, the poor, not the elite inhabitants of the city. The trick is to say that it is for the temple (see Jer. 7:4). If the temple is honoured, YHWH will be pleased and consequently protect and bless the country. The poor are not to be blamed. Jer. 5:4-5 says,

*"Then I said, 'These are only the poor;
they have no sense;
for they do not know the way of the LORD,
the justice of their God.*

*I will go to the great
and will speak to them,
for they know the way of the LORD,
the justice of their God.'
But they all alike had broken the yoke;
they had burst the bonds."*

The poor are ignorant, but "the great" know exactly what is going on. They are the "shepherds" to whom Jeremiah has to pronounce an oracle of woe,

*"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my
pasture!" declares the LORD" (Jer. 23:1, ESV).*

But YHWH promises that, in the New Covenant, there will be shepherds after His own heart who will feed the flock with knowledge and understanding (3:15, 23:4, 33:12). There will be no difference between the poor and the great,

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:33-34, ESV).

It is not difficult to hear these words being echoed in what is said about Jesus,

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36, ESV).

The Lord Jesus had shown Himself to be the good Shepherd Who gave His life for the sheep. Now He is risen from the dead and wants to entrust Peter with a shepherd ministry, saying,

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15-19, ESV).

We know that the Lord asked him the same question three times. It was a humiliating experience for Peter (having denied the Lord three times), but an honour at the same time, to be called to walk in the footsteps of “the chief Shepherd”, his beloved and loving Master (see also 1 Pet. 2:21 and 1 Pet. 5:1-4). He still had to learn what feeding the sheep implied in the New Covenant.

The Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. No longer would each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they would all know Him, from the least of them to the greatest. So what would a shepherd’s task in the New Covenant be? It would mean to be an example and in that way “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” so that the body of Christ will ...

*“... grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love”
(Eph. 4:15-16).*

Each member of the body is equally important in the growth into spiritual maturity.

It is a solemn task. Leaders of the Church need to realise what it is they are called to and dealing with. This is Paul’s concern when he writes to those in Corinth who are causing division. They present themselves as followers of certain big names — without the consent of these big names of course — to claim authority. Paul warns them to build the Church in a way that can stand the test of God’s fire on the Day of judgement. Causing division is in fact destroying God’s temple!

*“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple”
(1 Cor. 3:10-17, ESV).*

Quoting these passages we have come back to our theme of the testimony of Jesus, God’s presence in the midst of His people, His glory emanating (morally) from a bunch of sinners. Such is His grace! That is why it is such a serious offence when leaders of the Church make themselves important, or let others give them a prominent place. Paul says about Apollos and himself: “... neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything”. How foolish it is to use their names in order to claim authority! They are mere servants, not

gurus. It is God who gives the growth. Paul realises that his ministry is the ministry of the Spirit. Only the Spirit can change hearts and transform people into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3 and 4). It is a glorious ministry indeed, to help the children of God to be led by the Holy Spirit and walk in the Spirit, so that they become “a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:3). T. Austin-Sparks will elaborate on the importance of the Holy Spirit in a later issue.

To be continued

JEREMIAH AND REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

[Ed.] Although the burning of Jeremiah's scroll by Jehoiakim could not have coincided with Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in Daniel 2, as T. Austin-Sparks suggested, the connection between Jeremiah and Daniel is instructive, if not fascinating.

Jeremiah's time is tremendously interesting when we compare it with the time in which we live. The condition of God's people was such that the writer of the Chronicles had to say, "... there was no remedy" (2 Chr. 36:16); God has to intervene with severe measures. The prophet's message is a combination of judgement and redemption, not only for the house of Israel, but for all other nations as well — "to pluck up and to plant". There it is, Judah, a small, insignificant nation, a speck on the map, surrounded by great and mighty empires. How can it ever be of significance to the world? Yet, God has promised to its patriarch Abraham that by his seed all the earth shall be blessed.

It is stunning to see how God moves through history and sovereignly forms it, to fulfil His purpose to save mankind. To Him the size and power of empires mean nothing. With one blow He can destroy them. But He is just. YHWH is righteous (Psalm 11:7). He only acts on the basis of His own justice. No words can express the wisdom with which He paves the way in history to that ultimate judgement, the death on the cross of His Son Jesus Christ, followed by the ultimate victory of His love, the resurrection of "the Son of man", as Jesus liked to call Himself. In Jeremiah we can see these events dawning at the horizon.

Here we are, those who believe in God's Son, again a small and insignificant bunch of people, in the midst of great, mighty and horribly wicked empires, but moving on, under God's sovereign guidance, towards another great event, the final judgement and the establishment of God's Kingdom

here on earth, at the return of Jesus. And again, this event can be found in Jeremiah, a prophecy of redemption to the whole world.

The empires in Jeremiah's days were dreaming about a "great reset", a total, brutal overthrow and subjection of the world's powers. They believed their actions were sanctioned by their gods and reckoned that YHWH, the God of Israel, could be challenged as well. They did not understand that He was the Creator Himself, the God of the universe. What is worse, Israel itself did not understand that. The greater part of the people of Israel thought that God was on their side. They were "called by His name". That was true in a sense, but only in the light of their mission to reveal God as the God of the universe. God, in His great wisdom, used those great empires as a means of discipline, to get His people back on the right track, to call them back to their original mission. It was a severe method of discipline, but measured carefully. He only wanted these enemies to deal with His people to a certain extent. But they went too far and dealt mercilessly and outrageously. Edom even took malicious pleasure in the fall of Jerusalem. God punished them accordingly. The great kings of the earth were humiliated and had to acknowledge that only YHWH is God.

Are we on the right track, we who are on the other side of the cross, in our mission to reveal God's plan of redemption of mankind in Christ? Or do we take it for granted that God is on our side? Did He not say, "I am with you always, to the end of age"? Indeed, He did, but is it possible that there are parallels between our time and Jeremiah's and that the people of God need to learn the lesson of history all over again? Are we on God's side?

In our time God's people, the Christian community, is threatened not by national powers with their idols, ideologies and corrupt governments, but "the great reset" is to be on a global scale and on a higher level, closer to the headquarters of the prince of this world. Although there are at least two competing camps involved, there is one target, not conspiracy theorists, but the testimony of Jesus. No military campaigns this time, but one of tyrannical fear. How far the Lord will let these powers hold their sway is, in fact, not relevant. Whether we are pre-, post- or amillenarians will not make any difference in our stand against the evil forces. The point is whether we are uncompromisingly true to the Lord and remain under the sway of the Holy Spirit. And here the shift from Jeremiah to Daniel comes in as a great

encouragement. God's faithfulness and sustenance gets his people through any kind of fiery furnace or lion's den. His faithfulness goes beyond the grave, which undoes any reason for fear. And it is only a matter of time before we will see human arrogance and hypocrisy be utterly humiliated by the Creator.

Exactly how Daniel got hold of a copy of the book of Jeremiah we do not know. We do know that Jeremiah corresponded with the exiles (see Jer. 29). We also know that Baruch's brother Seraiah went to Babylon to accompany king Zedekiah, probably to negotiate with Nebuchadnezzar over the amount of tax that was put on Judah (Jer. 51:59-61). Or maybe the journey had something to do with the outcome of the international conference Zedekiah had held that same year. Jeremiah had asked Seraiah to throw the scroll into the river Euphrates after reading it to the exiles. But it might have been on that occasion that a copy of Jeremiah's book was preserved and given to the exiles. Daniel and his friends had already been there for twelve years. They were evidence of the truth of ΥHWH 's oracle through Jeremiah to the exiles that "in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:4-9). Daniel was not just an exile. He was carefully selected by Nebuchadnezzar's chief officer Ashpenaz, probably after Nebuchadnezzar was crowned king in 605 BC. And so Daniel became a pioneer in proving that God was in control, behind the scenes of geopolitical developments. He showed that there was solid ground to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It was only after the fall of Babylon, more than fifty years later, that Daniel "perceived in the books the numbers of years".

What had happened? The dates given in the book of Daniel are somewhat confusing because a different way of counting years is applied there. In Daniel 1:1 it says that in the *third* year of Jehoiakim's reign, 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. In verse 2 it says that Jehoiakim was defeated and verse 3 says that some of the elite Jewish population were deported to Babylon. It was in 605 BC that Jeremiah dictated his messages to Baruch, the *fourth* year of Jehoiakim's reign. It is the same year mentioned by Daniel.

During that time the Egyptians dominated the coastal region up to the area in the North that used to be Assyrian territory to the west of the Euphrates. It was in that same year that Nebuchadnezzar launched a military campaign against the Egyptian army at Carchemish and defeated Pharaoh Necho II.

Four years previous to this famous battle the young Necho had been successful when he assisted the Assyrian army to prevent the Chaldeans from crossing the Euphrates. A tragic incident happened during this Egyptian march to the North. For inexplicable reasons and against Necho's sincere warnings king Josiah thought to block his way. At Megiddo Josiah was wounded fatally. After this short delay the Egyptian army marched on. They were confronted with the powerful Chaldean-Mede troops, but they were able to push them back. However, the Assyrian dynasty had virtually come to an end. After three months Necho decided to return to Egypt. Probably he was confident that his garrisons on the west bank of the river Euphrates were strong enough to prevent the Chaldeans from crossing the river. On the way back he secured his influence in the Mediterranean coastal area. He deposed Josiah's son Jehoahaz from the throne. He probably wanted to be sure that no anti-Egyptian sentiments remained in Judah. He kidnapped him, replaced him by his brother Jehoiakim and taxed the land heavily.

For Egypt the downfall of the Assyrian empire meant that it was now directly confronted with Babylon. Necho realised that — for the sake of Egypt's welfare and safety — he had to make it a first priority to prevent Babylon from crossing the Euphrates and conquer the Levant. That is why Egypt tried to establish a stronghold on the west banks and even conquered some settlements on the east bank of the river. Meanwhile Babylon became more and more powerful. An Egyptian project to fortify its foothold at the Euphrates may have challenged Nebuchadnezzar, who was then operating as general under his father's reign, to actually start the fight at Carchemish. The Egyptian army was defeated in 605 BC.

The Chaldeans did not meet much resistance when they marched southwards along the coastal way and replaced the Egyptian domination. Only Ashkelon did not surrender. This is probably the event Daniel speaks about, in the early summer of 605 BC, when the Chaldean army invaded Judah. Nebuchadnezzar must have had an interest in Jerusalem. Maybe he thought it could become a brooding nest for rebellion if he left the city alone.

It must have been during that summer that Nebuchadnezzar heard of his father's death. He went home to Babylon and was crowned king of the Chaldeans not long after his return.

We do not know if it had been Nebuchadnezzar's own idea or his father's

idea to fetch promising youth, not only from Jerusalem's nobility, but also from Phoenecia and the Philistine area, to strengthen the administration in Babel and other cities that had suffered from the long period of Assyrian subjection. Daniel and his three friends were among them.

In the next year, 604 BC, in Kislev, the ecclesiastical ninth month, probably modern day November, the Chaldeans reached Ashkelon and destroyed it. That event may have caused Jehoiakim to proclaim a fast before YHWH (Jer. 36:9). Or it may have been earlier that same year. The Babylonian Chronicles³ report that Nebuchadnezzar did not stay long in Babel after he was crowned king of the Chaldeans, in the autumn of 605 BC. Only a few months later, at the end of January 604 BC, he set out against "*Hatti-land*", to the strategic places of the Levant, which included Judah. Anyway, for Israel it was a two year period of extreme political tension and uncertainty. Now it was Nebuchadnezzar imposing high taxes on Judah.

After three years Jehoiakim stopped paying tax, in spite of Jeremiah's warnings. It was in 597 BC, seven years after Jehoiakim burned Jeremiah's scroll, that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem again to make an end to its revolt.

During Jehoiakim's eleven-year reign it became more and more clear that the kingdom was divided. One camp believed that it was good to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah being one of them, as well as Baruch and the house of Shaphan the scribe, Ahikam's father and grandfather of Gedaliah (see Jer. 26:16-24). On the other side there was a camp that wanted to remain loyal to the house of David. It is important to understand that this was not a political division. We may call it a theological one. Jeremiah's camp based its position on God's Word in Deuteronomy. The people of God had gone astray in such a way that God had to execute judgement in the form of exile, but with the promise of restoration connected to it. Jehoiakim's camp however, believed blindly in the indestructibility of Jerusalem because of the alleged presence of God in the temple. It was the temple of the God who called Himself the God of Israel. God would intervene miraculously, as he had done a century ago, when the Assyrian army had besieged Jerusalem but was humiliated. And for a while the Chaldean subjection was released, so Jehoiakim's camp had all the more reason to believe they were right and

3. With special thanks to Oded Lipschits, professor in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near East Studies at Tel-Aviv University, who kindly provided information and insight from his book "The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem".

Jeremiah was wrong. After three years under Babylonian reign, Jehoiakim stopped paying tax. Nebuchadnezzar did not take any actions against this rebellion. And in 601 BC Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to cross the river Nile and conquer Egypt (what a "great reset" it was indeed, that he had in mind!) was a disaster and he had to go home to recover. Was this God's intervention?

Four years later Jehoiakim died at the age of thirty-six. The Bible does not tell us exactly what caused his death in 597 BC. It may have been during the siege. The Jews appointed Jehoiakim's son Jehoiakin king, but Nebuchadnezzar did not agree with that. He deported Jehoiakin to Babylon, together with the royal family, skilled craftsmen and the nobility of those days. Ezekiel was among them. He belonged to "the basket of good figs" (Jer. 24). Nebuchadnezzar also appointed Zedekiah, Jehoiakim's younger brother, vassal king over Judah.

We must understand that at this point it was not Nebuchadnezzar who was God's opponent. On the contrary, YHWH calls him "My servant" (Jer. 27:6). The greatest threat came from within the kingdom. It was idolatry indeed, as T. Austin-Sparks pointed out, and it was a special kind of idolatry. It included the temple cult ("The sin of Judah is written ... on the horns of their altars", Jer. 17:1). Zedekiah had turned it into something that was equal to the golden calf or even worse. In 593 BC he organised an international summit in Jerusalem with representatives of several nations that in fact were his enemies. King Nebuchadnezzar had become too powerful to combat. The agenda of the summit was how to tempt Egypt to come to their aid against the Chaldeans. It is a clear sign that Zedekiah trusted in his own abilities rather than in God. This initiative may even be the turning point, the drop that made the cup run over, for God.

Jeremiah's camp was wiser. Egypt? Never! This plan was so contrary to God's revelation in the Scriptures, that a split was inevitable. Zedekiah was greatly disturbed. An internal conflict was the very last thing he wanted. But accepting God's judgement now would not only spoil his new friendship with the other small kingdoms in the Levant, but would also arouse fury among the corrupt princes in Jerusalem, the priests and the (false) prophets. The princes were already accusing Jeremiah of treason, and those who believed that he was the one who spoke God's words. It was a group of influential families, such as the house of Baruch and the house of Gedaliah, who supported

Jeremiah. This demanded diplomatic skill. The least he could do was to send for Jeremiah and ask him for prayer (Jer. 37:3).

Zedekiah's diplomacy failed. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. The group of Jews who surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar became so powerful, that Zedekiah feared for his life. He made Jeremiah promise not to deliver him into the hands of these defectors. Still, he did not make up his mind. The situation became all the more confusing when Pharaoh finally decided to come to the aid of Jerusalem. The Chaldeans withdrew. We can hear the false prophets scolding Jeremiah once more. But Nebuchadnezzar was a clever man. If Egypt was interested in this city, it must be an important place indeed. This strategic fact, not fury, made Nebuchadnezzar decide that Jerusalem was not to be conquered only — for it had already been under his rule — but to be destroyed as well, so that for Egypt there was no reason left to march into the hinterland of the Mediterranean coast again. And so it happened.

But it was not the end. It was a new beginning. This is the wonderful outcome of a long pondering over what had happened, a reflection that we now know as the book of Lamentations. "Perhaps There Is Hope," is the original title of Johan Renkema's dissertation on Lamentations, taken from chapter 3 verse 21. It is this hope with which Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt the Jerusalem temple and wall, still under foreign rule and deprived of a king on David's throne, but under the encouraging prophecy of Haggai that,

"I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations ...

On that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, declares the LORD, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts" (Hag. 2:22-23, ESV).

Can we see God moving in our own time? Do we see, in spite of what is happening in the world, that He is on the throne of the universe? Are we anticipating the humiliation of those who have sold their souls to "the murderer from the beginning"? Then we must acknowledge that, as Peter says, God's judgment begins at His own house (1 Pet. 4:17).

When we extrapolate to our own time Jeremiah's message of exile and judgement starting at the House of God, what should our interpretation be? By exile Peter means the rest of our time in the flesh (1 Pet. 4:2). So what would the promise of return from exile mean to us? What is it we are going to return to? T. Austin-Sparks would say it is to the testimony of Jesus in fullness. We might be tempted to question if that is at all possible here on earth, but the point is that *that is the wrong question*. It is in fact the same question the people of Israel had after they had left Egypt, doubting if they would ever reach the promised land⁴. We know that salvation is only fully accomplished at the return of Jesus. Peter is very clear about that⁵. But what he wants to emphasise is that it should not make any difference to our devotion to Christ, our striving after holiness, if the return of Christ lies beyond the grave. The suffering we experience, he says, is only a testing of our faith. It is meant to purify us. This judgement is not condemnation, but a refining fire. Our suffering — for being a Christian — is cause for joy, because it is intrinsically connected with the glory that is awaiting us when Christ returns.

We will come back to this theme of return from exile in a later issue.

4. This may be the main theme of the letter to the Hebrews.

5. Please read both letters by Peter, preferably in one go.

