

“Jeremiah’s *Plaint and Its Answer*”  
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In the third verse of the 31st chapter of Jeremiah we have a prophet’s report of divine speech heard in a revelation-sleep. The content of what was related after the awakening holds a peculiar place among the prophecies of Jeremiah: “Jehovah appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore have I drawn out long lovingkindness unto thee.” Whilst a large part of the discourses of this prophet is given to rebuke of sin and prediction of judgment, the message here is one of promise. It transports us into the final world-order, when the chaos and ruin, the sin and the sorrow shall have been overpast, nay changed into their opposites. No wonder that one, who had had to deliver so many prophecies of woe and destruction, should have delighted in seeing and reproducing this vision of restoration and blessedness, that after having been so long employed in rooting up and plucking out, he should have rejoiced more than ordinarily in this planting of new hopes, a pause of rest and healing also for his own weary and distracted soul.

In taking the comfort of the prophetic promises to our hearts we do not, perhaps, always realize what after the tempests and tumults, in the brief seasons of clear shining which God interposed, such relief must have meant to the prophets themselves. For they had not merely to pass through the distress of the present; besides this they were not allowed to avert their eyes from the terrifying vision of the latter days. In anticipation they drank from the cup “with wine of reeling” filled by Jehovah’s hand. Nor did the prophets see only the turbulent surface, the foaming upper waves of the intruding flood, their eyes were opened to the religious and moral terrors underneath. The prophetic agony was no less spiritual than physical: it battled with the sin of Israel and the wrath of God, and these were even more dreadful realities than hostile invasion or collapse of the state or captivity for the remnant. In a sense which made them true types of Christ the prophets bore the unfaithfulness of the people on their hearts. As Jesus had a sorrowful acquaintance with the spirit no less than the body of the cross, so they were led to explore the deeper meaning of the judgment, to enter recesses of its pain undreamt of by the sinners in Israel themselves.

In Jeremiah’s ministry these things are illustrated with extraordinary clearness, partly owing to the individual temperament of the prophet, partly also to the critical times in which his lot had been cast. His was a retiring, peace-loving disposition, which from the very beginning protested against the Lord’s call to enter upon this public office: “Ah Lord Jehovah, behold I know not how to speak, for I am a child” (1:6). An almost idyllic, pastoral nature, he would have far preferred to lead the quiet priestly life, a shepherd among tranquil sheep. Why was this timid lad chosen to be a fortified brazen wall to his people, to hammer out words of iron against the flinty evil of their hearts? And though he surrendered to God for the sake of God, there always seems to have remained in his mind a scar of the tragic conflict between the stern things without and the tender things within. His soul sometimes found it difficult to enter self-forgetfully into the message. A strange compulsion directed his thought and forced its utterance. He sat alone because of God’s hand, filled with indignation. In painful experience he learned that the way of man is not in himself to order his steps. When the impulse of his innermost heart led him to intercede for Israel, the answer would sometimes come: “Pray not thou for this people” (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). There is something Job-like in the cry: “Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me, a man of strife and of contention to the whole earth” (15: 10). Even to the perilous verge of remonstrance with Jehovah did the prophet go in some of these

extreme moments: "O Jehovah, thou hast [over-]persuaded me, and I let myself be persuaded; thou art stronger than I and hast prevailed" (20:7). And when actually out of the urge of such nascent revolt, the idea of future refusal of himself to Jehovah assumed form, threatening, "I will not make mention nor speak any more in his name" (20:9), it turned within him as a burning fire shut up in his bones, which he could not contain. Nor was the inner aversion on such occasions confined to his own role in the sad drama, it sometimes reached the point of taking issue with Jehovah on behalf of the people: "Ah Lord, thou has greatly deceived this people, saying, ye shall have peace, whereas the sword reacheth unto the life" (4:10). And surely, in view of the deep chasm in the prophet's mind, these expressions, and others like them, were, if not excusable with reference to God, yet understandable from Jeremiah's human standpoint. It was not sinful pessimism, nor morbid world-weariness that made the prophet exclaim: "Oh that I could comfort myself against sorrow; my heart is faint within me; oh that I had in the wilderness some lodging-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people and go from them!" (8:18; 9:2).

Of course we must not for a moment forget that, mingling with this, there was always much of an opposite character, something that made the prophet put himself in Jehovah's hand, and, forgetful of all else, approve from the heart whatever it was God's good-pleasure to do or purpose. At such times his soul was as a weaned child within him. Not away from God, but in God he discovered his wayfarer's lodge with its profound peace. The bitter words were sometimes found and eaten, and turned, as by a miracle of transmutation, into a joy in the heart. But such seasons seem to have been sporadic, and carried no guarantee that, in close succession to them, the opposite state of mind would not gain control, finding utterance in words like these: "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable? Wilt thou be indeed unto me as a deceitful brook, waters that fail?" (15:18).

It is against the background of such moods that we must hold the words, "Jehovah appeared of old unto me saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore have I drawn out long lovingkindness unto thee" (31:3), in order to do justice to their sweetness and beauty. This is like coming out of the waste of the wilderness into a land of paradise. Even quite objectively regarded, the piece has its ineffable charm. It is like a landscape bathed in the glow of the harvest-season. In the farther distance winds the caravan of returning captives, coming homeward with weeping and supplication along rivers of water. The people are seen flowing unto the goodness of Jehovah, to the grain, the new wine, and the oil. In the foreground rises Judah with her cities, a mountain resplendent in holiness. And the whole is made musical by the sound of tabrets in the dances of them that make merry. Still, while a delight in itself, the scene, in order to be fully enjoyed, should be seen through the eyes of the prophet. It sounds like the notes of a bird finding its cage unexpectedly open, and with delirious joy exploring the new-gained freedom. For once the vision and the seer's deepest desire are perfectly blended. The lyre thrills in unison with something that sings itself within and needs no composing. The words move in absolute harmony with the graceful movements of the dancing virgins in the feast. Surely this prophet bore within himself a great poet. One cannot help feeling this even in his litanies with their forecast of doom on the sin of Israel. But most effectively, it shows itself in the larger and freer rhythms of the ascriptions of glory to Jehovah. It is in part a poet's satisfaction, that at the receding of the tide of vision, finds voice in the spontaneous words, "Upon this I awaked and beheld, and my sleep was sweet unto me" (31:26). For the prophets are the only true interpreters of the sleeping or waking moments in which God communicated His word unto them.

More important, however, than the joyousness of the experience or the poetic spell cast over it, is the religious spirit it reveals. Jeremiah was before aught else a child of God and a servant of Jehovah. Whether there be gifts of prophecy, they shall be done away with, or poetic tongues of the sweetest melodies they shall cease, but the religious bond with God is the one imperishable thing, on which the value and enduring of all else are suspended. Let us consider some of the traits characterizing this man of God in his relation to Jehovah, for after all his is one of the noblest figures in the field of Old Testament piety. First of all let us note the unparalleled direct and personal nature of his dealings with God. In Jeremiah's case there existed, alongside of the Spirit's official impact, if we may so call it, upon his mind, and interwoven with it, a divine approach addressing itself to the heart's private needs and desires. Of other communications of the truth addressed to himself, we may feel sure the prophet could have affirmed what here Israel is made to declare, that in them Jehovah had "appeared" to him. Appearing to speak makes revelation more than mere communication of truth; it puts God Himself in his word. It expresses that gracious condescension of contact, which Job distinguished from a less close approach in saying: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now sees thee mine eye" (42:5). And as Jehovah through His appearance injects the personal element into the transaction from His part, so, on the other hand, man receiving the vision feels in it the ultimate Godward expression of his own soul.

The collective character of God's dealings with Israel can be easily overemphasized, as if at the beginning there had been no personal rapport. There has been no time since God sought mankind and chose a people for Himself, in which the acts of individual visitation and of private prayer have been wholly lacking. But revealed religion itself has been subject in this respect to a process of increasing intensification and enrichment. Religion has been enabled to grow in the same degree that it has become conscious of its own direct encounter with God. When its roots touch that water, the plant is ready to bloom. It is easy to understand that more of the fine gold of piety enters an act whereby the single creature with all its sense of frailty and dependence casts itself upon the bosom of God, than there can possibly enter into the most impressive worship offered by men to God in their joint-capacity. Since the fruitage of all religion is ultimately in the human consciousness, where it becomes wholly transparent as a reflector of the divine glory, the normal goal of the entire religious movement must lie in the individual, for there alone can it be transmuted into clear surrender and adoration. All the rest is for the sake of that. It is absolutely true in the sphere of religion, and with absoluteness applying to nothing else in the world, what Jeremiah said: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth glory in this that he has understanding and knoweth me" (9:23, 24). For if we had the tongues of angels and the gift of prophecy, and all knowledge and all faith, and if our hands were ceaselessly busy with removing mountains of evil from the world, nevertheless if the features of the face of God remained strange to us, and we had no experience of the divine embrace and benedictions, it would profit us nothing. Nor would it profit God. His desire for us, no less than our need of Him can be satisfied in no other way than in a thorough spiritual penetration and possession.

The hidden man of the heart is the supreme religious reality that has value in the sight of God, and to Him this is so transcendently precious that He makes it the object of His chief joy. It is from there that the divine image looks back upon itself, so as to enable God to love His own in us. To shift the center from that to some peripheral point means to dereligionize religion at its very core. But while

this principle has always been in force from the beginning, there have appeared in the course of revelation men of God in whom the contact with Him assumed a preeminently personal character. David, the man after God's heart, many of the psalmists and prophets received this distinction. The nature of the prophetic office brought it about that those administering it were deeply initiated into the secrets of the Lord. Although we must be careful not to confound the two processes of revelation and religion, through rashly making the prophets' message the product of their religious experience pure and simple, yet the experience could not help being contributory to the performance of their official task. They had to receive before they could communicate, and in order to receive it was in many cases necessary for them to enter into the secret of their Sender. "Surely," says Amos, "the Lord Jehovah will do nothing except he reveal his secret to his servants, the prophets" (3:7). The prophets belong to the circle of divine acquaintance. Where something important is about to happen, it would seem like a breach of intimacy to keep them uninformed or unprepared. Thus a fine flower of religion is seen to blossom forth from the heart of prophecy. After all it was God who stood before the prophets unveiled in His purpose, and to have the feel of the purpose was to have the feel of God.

Among the prophets there are two in particular for whom their official task became a veritable means of grace. These two are Hosea and Jeremiah. This seems due to, or at least in line with, the temperamental endowment of both in which the element of sanctified emotion played an important part. In their case, probably, it was along the line of feeling that closeness of communion with God was obtained. In virtue of this their religious aspiration made straight for the possession of the heart of God. And Jeremiah had this faculty in an even stronger degree than his predecessor Hosea. Jeremiah reveals it in his profound treatment of the conscience in connection with the fact of sin: "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (17:9). He pictures to himself the confrontation of man with God in this innermost chamber of accounting: "I, Jehovah search the mind, I try the heart" (17:10). And the same thing is seen reversing itself between God and man on the plane of favor. In Jeremiah we meet not only with affectionate, comforting speech from Jehovah to his servant, we also meet with repeated individual prayer, ascending to God, arising to be sure, first of all, out of his prophetic occupation. These passages in which the prophet rises out of the perplexing maze and the thick atmosphere of his field of labor towards the serenity of the presence of God are truly remarkable.

Jeremiah is the praying prophet preeminently. The prayer is not always prayer for guidance and help, although the confused conditions of the age offered abundant scope for that. It is in the main prayer for relief and unburdening of soul, such as derives from the simple drawing near to God medicine and solace. It is the kind of prayer that so instinctively takes for its keynote the phrase, "Thou knowest Lord" (12:3; 15:15; 17:16; 18:23), showing to how large an extent the prayer-attitude was one of supreme confidence of the prophet in God. The prophet would have no secrets from Jehovah. And the mere pouring into the ears of God the disquietudes of the heart would bring calm and refreshment. The invitation, "Come unto me, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (16:16; cf. Matt. 11:28, 30), first fell from the lips of Jeremiah speaking for God. The intermingling of his discourses with repeated prayer-episodes places the prophet in close proximity to the genius of the Psalter. He surely walked in the company of those who had the ear of Jehovah and the freedom of His inner chamber. To him, as to all the great men of prayer, the mere thought of the hiding of God's face created a dread of unspeakable loneliness, deeper than any arising from other sources of separation.

The cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), while unique in its kind, nevertheless was prefigured in those piteous plaints of desolation heard now and then in psalm and prophecy. And through the imparting of this baptism of prayer the prophet, no doubt, was meant to prefigure Him on whose lips the graces of psalmist and prophet dwelt together in perfect unison to comfort the people of God of all ages.

If what has been said be germinally contained in the phrase, "Jehovah appeared unto me," a few words about the time of that memorable appearance will not seem superfluous. The virgin of Israel reports them as having been addressed to her "of old." There is something wonderful about an utterance made concerning a theophany of such far-away times: "Jehovah appeared to me of old" (31:3). No lapse of time in the past had been able to efface the impression these words made at their primal issue from the mouth of God. The virgin recalls them from out of the immemorial distances of time, when she was sitting in the midst of a small remnant, surrounded by the slain, and how all at once the sounds fell upon her ear: "Thou has found favor in the wilderness; yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore I have drawn out long lovingkindness unto thee" (31:2, 3). It would make only a slight difference in enhancing the mysteriousness of the situation, if, following certain expositors, we should change the temporal sense of "from afar," to that of spatial remoteness after this fashion: "From a far-off country, across the immeasurable wastes separating me from the holy land, the Lord suddenly appeared to me, as it were annihilating the distance, saying, 'I have loved thee of old.'" But it would be no improvement. To us the very point and pith of the statement seems to lie in the joining of the time-element to the mention of the theophany. The situation is dramatic; the discourse assumes the form of dialogue. First Jehovah speaks: "At that time will I be the God of all the families of Israel." Then Israel with acute remembrance gives answer: "Jehovah appeared to me of old." Then Jehovah speaks once more: "Again will I build thee and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel" (31:1, 3, 4). Thus to the hearing of Israel in the present re-echoes the voice from afar off, as though the ages were holding converse with each other about the eternal mercies of God. What the prophet had experienced so often in the presence of Jehovah, when words were exchanged and speech kindled speech, is here by a fine imagining made to take place between Jehovah and Israel.

But what is the motive for this strange reversion of Israel's mind to the past? The context suggests the answer. The olden time was the time of the Exodus, the Mosaic epoch. It was normative in its principles for every crisis. To the prophet's mind there was no other way for reopening the fountains of grace than by turning back to this declaration in the wilderness. The wilderness is the wrestling-place, where the spirit of sinful Israel has ever again to meet the mysterious stranger, who has the blessing, but will not impart it, until it shall have been fought for in bitter anguish of soul. Here is the vision of the sword and that of the ranks of the slain, perpetual witnesses to the divine resentment of sin. But here also, nay more impressive, is the picture of sovereign grace unaccountably interposing: here were the left ones and they *did* find favor and God *did* cause them to rest. It resembles the form of statement once used by Hosea for the same purpose: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her, and will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall make answer there as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt" (2:15). The reference, then, to the wilderness-journey, and the settlement of Canaan, is but an overture to the drama of redemption. It strikes at the outset the two notes that dominate the body of the music and how fitting the interplay of both!

There was need of protesting as now, so then, against the easy hope that paradise could be restored without reckoning with the angel and the flaming sword. Jeremiah knew from his own experience how every piece of hope and promise had to be fought for in penitence and prayer, snatched, as it were, out of the fires of judgment.

An example is furnished by the realistic portrayal of repentant Ephraim bemoaning himself: "Thou has chastised me, and I was chastised as a calf unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned, for thou art Jehovah my God. Surely, after that I *was* turned I repented; and after that I *was* instructed I smote upon my thigh; I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth" (31:18, 19). But the prophet felt also assured that, in spite of the present despair, there must be a future and a hope in store for Israel. As the ancient ordinances of the succession of day and night cannot be broken, so the eternal sequences in the process of redemption, sanctioned by a covenantal oath, are forever exempt from failing. And so from the cup of Jehovah wrath and milk and honey are made to flow together. In this paradox lies the chief preciousness of our faith. Did not our Lord Jesus Christ pour the New Covenant out of a cup filled with blood? What Jeremiah depicts here is neither a piece of unjustifiable optimism, nor a piece of unsanctified natural eschatology. No, the new order of things is baptized in the element of salvation. Jehovah has ransomed Jacob and redeemed him. The iniquity is forgiven, the sin remembered no more. The weary soul is satiated, and the sorrowful soul replenished. The entire scene glows with the unearthly splendor of grace.

In the next place let us note the reflex influence which all this exerts upon the prophet's religious state of mind. The type of piety has not been changed. There is still in it the same individual, but now thoroughly spiritualized intercourse between God and man. And yet, while the same qualitatively, it re-emerges a thousand times intensified. The recipient of salvation lives in closer union with God than the most ideal relationship on the basis of natural religion could possibly provide. There is no joy like the joy engendered by redemption. Nor is this simply due to the law of compensation. It is true this counts for much. To estimate truly the riches of grace one must have passed through the abjectness and poverty and despair of sin. But a far more principal cause is at work here. In redemption God opens up Himself to man in a wholly unprecedented manner, of which the highest religion of nature affords but the merest foretaste. One who is being saved explores and receives more of God than unfallen man or the unfallen angels ever could. A song like this has in it a deeper exultation than that which the Sons of God and the Morning Stars sang together for joy in the Creator.

In this point again Jeremiah's personal experience proved a typical forecast of Israel's future enjoyment of God. Through all the distress and terror of his ministry he had learned to know God with a new incomparable knowledge. Even that former sense of discord and protest in which the right always appeared on God's side, had only served to lay bare the ultimate rock where his soul was anchored with unbreakable chains to Jehovah. The great expostulators in the annals of faith have frequently been likewise the closest intimates of God's confidence. Here lies the birthplace of that heroism of religion by which some were enabled momentarily to rise above self-interest and self-safety in the simple satisfaction of having and knowing God Himself. Here lies the explanation of the outcry of Job, "Though he slay me yet will I hope in him" (13:15), and of the avowal of Habakkuk, "Though the fig-tree shall not flourish, neither shall fruit be in the vines, though the labor of the

olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food, the flocks shall be cut off from the folds, and there shall be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in Jehovah" (3:17, 18). Let us never forget it: whoever cuts out the redemptive heart from our religion not only bars the one road of escape, but he also bars us from the purest reaches of religious delight itself. The piety of redemption is the consummate flower of the fear of God in Old and New Testaments alike.

Finally, this prophetic utterance exhibits the intrinsic nobility of redemptive religion. It and it alone represents Jehovah's eternal love as the source from which it primordially springs, and from which it perennially renews itself. This divine declaration, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (31: 3), is by no means from Jeremiah's standpoint the commonplace which our over-familiarity with that attribute, not seldom at the expense of due regard for other attributes in the nature of God, has made it. The prophet means to describe by this term something quite extraordinary, something well-nigh inconceivable, a supreme wonder in that land of wonders which religion can never cease to be. Love is to him the highest form of the spiritual embrace of person by person. To ascribe it to God in connection with a creature is at the farthest remove from being a figure of speech. It means that in the most literal sense He concentrates all the light and warmth of His affection, all the prodigious wealth of its resources, his endless capacity of delight, upon the heart-to-heart union between the pious and Himself. And what God for His part brings into this union has a generosity, a sublime abandon, an absoluteness, that, measured by human analogies, we can only designate as the highest and purest type of devotion. It is named love for this very reason, that God puts into it His heart and soul and mind and strength, and gathers all His concerns with His people into the focus of this one desire. It is when speaking of this that Scripture employs its boldest anthropomorphisms. Here nothing but the absolute and unqualified are in place. He who would give God less than this total by a mere fraction would give Him nothing at all. In saying this we do not, of course, refer to the imperfect performance, but to the principle that regulates the obligation. The reason lies in the nature and position of God as the Highest Good, the one supremely desirable reality, besides whom and apart from whom it were folly to seek aught in heaven or on earth. Strictly speaking such a state of mind pertains only to the creature. God is the receiver, not the practicer of religion. And yet, considering His absolute devotion to His people, we cannot but speak of it in terms of reciprocity. In point of fact the occurrence of even the shadow of such a surrender to God in us is made possible only by the marvel of its occurrence in God. We love God, but can do so only because He loved us first. Thus the supreme force of religion must issue from the disclosure of God's sovereign love to us. No other divine attribute, taken by itself, is deep and wide enough to engender and support that movement. The prophet was well aware of this, for he distinguishes love even from lovingkindness, placing the former back of the latter. Kindness is a noble attribute; only, if we may apply to such things our frail human language, it is not the first-born among the divine virtues. "Chesed" is the loyal, tender attachment practiced in daily intercourse by reason of some original, more ultimate union preceding it. If the primordial love did not lie back of it, Jehovah's kindness could never be an assured possession of Israel. Were kindness or mercy or longsuffering our reliance, then the perfection of confidence would have to remain hopelessly beyond our reach. Kindness carries the necessity of ever-repeated renewal in itself. It is like a reservoir, full and rich indeed, but not like the fountain except by grace of the fountain's supply. But, since the fathomless tide of the divine love rises irresistibly underneath it, we know that it can never fail; but will prove at every point more than equal to our needs.

Thanks be to God, this applies to the church no less than to the individual. The Christian *church* binds up and heals the wounds of humanity, not in the sign of benevolence considered by itself, but in the sign of a compassion into which the love of God has but the tenderest tenderness of its touch. Because it was love that inspired Jehovah's kindness to Israel, there was no limit set to the store of pardon and salvation. "As often as I speak against Ephraim I remember him still; therefore my heart yearneth for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith Jehovah" (31:20). This gives the assurance that though the dreadful sword might again and again claim its harvest, Jehovah would make an absolute end. This inclusion of Ephraim amongst the objects of lovingkindness is, perhaps, the most touching trait in the entire prophecy. For Ephraim seemed to have been carried by the judgments of the past beyond every reach of hope and salvation; he had been lost, as it were, in the backward sweep of the terrible years: of what possible use could be to Ephraim mercy and kindness? But everlasting love, by reason of its eternity, surmounts even this. Like the vastness of heaven it encircles all the ceaseless change and attrition of time.

And what was true with reference to extinct Ephraim is just as true with reference to the past of every child of God. Each one carries for himself through life the consciousness of what cannot be undone. Who has never heard that doleful voice in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are not? There is nothing that will silence it except the thought of the infinite sweep of the omnipotent divine love: "Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears, for they shall come again" (31:16).

There is still a thought lying even further back for our comfort and satisfaction. The idea has always proved hard to bear that there should ever have been a stretch of existence in which our persons were indifferent to God. Love, and not the least religious love, seeks to eternalize itself, and that backwards no less than forward. In the unlimitable round of His timeless existence we have never been absent from nor uncared for by Him. A greater wonder as an object of the divine interest is *Ephraim not yet* than *Ephraim no more*. The best proof that He will never cease to love us lies in that He never began. What we are for Him and what He is for us belongs to the realm of eternal values. Without this we are nothing, in it we have all. Ours is the paean of Paul: "For we know that to them that love God all things work together for good . . . for those whom He foreknew [that is, eternally loved] he also predestinated to be made like unto the image of his Son . . . for I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:28, 38, 39).