

The Trial of Faith *by T. Austin-Sparks*

Reading: Jeremiah 32:1-27.

The Lord's word for us at this time comes out of the chapter which we have just read. I think it is all bounded by a declaration and an interrogation; a declaration — "*There is nothing too hard for thee*"; and the interrogation — "*Is there anything too hard for me?*" And it is interesting to note that the declaration is made by man — "There is nothing too hard for thee"; and the interrogation is made by God after man has made his statement, "Is there anything too hard for me?" and to me the message just lies in the interpretation or explanation of that order of things. We might have expected it to be the other way, the Lord first challenging, is there anything too hard for Me? and, after a certain amount of exercise, man responding and making his declaration, There is nothing too hard for Thee. But it is not in that order. It is in the reverse order, and the explanation of that contains the message.

You have seen the situation. Here is Jeremiah in a double imprisonment shut up in prison, guarded in the house of the king, and then the city in siege, the Chaldean armies encamped around: imprisonment indeed. There is not much doubt about it. In his own personal life shut up, and, in the case of his people or the Lord's people, shut up.

But a third factor which is an even more difficult and formidable one than that which lies right behind this scene, the fact that Jeremiah from the beginning was called to fulfil a ministry which, from every human standpoint, was destined and doomed to be a failure and he knew it. You know how often in the case of these prophecies, you find Jeremiah rebelling against his own ministry, angry, sometimes complaining, fretful, because of the ministry which he had been chosen to fulfil, which he had been told from the beginning would not be received, and, so far as this world is concerned, or his own lifetime was concerned, it would be a failure, that is, on certain grounds, according to certain standards. We can never say that Jeremiah's ministry was in the long run a failure, but in his own life and for immediate purposes, all his prophesying, his pleading, his tears, his burden, his suffering, were in vain, and he was told from the beginning that that ministry, so far as having any immediate result or result for a long time to come, was going to be a failure. Well, that is not a very bright outlook, taking all these things and putting them together: the foredoomed failure because of the setness of the situation amongst the Lord's people; the Lord's people themselves now in this siege which Jeremiah, for forty years up to this time, had been foretelling would end in their captivity. And then himself personally, a man in prison.

That is the situation, and then the Lord's word came to him in the midst of that telling him that his cousin would come and propose to him that he should buy the field in his native town of Anathoth. He waited and his cousin came according to the word of the Lord, and he said, I knew that this was the word of the Lord because what had been intimated to me by the Lord was fulfilled! The Lord gave the word and the Lord gave the witness that he was to take this step.

The Public Declaration

And then the transaction. What strikes us is the thoroughness with which Jeremiah carried out this business. I do not know how you would feel about it, but if ever I were tempted to be slack in a business transaction, I think it would be under conditions like these. We might be very thoroughgoing business people under other conditions, but see what the situation is, the forlorn hope and the risks involved. I am quite sure our hearts would not be in this business, but we are impressed with the way in which Jeremiah goes to work. He leaves no detail unattended to. He goes through the whole course of the

legal procedure quite thoroughly, has two documents drawn up, or a document and its copy made, brings the witnesses, has the original read, the copy compared to see that they are both exact, sealed and signed before the elders of the Lord's people of the city, then the one, the original, is sealed up and becomes the closed copy. The other is the one for any reference at any time, left open. So the thing is carried through very thoroughly. I mention it because it bears so much upon the one thing at the heart of this, the faith of Jeremiah. Then the documents are put into a vessel and buried. Jeremiah knows what that means. The Chaldeans were going to take the city, the people are going to be taken away into captivity seventy years. Well, possibly he will not live to possess the field which he has purchased, but against that day he purchases and reserves and preserves the title, the title deeds.

Well, we have got so far, so good. That has all been done in public before men; men have seen and heard and taken note. No doubt they have criticised, no doubt they have had their questions, no doubt they have called him a fool. Here is a man who, for forty years, has been telling us that this city is going into the possession of a foreign power, it is going to be overrun and occupied, the inhabitants are going to be carried away, the land is going to pass out of our possession! Here this man, having been talking in this way all these years, now buys fields, transacts business in this thoroughgoing way! Would they not say, This is surely a contradiction, surely he does not believe what he has been saying, surely the man is mad, if he does believe it! You know the position they could take. It has all been done in public and they have been taking note.

The Secret Conflict

The witnesses have gone, the elders have departed, closer friends have gone to their homes. Jeremiah is left alone. The public side of things has faded away. He is alone with what? Reaction! When he had handed the deeds to Baruch and they had been taken and buried, he is alone in the secret place. Then he says, I prayed! His declaration is not the declaration of a heart that is without questions, doubts or fears. It all comes over him and in the terrible conflict, of his own doubts, misgivings, fears, heart unbelief, he makes this cry, — O Lord, there is nothing too hard for Thee! That is not the confident, bold statement of a man who is absolutely sure of that. It is a man who is trying to save his own faith in the hour of reaction, a man who is struggling with all that is to be seen which so positively denies the position that he has taken, a man who is in the throes of a terrible battle between everything on the outside which says, Impossible, it can never be! You have made an awful mistake, you have taken the wrong course, you have given everything away!; and that inward other life which knows that God has said something at one time. He had a leading from the Lord, and then the Lord bore witness to it, confirmed it. He knows the Lord in his deepest heart. There is a realm down deep in him where he is sure but, today, just at this moment of terrible reaction, when he has been making this public declaration, it all comes back on him when he is alone and Satan assails him. Was I right? Have I made a mistake? A battle; everything is saying, No, you are wrong!

You know it is true, beloved, is it not, that so often, there are things about which we had absolutely no doubt in the hour when the Lord spoke to us and wonderful confirmations and witnesses that the Lord has given, but then comes the time of trial when we question, we are in the bitter conflict with the greatest certainties in our history.

Well, Jeremiah has this reaction, and he fights it by first of all making his affirmation — "There is nothing too hard for thee." Then he seeks to strengthen that position of faith in the Lord by going over all the wonderful things that the Lord has done for His people from Egypt onwards, no, from the creation onwards, the mighty works of God. He is supporting himself by bringing up divine history to his rescue in the hour of conflict for faith.

Now, why have I said all that? Not to justify a situation like that, though it may be comforting to us all to find that even a Jeremiah has been the way that we have gone and are going. What is faith? A man who has never had a doubt does not know what faith is. A man who has never had a fight with unbelief does not know anything about faith. A man who has no positive beliefs knows nothing whatever about true faith. Faith is always a militant thing in the Word of God. That is why you have got to take the shield of faith, and that is the big shield of faith over all. It is always militant. How is it militant? Because of these fiery darts, these wiles of the devil. You see, when you have taken the position by revelation from God, that is going to precipitate you into the deepest conflicts with the unbelief of your own heart, reinforced by satanic onslaught, and you will need to call up every reserve to maintain that position before God. Faith is never passive. Here we see Jeremiah in his terrible reaction from his public declaration, fighting the doubts which arise in his own heart. But it is that that makes a prophet, it is that that makes a servant of God. That is the way in which everything that is really going to count for God has to go, and these times of terrible reaction are all a part of the great purpose and achievement of God in the long run. Remember subsequent history opens with these words, *"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Jehovah by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, Jehovah stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia"* (Ezra 1:1). And Daniel, with all his great ministry in the latter days of this captivity, said, *"I learned by the books."* Jeremiah had said, *"the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah"*. History in the purpose of God was bound up with this position and with this terrible conflict which raged in the secret place over faith's declaration and faith's position as to God's will and God's intention.

Let me just reiterate that you may, beloved, sometimes be tempted to feel that you ought never to have a doubt, ought never to have a question, that your ground ought never to seem to shake under your feet, that if really you were a true servant and child of God, you would never for a moment have a shadow of a question. Well, I do not want to help you to doubt, but I do want to help you not to go under in such times by showing you that this large section of this chapter finds Jeremiah in the vortex of conflict with a big question immediately following upon the boldest public act of testimony, and having to fight this thing out in secret to preserve his position with God. It does not end in doubt, fear, uncertainty. There is triumph in the end, but this is a part of the difficult side of standing with God in a dark day for something which seems and is, naturally, so impossible from every natural standpoint, when a ministry is doomed to failure in certain respects. All the Lord's people are not going to accept that for which you are standing. No, a remnant shall return, and in that remnant God will have His thought. The rest will not have it, they are doomed to failure, and yet you are standing for that essential triumph of God's testimony. You are standing for that which must be eventually, or God is for ever defeated. And yet how impossible it seems! Many of you will be seeing more than I am saying, but we are all very conscious of the impossibility of the situation so far as the great body of Christians are concerned. How impossible it is that there shall be that which wholly represents God's thought. This buying of this field was a testimony enacted to the truth. The day will be when God will have what His heart is set upon. You have got to read the rest of this chapter where God comes in after this interrogation, and see how the Lord begins to open His heart about the history of Israel and then says, I have given them into the hands of the enemy. The city has been a disappointment and a failure from the day that it was founded. It has been a tragedy and a scene of iniquity which has stirred My anger to white heat! These are the things the Lord is saying. I am now handing it over to the enemy, but they shall come back, it shall be inhabited again! Men shall buy fields and build houses and plant vineyards. It shall be! Yet it was only that day before the Lord said this to Jeremiah, that Jeremiah had borne his public testimony in thoroughgoing acts unto a day which was to be, not in his own lifetime, but that is another matter. It is the testimony, not his own life and ministry, with which the prophet is bound up. It is the Lord's testimony; he is given to that.

God's Contradiction of the Impossible

Well now, let us look at this thing and see what it really says to us. I think it says in the first place, that the Lord here, by leading His servant to do this thing, that is to buy this field, is definitely contradicting the strongest adverse conditions. Conditions are such and such. The position is this and that. It is a very desperate situation, and the word may well be used — Impossible! The question may be raised as to whether it is possible, too hard, language rightly used in connection with this situation, but the Lord's leading in this matter is the Lord's own contradiction of those most adverse conditions, most impossible situations. If Jeremiah read rightly into the leading of the Lord and carried that reading through his experience, he would see that the very leading of the Lord was a contradiction of the circumstances. That is, he would have to say, The Lord led me to do that, to buy that field, therefore the Lord means something in that! The situation is so-and-so, but by what the Lord has led me to do, He contradicts the situation. The situation says, Impossible! but God, by His very leading, has denied that. The position that He has led us to take is His denial that it is ultimately impossible of realisation, whatever the circumstances may be, and you have faith. Faith is just that in essence, that it holds to the leading of the Lord in spite of impossible conditions which subsequently develop. I do not say I have got that faith; I don't suppose you have, but that is what is here and perhaps we have got to try and support our poor faith as Jeremiah did.

The Lord is seeking to try and strengthen our faith in a day when outwardly we would say, Too hard! Impossible! Is that what the Lord says? Is there anything too hard for Me? He might well come back on Jeremiah's — There is nothing too hard for Thee! Is there anything too hard for Me? It is not out of place for the Lord to say that after the declaration. Well, the Lord contradicts by the buying of this field in those conditions which seem to shout so loudly that nothing more is possible. Then Jeremiah believes God and acts according to his faith. His faith is resolved into obedience, and his obedience is a businesslike obedience, not a slack, slothful obedience, but, as we have pointed out, a very thorough transaction. That is the obedience of faith for which the Lord looks.

What does that mean to us? Well, if we have had reason to believe that the Lord has led at some time to take a certain course, do certain things, things which correspond to the buying of the field, and situations subsequently arise which seem to prove all that to have been a great mistake, all wrong, not, after all, in the will of God, the obedience of faith will call upon us to strengthen our attitude in that matter and hold on to that, whatever it is, in a new way, against the conditions which arise. Not, Oh well, we shall wait and see! — being slack about it, yielding rather to the pressure of conditions, letting go, taking an attitude, Well, if it was of the Lord, of course, it would come through, I don't see how it is going to be, and so on; or really, with both hands, in a double attestation, with two documents, over against the circumstances, affirming this thing has got to be, if God is true, it must be, it shall eventuate! The obedience of faith positive. We are in a day like Jeremiah's in many respects and this is one of the things, I feel, that faith demands, that we shall come down on both feet and with a double document, and stand firmly there upon the ground which we know in our heart of hearts, deeper down than all the circumstances and all the doubts, is the ground which God gave us, the field which the Lord led us to take, costly as it has been, and the weighing out in the balances is a very real part of this obedience of faith. It is a costly procedure.

Faith's Selflessness

Then this was all, as we have suggested, for a time to be, and it demanded, so far as Jeremiah was concerned, that element, that quality, in faith which is marked by an utter selflessness. I do think that so often we appear to be so much in the position that, if we were to be told that it will not be in your lifetime, the thing for which you are suffering, praying, preaching, testifying, we would lose interest. Perhaps our heart would go down, and if we did not put it into words, or even allow ourselves to think it definitely, our feeling would be. Well, what is the good, what is the good of *our* spending and suffering and enduring and going through all this and paying the price and we are never to see the accomplishment of it? The quality of Jeremiah's faith was that it was so selfless that he did it and he knew in his heart of hearts that he would never occupy that field. He was buying it testifying unto a day to come, a time to be, not his time. We said earlier, it was the Lord's interests, the Lord's faithfulness, the Lord's testimony, that mattered. If that should be realised at last, what matters it whether we are here to see it or not. That is the quality of faith, and I think that is real strength of faith. I believe really that the weak element in our position so often is that self element. That is just the clay part of this. It is brittle. It will not stand up to pressure. It is the self element in our enterprise; it is the self element in our position, in our ministry. We want so much to see this thing and to see it in our own time. Time goes on, the years pass, and we are apt to lose heart because we are coming to realise that this can never be fully in our time and we lose heart. We have got to have a longer view than that, and not only believe for a time to come, but work to a time to come which may or may not be our time. The point is there is not to be the admixture of self with faith which will be a weak element in faith and the point at which we shall always be breaking down.

Faith's Vindication

That is all, except this. He bought the field, the enemy captured the city, the land, the people, the king, carried them away into captivity. Jeremiah was between sixty and seventy years of age when it happened. It was to be for seventy years. When seventy years were past, the remnant came back, occupied the city and the land, came upon the field, dug up the field and found the vessel with some documents in it, and read the documents. Jeremiah is vindicated!

What did they say, that new generation that came back? What did they say? Ah, Jeremiah was right! In his day no one believed him, men called him a fool, they said every hard thing and did every hard thing, but Jeremiah was right. What faith was Jeremiah's! How true to the Lord was Jeremiah. He stood alone at great cost. Here is the evidence that he was right, his position was right. Jeremiah was loyal to the Lord; the Lord has proved Himself loyal to Jeremiah. That is the end. I believe if we are loyal to the Lord, the time will come, if not in our lifetime, when all will see and know that the Lord was loyal and has been loyal to us. The Lord will be no man's debtor.

How much that comforts you, I don't know. But here is this little meditation upon a man acting in faith, taking a position in faith, and then knowing the terrible reaction of his own position and act, the fight with his own heart, questions and doubts, but coming through at last vindicated, triumphant. I do not believe that a vessel really comes to its full service to the Lord until faith has suffered every kind of shaking and been established. There may be usefulness in measure with very weak faith, but full measure of usefulness to the Lord comes when faith has been established through much shaking and much suffering. Yes, that is the way of every vessel of the Lord. It has been thrown into this awful conflict over faith, and then its main usefulness has come out. That is another subject, but you can think about it. Moses had a certain amount of faith when he struck out in Egypt, but forty years later he is a very disciplined man and can be of very much more use to the Lord. But what a forty years of inaction for a man like Moses! If that is not enough to test a man's faith and all that he has gone through after his

devotion to the Lord in Egypt! Paul's full usefulness to the Lord did not come until he went to Rome and was in prison. The Church's enrichment has been a thousandfold more by those last years of his life in prison, but what a test of faith, what a perfecting of faith after many years, and so it is that a vessel, for its full usefulness, has to know a deep work by which faith is established. The Lord give us grace to endure the establishing processes!