

Drinking from Broken Cisterns

A Dramatic Monologue from Jeremiah

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Introduction in bulletin notes: Jeremiah served as a prophet of Judah, the southern kingdom of two tribes, during its decline and fall to the Babylonians in 586 BC. Israel, the northern kingdom of ten tribes, had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Jeremiah's days were tumultuous. The Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar, invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem in 605 BC, taking some prisoners into exile, including Daniel and his three friends. Nebuchadnezzar repeated this process in 597 BC. Fed up with the refusal of the Judeans to submit, he finally destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BC and took the majority of the rest of the people into exile. God reached out to his people repeatedly during the forty year ministry of Jeremiah through the reigns of Kings Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, asking them to repent of their idolatries, injustices and sins and turn back to him to prevent these disasters.

Introduction by associate pastor:

Intro: something like this:

Many of us don't read the Old Testament a lot, but it has some powerful messages that are applicable to us. Some of the most powerful come from the prophets. When we think of the prophets, we often jump to end-time prophecies. There are many of those, but more of their prophecies had to do with things in their own times. In particular, they were sent by God to call a wayward people back to God. Their ideas of judgment are not very popular these days, but really they were gracious warnings from God to give the people an opportunity to avoid these judgments if they would just turn back to God and his covenant with the nation. Today we get to hear from one of those prophets, Jeremiah, who has come to share with us some of the message he brought to the people of Judah around 600 BC.

My name is Jeremiah. God called me to be a prophet in the most discouraging and difficult time in the history of Judah. I prophesied during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah until our final fall to the Babylonians, a period of about forty years. I have been called the weeping prophet

because of the troubles I went through—rejection, beatings, imprisonment, opposition from false prophets, and resistance from kings and people.

It was not my idea to be a prophet, but God called me to this task. Here is how I wrote about that call in the opening page of my collection of prophesies: *“Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a youth”; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.*

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.’ Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, ‘Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:4-10) They first had to hear messages of judgment and destruction of the evils in the land before I could bring messages of rebuilding.

This was not going to be an easy or fun role. I was called to bring God’s word to a rebellious and stubborn people who did not want God to rule their lives. God had promised great blessings to us, his people, but these blessings would not come automatically. These blessings were promised to us in a holy covenant between us and the Lord. He promised to bless us abundantly in every way. He told us he would bless our agriculture. He would bless our families. He would bless us when attacked by other nations. But he called us to obey the laws of his covenant.

You have heard how this covenant was summarized in the Ten Commandments that Moses gave us: we were to have no other gods besides the Lord, make no images to worship, not take God’s name in vain and keep the sabbath holy as a day of worship and rest. We were to be a people who honored our parents, who did not commit murder, who did not commit adultery, who did not steal, who did not give false testimony about our neighbors, and people who did not covet what others have.

But these are things my people did not want to do. They thought it would be easier to follow the example of the Canaanites and surrounding nations, whose gods did not demand moral obedience. All they wanted was the

correct offerings. Following them also meant that you could participate in fertility rituals with the temple prostitutes. But false gods make false promises.

Turning to other gods was like spiritual adultery. Our people had entered into a covenant with the Lord, pledging exclusive devotion to him and total obedience to his commands, but they forsook the Lord and lusted after the gods of the surrounding nations instead. They should have learned the lesson from Israel, the nation of ten tribes to our north. They rejected God and followed pagan gods. As a result, they were destroyed by the Assyrians. Now God was threatening to destroy us through the Babylonians if we would not repent.

The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: *“Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel [the northern tribes], how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore? And I thought, ‘After she has done all this she will return to me,’ but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah [the southern two tribes] saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce [= destruction and exile through the Assyrians]. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.”* (Jeremiah 3:4-10)

The idolatries of Israel and Judah were spiritual adulteries. We were being unfaithful to the Lord, our heavenly husband to whom we had pledged ourselves, worshiping various pagan deities and spirits on every high hill, at large trees, or in front of big stones—any sites that seemed infused with spiritual power in the pagan minds.

In one of my early prophecies, God told me to tell the people this: *“Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* (Jeremiah 2:12-13)

The land of Judah had seasons of rain and seasons of dryness so it was imperative to store water in large cisterns during the rainy season so that

we would have enough water during the dry season. It was like God was offering us a continual flow of water year round, a fountain of living water. My people said no to God's offer. Instead, it was like they carved cisterns, (underground water tanks) so that they would not need God's spring of running water. But all these cisterns were cracked and could not hold water. That is what the promises of the false gods was like - they could hold no water. They were empty.

Now, you are not like that, are you? Surely you have read about what happened to Judah and learned from us, haven't you? I hope you do not follow the pattern of my people by putting your trust in the gods of this world, whether they are false gods and idols like Baal or just the things that the world offers us that can become gods like money, power, sensual pleasures or just having your own way.

My people thought that they were secure because the temple of the Lord was in Jerusalem and they thought that surely God would not allow the temple or the city which the temple was in or the nation of Judah which Jerusalem was in to be captured by foreigners. Surely having the temple was enough to secure God's blessings! Surely he would not let it be destroyed!

Well, God gave me a message to make sure the people understood the falsehood of such nonsense. *"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations?"* (Jeremiah 7:4-10)

Oh, my people thought that they were so clever. They thought that they could figure out shortcuts with God. They thought that they could combine worship of the Lord with worship of pagan gods. My people thought that their wisdom and wealth and strength would be enough. They could treat

God however they wanted and do what they wanted in life, choosing to follow some commandments and ignoring others that were inconvenient.

So God told me to issue this warning: *“Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.’”* (Jeremiah 9:23-24) Steadfast love, justice and righteousness. These were the most important things that God wanted from his people, but they are not things a self-willed, self-satisfied, proud, self-serving, self-indulgent people want.

The Lord God Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the covenant God of Moses who led his people out of Egypt and into our Promised Land had a heart to bless his people. This is what he wanted for my people in Judah and this is what he wants for you as well. I appealed to the people in these words:

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted by water,
that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”* (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

My people knew this image and you probably do, too. They knew that all along the river banks tall trees thrived whether there was rain or not. Their roots went down beneath the river and soaked up water from the wet ground. This is what the Lord wants his people to be like, living near him, finding his living water in season and out of season, not fearing the problems that are common to man because the Lord is always there to enrich and make fruitful.

This is what God wants for you as well. He wants you to be like that tree planted by water that does not fear when the heat or drought come. He wants you to dwell near him so that you can live in confidence and blessing

even when difficult times come for you, as they will. But you have to turn from whatever sins may be leading you astray and live close to the Lord.

God had me reach out to the people of Judah, the people he longed to love and bless, in many different ways over a period of about 40 years. At one point God used images from the potter. One day God told me to go to the potter's house and there he would give me a message. When I got there, the potter was working at his wheel. The vessel he was working on was not turning out as he wanted it to, so he smashed it into a big lump and started over.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: *“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’”* (Jeremiah 18:6-11)

“But they say, ‘That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’” (Jeremiah 18:12)

Why would they not listen? It was heart breaking for me to get this response from them again and again. Why would they keep on their stubborn path to destruction? Would any of you keep on this path? Would you take God's warnings as vain statements that have no validity? Would you stubbornly insist on going your own way and rejecting God's way?

Then God told me to buy a vessel from the potter and take some to the elders and priests to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, or Gehenna for short, at the entry of the Potsherd Gate and proclaim these words: *“Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the*

people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind— therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds.” (Jeremiah 19:3-8)

Then God told me to break the potter’s vessel and declare, *“Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended. Men shall bury in Topheth because there will be no place else to bury. The houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah—all the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the host of heaven, and drink offerings have been poured out to other gods—shall be defiled like the place of Topheth.”* (Jeremiah 19:11,13)

I wish I could say that this message was heeded and that the people of Judah repented. But they opposed it again and again. False prophets publicly denounced what I said. Here are some of the experiences I wrote about:

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.’” (Jeremiah 18:18)

“Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things. Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord.” (Jeremiah 20:1-2)

“The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people,

then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, "This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant"?' And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord." (Jeremiah 26:7-9) [Shiloh was the place where the tabernacle of the Lord was kept in earlier years before the Temple was built. It was destroyed by the Philistines as God's judgment on a disobedient nation.] I was only spared because the Lord brought to mind to some of the elders the example of the prophet Micah, who prophesied judgment on Judah during the reign of Hezekiah the king. The people did not kill him. Rather, they repented and avoided the disaster the prophet had warned about.

King Jehoiakim scoffed at God's message. At one time, a scroll of my prophecies was being read to him. He was so disdainful that he cut the scroll off every few lines and burned each piece into a fire pot in his room. (chapter 36)

My message was not all negative. I only spoke about God's coming judgment as a warning so that the people could repent while they still had the opportunity and avoid this judgment. But they did not. Therefore the Babylonians came and destroyed Judah. They brought down the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and captured the king and his family.

Even after this horrible judgment came, they refused to repent. God delivered a message to them through me to stay in the land and not go down to Egypt. Nevertheless, they stubbornly went to Egypt and forced me to go as well. I spoke again the word of the Lord to them, calling them to repent from their idolatries.

They responded: *"As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine."* (Jeremiah 44:16-18) Instead of acknowledging their wrongs and turning from their idolatries, they blamed the destruction of Jerusalem on not being faithful in their idolatrous offerings and not on their sins.

This was as I had spoken about much earlier: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? ‘I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”* (Jeremiah 17:9-10) We humans have such a large capacity to deceive ourselves. Only God truly knows our hearts. How we need to let him tell us truth for we are prone to distort any truth we get ahold of.

Even though they rejected the Lord and refused to repent, judgment was not the last word. I reminded the people of Judah of God’s unfailing love to Israel even after many past sins and rebellions using these words:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jeremiah 31:3b)

Beyond the judgment at the hand of the Babylonians God would yet bring blessings to his people: *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”* (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Glorious things are still in store for the people of God. You have experienced some of these through the blessings of the Messiah, but more are still to come.

God’s message for his people is also a message for all people of all times. It is a message for you. If you are caught up in idolatries and self-centered life patterns, then he is calling you to turn from these and turn back to his blessings. He wants to be for you the spring of living waters to replace your broken cisterns. He wants you to be a tree by his river of life

and continually soak up his blessings. Don't be foolish like my people and reject the good that God has for you!

So, what will you choose: God's living water or a broken cistern?

Associate pastor wrap-up:

Jeremiah has challenged us to take these words seriously. God deeply desires to bless us, but we if we stubbornly insist on running our own lives, we will miss his blessings. We will become like the people of Judah who rejected God's flow of living water and instead made for themselves cisterns that could not hold water. We are left with the challenge, which will we choose.

Concluding prayer by associate pastor.