

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 374

Why Do These Things Happen?

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 7th August, 2016**

Text: *“Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee: yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?” (Jeremiah 12. 1).*

Jeremiah was a man of sorrows like his Lord and Master. At this time, he seemed to be specially troubled. There were a lot of things he could not understand: things that were happening in the country, things the wicked were doing, things the Lord's people were doing, things that were affecting him, inward troubles, disappointments, perplexities. He brings all these things before the Lord.

Now people in the world would say, Why are a lot of people gathered in a little chapel in Luton talking about an old prophet hundreds of years ago? Beloved friends, surely the point is this: there are so many of you here and you have these inward questions. You have things in your life. You have the troubles that have come upon you, the afflictions. You wonder why. You wonder what the Lord's purpose is. You wonder what the end is going to be. There are things in your soul, the Lord's dealings with you. You do not altogether understand them. I am sure this takes up many people here this morning, both old and young. So Jeremiah took it all before the Lord.

Interestingly, the Lord did not seem to give him a clear answer. The Lord did not clearly give him an explanation of what was happening. Beloved friends, it is very much so with the Book of Job. The whole of the Book of Job seems to be this great question: why does this man have all these troubles and difficulties, these problems, these perplexities? What was the reason for it? At the end, the Lord never gives Job, never gives us, a clear answer to that question. Really the answer to the Book of Job is this: that God is almighty. He is so great, how can we understand His doings or His goings? Why should He really give us a reason for the things that He does? The simple point is because He is great, and almighty, and gracious, and wise, all must be right.

“And by His saints it stands confessed,
That what He does is ever best.”

You may say that if this is a theme that concerns so many in a greater or less measure, in providence and in grace, concerning your pathway, concerning your soul’s concerns, concerning the future – if the Lord does not give a really clear answer and say, this is the reason, and not that, and what He is going to do, what is the real profit of thinking about a subject like this? Well, I will tell you. I was really attracted by the way that Jeremiah was able to do deal with it: the humility of his approach to the Lord, the tenderness of his spirit, the submission, the way he approached. And not only that; he was able in praying to this great, almighty God whose judgments were abroad in the earth, he was able to pray to Him so lovingly and so intimately, just like we sing in our hymn: “Commune with Jesus as our Friend,” or in another hymn: “Great as He is, I dare be free.”

So really the burden on my spirit in bringing this word before you this morning – there are all kinds of things bound up in it – but this gracious example, how to go to the Lord in a time of trouble, how to go when we do not understand things, how to go when things seem to be going wrong; this beautiful example, the loving gracious way in which Jeremiah deals with it, and the Lord was not displeased, and the Lord will not be displeased with you.

One thing struck me, even since coming to chapel this morning: if the Lord perhaps did not give him the clear answer that he was hoping for, He was not silent to him. He still communed with him. He still spoke to him. What I noticed was that the following four chapters all begin more or less exactly the same: Almighty God in love speaking to Jeremiah. The next chapter: “Thus saith the Lord unto me”; and the next chapter: “The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah”; and then the next: “Then said the Lord unto me”; and even the fourth one: “The word of the Lord came also unto me, saying.”

So the theme is the encouragement to “make all your wants and wishes known.” Like Rebekah (I think I mentioned it last Lord’s day) – she was like Jeremiah here. There was something the matter in her life, and she did not exactly know what it was. Actually, she was bearing twins, but she did not really know. Things seemed to be going wrong, and

she could not understand what was happening, what was going to happen. We are told that Rebekah “went to inquire of the Lord.” Now whatever your thoughts are this morning – feeling concerned about your soul, or feeling concerned about what is happening in your life, or some trouble you are in, or what is going to take place, what the Lord’s will is for you – now this is the sinner’s safe and sure retreat. Rebekah went – where did she go? She went to the Lord Himself. “She went to inquire of the Lord.” And the Lord explained it all to her. Of course Rebekah, Jeremiah – these were in Old Testament times. “Much more believers now, in this more favoured day.”

Now it was not always that the Lord did not explain things to Jeremiah. Sometimes He did. Now here you have the mystery of divine sovereignty. You have it so often in David’s life. David enquired of the Lord twice in the same chapter (2 Samuel 5). Once He said, Yes; the other time, He said, No. Once He said, Go; the other time He said, Stay. God gives no account of His matters, but all that He does is right. This is the mystery of divine providence. “God moves in a mysterious way,” but it is not mysterious to Him, however mysterious it is to us.

But the Lord did not always keep silence about His way and His will. You remember there was that time in Jeremiah’s life when he was told to do what seemed to be a most foolish thing, and he could not understand why (Jeremiah 32). But if the Lord clearly tells you to do something, you must do it – but be sure it is the Lord telling you. A lot of people make excuses. They are doing something, and people do not agree, and they say, The Lord told me. Now be careful, but if the Lord does tell you to do something, you do it.

The Lord told him to go and buy a piece of land, but that land was under the control of the Babylonians. They had conquered it and they were going to hold it for the next seventy years. But he had to buy that land, and he had to pay for it and make sure he had the title deeds and everything, and he just could not understand it. It seemed so foolish and it seemed impossible. But the Lord said the time would come when that land would be needed, when those title deeds would be needed, when their captivity would end, when there would be deliverance.

The Lord took that occasion to speak some most precious truths to him, and to us, which have been made a blessing to the Lord’s people

down to the end of time. It seemed not only foolish; it seemed impossible; it could not be. Do you know how the Lord explained it then? “Behold, I am the Lord” – He told him who He was – “the God of all flesh” – He reminded him He was almighty. And then He put a question, or shall we say, a challenge: “Is there any thing too hard for Me?” Is it too hard for Me to bring My purposes to pass, to get rid of these Babylonians, to fulfil My purposes? What a word that has been to the Lord’s people down the ages: “Is there *any thing* too hard for Me?”

Now Jeremiah had a lot of perplexities, a lot of questions, but in this verse I have read to you [the text], there is one question he asked which has perplexed the people of God in all ages, and it still does today, and perhaps it does with you. That is, when the wicked in the world are walking wrongly and everything seems to go right for them, and you are seeking to walk in the fear of the Lord, and everything is going wrong. “Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?”

Of course, that is the same question that Asaph asked in that well-known Psalm 73. Asaph saw it, and he said that his feet were well nigh slipped. Jeremiah’s were not; Jeremiah seemed to be standing on solid ground. But Asaph said his feet were well nigh slipped. He could not understand all these things. But there with Asaph: “Until I went into the sanctuary.” That is the place where divine mysteries are explained. That is the place where you meet with the Saviour, whether in Psalm 73 you are thinking of the sanctuary as the temple, or the house of God, or whether you are thinking in that deeper sense, Christ our Sanctuary.

“Beloved Saviour, ever be
A Sanctuary unto me.”

What did Asaph see? Like Jeremiah, “Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?” He saw this, and may you and I see it: that all this prosperity of the wicked, everything going right, it is all the prosperity, all the happiness they are ever going to know. The sadness of the people of God, their disappointments, their trials – it is all the sorrow that they are ever going to know. And so Asaph found a resting place: “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee.

My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.”

Well then, to come to this point: Jeremiah, with so many troubled thoughts – how is he going to deal with them? And he did deal with them acceptably in the sight of God, and what a lesson this is for us! “Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee.” He started absolutely on solid ground. He did not understand it; it did not seem to make sense; it troubled him; but he knew that the Lord was righteous. He started from this point: whatever was happening, he was not quarrelling with God’s will. It must be right. He did not understand it, but, “Righteous art Thou, O Lord,” righteous in all Thy works, righteous in all Thy ways. Whatever Thou doest, it must be right. It seems strange to me; I cannot understand it; it almost seems as if it is not right; but it must be right. That is a good foundation. When we are puzzled, or when we are in trouble, or when we are tried and tempted, it is a good foundation on which to stand and seek not to be shaken from it.

“And by His saints it stands confessed,
That what He does is ever best.”

Or as another hymnwriter puts it,

“We cannot, Lord, Thy purpose see,
But all is well that’s done by Thee.”

“Righteous art Thou, O Lord.” Now may we have that impressed on our hearts, even if it is a disappointment, even if you hoped for something different.

“Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee.” You see this godly man’s humility. He is not going to demand things of the Lord. He is not coming in a wrong spirit. He is coming humbly. He is a sinner, but his Lord and God is the great, the almighty God. And so he has taken this humble position about these things. He is going to plead with Him. That is real prayer.

“I can no denial take,
When I plead for Jesus’ sake.”

I remember at Haslingden years ago someone prayed a very long prayer – I think it was half an hour or more – and when we were going out,

someone said to me, “There was not much pleading, was there!” O to plead for mercy, to plead on the ground of mercy, to plead that the Lord will hear it. The whole thought is our unworthiness. We do not deserve it. O but plead the blood. Didn’t the old, godly people used to say, “Plead the blood”! Plead it for your acceptance, for your forgiveness.

“When I plead with Thee.” It is pleading for help, and pleading for strength equal to our day, and pleading for the supply of our needs, pleading for answers to our prayers, pleading to be upheld. Now may we have a congregation in which there are many pleaders. And do not forget that word, all of you, at the prayer meeting:

“While one is pleading with our God,
May each one wrestle too.”

“Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee: yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments.” This little clause here seems beautiful to me. He is so humble; he is so tender; he is in the presence of Almighty God. He feels his nothingness, his unworthiness. He is in the depths of sorrow, but he is blessed with this spirit of access. What it is really: he sees Almighty God here as his Friend, and he is able to speak to Him as his Friend. And that is real praying, and what a favoured man Jeremiah was here!

We read of Abraham, the friend of God, but there are very few places in the Word of God, even in the New Testament, when anyone seemed able to come so close and so reverently and so tenderly and yet so familiarly. Jeremiah was speaking to the Lord as his Friend, and the Lord God was not offended. O wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing if in our homes, not only when in trouble, but day by day, and when we come to our prayer meetings, in our services, in the house of God, we were able to come to Almighty God on mercy’s ground, through the Redeemer’s blood, and say, “Yet” – despite Thy greatness; “yet” – though I do not understand it; “yet” – despite all these troubles; “yet let me talk with Thee.”

Sometimes it is the other way round, and the Lord talks to a sinner. For instance: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

“Yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments” – so tenderly and so closely. O to know more of that nearness and access, that closeness in prayer at the throne of grace! “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.” Jeremiah here entered right into the holiest and he touched the loving heart of his Saviour and his God. There is a pattern here. There is an example here, a beautiful example. May we in this solemn, latter day, with all our needs, be sweetly enabled to come. It is that coming tenderly.

You remember Ruth the Moabitess. She came softly and lay down at the feet of Boaz. Well, Jeremiah came softly here, and may you and I know that reverence, that godly fear, and yet that love, and yet that liberty, and yet that access to come softly to the Saviour’s feet and to tell Him all.

“Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee: yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments.” You see the Lord’s compassion here. You see this: that He understands and He cares. He will not break the bruised reed. Jeremiah was a bruised reed. He will not quench the smoking flax. Jeremiah was smoking flax. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust.”

“Yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments.” But then it is rather surprising. It is almost as if he received a very loving, tender rebuke. You would not expect it. This well-known verse (verse 5) is perhaps literally understood in a different sense here from how we usually interpret it. It was as if the Lord said, Jeremiah, you have been called as a minister of Jesus Christ to be a man of sorrows, and some of these things, really, if you think about them, they are only small things. How are you going to stand when greater things come? “If thou hast run with the footmen,” and that is what you are doing now, “and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses,” when things get harder? “And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” It was a terrible thing when Jordan burst its banks. In a day like this, how will you stand?

Yet Jeremiah knew underneath it all, through grace, what happened in the swellings of Jordan when Jordan burst her banks. There were the priests carrying the ark of the covenant, and Jordan divided for God’s people to get safely across, safely through. Jeremiah knew that. I

trust you and I do. It will be a wonderful thing when you and I come to the swellings of Jordan, whether it is greater trouble here, or the last great day – “How *wilt* thou do in the swelling of Jordan?” – to see the priests carrying the ark before us right down into Jordan – the mark, the evidence of the immediate presence of God. The Saviour is here. It is Christ Himself. And to see Him go before and make a way.

“Nor fear to cross that gloomy sea,
Since Thou hast tasted death for me.”

“Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee: yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments.” But if the Lord did not give him an immediate, sweet assurance of His love here, if you read through the pages of Jeremiah’s prophecy, he had some wonderful revelations that God was with him. He had wonderful answers to his prayers, despite all his sufferings and sorrows. Let me name just one, and what a blessing this was for this man of sorrows! “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” Now what better could Almighty God speak to this poor, sorrowful, suffering prophet and what more can He say to you in the midst of your fears, your concerns? O may He speak it to you this morning. “The Lord hath appeared ... unto me.” May He appear unto you, saying, “Yea.” He puts a *yea* upon it, because unbelief will always say, No, Lord; not me. “Yea, I have loved thee” – even thee, and it is with an everlasting love. And if you want the evidence of it: “Therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

“Let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments.” Well, the Lord most lovingly talked to Jeremiah there. But hear the whole conclusion of the matter. The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah comes to an end, and then unlike any other Book in Scripture, we have his Lamentations, and they *are* lamentations. But he has a resting place, and he has an answer to the concerns he had in Jeremiah chapter 11 and Jeremiah chapter 12, and he finds a resting place now and to all eternity. May you and I find that same resting place, and it was this: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed.” Jeremiah, you feared you were going to be consumed, but you never have been and you never will be. Now, “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.” You fail; I

fail; Jeremiah failed. The Lord fails not. “He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.” “His compassions fail not.”

“It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness.”