

Cistern That Holds Water **Jeremiah 2:9, 13**

Those of us who have weathered any summer in Central Texas can identify closely with this text. Almost every day during the last couple of months the summer's searing sun scorches the earth. All of God's creation thirsts for any drop of rain, including my house. Even the trees bow in abject sympathy and begin to die. Given our extreme investment in water for this area, what would a farmer give for the blessing of a full tank or pond versus the now cracked, dry earth? How blessed we would be to find a spring of clear water!

Like Central Texas, Israel can be a desolate, dry land. As one travels across it you see *wadi* (dry creek) after *wadi*; barren. If there are springs, most of the time they tease with only a trickle of muddy water. Water is precious and any farmer will tell you that a faulty cistern can spell disaster for his family and his livelihood. Cisterns are wells dug into limestone rock and lined with plaster. However carefully dug, sometimes the worst possible happens to the well, a crack appears! Immediately, the hard work is for naught and the water disappears.

Of course, for Jeremiah, all of the above is a metaphor. Probably the text in Jeremiah is from an early time in his ministry. (Some speculate that it was very early—even before Josiah repented and turned to obey the word of the Lord.) In reading the entire chapter of Jeremiah 2, much of it is cast in terms of a divine lawsuit against the people. Here, Jeremiah is the voice spelling out Yahweh's indictment, familiar in prophetic biblical texts of the time. The Jewish people are forgetting who led them out of Egypt through the wilderness into the promised land. They have turned back to pagan gods. Instead of the Lord's promise of receiving life and prosperity, they are losing "the fountain of living water." The analogy of the broken cistern is applicable here, they are losing the life giving necessity of water. The loss is also spiritual in nature, to the point where God threatens them with divorce and separation.

We are receiving this text in a community dedicated to the study of theology. What strikes me as interesting is that this lesson does not exclude us as theologians. Jeremiah addresses us as well as the regular congregants. In Jeremiah 2:8, four classes of people are noted: the priests, the teachers of the law, the shepherds or rulers and the

prophets. In contemporary terminology –both teachers and students are subject to indictment. Jeremiah is saying all of us have come under the spell of Baal.

This has frequently led me to wonder, why do we fall into the seemingly seductive “Baal-like” wiles? Why are we so drawn and fascinated with the gilded but ultimately shabby and tawdry features of life? These marketing “experts” know that even the most pious will be at least initially attracted and succumb to some extent. They also know the vast numbers of people (yes, even us) who will watch programs and read stories that the Bible clearly warns us to avoid at all cost.

I realize that I may have some issues, yes a bone to pick even with Jeremiah because he was capable of presenting some tempting images of the seeming attractions of life under the worship of the pagan god Baal. But, as I have studied over the years, I am more and more convinced that this kind of vivid presentation, while grabbing the readers attention; is not fruitful. Just recently, while being blasted by a “ballistic” sermon on the modern cultural dangers, my wife made a very insightful point. After the sermon, she spoke to a lady who was sitting in the pew directly in front of her. This woman is in her forties, struggling with cancer, separated from her husband and shouldering the additional burdens of caring for her elderly parents. As we left the assembly, my wife remarked, “I wonder how that sermon helped that poor lady who barely could make it into the church today?”

As I study the text, it takes me in a different direction. I asked the Lord, “What is this “fountain of living water” to which you direct me? The image in my mind is very clear. God is the only bountiful spring of water, which flows and overflows bountifully and continually. An Old Testament prophet roughly contemporary with Jeremiah spoke to those who suffered terribly, but with grace and valiance. He promised there will be a new Jerusalem. This prophet professed, “All who are thirsty come to the waters.” He then added something that should appeal to Christians today as I paraphrase. “Even to you who have no money, this is an inheritance so rich you can buy and eat to your heart’s content.” (Isa 55:1).

The Psalmist states:

“How precious is your covenant faithfulness, O God
Humans can take refuge in the shadow of your wings

They feast on the abundance of your house
And you give them drink from the river of you delights
For with you is the fountain of life.” (Ps 36:7-9).

Additionally, in John 4:10-14, perhaps overtly echoing the text of Jeremiah, Jesus introduces the woman from Samaria to the “living water” of life. Remember how at first she is reluctant to accept Jesus’ offer to drink. But as Jesus persisted in his proclamation, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give shall never thirst.” The “living water” is eternal life made available through God’s revelation, ultimately culminating in the teachings and life of His Son Jesus Christ.

As I write, the ground is still parched beyond belief through a long hot summer in Central Texas. Whether it be our formal assemblies, or at school, we come out of desperate desire to quench our spiritual thirst. As Jeremiah noted, there are many paths and ways of quenching that spiritual thirst. At our seminary even now, there are some pursuits that may turn out to be “broken cisterns.” How shameful that we, of all people, living in a theological community could neglect the “fountain of living water.” Let us pledge anew today to center our attention on the One who has the words of life: “The cistern that holds water forever.”

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