

Digging Broken Cisterns
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One of the best stories I have of Bob Wells that I forgot to mention just now was some years ago we were in the south of India. We had a team of half a dozen folks, and Bob's wife Shirley was there. And we got into the bus at the hotel and drove to the airport to board our flight to our next destination. When we got to the airport the telephone rang from the hotel saying, "You have left one of your guests."

And so, "Who's that?"

And suddenly Bob said, "Oh, it's Shirley!"

And so we had to wait for a taxi to bring Shirley to the airport. And I think his marriage took about ten years to deal with that issue. Wasn't that true, Bob? Maybe ten is a bit low.

If you have your Bible this morning I am going to read to you in Jeremiah Chapter 2. If you were here last week – and some of you were not able to be because of the snow – that excuse is gone now. We have had a beautiful weekend.

But if you were here last week I read the same verses I am going to read this morning.

Jeremiah Chapter 2; and I am going to read the first thirteen verses.

"The word of the LORD came to me: 'Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land now sown.

"Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them, declares the LORD.'

"Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel.

"This is what the LORD says: 'What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.

"They did not ask, "Where is the LORD, who brought us up out 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?"

"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 ask,’ “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.

“Therefore I bring charges against you again,’ declares the LORD. ‘And I will bring charges against your children’s children.

“Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they were not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.

“Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror,’ declares the LORD.

“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.”

And that is as far as I am going to read.

There is a book – recent book – entitled, “*Religion and the Demographic Revolution*” by a man called Callum Brown, who is a professor at a lead university in the United Kingdom.

And he examines in that book the rise of secularism in Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom and the United States, particularly since the early 1960’s.

Now I have only read quite a lengthy review of this book. I haven’t read the book itself. But the thesis is that in the 1960’s two great social and cultural changes in the western world began to flourish.

The first was the rapid decline of Christian identity and Christian practice, and along with that, the rise of the number of people identifying themselves when it comes to census and so on as being of no religion.

The second is the revolution in sex, family and work, particularly as impacted by women - and that is one of the sub-themes of his book.

And his argument of that book is that these two things were intimately connected. Women’s changing patterns of marriage, coupling and birthing are correlated with the diminishing religiosity in these cultures.

“Religion,” he writes, “matters more than simply as mere belief or practice or church attendance. It shapes how people construct their families and their sexual practices and their life course. And in nations where religion has been dissolving into apathy and atheism, the process has necessitated a demographic revolution built on new moral codes and ethical understanding.”

If we reject Christian belief, he says – and he is not writing as a Christian, by the way – in fact he is writing as a skeptic. If we reject Christian belief we lose the ground for morality and we have to start again with a new order of morality and behavior. And this we have been doing, he says, since the 1960's.

It is not new for a nation to reject its gods. Nor when they do is it new for them to flounder over the criteria for their ethics and their morality and their recognition of what is good or bad or right or wrong.

A big discussion coming out of the new atheism movement over the last 15 or 20 years has been the question, “Can we be good without God?”

And one of the great atheist writers wrote a book of that title. And his conclusion is that we can be and he gives his reasons for it.

But the reason why that issue even arises is because can we be good without an anchor that gives to us some sense of what is right and what is wrong?

Otherwise as Ravi Zacharias once on this platform told the story of being at Oxford University and talking to a student who said, “There is no such thing as right and wrong; these things do not exist in any concrete, absolute sense.”

And so Ravi Zacharias said to him, “If you brought a baby to me now and I took a knife and I cut the baby in half, would that be bad or good? Would that be wrong or right?”

And he said the man thought for a moment and he said, “Well, I certainly wouldn't like it, but I cannot say it would be wrong.” Because there are no criteria anymore once you leave God.

And changed behavior always follows spiritual declension. And that is the issue that Jeremiah addresses in this very chapter. He talks about a lot of the details which we won't have time this morning to look at, a lot of the symptoms of it.

But he sums it up in Verse 13 of Chapter 2, which was our text last week and will be our text again this week, where He says,

“My people have committed two sins:”

Number one:

“They have forsaken me, the spring of living water,”

And Number two:

“They have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Now last week we looked at the first part of that.

“My people have committed two sins:”

Number one:

“They have forsaken me, the spring of living water.”

And we asked two questions.

Question number one: What does it mean to forsake God - not to stop believing, but to forsake God?

Number two: What does it mean to forego the spring of living water - this beautiful description of something fresh and flowing as a source of life that He describes Himself as in those verses?

But now this morning and today I want to look at the inevitable second sin, as He calls them. (“You have committed two sins.”)

The second one is inevitable in the light of the first, “having forsaken Me, the spring of living water,” He says, “they have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Belief in God that develops into a relationship with God (and belief in God doesn’t always develop into a relationship with God) meets a very deep innate need that is there within every human being. And we mentioned that last week.

But if you ditch that, if we forsake God, we do not step away into nothingness; we step away into alternatives. And whatever they may be, He puts one big label over them – they are cisterns, not flowing water like the stream He describes Himself as, but like a bucket, a tank, as cisterns.

Not only are they cisterns, stagnant water, but they are leaking, they are broken and they are drained. They don’t hold what we are looking for.

G.K. Chesterton once famously wrote, *“If a person stops believing in God, he doesn’t believe in nothing; he believes in anything.”*

And I would add to that: because he has to believe in something.

And in this case it becomes broken cisterns.

Now there are several aspects of these broken cisterns that are in this chapter. When I started studying this with a view to today and last week, I identified a number of broken cisterns. But in preparing this week to speak to you, I have just selected one. Otherwise we would be here till 4 o’clock this afternoon and that wouldn’t work.

So I am going to talk about one of them, but I think it is the important one – the important one. And that is that the broken cistern they had turned to was the issue of idolatry.

In Verse 5,

“This is what the LORD says: ‘What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.’”

Notice the parallel there.

In Verse 8, second part of Verse 8:

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

Verse 11:

“Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.”

They have exchanged God (capital G) for gods (small g) and the repeated phrase is that they are worthless idols, worthless idols, worthless idols, worthless idols four times.

Now of course they didn't seem worthless to the people. People aren't that foolish – few are that foolish.

They followed them because they felt they gave them some worth, they gave them some purpose, they gave them some stimulus, they gave them some empowerment, they gave them some excitement, they gave them something fresh, they gave them some meaning.

But in following worthless idols (in Verse 5) they became worthless themselves, because in due course, you always become like your god.

That is true of the Gospel actually. The goal of the Gospel is restoring into human experience the righteousness of God, the moral character of God, which is why the goal in restoring the righteousness of God is that we become Christ-like.

Why? Because the God you worship is the God you become like. If it is the true God and you find that fulfillment in what human beings were truly created to be – being made in His image – that's good.

But the same principle applies to false gods – you become false. Worthless gods – you become worthless. Dangerous gods – you become dangerous. You become like your god.

And as we look into the Word this morning my prayer is that some of us may be honest enough to see that we are looking into a mirror. And we are finding there features that are developed in our own lives that are symptomatic that something else has become the driving force in my life.

And having forsaken God, they had adopted idols and they had become like them.

And none of us is static. Whatever drives our life will characterize it.

Hilary and I, on one occasion, saw on a rough road leading into the outback in Australia, a sign at the beginning of this road that said, "Choose your rut carefully; you may be in it for the next 500 kilometers."

You can apply that to life. Choose your rut carefully because you might find yourself locked into it for years.

People are innately religious. I think that is self-evident. If you go to any city of the world in any time in its history, whether it is a sophisticated city or a primitive city, you may not find great industry in every place, you may not see great places of learning in every place, you may not see the accumulation of wealth in every place, but you will see the evidence of worship in every place.

You will see the temple or the mosque or the shrine or the church or the idol. And where there have been attempts to eliminate that – Albania became the first atheist state in the world; they declared that in the 1960's. They called themselves the first atheist state in the world. Any religious building, any religious expression was forbidden. Buildings destroyed or converted into other usages and people found to be involved in the worshiping of any god were arrested, imprisoned, some of them killed for it.

And then when the whole Albanian Communist government collapsed (one of the last Communist governments to do so), and fresh freedoms came in, statistics today will tell you 92% of Albanians affiliate with a religious movement, whether it is Islam or Christianity, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Evangelical, whatever it may be, because there is an innate sense inside, "I have got to connect with something bigger than myself."

Now we may think that idolatry doesn't apply in modern Canada. We are defined by and large as a secular society. We have no need of idols down the road; we have no need of statues. We have temples of course and shrines and so on, but these things are just for the very minority who usually have inherited and imported the culture associated with that religion. That would be how most people would see it.

But idols are much more than statues. Idols are much more than carvings. They are much more than totem poles. They are much more than temples.

In Ezekiel 14:3 God speaks to the leaders of Israel, and listen to this statement:

"Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts." Ezekiel 14:3.

These are not idols of stone, they are not external to which you go. They are within your own heart, but they are idols nonetheless.

In fact John Calvin wrote on one occasion, “*The human mind is a perpetual factory for idols.*” It’s an idol factory.

Tim Keller is the pastor of the Church of the Redeemer in New York City. He is a prolific writer. His books are excellent, writes on a very wide range of subjects, and many of you will have read some of his books.

He wrote one helpful book called “*Counterfeit Gods.*”

He works in New York amongst mainly young upwardly mobile people and he is in one of the great centers of the world, of course. New York is a hub of culture, of art, entertainment, wealth, of influence.

And he writes, not likely, but after observation, an analysis over a number of years, he writes that the people he is amongst are being driven in our culture by idolatry.

He defines an idol as something we cannot live without. He identifies some of our common idols as money, materialism, sex, power, body image (which he says this is an especial problem for women), work, ambition, reputation.

You could have a lower league of gods and include food and things like that that are so dominant in our culture.

Now of course these are not new. You find these identified as idols in the New Testament too, because in Colossians 3:5 Paul talks about sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry, says Paul. These are idols.

And they are no out there; they are in here, as Ezekiel says, “You have made idols in your heart.”

You see money is necessary to life of course, but money can become so much more than just money; it can become a powerful life-altering culture-shaping god that makes us do what we would not normally do. Eventually when money has become an idol, it breaks the hearts of its worshipers.

Keller writes about five leading bankers in the last recession who committed suicide because they were addicted to the idol of money.

Lust can become a driving power in a person’s life. And if you feed it enough, it will break the rules that you once lived by.

In our day pornography has become a shrine at which the idol of lust is worshiped. It is readily available. You can turn on that god and let it drive you at almost any time. It has become increasingly culturally acceptable, and we will talk in a moment about that and what that does to our consciences. But it does and it will destroy.

Power is an idol of our day. The desire for power, the desire to control is an idol. There are marriages where husbands lord it over their wives. There are marriages where wives manipulate and control their husbands. There are families where many of us as parents plot our children's lives for them and we resent it when our kids have their own ideas, and we resist it.

Power in the hierarchy of work life – I know so many people whose work is great except for the person they have to report to and they live under this crushing exercise of power that is not feeding and encouraging but squeezing.

And there are other spheres of social interaction where people are insecure unless they have some kind of position of power.

What about self-display? I didn't know what word to use for this, so I have put self-display, and what I am really thinking about here is the way social media sucks us in and becomes our reference point and therefore becomes our idol, that we have things in our lives that are valued by how many other people see them. They don't have intrinsic value in themselves; it is for other people to see them.

And so we compete for "likes" and it is killing our capacity to enjoy something simply for what it is. It has to be seen by somebody else.

In fact you can actually purchase "likes" for your Facebook page – did you know that? You can subscribe to it and purchase them. Actually businesses do that.

I saw a picture of the queen somewhere recently and she was on the street with people around, and do you know, as you looked at that crowd around her, everyone had a camera, had a smartphone up to their eyes. None of them were looking at the queen at all; they were just getting a picture to show other people.

And I read in a newspaper I read most days – there was an article there on this kind of thing and it said that there was a young mother – it interviewed a young mother who was really struggling with motherhood, had a very hard time with her baby. The baby was crying much of the time, didn't sleep well; this poor mother was tearing her hair out.

She said, "But you know, if there is a minute when my little baby is calm and smiles and gives me a beautiful look, I take a picture and I put it on Facebook and everybody thinks that's my child.

And it's not the story. She controls what people see and then finds herself having to control her own ability to live up to what she has decided people can see.

And we get so locked in to social media that we have no time for real relationships, many of us.

I was in a hospital here in Toronto a couple of years ago now and I was being admitted. And in the same room there was a young lad, about twelve, who was also being admitted. And he was

there with what I presumed to be were his grandparents. I assume his parents were busy and his grandparents had brought him to the hospital.

And during that time his grandparents were on their mobile devices the whole time engaged not in a word of conversation, there was no listening to him, there was no reassuring of him. I could see the boy was tense. I longed to go over and just sit with him and reassure him. “You’re going into hospital but it’s going to be okay.”

And I think this term social media could be a huge misnomer. I think when we have a bit of hindsight in a few years’ time we might call it anti-social media because it actually breaks the relationships that mean most to us.

And these things become a driving force in our lives – money, lust, social media, power.

And you know Jeremiah tells us that these idols reach the level of addiction because in Verse 25, Jeremiah 2, second part of that verse he said,

“You said, ‘It is no use! I love foreign gods, and I must go after them.’”

That is a definition of addiction. “It’s no use. I would like to turn away, but I love it and I must go after them.” Driven, controlled, addicted.

And these are numerous because in Verse 28 He says,

“Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah.”

You’ve got stacks of them.

You know, Paul warns about the gods of this age, well the god of this age in 2 Corinthians 4:4. He says,

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Now the god of this age could refer to the devil. That’s how I have always understood it to be. But in thinking about it, the god of this age could be the gods of this time, of this age, of this 20th Century, of this city. And these are what blind us and blind the unbeliever so they cannot see the light of the glory of Christ.

And by definition, when we are in that situation, we don’t know it because we cannot see. We have allowed these other things, the gods of this age, to become predominant.

You know we have a conscience – God gave it to us. It is one of, to my mind, one of the evidences of God in our creation.

And Romans 2:14 Paul writes there,

“Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing them and now defending them.”

So these are folks who have never heard the law of God but they live in a way that is fairly conforming to the law of God, because, written in their hearts is the law of God, which is the righteousness of God, which is the sense of right and wrong.

Little children, as they begin to grow, they know things that are right or wrong, they know what is unjust. Are you not sure? We are going to have twins – a least we are not, but our daughter is having twins in April. And I would be pretty sure of this: those kids won’t have to be very old, when you go to one and say, “I’m going to give you a bit of ice cream – I’m not going to give one to you.”

And the one who doesn’t, you can be sure he will get upset. Why? Because there is an inherent sense of justice. “This isn’t fair.”

It’s within the human psyche, in the human spirit. It speaks into the innermost parts of our hearts.

But the problem is our conscience can become damaged and our conscience can become an extremely unreliable source of knowing what is right and wrong.

Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:2; he talks of those “whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.”

He writes to Titus in Titus 1:15; he speaks there of those “whose minds and consciences are corrupted.”

And then our conscience ceases to be a reliable guide. It is seared like with a hot iron. It has been cauterized, it has been branded insensitive, it has been corrupted, it has become untrustworthy. Which is why, when we play with sin long enough and we allow these idols to begin to dominate long enough, we are no longer seeing right from wrong, good from bad.

You begin to justify your sexual behavior because why not? Because you have moved from that purity which is in Christ, which is why, when your conscience is seared you have got to leave your conscience and read this book and say, “This is the truth,” if you are a believer and you are a Christian.

And I may not understand it, I may not even like it – “I don’t know why it says this, but it does,” because my conscience has been broken.

That’s why some of us cannot trust our conscience. It has become untrustworthy, seared and corrupted.

And an evidence of that is our inability to love people well. Paul said that to Timothy also in 1 Timothy 1:5:

“The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

You break that good conscience and you will find that you have reduced significantly your capacity to love – to love your wife, to love your husband, to love your kids, to love those close to you – because your conscience now is insecure.

And here is the tragedy. These idols that we bow to have become so useless. In Psalm 115 – I was just reading this the other morning in my daily reading, and I came across Psalm 115:2-8:

“Why do the nations say, ‘Where is your God?’

“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever he pleases.

“But their gods are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.

“They have mouths, but they cannot speak, they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear, they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel, they have feet but they cannot walk; they cannot utter a sound with their mouths.

“And those who make them will be like them, and so will those who trust in them.”

It will drain you of life. It will give the appearance of having those qualities – the mouths, the eyes, the ears, the nose, but it cannot do anything with them. And those who make them will be like them.

It takes a deep work of God to deal with this, as Jeremiah told them it would, because in Jeremiah 2:22 (we didn’t read that far) he says,

““Though you wash yourselves with soda and use an abundance of soap...””

(That is an external clean-up and you use soda and soap for that.)

““...the stain of your guilt is still before me,’ declares the Sovereign LORD.

““How can you say, ‘I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals’?””

But of course you are defiled. The tragedy is you don’t know it. And some of us are locked into things. We don’t know how locked we are until we say, “Well I will walk away from it,” and you find that you cannot.

That's why here at the Peoples Church we have Freedom sessions that many people have found tremendously helpful in looking into these addictive patterns in our lives and going back to the Scripture and in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. And there are probably some of you here this morning and you have been liberated through that process.

But it is a process; it is not an overnight thing. It's not just "say a prayer" and it's all done. It is a hard process. And we have facilities here at the Peoples Church to counsel and help people through.

If you are in that situation and you realize and say, "I need some help," do get in touch because there are facilities here for that.

And just let me remind you of this: that Jeremiah is talking to the people of God, the people of God who have forsaken God. They have not stopped believing in God – he never accuses them of that. But they have forsaken God and allowed something other than God to fill the slot and dominate their lives and give them this false sense of hope and meaning and excitement and intimacy.

Keller writes this also:

"Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible evil. And you know it is a god when you must have it and you are driven to break the rules you once honored and even to harm others and to harm ourselves in order to get it."

That's when you know it is a spiritual addiction.

Is there anything making you behave in a way that you would never have behaved ten years ago, five years ago, two years ago, maybe? Is there anything you do that harms and is harming other people and even those you love?

And your judgement may not be the clearest on this; their judgement will be. When somebody you love says, "You are hurting me," believe it even though you might justify why it doesn't need to.

And anything that is harming yourself – is there anything in your life that you cannot let go of? If there is, it is an idol. It is the symptom of having left this spring of living water, this fresh, flowing, sustaining spring, and exchange it for a cistern, a tank of static water. Not only static, but it's broken, it leaks, it cannot hold water.

And here's something about you: you are drained because it cannot sustain us.

There is a song we used to sing years ago, which I grew up singing these old songs, but it has the opening line,

*O Christ, in You my soul has found,
And found in You alone,*

*The peace, the joy I sought so long,
The bliss till now unknown.*

And then here is a verse that says this:

*I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah, the waters failed;
Even as I stooped to drink
They fled and mocked me as I wailed.*

And mock us they do, and mock us they will, and wail we will.

And some of us are being mocked by idols and mocked by sins that we thought would be our friends and give us pleasure. Sin is never a friend – never. Whether it is monetary or sexual or egotistical or power; by definition that which is sin is itself poison. And we will poison our lives.

And even as I stooped to drink, that song says, they fled and mocked me, just mocked me as I wailed.

And the invitation is to come back to the spring of living water. “You have forsaken Me.” That’s the root of it.

As that study I began with, that you move away from God and you have got to reorient a whole structure of what is good and what is bad and what is right and what is wrong. We do it personally. Move away from God and bad things become good things for us.

Forsaking God, the spring of living water – it’s not a superficial issue; it affects every part of your life, every part of your family, every part of your relationships, every part of your future.

But this spring of living water, that is God Himself, is life-giving, it is fresh, it quenches the thirst, it goes deep down into our souls.

As Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, which I quoted last week,

“Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.”

Can you imagine that? Do you believe that is possible? He will never thirst.

“Indeed the water I give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”

As I said last week, the well is always deep and the spring is always fresh. And this constant supply of this water which will never thirst will go deep like a well and become fresh everyday like a spring.

Don't settle for broken cisterns. They of course will offer you immediate pleasure, immediate gratification, but they are cisterns. They have no in or out; they are just cisterns. But they are broken cisterns. They cannot hold water and they will leave you drained.

Are you satisfied with that?

Let's pray together.

It is the prerogative of God the Holy Spirit to speak personally to us. I can speak to us all from the Word of God, but it is His task to speak personally.

And maybe some of you have heard His voice this morning. Maybe you have heard His conviction. And the easiest thing in the world would be to leave this place this morning and just put it behind you.

It will wear off – don't worry, it will. And you can go back to your old and you can go back the way things were. You will still carry the pain associated with it, but you can choose so to do.

Or you can say this morning, "I have tried these broken cisterns. The water did fail as I stooped to drink. They do mock me. And in my heart of hearts I do wail because I know they are broken."

And if you are here this morning and you say, "I want to get back with God; I want to be restored to Him," standing and my praying for you won't be the whole story, but it may be the beginning of a journey home.

And I am going to ask you if God has spoken to you and you want to deal with this, you stand to your feet and I am going to pray for you.

And whatever way it is, if God has spoken, whatever He has spoken about, stand to your feet and I will pray for you that God the Holy Spirit will bring a new joy into your heart in anticipation of what He might do.

And several people are on their feet and I am going to pray for them. Others would like to join them. When you do something physically with your body like this, you remember it.

Lord, I want to pray for each person on their feet here this morning. And first and foremost, You love each one of us. The brokenness of our lives, wrong choices we have made, the sins we have engaged in, don't reduce or dilute Your love for us. It dilutes our ability to receive it and enjoy it, but You love each one of us, so much so that You want to draw us back to Yourself into a deeper, more intimate, satisfying source of life and fulfillment and joy that can be found in You.

I pray, Lord, that You will help them to face the issues that began to dominate their lives and to repent of them, to confess them, to thank You for Your forgiveness, to have the courage to seek help, to walk a different path.

And I pray, Lord, everyone on their feet here this morning will find that help and will be able to be freed from these tentacles that hold us tightly, knee-breaking. That as a result, we might know God again in such a way we don't just have a theology, we don't just believe in You, but we enjoy that fresh fountain of living water deep in our souls.