

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 4, 2020)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Thirst

(Jeremiah 2:1-13)

Study #2

Sermon series: Faithful

(Stories from Jeremiah)

Introduction: WATER is life...

On average, San Antonio gets just the right amount of rain. After a couple of years of drought, we'll follow that up with a major flood for a perfect average.

As it is with most every close-to-the-desert city on earth, water is always a hot topic for our town.

In years when we do receive limited rainfall, the San Antonio Water System (SAWS) imposes restrictions on water use - and these restrictions can be draconian. But we submit to them and pay water rate hikes because, well, we need water. Water is life.

It is true of water more than any other natural resource: civilization follows water.

The settling of America followed waterways for drinking, for transportation, for agriculture, and cooking and hygiene. Our city was settled where it is because of San Pedro Springs and the San Antonio River and Salado and Leon and Culebra Creeks where Native Americans had found water centuries earlier.

The presence of the gigantic Edwards Underground Aquifer has allowed continued growth of San Antonio.

The availability of water even affects my camping life.

I'm not a fan of carrying a lot of water while camping. So, in planning a trip, I like to choose a route where there is an abundance of water. I try to camp near rivers or lakes and would far rather purify slightly impure water than carry it.

And I'm not alone in this consideration.

Some years ago, I read the book, Undaunted Courage (Stephen Ambrose), a book about the Lewis and Clark expedition of the early 1800's and was impressed at how crucial water was to their travel and to their survival.¹

Rivers and lakes and aquifers are crucial to sustain a population. We need the provision of water to survive and thrive.

Water as a picture of God's supply...

So, given the importance of water for our *physical* needs, it is not surprising that the Bible often uses water to picture God's provision for our deepest *personal* needs.

The psalmist wrote of his spiritual thirst,
***[Psalm 42:1] As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God.***

And Jesus had lots to say about water, too. To the Samaritan woman, He said, ***[John 4:10]... "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."***

Later, on one of the great festival days of the Jews, Jesus stood up in the temple in Jerusalem and cried out, ***[John 7:37]... "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. [38] He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"***

¹ Undaunted Courage is a fascinating read. After learning about the hardships and challenges those guys experienced on their journey, I'm sure I will never consider anything I ever tackle in the backcountry difficult.

Jesus promised refreshing spiritual water that will quench the deepest thirsts of our souls, just like a mountain stream satisfies our bodies' thirst.

However, as we turn to the second chapter of Jeremiah this morning, we discover that there are other, cheaper waters available that, while wet, don't satisfy.

Orient to Jeremiah...

Jeremiah was a prophet who lived about six hundred years before Jesus was born. He was called by God to call the Jewish people back to dependence on God.

We started looking into the book of Jeremiah last Sunday and will be here for a couple of months, not that we'll study the entire fifty-two chapters.

Sometimes we'll look at a narrative section and see what there is to learn about the life of faith. At other times we will dig deep into one of his messages and explore its significance.

That - listen closely to one of his messages - is what we are doing today.²

Jeremiah was probably in his late teen-aged years when he delivered this message to his people.³

I can just picture Jeremiah rising early one morning around the year 625 BC to walk the three miles from Anathoth (his hometown) up to Jerusalem.

He knows what he is going to say. The Lord has told him what the message is to be.

² Most commentators are convinced that this prophecy was given near the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry (while good King Josiah was on the throne.)

³ According to those who have studied such things, he delivered it in the style and form of a legal indictment against Israel..

But this was his first message. Was he excited? Was he nervous?

Kathy can tell you that before I stood up to give my first message at Grace Bible Church in Nacogdoches, Texas, I was green around the gills, ready to throw up for nervousness.

We aren't told if Jeremiah had butterflies. But, nervous or not, he spoke, addressing everyone in Jerusalem in the name of the Lord.

The Good Ol' Days (vv. 2-3)

Israel - Loyal to the Lord (v. 2)

[1] Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,⁴

[2] "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord,

"I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,

The love of your betrothals,

Your following after Me in the wilderness,

Through a land not sown.

He begins with some very kind words, reflecting back to the time when God established a relationship with Abraham's offspring.

He's harkening back to Mount Sinai when He gave the people the Law and entered into a covenant with them. God considered that He had "married" the Jews.⁵

Early on, as there often is in a marriage, Israel and the Lord enjoyed a "honeymoon phase" to their relationship. Love flowed between the Lord and His people.⁶

⁴ There is no indication as to how exactly the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. But clearly, he understood that he was conveying the mind of the Lord as he spoke. See 2 Peter 1:21 - "*holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*"

⁵ The relationship into which Israel entered with God is depicted as a bridal relationship. The Lord "married" her at Sinai. Sometimes, the Bible uses words that convey the idea of God "birthing" the Jews at the Exodus event.

⁶ See the book of Hosea and the relationship of Hosea and his wife, Gomer, for another example of marriage symbolizing the relationship between God and Israel.

In the Old Testament, the word “**devotion**” (*chesed*) is often translated *grace* or *lovingkindness*. Almost always it is used to describe the way God deals with His people.

Here, Jeremiah quotes the Lord as saying that Israel was marked by this *lovingkindness* (*chesed*) toward Him.

God recalls how His bride - Israel - celebrated festivals to worship Him: Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost.

She followed everywhere He led her, even into barren lands.

Back in Egypt, where the Jews had been enslaved, there were tilled fields and abundant crops. After the Exodus, though, the Lord led her through an uncultivated “**land not sown.**” Yet, He says here that she still faithfully followed His lead throughout forty years of wilderness wandering.

Clearly, God is exercising a very gracious and selective memory, because much of what we read about Israel’s behavior in the wilderness doesn’t quite match this glowing report of faithfulness.

But, if there was a bit of exaggerating going on when God described the Jews’ faithfulness to Him, it is completely true that He was completely gracious toward the Jews.

The Lord - Israel’s Strong Protector (v. 3)

**[3] “Israel was holy to the Lord,
The first of His harvest.
All who ate of it became guilty;
Evil came upon them,” declares the Lord.’**

Here, God describes Himself as His people’s Protector and Provider.

Read the Old Testament and you’ll see how He came to Israel’s rescue, fended off attacks, and opposed those who tried to harm her.

Those were the good ol’ days. Everything was sweetness and light. Love flowed between God and His people.

So...is this - sweetness and light, love, peace, and joy - a good description of your walk with God right now?

I hope so. It may be that you have recently tasted - or re-tasted - some rich measure of His grace. Or you again have been impressed with the beauty of the cross - how Jesus died and rose again for you.

If that is your current experience, wonderful. It’s fantastic when our walk with our God is deep and rich.

But it is possible that listening to Jeremiah’s words is prompting you to admit that such spiritual health is *not* your current story. It may have been at one time, but it isn’t now.

In our passage, the Lord referred to the “good ol’ days” between Him and Israel. Those days are passed. Spiritual vitality is gone. And maybe that’s where you are right now.

If a healthy relationship with God is more a thing of the past than of the present, what happened? What changed?

That’s a great question. And its exactly the question the Lord put to His people twenty-six hundred years ago.

The Bad New Days (vv. 4-12)

A Long-Standing Pattern of Failure (vv. 4-8)

Fathers left the Lord (v. 5)

[4] Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob,⁷ and all the families of the house of Israel.

Ephesians 5 would be the classic New Testament text showing Christ as the groom and the church as the bride.

⁷ Jeremiah addresses the house of Jacob. (another way to refer to the nation of Israel, the Jews)

**[5] Thus says the Lord,⁸
 “What injustice did your fathers find in Me,
 That they went far from Me
 And walked after emptiness and became empty?**

The problem with ancient Israel wasn't God's leadership. He never stopped leading. They simply stopped following.

But in ceasing to follow Him, the God who provides, they began to follow the god of emptiness.

This word - *emptiness* - is also found in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. It is the Hebrew word *hebel* and is often translated “vanity.”

One of my seminary professors used to translate it “soap bubbles.” A more modern commentator renders it “phantom.” Both are great pictures of worshiping a god-who-is-not-god.

Israel had it all. She had a relationship with Almighty God. She was bride to the best Groom in the universe. And she walked away from Him and embraced soap bubbles.

To walk away from God is to walk into emptiness.

There is a story from the life of Jesus that reflects this idea.

After Jesus had fed over five thousand people with a few fish and loaves by the Sea of Galilee, He challenged the crowd to believe in Him (His actual words were, **[John 6:54]...eat My flesh and drink My blood**” - the crowd wasn't happy with His word choice).

The crowd balked and the number of His followers dwindled from thousands to twelve.

As the crowds walked away, Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, **[John 6:67] “You do not want to go away also, do you?”**

To which Peter replied, **[John 6:68]...“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. [69] We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”**

In other words, “After You, Lord, there is nothing. If we leave You, we've left the only route to meaning and purpose and life there is.”

On that day by the lake, Peter got it right.

On other days, in 2020 and in the days of Jeremiah, people have often pursued hebel / vanity. Abandoning God, they got nothing in return.

To God's great gifts, His people responded with contempt.

People were cold to the Lord's blessings (vv. 6-7)

**[6] “They did not say, ‘Where is the Lord
 Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
 Who led us through the wilderness,
 Through a land of deserts and of pits,
 Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,
 Through a land that no one crossed
 And where no man dwelt?’**

**[7] “I brought you into the fruitful land
 To eat its fruit and its good things.
 But you came and defiled My land,
 And My inheritance you made an abomination.**

The Lord miraculously rescued Israel from Egyptian bondage.

Then, just as impressive, for over forty years He led them through a wilderness that nobody could have survived without God.

And still, after all God had done for them, they didn't seek Him. They forgot to remember Him.

And when they finally entered the land God had promised them, they totally ruined it, corrupting it through the worship of false gods.

⁸ “Thus says the Lord” - a common expression of the prophets.

In Jeremiah's day, that's how the Jewish people said, "Thanks" to God for His good gifts. The leaders didn't do any better.

The leaders rebelled against the Lord (v. 8)

**[8] "The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?'
And those who handle the law did not know Me;
The rulers also transgressed against Me
And the prophets prophesied by Baal
And walked after things that did not profit.**

The *priests*, who were responsible to lead the people to follow the Lord, didn't really know the Lord, themselves.

Having been put in place to uphold His laws, the *political leaders* (kings, princes, city officials) broke every one of them.

Even the *prophets* abandoned God. How it must have stung for the prophet, Jeremiah, to have to write that the Lord's prophets have followed the false god, Baal.⁹

All the people ceased walking with the Lord.

No other nation had been chosen by the one, true God to be His people. Israel had unprecedented privilege. And she walked away from all of it.

A Unique and Awful Failure (vv. 9-12)

A one-of-a-kind sin (vv. 9-11)

**[9] "Therefore I will yet contend with you," declares the Lord,
"And with your sons' sons I will contend.
[10] "For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,
And send to Kedar and observe closely
And see if there has been such a thing as this!**

⁹ Despite reformations at various times in Israel, the people continually reverted to the deities and rituals of Canaan. The false prophets led them in this way and Jeremiah was in constant conflict with these other prophets.

**[11] "Has a nation changed gods
When they were not gods?
But My people have changed their glory
For that which does not profit.**

Go as far west as you can - all the way to the island of Cyprus (Kittim) in the Mediterranean Sea. Go east into the desert where the Arab tribes wander (Kedar).

You'll never find a people who have abandoned their god.

Only Israel has done this.

And let's not miss something crucial here. Twice (vv. 8, 11) the Lord reproached Israel for exchanging the glory of following Him "**For that which does not profit.**"

He's adding an economic slant. There is no "**profit**" to abandoning God. Walking away from God impoverishes. It bankrupts the soul.

God wants us to follow Him because it is good FOR US. It is in our own interest to follow His lead, to love Him and to be loyal to Him.

For Israel, following God would lead to national security. It would allow them, as a nation, to show off God's glory to the nations.

For us, today, following God's lead results in the abundant life Jesus promised. It is the path to love, to peace and joy, to meaning.

Forsaking God is nutty. It leads to disaster.

Creation cringed when it saw the Jews walking away from God. Today, it's even more cringe-worthy when we who have believed in Jesus pursue soap bubbles in our search for life.

All creation cringes (v. 12)

**[12] "Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate," declares the Lord.**

Now, do you remember that earlier I posed a diagnostic question about your spiritual life, about my own life with God?

That question was:

If my life with God has moved from vibrant to stagnant, from meaningful to “going through the motions”, what happened?

In what I believe is the most insightful analysis of spiritual decline we find anywhere in the Bible, here’s what happened.

It’s what always happens.

A Discernible Two-Stage Failure (v. 13)

Abandoning the source of living water

**[13] “For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters**

God - the fountain of living waters

Think with me about *living waters*.

The term refers to a flowing spring or a running stream. Every Texas landowner would love to have *living waters* on his or her property.

It’s a tremendous benefit when a South Texas farmer has a river running through it or has an artesian spring bubbling up out of an aquifer to irrigate a field.

There is no need to worry about rains. Let the rains fail. The land has fresh water.

God claims to be this kind of an unquenchable resource for His people. He is a constantly reliable source of sustenance and refreshment to our souls.

What His people need, He provides.

Purpose and meaning in life? Got it. Direction? Got it. Abundance and joy? Got it. Peace in troubled times? Got that, too.

Israel has forsaken Him

The ancient Jews knew all that the Lord was offering - and they “*forsook Him.*” They walked away. They weren’t interested.

Access to God’s “*living waters*” would have required that they stayed in proximity to Him. And *that* they resolutely refused to do.

So, first, they walked away from God’s refreshing streams. Second, they settled for a different, way less satisfying water.

Digging leaky cisterns

**[13]...To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.**

Israel dug cisterns

If you lived in the ancient world and had access to a flowing stream or a lake, you would obviously use that water.

If there was no available ground water, you would dig a well by tunneling down until you found water.

But, if you lived in an area where the water table was so deep that you couldn’t dig a well, you would have had to create an underground storage tank. That’s what a cistern is.

A cistern is a pit dug in hard clay or cut out of the rock. During rainy seasons, the owner of the cistern diverts the rainwater into the cistern. It is then covered to keep the water from evaporating in hot weather.

It is hard work to dig a cistern. Sometimes it takes years to cut through the rock and make a cistern large enough to be useful.

But cistern-digging was - and is - common in Palestine. The practice of cistern-digging made settlement possible throughout the Ancient Near East where there were no rivers.

So, cisterns aren't a bad thing. But they do have their downsides.

These cisterns hold no water

One modern observer of the cisterns of the Middle East says that water collected in cisterns has *"the color of weak soapsuds, the taste of the earth or the stable and is full of worms."*¹⁰

Yummy.

But taste and appearance and worms aren't the worst thing about cisterns. The worst part is...they leak.

Even plaster-lined cisterns cut out of the rock are strangely liable to leak.

That means that in the time of greatest need, when conditions are really droughty, the cistern owner goes out to his cistern to draw out water for his family and finds that it's bone dry. Cisterns fail.

When the Lord accused His people of digging cisterns, He wasn't thinking of literal holes in the ground.

He had in mind their habit of turning to the nations around them for protection and provision. He meant Egypt and Assyria.¹¹

God had promised to be their protection and provision. Instead of turning to Him, though, they sought alliances with the superpowers of the day and those alliances turned out to be very leaky cisterns.

¹⁰ W. H. Thomson, The Land and the Book, p. p. 287, quoted in Kidner's commentary on Jeremiah.

¹¹ Jeremiah lived through the time when Judah was a vassal state of Assyrian, then Egypt, then Babylon.

Whenever Israel put her confidence in something or someone other than the Lord, she ended up disappointed, humiliated, and defeated. The cisterns leaked every time.¹²

As we translate the Jeremiah metaphor to our own situation today, a cistern is anything in which we place our confidence *other* than Jesus. Cistern-digging is looking for LIFE outside of Jesus.

So, have you been busy digging any cisterns lately?

Conclusion:

Cisterns come in all shapes and sizes. Some are respectable and wholesome looking - friends, family, exercise, work - but end up taking the place that only God should have in a life.

Some cisterns are overtly destructive and waste time, energy, money, and brain space.

We dig them, though, because we are thirsty. We're all thirsty. We long for more than we have. God made us to be thirsty.

At the beginning this morning, we listened to Jesus speak to a woman who was drawing water at a very old well in Samaria.

He was sitting by the well when she made her way to the well. He was thirsty, so He asked her for a drink.

She was shocked that He, a Jew, had even spoken to her, a Samaritan woman.

Her shock increased when he spoke to her again. Now, not about His own thirst, but about hers.

[[John 4:10]... "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

¹² The remainder of Jeremiah chapter 2 assures the Jews that as it has happened before, so it will happen again if they depend on anyone other than Him.

Jesus knew that this woman was thirsty. On the obvious H₂O level, she wouldn't have come to the well if she hadn't been thirsty.

But, by promising her "*living water*" He's clearly moving beyond the physical to something far deeper.

Using the vocabulary of thirst, He knows that she longs for things that only God can supply. She has transcendent needs. Just like you and everybody you know.

We all thirst...

...to know that we matter in the grand scheme of things.

...to know that we are more than a cog in a wheel.

...to lead a life of meaning and purpose.

...to be fully and truly alive.

...to be safe and secure in the care of someone (Someone) strong enough to protect us against final harm.

Getting our candidate elected won't satisfy those thirsts.

Neither will making more money, living in a bigger house, or driving a nicer car. Indulging the appetites of life to the hilt will leave us thirsty.

The satisfaction of our deepest thirsts begins when we turn to Jesus by faith.

Our ongoing thirsts are quenched as we forsake our leaky cisterns and nurture a vibrant, growing relationship with Jesus.

But that can be a tough assignment.

The people of God have always tended to be incurable cistern diggers. We work hard on those cisterns, spending years to pound through the rock to get them good and deep.

We're proud of the plaster-lined holes we've dug. And if the water tastes a little bit like dirt, looks a lot like soapsuds, and has earthworms swimming around, at least we can say that we dug the hole. "*That's MY cistern!*"

Can we all agree today to that the best thing we can do for the satisfaction of our deepest thirsts is to identify the cisterns to which we have turned, turn from them, and run to Jesus, the Source of living water?