

"BROKEN CISTERNS"

"Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."
Jeremiah 2:12-13.

Jeremiah, one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, is delivering his first sermon to the people of Jerusalem, in which he rehearses God's message to him when he was called and set apart to the prophetic office. He was called to prophesy when but a youth, in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah, and he continued to prophesy in Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah for forty years, until the final capture of the city.

No prophet reveals to us the innermost recesses of his mind more than Jeremiah. Naturally of a shy and timid disposition, subject to despondency and sadness, he was called to a work requiring undaunted resolution and rare courage. Belonging to the orders of both priest and prophet, he was compelled to witness against each, when these offices had sunk into the lowest state of degradation. From the first moment of his call he was alone in a hostile world, but devoted to his duty he maintained his work to the end.

How startling and pathetic is the prophet's description of the transgressions, corruptions and idolatry of God's chosen people! What a tragic picture of national degeneracy! As the prophet dwelt upon it he broke out in lamentation: "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" 9:1. He was a true patriot who felt profoundly the sin of his nation. He could not close his eyes to the fact of the enormity of their sin, nor turn a deaf ear to the earnest appeals of the few faithful ones who sought his counsel and help.

The wickedness of the times is concisely expressed in the language of our text. Jeremiah is here quoting God's own words to the people: "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." Jeremiah 2:12-13. Thus pointedly and plainly God mentioned to Jeremiah two sins of Israel. These same sins are still being committed by nations of the world today.

I. The Sin of Desertion.

"They have forsaken Me." This was the great sin of ancient Israel. It is man's great sin today. It is a fact for amazement. God was theirs, yet they deserted Him. "Be astonished," saith the Lord. It is a cry of amazement from God. "O ye heavens!" peopled with myriads, did ye ever know such a wrong done to your faithful and gracious King? It seems almost impossible that a nation which had been so blessed of God and had risen to such great heights because of His blessing and guidance should, in the midst of prosperity, turn from this One Who had done so much for them.

1. This sin is irrational.

The forsaking of "a fountain of living waters" for "broken cisterns that can hold no water" is evidence enough of a foolish barter and an evil choice. Consider the marked difference between a fountain and a cistern. A fountain is not a human creation. It is a well springing up in the desert, a spring bubbling out of the hillside, fresh, sparkling and pure. It is indicative of overflowing plenitude. Spontaneously the waters come forth from the indwelling resources. They are "living waters"; unceasing, never stagnant, always fresh and refreshing.

God is the infinite source of all good, the only Fountain of living waters, the eternal sufficiency. You remember what our Lord said to the woman of Samaria: "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water." John 4:10. When you think of water you are considering a vital necessity of life. So, here is Israel guilty of the supreme folly of turning away from God.

God is the Fountain of living water. His refreshing grace is ever flowing and in great abundance. It is not limited in quantity. There is enough for all, and it may be had at all times. It is a fresh stream and flowing now. The Christian does not have to go back to the grace of God in past ages. Moreover, it is wholesome and invigorating.

A cistern is a large cavity or pit to catch and store the surface rain water. It is astonishing that man would prefer a cistern to a fountain. God makes the fresh spring and man makes the cistern. Can man's work equal God's? A cistern is limited in supply. Besides its contents frequently get impregnated with unwholesome matter and become impure. It is hard to believe that anyone in his right mind would leave a fountain of living water, knowing it to be such, and enjoying the use of it, and be contented with a cistern such as is here described. Why should he leave a fountain for a cistern, even if the latter were ready-made? It is still less credible that he should go to the trouble of making a cistern.

2. This sin is unnatural.

Jeremiah reminded the people of the unnaturalness of such an act. Even the heathen do not exchange their gods. With Israel idolatry was an attraction. You see there was not the strict demands made that there was in the pure faith of Jehovah. You can indulge your lusts in idolatry. You could be selfish and revengeful. You could follow your instincts.

3. This sin is unjustifiable.

People have sometimes deserted their king and justified themselves before the world by proclaiming his tyranny. Children have forsaken their parents because they asserted that they were cruel to them. But, we cannot assign any reason for deserting God. He is ever just and merciful. He is always adequate for our needs, and we act wisely and well when we give Him our love and service.

4. This sin is ungrateful.

Such desertion is gross ingratitude. After reminding them of the manifold mercies of God and reciting the numerous acts of God in His gracious dealings with them, the prophet appeals to them and challenges them to show cause for their desertion.

II. The Substitutes for God.

If you stray away from God you must have a substitute. If you have forsaken "the fountain of living waters" you must have the cistern. Not only nature, but the human soul abhors a vacuum. Man must have water. If he forsakes the fountain, he must have the cistern. If God is dethroned, there is something else you must worship. Oh, the folly of the people of Israel that they should forsake the fountain, with its sparkling and living waters and choose the cistern with its stagnant and still waters, the thing of their own creation!

"My people have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns." What labor it involved! What effort it meant! And so uncalled for; strength exhausted to no purpose; time foolishly and wrongfully wasted. The people of Israel did not add to their glory, honor or power when they deserted the true God for false deities; forsook the fountain for a cistern. Instead, their glory and honor departed, and their power surely waned. They became the prey of other nations. Their idolatry became a grievous burden. Jeremiah told them plainly: "These lower and secondary things are going to disappoint. You will come to the cistern and find water lacking in the time of drought." Broken cisterns are a sad and bitter experience. Broken cisterns are worthless.

The most common evidence of desertion is forgetfulness of God. Are you not choosing your own ways, and mapping out your own life, without any consultation with God? Are you not framing your own codes of morals, and setting up your own standards of right and wrong, without asking God's illumination or sanction? Do you not forget to let His glory be the supreme end of your life? Do you not ignore the perfect example of the Saviour as a model and rule for your behavior? Do you not receive countless daily mercies and yet you are living in the land of forgetfulness, where the voice of praise and thanksgiving is never heard?

Men cannot improve on the Fountain of living waters. The water from this Fountain just suits man's thirst, and is sweetest and best at the last. And praise God it never gives out! It flows as fresh as ever. But the water in a man-hewed cistern is always low and never reaches even to the margin of your soul's real need, and when your want is the greatest it is gone.

How accessible is this Fountain? A way is open to it. All are invited to it. All are made welcome when they come to it. All who drink thereof are abundantly satisfied. Oh, come and drink of these living waters! Forsake not this Fountain, and you will ever enjoy the complete satisfaction of the Divine provision. The supply from this Fountain is inexhaustible. It is so deep and so full that if all the millions would come and drink there would be enough for all, enough for each, and enough for evermore. It is all-sufficient. I call you in the name of Christ to come to Him, the Fountain of the water of salvation.