Say to This Mountain: The Life of James T. Jeremiah

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Chapter 1

A Tale of Two Cities
(1914–1932)

In 1914 much of the world was beginning to fight World War I, “the war to end all wars.” As Europeans sent their sons to the slaughter, the United States waited and watched, self-reliant and seemingly unaware that the heretofore sleeping dogs of violence, economic depression, and human misery would become so ravenous only a few years hence. Indeed, these concerns—political, economic, or otherwise—seemed distant and unobtrusive to Thomas Jeremiah, a gangly farmer living in Corning, a small agricultural community in upstate New York. No, he had more important concerns: his first son, James T. Jeremiah, was about to be born.

Thomas Jeremiah’s parents had immigrated to the United States from Wales; he and his brother were the only two children born in this country. His father, settling near Corning, became a farmer, and Thomas picked up the trade, following in the only steps he knew. He acquired more pastureland and still more usable cropland, about 88 acres “up the road and into the valley” south of Corning, along with ten or fifteen milking cows, enough for Thomas to make a living by his hands. The life of a farmer was grueling. He faced long hours behind horse-drawn plows, continual maintenance of equipment, barnyard animals to tend, and the seasonal anxiety of planting, harvesting, and selling the crops. At the turn of the century, electricity and
indoor plumbing were for the wealthy; in short, all the amenities taken for granted only forty years later were inconceivable in the early 1900s.

Thomas Jeremiah soon married Flora Rozell, the daughter of "a successful blacksmith and a veteran of the Civil War." She moved up to Corning from Binghamton, New York. Flora's father and mother would become a "real part of my life," recalled James, a hinge pin that would change forever the course of his history.

The faces in the wedding portrait of Thomas and Flora Jeremiah reflect a joyful, happy relationship. Flora wore a long white gown flowing off the picture, her dark hair put up in the fashion of the day, and one of her slim, attractive arms resting playfully on her new husband's shoulder. She was a beautiful woman, elegant, with no obvious apprehension of any tragedies that might lie just around the corner. Thomas, tall and thin, had large, long-fingered hands, one on his knee, the other propped artificially on a dark wooden rest. His face was smooth, with large ears and thinning brown hair neatly combed to the side.

Early in the marriage, Flora became pregnant, but the child died at birth. Several years later she became pregnant again, and on June 11, 1914, James T. Jeremiah came into the world. Five years later, in 1919, she would have another boy, whom they named Edward; and three years after Edward, in 1922, Howard would be born.

Nothing out of the ordinary occurred on that summer day in June, the hot air plastering the dirt-stained shirt to Thomas's back, as the cries from the newborn James echoed through the bedroom and out into the windswept acres beyond. No birth was considered easy in the beginning of the twentieth century; the infant mortality rate was still high, especially in rural communities. The world was rumbling with rumors of a great and hideous war; but on that summer day in June, life and exuberance issued from
the tiny mouth of little James and through the warm, caressing eyes of Flora Jeremiah.

* * *

Although life on the farm was filled with chores—drawing water for the day; cutting, gathering, and stacking firewood for the wood-burning stove; helping Thomas in the fields—the three boys were able to find time to chase each other, wrestle, and make mischief as young boys do. Later in his life James would recall, “We had a place for the cows, a pasture field with a big swamp. The cows loved it because it had a lot of grass around it. Someone asked me one day why I don’t play golf. Well, I said, ‘When I was a kid, I made a practice of chasing white cows all over the pasture, and I’ll be hanged if I will waste my time on a little white ball.’ ”

The Jeremiah farm bordered a fruit farm on one side and another large field on the other. Both adjacent properties had working distilleries for making whiskey. The fruit farmer would routinely take the distillery into his house and put it on the front burner of his stove. “We would have dinner with him and his family on occasion, and that still would be working in the background. One day we [James and his father] were out in the woods, and we found two kegs of whiskey. I tried to get my father to shoot a hole in them, but he wouldn’t do it.”

In the age of horse-drawn carts, travel was tedious, smelly, and long. Flora would regularly gather the three boys, put them in the wagon, and journey four miles to town. James would sit with Howard and Edward, listening to the creaking of the wheels, the whipping of the horse’s tail, the clip-clop of the hooves rhythmically pounding the dirt road.

On special occasions in the summertime, when the August heat beat down upon the countryside, Flora would buy ice-cream cones for her sons. And on the return trip, it
was Edward who took his time, licking the drips slowly, intentionally. James and Howard, consumed with the smooth, sweet, delicious treat, slurped and licked their cones to a soggy nub. And as the ice cream dripped down their hands and chins, drying to a sticky film in the humid air, Edward, still patiently licking and silently watching his brothers, smiled with delight. The long trip home soon became unbearable, the small wagon filled with the sounds of loud, deliberately provocative chides toward the middle brother still enjoying his slowly melting, carefully licked ice-cream cone.

The town of Corning was a hub for James’ father as well. Thomas worked the fields in the spring and summer. Then in the empty winter months, he would daily walk four miles in all sorts of weather to catch a trolley that would take him to the Corning Glass Works. It was this Welsh tenacity and stubbornness in James that God would first strip and then use for His glory.

While Howard stayed with Flora, James and Edward would walk three miles each day to a one-room schoolhouse. The trip, as could be imagined, was long, arduous, and—for a child uninterested in academics—“hard to go: a terrible ten miles there and three to come home.” But there in a tiny building that included all eight grades and thirty students, James would learn his “3 R’s,” be introduced to his first educational experiences, and soon become familiar with the ropes of institutional learning. He would recall later in his life that “the teachers were always kind, always tried to help, but did not put up with any nonsense. They knew what it was to practice the laying on of hands. They had other ways to make you listen as well.”

The years passed with little change to the Jeremiah family. The “Great War” had ended, its battle scars severe but healing. Several years down the road would come the second terrible blow to the age of infinite progress: the
financial crash of 1929. That economic free fall paved the way for a depression that would tear once again into America’s economic and social fabric. But the Jeremiah family, like others during the early part of the century, could not foresee such hardships, for they were engrossed in the business of living. Soon they would have a wake-up call that would leave them reeling.

Certain events in our histories move us or sweep us toward our destiny. They are turning points ordained by a sovereign God to bring us to Himself. The Bible is replete with individuals in such situations. Joseph was sold into slavery, accused by Potiphar’s wife, and put into prison, only to reign over all of Egypt as Pharaoh’s number-two man. Jesus, the ultimate paradox of bad things happening to good people (indeed in His case, a perfect and sinless person), was nailed to a cross unjustly before His accusers. Yet through such divine action, the world received access to the throne of grace, and sins could be washed away by the blood of that spotless Lamb. Throughout all of history, God has been working His divine will in those who will acknowledge it, those who will surrender themselves to Omnipotence. For some, such a blow, such a hit by the hammer of God, is cursed. For others, however, it is a life-changing renewal and a step closer to a holy and loving God. The year 1926 was that time for Thomas, Flora, James, Edward, and little Howard Jeremiah.

It was a cold winter, and snow had covered all of the pasture. Bits of brown weeds, stiff and straw-like, pushed up through the drifts of snow; others folded over, hollowing out shelters for whatever fortunate animal could find it. It was mid-afternoon, and twelve-year-old James rode with his father out to the woods to cut and gather firewood for the night ahead. The crunch of the horse’s hooves across the thin frozen crust was mingled with the animal’s heavy breathing, snorts of steam exploding from its nostrils and
mouth. The two men made their way through several drifts, across the fields, and into the outer edge of the woods. James and his father spent the afternoon gathering, cutting, stripping, and piling up a surplus of kindling and logs.

One could imagine the scene: the cows foraging around in the nearby pastures and lowing as they move from one grazing spot to the next. Perhaps a wind rocks the bare trees and creaks their long branches. Then suddenly, above the sounds, James makes out a shrill voice. He continues to stack and gather, but again is pulled to a stop by the shrill calls. Thomas, noticing his son, also stops to listen; the voice in the distance is alarmed, filled with hysteria. Something is wrong.

From over the hill, trudging through the snow, falling down, rising again out of the large drifts, Edward comes, screaming. What he says is unintelligible, but his meaning is quite clear: emergency! It is a cry for help. Thomas throws down his ax and strides toward the panic-stricken boy. As Edward comes closer, the message hits like terrible fists.

“Howard is sick! He is very sick! You better get down there!”

That four-year-old Howard was sick was not news to James and his father, for he had been down with a fever for several days. But the panic in Edward’s voice and the fact that the boy had run to get them quickly commanded their attention.

James and Edward jumped into the back of the sleigh, while their father whipped the horse into a lope. The cold breeze stung James’ cheek. A fear gripped them all. When they entered the house, there lay Howard, unconscious, his breath garbled and wheezing. Thomas quickly called for the doctor, harnessed the horse to the sleigh, and rode to Corning to fetch him. The doctor arrived and examined the sickly boy: high fever, headache, diarrhea, and, there on his stomach, the all too familiar rose-colored spots.
had typhoid fever. The fever had rapidly progressed into bronchitis, and the doctor feared pneumonia. The entire house was at risk, and since the symptoms occur one to three weeks after infection, other members of the family could already have been infected.\textsuperscript{2}

Typhoid fever is caused by unsanitary living conditions. This type of outbreak, which took so many lives at the turn of the century, rouses people little today. Most rural areas, even decades after the 1920s, had no indoor plumbing. Drinking water obtained from the well outside had to be carried into the house in buckets to be heated for cooking, cleaning, and washing. Only city dwellers had modern-day bathrooms. The majority of Americans used outhouses, wooden shacks built over deep holes. These holes would drain into cesspools located somewhere close by. After the holes filled, the outhouse was moved to a new location, the old hole buried. Since the well was usually located quite near the outhouse or the cesspool, the potential for contamination of drinking water and food was extremely high. Further, a farmer working in the barn with the animals would track bacteria into the house, which could easily infect the entire family.

That night James did not sleep. He lay awake listening to his younger brother struggling for breath, the raspy inhalations, the sputtering of phlegm, the desperate battle for life. That sound, that personal experience with death, would haunt him the rest of his life. Several days later, little Howard died. The family was devastated. James would admit seventy years later that “the sorrow of Howard’s death is still a part of my life, as I think of that little boy going through all of that. I am sure he went to Heaven, because I am sure God takes care of babies.”

But it was Flora, James’ mother, who was hit the hardest. “She was brokenhearted. She loved that boy. She loved all of us, and she loved him. She didn’t want to see him go.”
She who had already lost one child at birth was especially close to Howard, for he was the baby, the one with her during the day while Thomas worked in the fields and James and Edward went to school. One can only imagine the loss from such a blow. But her grief was soon squelched by the tyranny of the urgent.

The doctor’s diagnosis had been correct, for just after Howard’s death, James’ brother Edward showed symptoms of typhoid fever. Flora was determined not to lose another son, so they took him to Thomas’s brother downtown. James Jeremiah (the very uncle James T. was named after) was a successful tinsmith who worked on roofs and furnaces in Corning. Moving Edward to Corning removed him from the contamination, but more trouble was to follow. Thomas suddenly showed signs of fever and became weak, the red blotches appearing on his stomach. He, too, had typhoid fever. Flora was desperate. She called the doctor, who told her to take him to the hospital. The carriers of the bacteria had to be identified and controlled, or further death would result. In those days taking someone to the hospital was rare and was considered an act of desperation. A rural farmer did not have the resources to pick up and leave his home to have a family member cared for in an institution. Illness, births, and even deaths were common occurrences within the home during the early decades of the twentieth century. Taking Thomas to the hospital in Corning was the action of a fearful wife who believed that her family was on the brink of oblivion.

The walls of security had suddenly crashed in ruin around the Jeremiah family. While James’ father was treated at the hospital, James’ brother was recovering in Corning. Then it became apparent that James himself was infected with something: the measles. Now that she and James were the only ones at the farm, Flora, emotionally and physically drained, could focus all of her attention on her oldest son.
She “had a hard time of it,” but persevered; for “she had a real love for her family, a love for the boys, a real concern.”

While Thomas and Edward recovered from their illness, young James, man of the house at twelve years old, would have to keep the farm running. But this responsibility was too much for an inexperienced youth. “I had tried to operate the farm, take care of the cows. I never did learn how to milk. Couldn’t do it then and can’t do it to this day.” The daily routine soon grew to be a monumental burden for Flora and James. After returning from the hospital, James’ father soon made an effort to help out as he could. Weak from his illness, he would still go out and lend a hand in the fields. While James guided the plow through the dark soil, Thomas would walk alongside and “sort of drive the horses.” After they had reached the end of the furrow, James and his father would lift the plow, turn it around, and then head back the other way.

The Corning farm was too much for James and his father to manage. That was about the time that Edward Rozell, James’ grandfather, called from Johnson City. The farm was deteriorating rapidly, and Rozell knew that his daughter and son-in-law needed help. He issued an invitation, and it wasn’t long until the couple accepted. James’ father and mother packed up essential items and shipped them to Johnson City by train, taking little else with them on the eighty-mile journey to their new home. The house they left behind was overrun and ravished with the haunting memories of little Howard’s death and the terrible battle with typhoid. It was time to move out, move away, start fresh with familiar people. The hand of God had suddenly gripped the family and pushed them in a new direction.

Edward Stanley Rozell, James’ grandfather, had seen great changes in the country. Indeed, after his father’s death in the Civil War, he quickly enlisted, but was barely taken
because he was legally too young to join with the North. James would recall, "When I was pastor in Dayton, a lady in the congregation had a sister visiting from North Carolina. She introduced me to the sister, and her sister said, 'My grandfather fought in the Civil War.'"

"I said, 'So did mine.' She could tell by my accent that it wasn't on the same side, and she was ready to fight it all over again."

When the bloody Civil War ended, Edward Rozell married Mary Jane Brown and became a successful blacksmith outside Johnson City. By the time the Jeremiah family moved in, Mr. Rozell was retired and was living well in a comfortable house. Thick in the shoulders with strong hands from his life at the anvil and hammer, Edward Rozell had become quite a distinguished gentleman. His wife, Mary Jane, was a plump woman who, so characteristic of family portraits of that time, looked sullen wearing a dark cumbersome Victorian dress, hair up, wire spectacles masking saddened eyes.

James and his family soon settled into a routine at 134 Ackley Avenue. The house had plenty of space for them to shake off the cares from Corning and begin the business of living once again. "We had four bedrooms, room enough for all of us. My mother and father had the front room. My brother Edward and I had the side room."

James' father was soon hired at the 1900 Washer Company. By this time he had regained his old self. "He was an interesting fellow, you know. He smoked cigarettes and a pipe. But if he had ever caught us smoking, he would have paddled the life out of us. When he got typhoid fever, he lost the appetite for tobacco; but when he got better, he went back to it." His father also experimented with homemade beer. "I tasted that once," James would later note with a grimace. "Thank the Lord it cured me from ever becoming a drunk. It was abominable!" Thomas presently landed a job as a janitor at the local high school, and eventually he
became the superintendent of janitorial services for five schools in the district. The changes that would occur in his spiritual life would be minimal. He had been prompted by God to share in a new life, but he decided instead to grind out his future on his own.

Flora Jeremiah took a job in the office of the Endicott Johnson Corporation, a shoe factory. When the Depression ravished the United States, James' mother was thus able to help provide needed care and provisions for the family. "They [the Endicott Johnson Corporation] took care of their workers. They had health service for them and everything. Although the Depression was real and you could feel it, we didn't lose anything through it. We had enough to eat. The Lord took care of us. We were never really hungry."

James' grandparents were Christian, God-fearing people who prayed before every meal and at the close of each day. Before James would fall asleep, he would hear his grandparents pray. "That made an impression on me. They prayed out loud. I didn't know what they prayed, brother, but they were talking to the Lord. That made an impression on me for all of my life."

James, Flora, Edward, and the grandparents regularly attended a Methodist church in Binghamton, which was a far cry from the lack of spiritual nourishment James had received in Corning. "I went to a church [when living in Corning] with a neighbor, but I look back upon it now and am glad I didn't go there regularly: there was not enough gospel to get saved." James' mother, unable to attend church in Corning due to distance and the fact that her husband lacked interest in Christianity, jumped at the chance in Johnson City. She would take the two boys to church when she could and played the violin for the church orchestra. James would recall years later the power that the church had on his life. "I remember revival meetings and hearing the gospel. I got under conviction. I didn't get
saved then. That old boy [the preacher] had a message to tell the people about getting saved. I don’t know what the church is today. They probably don’t even know how to spell the word ‘saved.’ That thing [the church] is about as gone as a gone goose.”

In one of God’s little ironies, James was able to obtain a job peddling papers throughout the neighborhood. On his route he would stop at the Practical Bible Training School. “I went into the office one day to peddle papers, and John A. Davis, the president, was on the telephone. He looked at me sternly and said, ‘Be quiet!’” And James stood stiff, dramatically holding out a paper as though he were a statue. He would later remember a time when several of the school’s solicitors came knocking at his grandfather’s door looking for financial support. James asked his grandfather why he wouldn’t contribute. “Well,” Edward Rozell answered, “I told them that I shoed John Davis’s horses for the wagons, and when he pays me the money that he owes me for that, then I’ll give something.”

“But they were kind to me. Mrs. Davis particularly, the wife of the founder of the school, was a fine woman and a real testimony to me as an unsaved boy.” The seminary that James would later attend would be an offshoot of that very institution.

One of the biggest changes that occurred in James’ life during this time was his schooling. The new facility was a large city school, a far cry from the one-room school that he had attended in Corning. When James first entered the immense brick building and saw the many classrooms filled with hundreds of children, he “nearly died of fright. This old country boy didn’t know what to do.” Although a shock at the time, this step into the life of the city, its people, and the ways of the world was preparing him for the road that lay before him.

James was not a good student, and like most kids his
age he wanted to be done with academics as soon and as painlessly as possible. He hated the class oral English (speech class), and tried to duck out of it as much as possible, little realizing that his ministry would someday be made from the very skills taught in that class.

One day he was sitting in another despised class, biology. He was acting up, for he did not care for the teacher and cared even less for the evolutionary theory that she was teaching. Even then in his unregenerate days, James did not like being traced back to a monkey. He was told to sit up, stay in his seat, and quit fidgeting. He continued to be a nuisance. She warned him again, and he refused. Finally the instructor, frustrated and out of patience, walked over to him and sternly commanded, “James, you sit up there, or I will send you to your father.” Then as now, “it is a very unsatisfactory arrangement to be a student where your father is the custodian or teacher.” James straightened up, for the fear of his father’s wrath settled upon his antsy limbs. When he got home, he told his father what had happened. “What would you have done if she had sent me to you?” he asked.

Thomas sucked on his pipe for a moment and then blew out a stream of smoke. “I’d send you back to her and tell her that if she couldn’t take care of you, I don’t know who could.” These are the types of words a young rambunctious teen wishes to hear, and probably they spell doom for a biology teacher.

It was during those high school days that James was truly confronted with the gospel. One day while he was over at the house of his friend Edgar Erieg, a man came to the door.

“Edgar, you haven’t been to Sunday School lately. You should come. We have a fine class, a good basketball team.” That was all it took: basketball. James told Edgar after the man had left, “You and I are going to Sunday School next week.”
That next week they did go, played basketball at the church, and listened to the Sunday School teacher, who, no matter what the topic was, ended the message with Jesus’ dying on the cross and an exhortation: “You boys need the Lord.”

James listened but did not respond. He was in those years of “immortality,” the teen years where life is forever and health and well-being are part of the package. Yet the tragedy of losing his brother and that feeling of emptiness and loss were perhaps beginning to catch up with him.

Then tragedy struck the Jeremiah family again in 1932, James’ junior year in high school. As the family gathered for dinner, James’ grandfather bowed his head and asked God’s blessing on the food. The family began to eat as usual. James would recall the rest years later:

I know that we were sitting at the table. Franklin D. Roosevelt was running for office, and the radio was on. My father, after he had finished his dinner, went to listen. All of the sudden my grandfather slumped forward. Dad and I carried him to the front room and laid him on the davenport, but he was dead.

The man who had brought Christ into the Jeremiah household, the man who had for so long been a kind, considerate guide and mentor to young James, a man who had seen the worst and the best in the world died peacefully at the respectable age of eighty-three. It would be James’ second experience with death, an experience that would press itself deep into his soul.

One particular day the Sunday School teacher pulled James aside.

“I want you to do something for me.”

“What?” James responded with an indifferent shrug.

“I want you to read the Gospel of John and ask the Lord to show you the truth.”

James paused and shrugged again, but agreed. That night he opened the Gospel of John:
A Tale of Two Cities

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

He read the entire book of John and through that experience was converted. “I can’t tell you the date, though I can tell you the place: it was at home. I don’t know all the details of it, but I know the Lord saved me. It used to bother me that I could not tell the date or the hour and so on. But then I remembered that salvation is a new birth. I had already had one birth, and I couldn’t remember that; so why should I have to remember the other one?”

That he was saved relatively later in his youth would drive James’ subsequent strong feelings on Christian education and the need for a vibrant youth program.

Suppose that Paul had been converted at seventy instead of twenty-five. There would be no Paul in history. There was a Matthew Henry because he was converted at eleven and not at seventy; a Dr. Isaac Watts because he was converted at nine and not at ninety; a Jonathan Edwards because he was converted at eight and not eighty; a Richard Baxter because he was converted at six and not at sixty. If our young people are not reached for Christ when they are young, they are likely not to be won to Him at all.3

Soon after graduation in 1933, at nineteen, James sought employment in Endicott. He was just beginning to feel the gnawing of the Holy Spirit that would eventually drive him headlong into the ministry. But James, at that time not heeding the call, decided to take the trolley into town to find a job. The family still did not have an automobile; in fact, it would not be until both James and Edward had moved out of the house that their parents would finally get
a Ford—one for Thomas and one for Flora.

IBM was a fledgling company at the time, and James got a job working on punch clocks or time card clocks. His job was to test to see that the clock was functioning and that the time registered correctly upon the card. The work was dull and monotonous, eight hours of drudgery. James was beginning to feel the definite call of God upon his life, yet from that earlier time when he had delivered newspapers to the Practical Bible Training School, he had an overwhelming dread of having to preach. Somehow, even before his salvation, he had sensed that God desired him to preach the gospel.

Finally, the feeling of conviction was so great that James decided he had to do something about it. After much consideration, he knew he had to get more Bible training. Baptist Bible Seminary, an offshoot from the place where he had delivered papers as a youth, would become his first stepping-stone into a life of full-time ministry.

"One day I felt the Lord calling me to preach," James would reminisce. "I had to do something. So I went to Tommy Flynn, my boss who was a Catholic, and said, 'Tommy, I am going to quit. I am going to seminary to become a pastor.' And I will never forget his response. He said, 'Jimmy, that is a great thing to do. You will never regret doing that. I am so glad you are doing that.'"

Tommy wasn't necessarily glad that James was quitting, for James was a good worker; but even Tommy must have sensed the Lord's working in this young man's life and felt the need to encourage him. And that was one of the first confirmations to James as he tested out his new wings of faith. God was moving, and now he needed to be obedient. God had done so much in saving a rambunctious, prideful young man. And now James was ready to begin to be used, to go where he could be most effective. Little did he know that the great mountains before him would dwarf Mount
Everest in comparison. It is in the little things, in the present, not yesterday or tomorrow, that God builds character and tenacity. The seminary would be James' first real step of obedience toward a lifetime of Christian service.

ENDNOTES

1. All quotations of James T. Jeremiah, unless otherwise noted, are from personal interviews conducted by the author.
