

Clean Water

“for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).



When scientists look for life in other parts of the Universe, the first thing they look for is the presence of water. Water makes life possible. We can never overestimate our concern for an abundance of pure, clean, refreshing, life-giving water. When you fly over the United States today you can see how much emphasis we place on water as you view some 75,000 large dams and 2 million 500 thousand small ones that create lakes, reservoirs, and ponds that equal an area larger than New Hampshire and Vermont combined.

Water is the lifeblood of the universe. We use water to quench thirst, to cook, to clean, to flush away wastes, to irrigate crops, water livestock, and to manufacture products. Where water is available, it is too common to consider; where it is not, it is the only thing that matters.



When people act responsibly toward the environment, the earth continues to supply adequate quantities of quality water. When people degrade and pollute the world around them, water dries up or becomes unusable. It is not hard to contaminate water. Toxins spread easily in water. Harmful micro-organisms grow rapidly in water --especially when it is still.

When water flows, it purifies and cleanses itself and all that it comes in contact with. The water cycle provides a means for redistributing water across the earth, while at the same time allowing the water to rid itself of certain suspended contaminants. The Bible talks about *living water* that comes forth from a vast, unseen, invisible source beneath the surface of the earth, supplying the flow for wells and springs, and sustaining many streams and rivers even in periods of drought. Yet, it is possible for even these living waters to become contaminated. A drink from a cool, clear mountain stream may no longer be safe, due to the widespread occurrence of giardia, a serious health hazard caused by bacteria, and unknown to the wilderness prior to the 1970's. Perhaps people are less concerned about the *living water* because it flows away from them, taking the pollution to an unknown neighbor downstream.

Water is the major constituent of living matter, comprising from 50 to 90 percent of all living things. The blood in animals and sap in plants consists largely of water and serves to transport food and nourishment and remove waste material.

As disease and pollution in water signals a sign of caution in the physical world, so there is a spiritual

world of water that is even more important to human survival.

Our passage today deals with the contamination of the *spiritual water* that was intended by God to nourish his people. "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jer. 2:13).

What is the story behind this passage? Because the book of Jeremiah is so autobiographical, it is possible to understand Jeremiah's life, character, and times better than those of any other Hebrew prophet. The young preacher pleaded his youth: presenting himself as retiring, sensitive and afraid of people's "faces;" he considered himself unfit for the work which was placed upon him. He was charged with treason (Jeremiah 38:1-6). I suspect the fact that he actually stayed in the ministry for a full 40 years is, by these measures, a demonstration of the grace of God.

Jeremiah was called to work in the reign of King Josiah --before Israel was taken into exile by Babylon and Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C. At the time of Josiah, Israel was deep in idolatry and apostasy. Josiah made, what was the last in a series of religious awakenings, undoubtedly supported by Jeremiah. When Josiah died, Jeremiah mourned the death of Judah's last good king (2 Chronicles 35:25) and life became more difficult for Jeremiah. Within three months of his death a very wicked man, Jehoiakim, came to the throne. Of course, Jehoiakim tried to shut Jeremiah up, then failing to accomplish that, tried to kill him. Jehoiakim ruled for 11 years --it was a long siege for Jeremiah. No wonder he was known as the *weeping prophet*.

When Israel was taken captive to Babylon, Jeremiah chose to stay behind with some of the common (poor) people who were left in Judah when most of the Jews were deported. A puppet government was set up, with Gedaliah as governor. When Gedaliah was assassinated, the remaining Jews fled to Egypt; Jeremiah went with them and died there.

Why did the last attempt at a religious awakening fail? Commentators tell us that it was probably because of the *external nature* of the effort (Jeremiah 3:10). Josiah's reform appears to have been a thing of outward appearance --engineered by the king. It was more an upsurge of nationalism than a religious revival --the two things are very different from each other. Apparently, Josiah knew how to write God into his speeches when the occasion called for it. When the situation demands, most any politician can come up with a "checkers speech" or a "God bless America" to save the day.

What was missing in all of this hoopla about revival was, Jeremiah's emphasis on the *inner spiritual character* of true religion. God will give his renewed people a heart to know him (Jeremiah 24:7). In this doctrine of the "new heart" Jeremiah unfolds the depth of human sin and predicts the intervention of divine grace. Yes, Jeremiah is predicting the need for the New Testament --and the coming of Christ (Hebrews 8:1 to 9:28).

There is more than a hint that Israel tried to "look good" --to "look clean." According to the Bible, the revival was only "skin deep." "Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me" (Jeremiah 2:22). Now, of course, he wasn't talking about physical soap. It is not enough to look religious, or talk the evangelical lingo.

What caused the spiritual springs to dry-up in Israel?

At some point, every Christian must decide which world he or she will live for. There is the material world, there is the spiritual world. But Christians are heavily invested in the material world --that makes it hard to decide. In our passage, the worship of Baal offered things you can touch. Things you can touch are real -- they don't last, but they're real. That's why Madonna sang "I'm a Material Girl" --who isn't? Most Christians do put most of their stock (admit it or not) in material. They want the material, temporary world to give them some credit. They want to get as much stuff as they can or become as important as they can, so that when they are gone the material world will say, "Boy, wasn't he or she smart." And that will be his or her reason for having lived. This material world is also in the Church; it is what Jimmy Baker meant when he said to his board, "We're going first class; we're not going to be second class." That's Baal. That's the material world --not the spiritual world. It is a question of, shall we be important here --or a blessing there? So Jeremiah asks, "How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals?'" (Jer. 2:23).

Jeremiah suggested that when they went after the material world, the world of Baal, they "went after things that do not profit" (Jeremiah 28). So, where is the spiritual world? I well remember a truck pulling into our driveway; it was a teacher with a load of food for some very hard hit families. I couldn't believe how much he and his wife had sent. What he said was a view into the spiritual. He said, "If I die with ten cents that I didn't use to try to do some good, it will be a dime too much."

Did you know that nearly every single criminal has come from a background of abuse, privation, and poverty? And why is it that some from similar backgrounds and life experiences don't go into crime? Researchers tell us it is, most often, because some teacher, some minister, some neighbor, some club leader, some Sunday School teacher showed an interest in them. Somebody convinced them that there is a spiritual dimension --that it is not just a matter of animal survival of the fittest out there. You can't touch that spiritual dimension --but, it is real.

Secondly, the spiritual life is not free and easy; few people want to help pump the water. The water comes from "way down deep." "For long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds, and said 'I will not serve!'" (Jeremiah 2:20). They said, "We will not pull a plow for God." Work in the spiritual world often requires effort in the physical world. In order to pull the plow, we must put on the yoke. We're fond of talking about freedom; too often, we do so like children. We whack our neighbor and say, "This is a free country." I do not believe that freedom means freedom from your responsibility toward all of God's children around you. I do not think freedom means we may do as we please, no matter who is hurt by it. "Why then do my people say, 'We are free, we will come to you no more?'" (Jeremiah 2:31). What we are free to do is, we are free to follow Christ. That is freedom. "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). This freedom comes with a plow to pull. They didn't want to pull a plow.

Thirdly, they made excuses for everything, denying that they had ever done anything wrong --and if they did, they had a good reason; they will explain it to you. "You say, 'I am innocent; surely his anger has turned from me.' Now I am bringing you to judgment for saying, 'I have not sinned.'" I expect the greatest of all denials of a spiritual world is contained in that one sentence, "I have not sinned." In any truly spiritual church, people must have the right to say, "I have sinned." It is the very knob by which we must open the door to

Christ. That one sentence puts all humanity in proper perspective. That one sentence raises us above the physical world of animals, to the spiritual world of humans. Animals do not sin because they don't recognize a spiritual world. It is far too common, that the only place where that sentence is forbidden is in the church. Any such prohibition is sure to dry up the clean waters of grace.

This is what is meant when the Lord said, "for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). They left the cool, refreshing, sparkling, flowing water. But, people must have water; they will get it somewhere. So, they traded spring water for cistern water --a stagnant puddle. Not only was the cistern water inferior, but it didn't last --the cistern was broken.

Once, Jesus met a woman drawing water from a well in Samaria. He said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." She figured out what Jesus meant --so can you.

There are two worlds -the physical and the spiritual. The physical world is temporal and constantly deteriorating, the spiritual is new every day. There is a spiritual dimension to life that is much more substantial than the physical dimension. Because of the nature of physical things, they cannot be eternal. By the same token, it is the very nature of the spiritual that allows it to be eternal. That is exactly why the Bible says, "No man has seen God at any time --God is a spirit, and they who worship him worship him in spirit and in truth." It wouldn't make sense to have a material-visible God --that kind of God cannot be eternal; no material is eternal.

So then, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a *spiritual* body. There is a natural body, and there is a *spiritual* body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). The spiritual dimension is just as real as the physical dimension. "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). "For we know that if our earthly house were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1).

Here is what God thought about their refusal to follow the spiritual. "In time of trouble they say, 'Come and save us!' But where are your gods that you made for yourselves? Let them come, if they can save you" (Jeremiah 2:27, 28). There is nothing in the physical world that can save us.

There is more: Materialism has its roots in nothing, you "say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth'" (Jeremiah 2:27). It's a pretty empty idea. We come from the Spirit God; let us serve that God "In spirit and in truth." After all, the "things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Hebrews 11:3). The clean water is spiritual water. Josiah's revival didn't work. So, here is how to start a revival that cannot fail. First, get a piece of chalk. Now, draw a circle on the floor. Next, step into the circle taking nothing into the circle with you. Now, pray, "Lord, start a revival in this circle."

Thirsty? Stick with Jesus, who said, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water" (John 4:10). Jesus answered, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never hunger, and **whoever believes in Me will never thirst**" (John 6:35). I think that it is time for Christians to be more like Jesus again.