

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: January 15, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“LIVING WATER or BROKEN CISTERNS?”

Jeremiah 2:1-18, 13-19

☑ Having drunk deeply from a fresh flowing, crystal clear, pure spring, who would opt for stagnant, visibly dirty, contaminant-laden water from a cistern while spring water is still available? Yet that is exactly what God’s people are doing in the days of Jeremiah!

■ Please turn to Jeremiah 2. In verse 13 Holy God says, “**My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns. Broken cisterns that cannot hold water.**”

📖 Living water is what flows in springs, artesian wells, and rivers. The supply is continually renewed and replenished so the water is fresh. Impurities are quickly washed away.

📖 Cistern water is seepage and run-off that collects in a tank. This water is motionless and it easily becomes scummy. When a bug lays its eggs in it or an animal falls in and dies it stays there until someone removes it.

Judah’s dry climate forces many people to depend on cisterns for survival much of the year. They would never pass up the opportunity to drink living water. So when the LORD says: “**My people... have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns. Broken cisterns,**” his accusation hits hard, like a blow to the solar plexus.

◆ Sovereign God is *not* talking about the tangible liquid we take into our physical bodies. He is using material H₂O as a metaphor for spiritual water, the invisible, intangible “stuff” with which we hydrate our souls.

📖 Spiritual water can have somewhat different meanings in different Scripture passages. Here it refers to the blessings of real, abundant life.

◆ The Living God calls himself “**the spring of living water**” because he is the unique source of real life and its blessings.

📖 But some seek spiritual hydration elsewhere. Forsaking the Living God, they “[dig] **their own cisterns.**” That is called idolatry.

☞ Sometimes it is blatant: the cistern is a natural feature, or a physical image made of wood, stone, or metal, or primitive superstition. Such are unlikely to deceive *us*. Yet the broken cistern often takes subtler form: money, possessions, comfort, pleasure, status, power, counterfeit religion or the self. It is safe to say that these idols have less trouble worming their way into our hearts. Every idol functions as a cistern into which people pour their trust and hope for the blessings only the real God can give: security, meaning, and ultimate satisfaction. That is what the people of Judah have been doing.

🕒 Let’s set the historical context. Jeremiah 1:2 explains that “**the word of the Lord**” first “**came to**” “**Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah**” “**in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah.**” That puts his initial call in 626 B.C.

🕒 Chapter 2 is Jeremiah's earliest recorded sermon, and it probably dates to 626 or 625 B.C. Judah is in desperate need of revival. Most of Jeremiah's neighbors are ignoring Scripture, disobeying God's Law, and participating in flagrant idol worship.

■ It has not always been this way. In verses 2-3 the LORD declares: **"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them."**

In the desert the Hebrew people learned to love YHWH. It was a long and painful process, but Israel grew in faith and obedience. Divine blessing and judgment shaped them into a holy people who lived as those set apart exclusively for the living God. Not anymore.

Verses 5-8 outline their idolatrous failures.

■ Verse 5: **"What fault did your [ancestors] find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves."**

📖 This Hebrew word *hebel* is most often rendered "vapor," "worthless," "vanity" or "meaningless." It can mean empty, futile, unsubstantial, senseless, and transitory. Idols are empty of substance. They die with their creators, and it is futile to appeal to them for help.

★ Israel **"followed worthless idols and"** as a result, they **"became worthless."** Fact: everyone takes on, to varying degrees, the nature of the deity they worship. Serve a god of sensuality, and you become sensual. Serve a god of sheer power, and you become obsessed

with power. Serve a worthless god, and you yourself become worthless in some ways.

☼ This is a principal theme of the book of Jeremiah: the stupidity of idolatry. It is not merely wrong, it is not only untrue, it is also stupid.

☼ And this is Judah's idolatrous failure: futility. In exchanging **"the spring of living water"** for cisterns they have dug, **"broken cisterns that cannot hold water,"** they have made themselves empty.

■ Verse 6 {NIV/NRSV}: **"They did not say,"** (the NIV says "ask" but the Hebrew literally reads, "say")

**"Where is the LORD,
who brought us up from the land of
Egypt,
and led us through the barren wilderness,
through a land of deserts and rifts,
a land of drought and darkness,
a land where no one travels and
no one lives?"**

Sovereign God explicitly instructed his people {Deut 4:9, NRSV} **"neither to forget the things that [their] eyes [had] seen nor to let them slip from [their minds]."** He charged them to **"make them known to [their] children and [their] children's children"** the miraculous events surrounding their liberation from slavery, the giving of the Law, and their preservation in the desert.

★ It is not a command to live in the past. The fact is that remembering God's great and good historic deeds inspires gratitude and motivates us to seek an active relationship with him here and now.

☼ This, too, is a principal theme of the book: sacred memory.

☼ But Israel has not remembered that YHWH is “**the spring of living water.**” They “**have dug their own cisterns... that cannot hold water.**” This, too, is Judah’s idolatrous failure: forgetfulness.

■ Verses 7-8:

**“I brought you into a fertile land
to eat its fruit and rich produce.
But you came and defiled my land
and made my inheritance detestable.**

**The priests did not [say],
‘Where is the LORD?’**

**Those who deal with the law did not know me;
the leaders rebelled against me.**

**The prophets prophesied by Baal,
following worthless idols. ”**

☼ This brings us to another principal theme of the book: the land. God intended the Land of Promise to be a place where his people could satisfy their thirst for physical and spiritual water, a consecrated land sanctified by the faithful worship, virtuous deeds, and righteous relationships of its inhabitants.

★ Fact: the land bears witness to the Creator’s goodness on the one hand, for better or for worse, human stewardship on the other.

☼ But the priests have polluted it with spiritual negligence, the judges with injustice, the leaders with corruption, and the prophets with idolatry, and the public has followed their lead. They “**have dug their own**

cisterns,” lapping up the scummy drops of seepage and run-off, dirtying themselves and the land. This also is Israel’s idolatrous failure: defilement.

Of course, no one in Judah went looking for futility, forgetfulness, and defilement. All along, they have expected their cisterns to fill up with good water.

■ But their hopes have been dashed every step of the way. As we discover in verses 14-16 the Hebrew people have “**become plunder**” for more powerful neighbors. The “**Lions**” of Assyria “**laid waste**” the northern kingdom of Israel 96 years ago: it is no more, its “**towns are burned and deserted.**” Now the Egyptians, “**the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes have**” turned Judah into their puppet state, figuratively “**shaving the crown of [her] head**” as slave owners do to their human property.

■ This should have freed the Israelites from their spiritual misconceptions, but it has not. Verse 18: “**Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor [a branch of the Nile]? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River [the Euphrates]?”** God’s people are further immersing herself in two kinds of idolatry: ① They have adopted Egyptian and Assyrian paganism in the futile hope that their gods will make Judah strong; and, ② they have made military alliances with Egypt and Assyria in the ludicrous expectation that those powers can provide better protection than the LORD Almighty.

■ This is what will happen: A) Egypt and Assyria will evaporate before Babylon like morning mist under

the blazing summer sun; and b) the tainted waters of idolatry are going to kill Judah's taste for **"living water,"** so that she will die of spiritual dehydration long before the Babylonians grind her cities to dust. Verse 19: **"Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realized how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the LORD your God and have no awe of me,' declares the LORD, the LORD Almighty."**

This is not 7th Century B.C. Judah, and we do not worship statues. Even so, idolatry is a very real threat. Many of our neighbors **"have forsaken** [the living God], **the spring of living water."** We ourselves are tempted to **"[dig our] own cisterns."**

To quote James Packer,

For us there are... the great gods Sex, Shekels [\$], and Stomach (an unholy trinity constituting one god: self), and the other enslaving trio, Pleasure, Possessions, and Position, whose worship is described as "The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). Football, the Firm, and Family are also gods for some. Indeed the list of other gods is endless, for anything that anyone allows to run his [or her] life becomes his [or her] god and the claimants for this prerogative are legion."

But whatever form the self-dug cistern takes, it is inevitably, inexorably broken. It **"cannot hold water."** It cannot give life, as does **"the spring of living water."**

Brothers and sisters: let us learn from Judah's fatal error. Let us choose life! May we drink deeply from **"the spring of living water"** and receive the blessings of real, abundant life.