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The Fountain and the Cisterns

by T. Austin-Sparks

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An excerpt from "The Voices of the Prophets" - Chapter 2.*

"It shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it desolate for ever" (Jeremiah 25:12).

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom..." (2 Chronicles 36:22, Ezra 1:1 onwards: see also Isaiah 45:1- 8).

Here then is the vindication of Jeremiah. But he never lived to see it. Therein lies one of the most testing things that a faithful and greatly opposed servant of the Lord can have to accept. Jeremiah had to fulfil his ministry knowing that, so far as his own time and the people thereof were concerned, it would be an apparent failure; he would not live to see that part of his commission fulfilled - "*To build and to plant*" (Jeremiah 1:10). How many of the servants of the Lord have been called upon to follow Him in this so searching and testing path! They, as He, have had to do their work for a time to come. We observe the seeming failure of the Lord's own earthly life and labours when "He was crucified through weakness". We see the desertion, forsaking, discrediting, and discounting which marked the closing days of the Apostle Paul's earthly course. What a galaxy of lonely heroes of the faith compose the noble army of the "despised and rejected of men", upon whose costly ministry men passed the verdict 'It was to no purpose'! But if their ministry and labours had anything of God in them, that element is eternal and immortal, and it will live again: God will vindicate, and "the men of Anathoth" (Jeremiah 11:21,23) will be the ones upon whom history and eternity will heap the shame. The tears of the Jeremiahs will - as the Psalmist says - be kept in God's

bottle. This is one of "the voices of the prophets" which, although not heard by dull spiritual ears, will be shouted for all to hear by the events of history. Ezra and Nehemiah, and Daniel's visions in fulfillment, will be the answer to Jeremiah's rejected ministry.

Cyrus may be a pagan, having no personal knowledge of the Lord, but his irreligious solicitude for God's interests will declare for all time that, while Jeremiah may be ignored or discounted, the God who called and appointed him cannot be so dismissed. If there is one voice that shouts from the book of Jeremiah it is the voice of Divine Sovereignty. The whole book is contracted in the Lord's words to His servant in the Potter's House: "*Cannot I do with you...?*" (Jeremiah 18:1-11). The Sovereignty of God is a difficult thing to be against. Ask Jerusalem and the Jewish nation about that in the year A.D. 70 when the sovereign words of Jesus Christ as recorded in Luke 19:41-44 were so literally fulfilled.

So much, then, for the inclusive 'voice' of Jeremiah. But what were some of the things that our Prophet had specifically to encounter and cry against? We can put these into a phrase. He cried concerning certain basic and fundamental contrasts...

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This is a contrast that the Lord vehemently called an "evil" - "*My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water*" (Jeremiah 2:13). Let us be duly impressed - before we pass on - with the Lord's judgment upon this alternative procedure; it is *evil!* The Lord says that it is a fundamental evil.

There are several features of these alternatives.

(a) The feature of the One and the many: the one Fountain; the many cisterns.

Here we have a voice of the Prophet which, having been missed, has resulted in - not only Israel's undoing - but, largely in that of organized Christianity, and is not absent from evangelical Christianity. It is a matter to which the Bible gives the most serious attention, and upon which the New Testament is very largely built. It is no less a question than that of the all-sufficiency of God or - alternatively - the many devices of men. It is just the exclusive and final fullness of God or the independent or plus resource of human effort. This is the inherent principle of the One Fountain or of the many hewn out cisterns. Into what a lot of Christian work and activity this issue has become real! From the dawn of man's active relationship with God there has been this incorrigible propensity of man to "put forth *his* hand" and lay it possessively or controllingly upon God's things. Probably this is Satan's (Lucifer's) sin which led to his fall, and was the very nature of his 'tempting' and deceiving Adam. That is why God calls this '*evil!*'. It is the evil of dividing God's place; of insinuating man's independence, and implying man's ability. It is at the heart of humanism, of autocracy, of dictatorship. It is the essence of that so oft-referred to symbolic term in the New Testament - "the flesh". It is the principle of the 'uncircumcised heart', which - like the 'uncircumcised Philistines' - insinuates itself in the things of God. It is full of significance that it was not until David came fully and pre-eminently to the throne that the Philistines were finally subdued. Theirs was a hand against the throne. Not until Christ is absolutely Lord will this tendency to self-assertion be overruled.

What the many "cisterns" represent in their form and nature is just legion; too many things produced by human strength, intelligence, and ingenuity to tabulate or catalogue.

There is a very serious and solemn precautionary reason why, after having given the command and commission to His Apostles to go into all the world, He added "*But, tarry ye... until ye be clothed with power from on high*" (Luke 24:49); "He charged them not to depart... but to wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). The world-commission must never be taken upon any kind of natural energy. The Holy Spirit alone, and that as a definite bit of personal history, is to be the source of God's work.

(b) Another difference is indicated in our text.

The cisterns of religious man's hewing can "hold no water". Perhaps the emphasis should be upon the word "hold". They are 'empty' because they are leaky. They have to be repeatedly and continually filled artificially. Their hewers are involved in the arduous task of finding and replenishing the resources. They get something and it leaks away, and dryness demands more and more human effort to defeat it. What a true description of all that comes from man putting his hand upon God's work! His are indeed leaky cisterns. On the other hand there is the Fountain. Full, final, inexhaustible, and ever fresh, never stagnant.

"The water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life" (John 4:14).

"Out of him shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

What a thing it is to have an opened Heaven, and never to have to hew out a message, a discourse, a ministry, an enterprise! It was against this weary, disappointing, laborious life that Jeremiah testified, and his "Voice" must be listened for in this matter today for an *evil* thing has limited the life of the Lord. Fullness is always a mark of the good pleasure of the Lord.