Jeremiah - Commentaries by G.S. Byford

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It is always easier to follow tradition than the written word of God; in doing so the conscience is not exercised, and we avoid the difficulty (sometimes a serious one), of giving reasons for our conduct. It is enough that we have been brought up from our infancy to believe and practice certain things, and to walk in a certain path: if right and good for our elders, why not for us? The Lord Jesus, in His ministry at Jerusalem, was frequently in conflict with the Pharisees about this very thing; as many passages in the Gospels (especially Matthew's) bear witness. That which has been handed down from father to son may not be bad in itself—it may have been good, at least for the time; but there is a false standard and a human authority set up in the soul, which, if it does not deny that of the word of God, will assuredly give it the second place. The Pharisee, attempting to approach God in all the excellence of his religious character (Luke 18:12), puts his fasting twice in the week, before the payment of tithes: the former was not enjoined in the Mosaic law, the latter was. The word of God in its direct application to the soul, judges and humbles one, while traditional observance fosters spiritual pride.

To walk in a path which my fathers have trodden before me, and marked out for my guidance, however attractive to the soul who desires rest, will not satisfy an awakened conscience or provide an answer when one is challenged. “What dost thou here, Elijah?” is a terrible question for every one who cannot justify his position by the word. It was comparatively easy for the disciples when the Lord was with them, and they could go to Him in all their joys, their sorrows, and their difficulties; but He warned them of a time of peril when the words He had spoken, brought to their remembrance by the Holy Spirit whom He would send, would in a way compensate for His own absence, and give them also a spiritual enjoyment of His own, and of His Father's presence with them (John 14:23).

It would seem that the Rechabites had continued as long as possible the observance of their father's commandments. Their filial piety was fully acknowledged, and rewarded (ver. 19). But in a day of ruin or of judgment, the word of the living God alone can give strength to the soul and shed divine light upon the path. It meets us in all circumstances and conditions; it reveals the true character of what is exercising and distressing the soul; it answers every question, and enables one to tread the path of obedience and dependence with more confidence than ever; because I have been to God about the evil, and have got my answer.

Obviously the sons of Jehonadab could not do this. That which was their rule of life was not to be adjusted to the new circumstances which befell them. And this is where any human creed or system betrays its weakness. The Rechabites could not consult their father in the emergency, as is the believer's privilege now; and so it seems that they did the very worst thing possible. Jerusalem, the holy city, must surely be a haven of refuge, a sacred place that the Chaldean could not and dare not touch. But alas! Jerusalem was doomed, highly favored, yet all the more guilty. The wrath of God fell heavily upon it.

The Spirit of God takes advantage of their recourse to that very place, in the way of testimony to the nation; and this without either sanctioning or condemning the manner of life of the Rechabites, or their partial departure from it under the pressure of fear. This was not the point; but their faithfulness was an object lesson for the Jews, and gave point to an earnest appeal to the conscience of the nation at a time when the Judge was at the door. It must have been a strong temptation; for God's faithful and suffering servant took them to the sacred house of God, with witnesses amongst whom was a “man of God.” They might have thought that in such a holy place, and invited by such men, they could be absolved from their ordinary obligation. But they stood the test. God's purpose was gained; while His people pursued their guilty way to the bitter end.

In the history of Israel under the reign of Jehu, we have no mention of Jehonadab's charge to his sons; yet he himself is brought before us (2 Kings 10) in such a manner as suggests that the Spirit of God was creating and maintaining, beneath the surface of national life, piety and godliness in not a few humble souls, whose eyes were opened to the enormity of the evil of the state religion established by Jeroboam. First, its effect was to make God a stranger to His own people and in His own land. To this was added by Ahab the worship of Baal. Hence Jehu had been commissioned to execute the judgment of God upon the house of Ahab. Jehonadab hears of it, and his heart goes out in loyalty and devotedness towards this external servant of God. When he goes to meet him (ver. 15), Jehu at once displays his true character: “Come with me and see my zeal for Jehovah,” is the language of one whose heart was devoid, as of faith and piety toward God, also of love and pity for man. His methods were brutal and treacherous, while he yearned for the approbation of man, and especially of such a one as Jehonadab who had doubtless a reputation for religion. We read no more of the latter, who must have had a sorrowful experience in his company (vers. 18-28). It was soon proved that putting down Baal worship, because it suited him, left him free to continue the sin of a self-devised and politic religion already judged by God (1 Kings 13), because this suited him. The spirit of Jehonadab, grieved and crushed within by such affronts offered to Jehovah, led him into such a manner of life as testified of his moral judgment of the evil, and of his refusal to enjoy himself or to be even a citizen of that land, which had made the worship of Jehovah impossible, except indeed individually through grace.

We have thus two distinct types of service contrasted; and we have their counterparts to-day in Christendom. The one is all fire, zealous, energetic, and self-assertive; it seeks the fellowship and sanction of such as are known to be godly. But faith, obedience, and dependence, are strangers to such men. “Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord” expresses their real character; and they will in due time come under the just judgment of God. On the other hand “he who doeth the will of God abideth forever.”

Centuries after that meeting of Jehu and Jehonadab, when the apostate kingdom of the ten tribes was judged and the people went into captivity, such as had sighed and cried over the abominations practiced amongst God's people (Ezek 9:14), were still maintained and acknowledged by God. Obedience is ever precious in His sight; therefore it was that He said, Jehonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me forever. G. S. B.