

The Well And The Cistern

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, we are standing before you. We have the promise of your presence among us. We very much need that your word should speak to our hearts.

And so by the gracious work of your Holy Spirit, will you allow me to talk and others to listen so that we may all together hear you. We ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You'll need to turn to Jeremiah chapter 2, verses 9 to 13. So just have your finger in there, ready to go. And that's in your Bible, in the Pew Bible at least, on page 663.

Now, you all know that at Queen Elizabeth Park, there is a massive parking lot. And it's surrounded by a sort of Japanese garden, and there is various features of that park, which you're all familiar with. And underneath that parking lot is a massive reservoir.

Or, in the words of Jeremiah chapter 2, a cistern, a huge cistern. And that all of you who have drunk, showered, washed, or otherwise used water this morning will have drawn water from the cistern in Queen Elizabeth Park.

[1 : 40] And the truth of it is, though, that that cistern at Queen Elizabeth Park is of very little value if it ceases to be connected to the vast mountainous wilderness high above Vancouver, where the year-round snowpack and the rains of which Guy spoke are constantly falling and renewing our water supply.

Now, that's just a picture I want you to have, because this morning we're talking about wells of water and cisterns. And what we're looking at is this passage from Jeremiah chapter 2, verses 9.

A wonderful passage of scripture, and I just want to let you in on it as you read it, if you look at it. The Lord says, Therefore I still contend with you.

And he's talking to the people of God, and he's saying, My argument remains. I will keep the argument going. I will not give up on the argument. I will keep the argument going with you, with your children, and with your children's children.

I will keep it going. And one of the basic functions of a church in this community is to keep the argument going, so that you will know what the will of the Lord is, you and I who are so easily able to be misled and to sidestep the implications of it.

[3 : 17] So the Lord says through Jeremiah, I'm going to keep the argument going. He said, I want to bring you some witnesses. And he says, Go across to Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and see.

Now, what he means in our language by that is, if you were to ask a pagan African or a card-carrying communist about this, they would tell you things that you seem to have neglected.

And the thing that they would tell you is that a nation has never changed its gods, even though they are no gods. They remain loyal. And so we live in a world where people are very faithful to whatever god it is, they believe in it.

And you see that encouraged in our pluralistic society, that we go on believing in the gods of our forefathers, and it goes on and on and on. And it's only in that wonderful community of the people of the Lord where other things begin to happen.

And he shows you what other things happen. My people, he says, the Lord speaks here, he says, My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.

[4 : 33] Why are my people different? And why have they moved into a spiritual recession? That's what it says.

They've turned to something in which there is no profit. And that's what's happened. They've become poverty-stricken spiritually, at least they're afraid of it.

And that's what they've done. They've changed. My people have given up their glory. And then look at these wonderful verses where it says, Be appalled, O heavens!

Be shocked! Be utterly desolate! Says the Lord. You know, The whole of nature, Jeremiah says, is watching you, the people of God.

And they are appalled, shocked, and desolate because they live in perfect accord with the will of God.

[5 : 39] The ordering of the heavens and the cycles of nature and all those things live in perfect obedience to the will of God. And they look and see you who are the people of God and they are, as it says, shocked, appalled, and utterly desolate.

Then he says, there's two reasons that they are, that the whole of nature is shocked. You know that very often you can pick up a whole lot of sidewalk wisdom by listening to some, listening to some of the stories of the wonders of our modern emancipated society.

And some old timer will say, well, it just goes against nature, doesn't it? And that's what Jeremiah is saying. The whole thing is totally against nature. That isn't accepted as an argument in our society now, but Jeremiah thought it was significant that the whole of nature is wonderfully ordered and only with man is this problem.

Well, then he says, there's two things that you've done. The two things that you've done is forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and you have made broken cisterns, cisterns that cannot meet the demand, cisterns that allow the water, the living water, to seep away so that it never gets to the people it's meant for.

And so Jeremiah says, and the Lord says through Jeremiah, what you've done is you've switched from a relationship to the living fountain, and you've built with your own hands a cistern and saying, that's all we need.

[7 : 28] We don't need anything else. We don't need the fountain of living water. Well, that, you know, that's basically what our society has said, and we've made some wonderful discoveries by saying we are no longer believing in God, we are no longer dependent on God, we no longer relate to God, God is no longer a part of our society.

And we've said it in much more sophisticated terms than that, and I would like to suggest to you some of the ways that Leslie Newbigin says that we have done that. The way we have done it is we have said we are enlightened, and because we know so much, we don't have to depend on God any longer.

so that the Socrates drop Christian values, because they now know how to behave. Nobody can tell them how to behave.

They now know innately how to behave because of the superior intelligence which they have. And while they've dropped their Christian values, they haven't yet announced what values they're going to go by, except that there is implicit that in our society, in the public realm, we know how to behave.

Even though every newspaper every day says that there are some slight variations from how we should behave. So that's the first thing that Newbigin suggests.

[8 : 51] Science and religion are no longer in tension in our society because science is public truth or public fact while religion is only private values.

So you can dismiss religion as having no ultimate bearing apart from the particular individual who might get some personal enjoyment out of it. But it has no place in the public realm.

And we've dealt with the problem of science and religion that way. We have a rational tolerance. We will put up with this ethnic group and that ethnic group and this religion and that religion.

And we have everybody can do anything they want and everybody tolerates everybody except the people that are intolerant and they aren't tolerated in our society. And so you get that built-in contradiction.

Again, Newbigin says we eliminate the relics of the sacred which he says in our society hang around the necks of our judges.

[9 : 58] judges. And he says only an administration that the judges are there only for the administration of the agreed aims of our society.

And that sort of is what's going on around the abortion issue now. You know that we as a society know what should be done and we are agreed about what should be done and all the courts are to do is to enforce what we tell them to do.

And that's why we're careful to pick judges who will be careful to tell them what we think. And then he says further that we disregard people who act by emotion or irrational impulse.

And so you wipe out all the artists and all the poets and all the songwriters because they are irrational and they act by emotional impulse and therefore they make no significant contribution to our society and we don't need them.

Then he says he talks about this business of human society does not have to distinguish between right and wrong.

[11 : 04] Everything can be right if seen in the right light. And so you have to be careful to see everything in the right light and to have people show it to you in the right light and then you know that it's right and in fact the concept that there's anything wrong is intolerable to us in our society.

Then he says, which I think is of interest because it's slightly scandalous, but it seems to have a lot of illustrations. In our society political ethics are divorced, politics and ethics are divorced, you know, that politics works by certain rules and ethics work by other rules.

And so that when you catch politicians lying, you shouldn't be shocked because they're not working according to your ethical system. They have a pragmatic ethical, they have a pragmatic system which is called politics, which doesn't demand that they observe any particular ethical system, which would only betray that they were probably religious and therefore shouldn't hold office anyway.

And so you get that kind of thing. And so, and also what we're doing is we are generating, Newbigin says, we have an unprecedented crop of new religions.

You know, the manufacture of religions is enormous. And so you create a whole lot of them, one to suit everybody. And that's the way we go. So what Newbigin is saying is these are some of the cisterns we've built.

[12 : 29] And some of them have been in existence since the 60s, and they're beginning to show cracks. And they are beginning to show that they are broken cisterns.

And the necessity to get back to the source of the living water becomes more and more imperative in our society.

Now, what I want to do, just to tie this all together, is to pick up this reference to the living water as it's found in the New Testament when Jesus meets the woman at the well and says to her, if you knew who it was that was speaking to you, you would ask him, and he would give you living water.

And if you have the woman represent, in a sense, our secular society, you see how this secular society of ours encounters the living God.

And it's an amazing story in John chapter 4, where the woman is at the well. She's engaged in conversation by Jesus. They are at a well called Jacob's Well, so that in the Old Testament you have a source of water which maintains the life of the people of God, but in contrast to Jacob's Well is the other well which Christ sees there, which is himself.

[13 : 51] And he sees Jacob's water supplying water and himself supplying living water. Jacob's Well, people have been coming back to generation after generation after generation after generation and drawing water from it, but now he's going to give them the water which will mean that they will never thirst again.

And we go back and back and back to those sources which refresh and renew us, but we always need more. And Christ wants to be our sufficiency.

And Christ wants to answer to our deepest thirst. So that the woman looks at Christ and says, you have nothing to draw water with. And the well is deep.

And of course, Christ doesn't need to draw water because he himself is the water of which he speaks. And she says finally, well, give me to drink.

And he says to her, well, go and call your husband. Because if you're going to drink of this water, you need to share it with somebody else.

[14 : 59] It's not just for you privately. It's for you and those around you. And you have to bring them to share. And so they go into that discussion. But here you see Jesus is saying that he is the living water.

I've suggested in the notes in the bulletin this morning that a lot of us need a source of refreshment and renewal. A lot of us need to find the answer to the ultimate purposes of God in our world.

A lot of us need to find the answer to where we are in this universe and what we need. And all that happens in order that, you know, all that happens because Jesus Christ becomes for us the well of water springing up onto eternal life.

We are given the inexhaustible supply of the life of God through the Holy Spirit of God conveyed to us through Jesus Christ.

And we receive that fountain of living water into our lives as we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

[16 : 13] And that, of course, is what we do in the communion service as we come forward to partake of the bread and the wine. This is as though this woman says, give me a drink. And as though you are coming to kneel at the communion rail this morning and to say, give me a drink.

Give me that water which will well up unto a source of living water that I will never thirst again, that it will satisfy my deepest longings.

And Christ is for us the satisfaction of our deepest longings. And we, in faith, receive him in the service of the Holy Communion. And so we get ourselves, you know, we have to cut ourselves off from the broken cisterns of our society, which can't meet our deepest needs, and return to the fountain of living water, which is our God, and draw from him all the resources that we need to sustain and maintain our life, not only now, but through the whole of eternity.

Let me pray. Just bow your heads, if you will. Our God, we ask that you will help us.

Because we are so clever in fashioning cisterns, and yet those cisterns cannot contain enough to meet the deep, deep needs of all our lives.

[17 : 43] And bring us back as a congregation, and as a people in this city, to draw on the fountain of living water, the inexhaustible resource, which is found in you alone, which is transmitted to us through Jesus Christ, and taken in by us as your Holy Spirit indwells us, and we abide in him.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.