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**The Prophet Jeremiah**  
**II. Broken Cisterns and Living Waters**  
**Jeremiah 2:4-13**

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Tom Long, noted preacher and teacher of preachers, was having lunch with a recent seminary graduate. The graduate was serving her first church and preaching her first sermons. She confessed to Long, *“I’ve got a problem. I can preach love and hope and grace, but I cannot bring myself to preach about sin and judgment. People already get so many bad messages; I don’t want my preaching to add another burden.”* Then she changed the subject and began to talk about the tough time she was having as a single mom – particularly the tough time she was having with her teenage son. He was driving her into misery with his defiant attitude and reckless behavior. He had stolen money from her, wrecked the family car. She continued, *“Last night, I finally broke down. My son blew into the house, and after hurling angry words at me, slammed the door to his room. I decided that enough was enough and I confronted him. Even though he is bigger than I am, I opened the door, stood there, looked directly at him, and said with all the firmness I could muster, ‘I love you so much I will not allow you to do this to yourself or to us anymore.’”* Tom Long sat there for a moment, and then he said, *“I believe I have just heard a very powerful and faithful sermon on sin and judgment.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“I love you so much I will not allow you to do this to yourself or to us anymore.”* In essence, that is precisely what God is saying to His own wayward child, Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah:

*I brought you into a plentiful land  
to enjoy its fruits and its good things.  
But when you came in, you defiled my land  
and made my heritage an abomination . . .  
Therefore I still contend with you, declares the Lord,  
and with your children’s children I will contend.*

God loves Israel. God redeemed His people out of slavery in Egypt. God brought them through the wilderness into a promised land flowing with milk and honey. God had lavished upon them the gift of His Law – His divine guidance for how Israel may live joyfully, as well as obediently, in their promised land. And God had never once broken faith with them – He had faithfully blessed them in keeping the covenant He made with them on Mt. Sinai.

But how has Israel responded to the faithful immensity of God’s love for them? They have turned their backs on Him and upon all that He had taught them – turning instead to other gods

who are nothing but false gods, the neighboring Canaanites' god Baal being chief among them. They have bowed down before Baal as if Baal had saved them, as if Baal could ever save them. And the Lord God, who had delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt, brought them into the promised land – the one, true God – Him they ignore, Him they disobey, Him they treat with an ingratitude born of indifference.

And so now, in Jeremiah's moment, enough has become enough – God will tolerate Israel's unfaithfulness no longer. He speaks to them through His prophet, saying to them, *"I love you too much to let you do that to yourself and to us anymore."* For it is not just that they are disobeying God, but also that in doing so they are debasing and ultimately destroying themselves. Image follows image in our passage – four in a row, actually – and each one bearing the same message. The first one is found in verse five:

*What wrong did your fathers find in me  
that they went far from me,  
and went after worthlessness,  
and became worthless?*

That is basically the charge God brings against His people: *"they went far from me and went after worthlessness"* – the false gods of the nations around them. And there also is this, that in doing so Israel has brought great harm upon themselves: *"Went after worthlessness, and became worthless."* Mark that well: we become what we worship, says the Lord God. Go after worthlessness, and worthless you become.

Then again, a second time – verses six through eight:

*The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"  
Those who handle the law did not know me;  
the shepherds transgressed against me;  
the prophets went after things that do not profit.*

Sin: turning away from God. Result: clinging to that which brings no profit to their land nor to their souls.

A third time – verses nine through eleven:

*Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed their glory  
for that which does not profit.*

That one would be downright funny, were it not so pathetically sad. God is saying that the pagan peoples around Israel who worship all those false gods, non-gods – well, at least they stay faithful to their false gods. But you, Israel, says God, who belong to the one true God, have exchanged me quite greedily for those false god who bring no profit.

And then the last of the four images of accusation – verses twelve and thirteen:

*Be appalled, O heavens, as 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.*

Of the four, this is the image, the accusation, which most captures my imagination – I suppose because of everything we just heard in our study of the Gospel of John. Jesus saying to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4: *“Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*<sup>2</sup> Or Jesus, on the last day of the great feast, standing up and saying to the crowd in John 7, *“If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”*<sup>3</sup> And so says God to His people through His prophet Jeremiah: *“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that hold no water.”* Israel would rather drink dirty water from a cistern of unfaithfulness than drink living water from the fountain of God’s goodness and grace.

But it’s even worse than that. A cistern, in those days, was usually an underground chamber built or carved into the rock to catch and store rainwater. In the dry and desert world of the ancient Near East, cisterns were often the difference between life and death. So let’s put ourselves into this picture of living water versus broken cisterns – that we might hear the full force of what God is saying. And, also, because I believe that it is right here that you and I enter into what God is saying. Imagine you are crossing the desert with no water. In the distance you see an oasis, a patch of luscious green growth spreading out from around a flowing spring of water. You rush over, bend down and lift the cool water to your parched and aching lips. And instantly you feel life returning to you. That water is life itself! And this, says God, is what He would be to Israel – like a fountain of living water in the desert of this world, bringing life to their parched spirits.

Now imagine you are crossing the desert with no water, and in the distance you spy the entrance to a cistern. You race up to it with what little speed your dehydrated body will permit. You reach the edge and then thrust yourself, head and shoulders, over to see and inhale the coolness of the water. Only the cistern is dry – a large crack in the bottom has allowed all the water to seep out. And your thirst begins to overwhelm you, and your strength begins to fail. This, says God, is what Israel has chosen instead of His fountain of living water, life itself. In turning its back on Him and bowing down before false gods, Israel has chosen that which can only lead them to death, a broken cistern that can hold no water in a desert land. A broken cistern that can give no life. In choosing to forsake the living God for false idols, Israel has not only proven itself to be ungrateful, disloyal, and rebellious; but also Israel has chosen for itself a life that simply does not work, that will not ever satisfy, that cannot lead to goodness or joy – a life that does not quench the thirst for living. God offers living waters. Israel, perversely, chooses for itself broken cisterns that will all run dry.

*“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters.”* And, instead, *“They have hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* God, through His prophet Jeremiah – well, He isn’t just speaking to Israel, is He? This morning, He is speaking also to us. For do we not also find ourselves living lives that so often feel arid, dried out, and dull? Living lives that fail to overflow with love and joy and gratitude and goodness and peace – all the ways Jesus described the way our lives could be in Him, the fountain of living waters. So, could our problem be – as with Israel – that we, like Israel, are trying to live life from out of the dried up, broken cisterns of this world’s wisdom and ways? Chasing after stupid, useless idols the world holds up before us with flashing lights and neon colors to distract us – instead of choosing the one, true God to be our one greatest desire, and our hearts’ true home? Could that be our problem, that we are choosing daily to drink from the world’s broken cisterns of false gods and false goals and false values – instead of from the One who is the fountain of living water?

Broken cisterns instead of living waters. Going after what is worthless – the false gods, false promises, false values, false definitions of a good life on offer in this world – and so becoming worthless ourselves. Instead of drinking in deeply of the living waters of God’s refreshing, fulfilling, renewing, and sustaining Word. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: *“The puzzle is why so many people live so badly. Not so wickedly, but so inanely. Not so cruelly, but so stupidly . . . People, aimless and bored, amuse themselves with trivia and trash.”*<sup>4</sup> Choosing to live by the broken cisterns of this world, instead of from the living waters of God’s grace.

Let us hear that divine judgment upon Israel’s failures and our own. Our failure truly and completely to give our lives to Christ, truly and completely to make life in Him our greatest priority, truly and completely to believe in His Word, truly and completely to trust that His Way and His Truth and His Life is what we are truly and completely thirsty for. Let us acknowledge that when we choose – as we constantly do – to fill up our days, our attention, our hearts, our minds, our bodies with that which is worldly and worthless – that this is the reason why our lives so often seem even to us to be so unfulfilled, so unsatisfying, so missing out on that something more which is really being alive. Let us hear God’s judgement upon Israel and upon us that in not letting Him truly and completely be our Teacher, our Master, our Lord, and our Friend each and every day, each and every moment of every day – that this, and this alone is why we are still so thirsty. Not His failure to fill us up – but our failure to seek Him that we might be filled. Let us hear that judgment.

But let us also hear the invitation that this judgment is meant to drive us toward – His invitation for us to turn away from our broken cisterns and to turn toward Him anew. And more deeply this time. Let us hear God saying to us, through His prophet’s words to us this morning, that *“I love you so much I will not allow you to do this to yourself and to us anymore.”* Let us hear in the judgment Jesus saying to us afresh: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . .”* *“If anyone still thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”*

And then let us do just that – come to Him. Saying to Him as we come – just as we did in the call to worship:

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
 my soul thirsts for you;  
 my flesh faints for you;  
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.<sup>5</sup>*

Come to Him. Earnestly seek after Him.

A missionary recalled a conversation about faith with a Masai tribesman in Kenya. The missionary used a certain Masai word to define the concept of faith, but the tribesman rejected it forcefully. The Masai word the missionary used for faith meant merely “assent” or “agreement.” The tribesman likened this inadequate word to “*a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and fingers took part in the act.*” True faith, the tribesman said, should be pictured in the way a lion hunts: “*His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power in his body is involved in the terrible death leap . . . And as the animal goes down, the lion envelops it in his [legs], pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.*”<sup>6</sup>

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
 my soul thirsts for you;  
 my flesh faints for you;  
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.

“For most of my growing-up years,” writes Canadian pastor, Mark Buchanan:

*For most of my growing-up years, I sought God as I understood Him in ways that suited me. Meaning, I only bothered with God when I was in trouble or wanted something . . . My relationship with God was entirely...one-sided, self-centered, anxiety-driven. I made up the rules, dictated the terms, did as I pleased . . .*

*And always I asked God to make me happy. He was to pluck me clean out of my predicaments and fill my cup to overflowing, but otherwise He should hover in the wings, putter in the garden shed, unobtrusive, keeping His thoughts to Himself.*

*Yet there was another part of me that, from earliest childhood, was aware of a different face of God, a God dangerous, wild, utterly free, who smashed the little household deities I devised and called ‘god,’ who wooed and thundered, who cared little about my happiness, who cared immensely about my joy, who hid Himself from my searching and disclosed Himself without my seeking it. Not a God who did my bidding, but who called me to surrender. Not a God who pampered, but who commanded, created, consoled. A God*

*immensely creative and gracious and fair, but not to be trifled with, not to be presumed upon . . .*

*A part of me then would rather this not be God. But another part hoped it was. Because my idea of God was boring.*

*And the more I chased my own happiness, the worse I got. At twenty-one, I came to the end of myself. I turned to God . . .*

*Now . . . I don't always understand God. I have, like Jacob, wrestled all night with Him, until I'm bone-weary, until He blesses and hobbles me. I have, like Job, sulked on my dunghill, feeling betrayed by Him . . . I have, like David, danced wild-limbed and ecstatic before Him, scorning the shame. I have, like Paul, felt His strength in my weakness, His death in my living, His life in my dying, His glory in my plainness. I have met God in a thousand different ways, some exhilarating as homecoming after exile, some terrifying as the phone ringing in the dead of the night.*

*But boring? God is as far from boring as toadstools are from oak trees, as puddles are from oceans.<sup>7</sup>*

This is the way a Christian believes. This is what faith is. In other words, the very opposite of a broken cistern. Because our God is the fountain of living waters.

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you;  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in William H. Willimon, "Sin As A Byproduct of Worship," sermon accessed on-line on August 18, 2005 at [www.chapel.duke.edu/sermons/020898.htm](http://www.chapel.duke.edu/sermons/020898.htm). This link is no longer active.

<sup>2</sup> John 4:14.

<sup>3</sup> John 7:37.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, Run with the Horses (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 63:1.

<sup>6</sup> Os Guinness, Long Journey Home (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Buchanan, The Holy Wild (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), pp. 250-253.