

## A SEAT IN THE BALCONY

Sermon preached before the Southern Baptist Convention, Wednesday, May 19, 1949, at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by Dr. Norman W. Cox, First Baptist Church, Meridian, Mississippi.

Text: "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain, of the daughter of my people! Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them." (Jeremiah 9:1-2).

Jeremiah did not want to be a prophet. He was a devout, fervent believer in God. He was an earnest, persistent student of his Bible. The windows of his soul were open to the leadership of God's spirit. He was intensely patriotic. He saw that Judah was in scornful rebellion against the word and will of God. Strong enemies from without were threatening the security of his nation. Within, the termites of idolatry, selfishness, and the vain delusions of social follies, coupled with unbelief, were undermining the structure of his nation's security. His soul yearned for a revival that would bring the people into fellowship with God and would give them security within the fortress of Jehovah's sustaining grace. He longed for God to call some man to be a prophet whose preaching would stir the nation to repentance and set their feet in the paths that lead to a triumphant destiny.

Then it happened--on a day that he was surprised and frightened by the fact that God was calling him to be that prophet. He was by nature both humble and reticent. He shrank in dismay before the awful responsibility of being God's voice to his people. At first he refused to face the fact of God's will for his life. However, the fires which God's call lighted upon the latar of his heart continued to burn with increasing intensity. At last, he could refuse no longer. He gave himself in com-

plete abandon to the call of God. He burned all bridges behind him. From the hour when that decision became final, he was solely God's man, whose mind and heart and all were given to learning God's will and word for the people and to proclaim the divine message to them.

On a day not so long thereafter--it may have been one of the great feast days when the Court of the Jews just outside the Temple portals was crowded with people--Jeremiah mounted the speaker's stand and began to pour out to them the burden of God's desire for their repentance.

The people were pleased. The public may persecute, and not infrequently crucify, the prophets of God buty they want to have them around. Regardless of how sinful they are, they feel that God has not forgotten as long as he continued to send his heaven-called preachers to proclaim his word the them. Alas, the public's desire for a prophet in their midst frequently is far beneath God's purpose in sending that preacher to them.

Years ago, I was preaching in a village in Georgia where there was no Baptist church and out of which meeting a church was organized. A few days before this incident a cyclone had struck not many miles away and had done much damage. Late one afternoon I was seated on the porch of my host's home. Threatening clouds were boiling out of the Southwest. I had seen two cyclones previously, and it looked as though another might be on the way.

Across the street a man was nervously pacing up and down the length of his porch. Each time he would get to the south end he would look at the clouds and nervously walk to the north end and back again. I divided my attention with him and the clouds. After a few minutes as the prospects of a storm became more threatening, he cried out to me, "Preacher, oh preacher, come over here."

"Why don't you come over here?" I answered, "It is no farther over here than it is over there."

"No, no," he said. "I want you to come over here."

Then I asked, to tease him, "Why do you want me to go over there?"

He cried, "It looks as though we are going to have bad weather, and I would be more comfortable if I had a preacher in my house."

Yes, there are lots of poor sinners whose hearts are far from God who comfort themselves in the idea that the presence of a man of God in their midst offers them some security against the wrath of God's judgment upon their sin.

Jeremiah must have been a very eloquent preacher. No man could have had the combination of imagination, fervor, self-forgetting devotion, and intensity of spirit which were so richly his and not have been blessed with the unction of divine eloquence.

Great throngs waited upon his ministry, Their emotions were thrilled by his sermons. His passionate pleading shook them to the soles of their sandals. Then a thing happened that broke Jeremiah's heart. He discovered that while the people heard him with their ears, they heeded not with their hearts. He learned, with bitter disappointment, that while they enjoyed his sermons they refused to commit themselves to the call of his message. While they applauded the light they walked in darkness. This terrible experience has broken the hearts of God's preachers from Noah until today. It broke the heart of Jesus.

The resistance of the people against the truth of God led the prophet to renew his effort and intensify his emphasis. He saw clearly a people whose hearts were stubbornly set on merrily going to hell.

When he began to bear down with his pronouncements of the doom of God upon them for their folly, they began to rationalize a justification for their sins and to heckle him. He pressed on and they quit going to hear him preach. Remember that they did Jesus that way.

Our text shows us the heart of a distraught preacher on Monday

morning after a hard Sunday. He had poured out his soul to the little handful who were still coming to hear him preach. He remembered the former throngs who were not there. He saw the steadily approaching day of doom because they would not repent. His compassionate soul is overborne with sympathy, and he cries out, "Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people."

In this cry of his soul he is saying that he wishes that he could in the sight of that nation, dissolve himself into tears, if thereby the spectacle of his compassionate grief for them might awaken their torpid spirits and call them to repentance from their persistent depravity.

Then there crept into his soul that chilling question that has voiced itself in the hearts of all God's preachers in such an hour: What is the use? Why should I be burdened to death for the sin and folly of a people who do not care? Why should I waste my life in worrying about their unconcern?

Then, immediately, there struck the emotional lightning of what the psychologists call the "escape impulse." The intertension of his soul swings the emotional pendulum to the other extreme. His longing to escape the burden that overwhelmed him led him to cry, "Oh, that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men that I might leave my people and go from them!"

This is a highly imaginative picture. As we know Palestine was a little country about 50 miles wide and 110 miles long. It was traversed by three great intercontinental highways over which the tourists, commerce, and armies traveled. Along these highways, there were caravan series where the caravans stopped and found food and shelter, a place of rest for man and beast, for the night. To modernize the picture, they were tourist courts outside of the city by the side of the highway. The thing that

Jeremiah prayed for here was for God to let him withdraw from the battle and go out and live in a tourist court by the side of the road. He wanted one with a good comfortable porch, an easy chair in which he might sit and a bannister rail upon which he might prop his feet and watch the world by by!

He would not love God less nor would he be less interested in the fate of his nation. For the moment he had lost his zest for the battle. He wanted to withdraw from the team, take off his uniform, get himself a seat in the stadium, and wath the other fellow bear the burden of the battle. Someone, whom I do not know, has described what happened in the heart of Jeremiah and that which is happening in the hearts of many of us in these lines to which I have added a few:

#### I Want to Let Go

"I want to let go,  
But I won't let go.  
There are battles to fight  
By day and by night  
For God and the right,  
And I'll never let go.

I want to let go,  
But I won't let go.  
I'm sick, 'tis true  
Worried and blue  
And worn through and through,  
But I won't let go.

I want to let go,  
But I won't let go.  
I will never yield.  
What! lie down on the field  
And surrender my shield?  
No, I'll never let go.

I want to let go,  
But I won't let go.  
Let this be my song  
Mid legions of wrong,  
Oh, God make me strong,  
That I may never let go."

I want to let go,  
But I won't let go.  
Although I am undone  
Still Christ, God's Son,  
Will help me to run And I will never let go.

What a familiar experience! Every true lover of Christ has known it. We have sat where he sat. In these terrible days through which life is taking us now, alas, there are millions whose hearts have known the love of Christ but who have in a measure, some very much and others less, let go. They have retired from the conflict and become well-wishing spectators.

While others--multitudes--have let go, this is a passing impulse to the heart that is wed to God in Christ. Jeremiah did not let go. He was faithful through 40 years of persistent frustration and discouragement.

These words from his heart, which mirror to us the struggle within his soul, have become rather a fixed pattern of the picture we see in all our churches. Their balconies are crowded to overflowing with spectators who are unburdened and uncompassionate and unsacrificing well-wishers. Only a few are steadfastly fervent, and they frequently are unappreciated.

I can give you a true picture of the balcony in your church. In every one of them there are some Pouter's Benches that are crowded. They have filled up with folks whose feelings have been hurt. Some were not elected to offices they wanted. Others were not asked to sin or to speak or to teach or to do this or that. Some did not get the compliments they expected. Some are mad because the preacher preached the truth of God, and they thought he was trying to embarrass them personally.

#### THE QUITTER

I have taught a class for many a year:  
Borne my burdens, toiled through tears,  
But folks don't notice me a bit,  
I'm so discouraged--I'll just quit.

I joined the choir sometime ago,  
But folks don't seem moved a bit,  
So what's the use to sing--I'll just quit.

I've labored long in women's work  
And not a task did shirk  
But folks have talked a bit  
And I won't stand it--I'll just quit.

I've led young people day and night  
 And sacrificed to lead them right,  
 But folks won't help me out a bit  
 And I'm so tired I think—I'll quit.

Christ's cause is hindered everywhere  
 And folks are dying in despair,  
 The reason why:  
 Just list a bit: The church is  
 Full of folks who quit.

We have other pews in our balcony filled with people who have grown tired in service. They were actually in line with the Lord once. They failed to refresh their souls through personal communion with Christ. They neglected to secure the undergirding of a sustaining faith through a continuing renewal of their strength from God, and they got tired and quit.

I remember many years ago in a city where I had but then recently gone to be pastor, we needed a man to lead the men of the church in a challenging program of service. I talked to the brethren and was advised that the church had in its membership a man who was exactly the one needed. He had a Ph.D degree. They said that for many years he had been a faithful and devout member of the church and active in many ministries. But for the past two or three years he had completely retired from all activity. He came to church about every other Sunday morning. I asked for some of them to go with me to lay our plea upon his heart. They suggested that it was better that I see him alone. That did not sound good, but I went. Prayerfully, I presented our call for his help. From the very start, I knew I was making progress. However, I pressed on. When I had finished, he said, "I am sorry to disappoint you and the men of the church. I could the thing you are asking, but I have my bit for God and have retired."

His words strangely and abnormally affected me. An expression of terrifying fear temporarily registred itself in my countence. What his words did to me startled him and he exclaimed, "Why do you react like that?"

And I answered, Suppose that God were to take the same attitude toward you that you have toward Him and his work. You say that you have quit on God; suppose that God were to quit on you?"

For a moment he was jarred. Then he shrugged his shoulders and rather sighed, "I do not suppose I would be around here very long, would I?"

But he could not be moved.

Three weeks after that very day and hour, they pushed his body in a casket down the aisle of that church and stopped it in front of the pulpit. He had seemed to have been in perfect health, but they had found him dead in bed the morning of the day before. And this preacher had to try to preach his funeral. I could scarcely think of anything to say, though he was a very prominent man, because I kept hearing, over and over, his words, "I have done my bit for God and have retired."

Oh, my friends, please do not maintain an attitude in life that will embarrass your pastor when he has to conduct your funeral.

Well, we have a lot of groups in the balcony. There are the "Part-Timers," who like to serve the Lord when it is convenient and give a little change when they have a surplus.

Then there are the "Perpetual Loafers." We all know them.

Alas, some of our best people are in the balcony. They come to church pretty frequently on Sunday morning. Quite a few of them tithe. They rather faithfully leave their cards on the doorsteps of the Almighty, but they are absorbed in business, club, and social activities. They are patrons, however of God. They do not square their social lives with habits consistent with their Christian profession. They are disposed in their attitude and inclination to cherish whatever the world apart from Christ has that satisfies their desires and at the same time to hold on to the Lord. They are miserable and unhappy. They

are continually seeking to work out a compromise so that they will not separate themselves from God nor exclude themselves from the fellowship of those who are totally apart from Christ. A lot of these people have been converted but they are a long ways from Christ.

I remember a Christmas Eve afternoon some years ago in Huntington, West Virginia, Mrs. Cox needed to go to the grocery store. The store where we usually went was next door to a state liquor store. She said to me, "Please take me in the car and let me out in front of the store. I know you cannot get a place to park. Drive around four or five minutes and then come back and pick me up."

I happened that just as we approached the grocery store, some one backed out from a parking space right in front of the liquor store and I drove in and sat there and waited. On the afternoon before Christmas throngs of people, God spare the mark, were going in to buy their Christmas liquor. A Salvation Army lass stood at the door with her tambourine. I knew a great many of the people who were going into the store. It was very interesting to observe that the church members put a generous contribution into the Salvation Army lassie's tambourine. They were trying to purchase immunity for their conscience.

The characteristics of Christians with the balcony attitude are strikingly evident and familiar. They are quickest to applaud, first to hiss. They are long on advice and short on assistance. They are clever on excuses and unwilling to labor. They are sit-downers on sacrifice. They are complaining critics who scorn ~~balcony seats in which~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ intensely fervent about ~~xxxxxx~~ constancy. They are sitters instead of servers; slackers instead of soldiers; faithless instead of fervent.

The lure of the escape complex snares many of us unawares. Without realizing it and still believing that we are faithful unto our Lord, we hunt ourselves a balcony seat in which we are intensely fervent about

some things and totally indifferent about others.

Of this kind, there are those who become the special pleaders of a pet doctrine. They become totally blind to all the other vast range of Christian belief and obligation. They largely read only the part of the Bible where they can find the one doctrine that has gripped them.

We find the same thing with respect to those who become absorbed in one field of Christian interest. They exclude the concern their hearts should feel for other causes.

Others there are who love only one auxiliary of the church. It might be Sunday school, Training Union, Woman's Missionary Union, or the Brotherhood. As far as they are concerned that is all there is to the church. I have in mind numerous persons who attend no other service and channel all their tithe through the treasury of one auxiliary.

Likewise, we have those who see only one institution. They give all of their support to it, and they say: "Let somebody else look after the others."

We find a few who substitute conventions, conferences, and resolutions for alert personal service. I well remember years ago a deacon who spent between \$500 and \$750 a year attending conventions and conferences. He did not give one penny to the support of his church or any phase of its program. He made a lot of big speeches for various institutional and missionary causes, but he never himself gave a dime to the support of either. When his attention was called to his inconsistency, his answer always was that he invested all the money he had to give in attending conventions.

Without our knowing it, the devil has led many of us to rationalize for ourselves an escape from a conviction of personal obligation to visit, to teach, to evangelize, to train, to enlist, and to mobilize for Christ.

In some way can it not be true that in some serious respect we are each in the balcony? Somewhere we have excused ourselves from some obligation that the will of Christ would press upon us. Do we not each have a problem about this matter? Is there not for each of us room for deep searching of heart regarding our attitude toward some areas of Christ's will for our lives?

Years ago I brought a message similar to this and when the service was over one of my best deacons said to me, "Pastor, I am on the back seat of the balcony. Tell me how I can come down and how I can have some guide to warn me against getting back in it."

His question is easy to answer, but the response is difficult for each of us.

If I am not in the balcony my heart has given Christ a first priority. Beginning with my family I am going to try positively to have a Christian home. In my community I am going to commit myself steadfastly to being a Christian citizen. In my social relationship I will be striving to fashion my attitude and relationships by the mind and spirit of Christ. I will be among those who are trying to give full service in all the affairs of the church. I will be a steward of the time that God has given me so that I can travel with Jesus to visit the poor, the aged, sick, sorrowing, and the back-sliding and the sinner.

Yes, if I am not in the balcony, I am going with Christ to seek the 600,000 new members in 1949 for our Sunday schools. I will be busy traveling with him for the Training Union, the Woman's Missionary Union, and the Brotherhood. My heart's desire will be to serve him in the support I can give to our Christian institutions. It will be a joyous privilege to tithe and to give my offerings as proof of my partnership with my Saviour. My soul will yearn to win others to Christ, to help

positively to make my community Christian, to be obedient unto the heavenly vision for our Baptist work in the fields of state, home, and foreign missions.

My prayer daily will be, from the depths of my heart, "God forbid that any man in my community, state, our Southland, and the uttermost parts of the earth shall fail to know of Christ because of my failure."

In my inner soul there should be a longing to discipline myself to adherence to the standard of Jesus for personal life and living. I should sincerely long to be:

"Able to suffer without complaining,  
 To be misunderstood without explaining;  
 Able to endure without a breaking,  
 To be forsaken without forsaking;  
 Able to give without receiving,  
 To be ignored without grieving;  
 Able to ask without commanding,  
 To love despite misunderstanding;  
 Able to turn to the Lord for guarding,  
 Able to wait for His own rewarding?"

We live in the same kind of a world situation as the one that broke the heart of Jeremiah. We have vastly more to enhearten us than he had. We have the captaincy of Christ available of our sustaining inspiration and strength. Three road lie before us as Christians as we face life, society, the technologies, ideologies, and materialism of our day. They are: the road of unregenerate nature whose end is the slimy mire of the swamps sinking into the depths of decaying despair; the road to escape from the obligations of the gospel into the balcony of fruitless wish thinking; the road over which Christ's faithful soldiers have marched to battle and to victory whenever they have followed him.

What is the one thing that the godless world fears most? What does the communist fear most? What does the crooked politician fear most? What does the beer and liquor crowd fear most? What does the gambler and organized crime fear most? What do the enemies of religion, the home, our sacred freedoms fear most? What do the foes of righteousness and

and the kingdom of God fear most?

The one thing that most terrifies the hosts of Satan is that one day all those who believe in Christ will wake up, march down out of the balcony, wholeheartedly fall into step with their Saviour and start living out in their lives the faith they have confessed.

When that happens the forces that damn our days will suffer disastrous defeat. Until that occurs we are doomed for more of what has plagued us.

Surely our God himself is sounding to each of us the call of Joshua's farewell: "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in truth: put away the little gods that have compromised and corrupted you; and serve ye the Lord ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

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