

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

SERMON: JEREMIAH 17:1-8**ONES WHO WITHER / ONES WHO THRIVE***(original draft for 8-8-21)*

[God is speaking] *“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with the point of a diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of your altars; while their children remember their altars and their wooden images by the green trees on the high hills.*

O My mountain in the field, I will give as plunder your wealth, all your treasures, and your high places of sin within all your borders. And you, even yourself, shall let go of your heritage which I gave you. And I will cause you to serve your enemies in the land which you do not know, for you have kindled a fire in My anger which shall burn forever.”

Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes. But its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.”

Contrast makes things very striking, doesn't it? A dark blue house with white trim, for example. A tall husband and a short wife. Etc. Do you see the contrast in our text for today? Unbelievers and believers. God's anger and God's blessing. Those who wither and those who thrive.

Jeremiah lived during the last years of the Old Testament nation of the tribe of Judah. Jerusalem was its capital. (The other tribes of Israel, called “Israel” had already been taken captive to Assyria never to come back. They had been devoted to idol worship.) Jeremiah's life must have been comparatively easy at the beginning. King Josiah was on the throne of Judah. Josiah was a very good king. His heart was devoted to the Lord, like his grandfather Hezekiah. Josiah and grandfather Hezekiah walked in the footsteps of their even greater ancestor and king, King David. However, the people of Judah became sorely infected by idol worship also. Various kings of Judah had offered their own children in child sacrifice to idols—a practice repulsive to the Lord. In fact Josiah's own father had been madly given to idol worship. This idolatry ran rampant again after good king Josiah's death. Jeremiah was still serving as prophet. Josiah's three sons and one grandson reigned after him as the last four kings of Judah. They were given to idol worship. Now things were not easy for the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah's assignment from the Lord was to preach repentance to these hard-hearted kings and people, to “turn them around.” The kings and people did not kindly receive Jeremiah's message of “change your heart and your ways.” They felt they were fine. They were happy and God should be too. They treated Jeremiah harshly—even throwing him into a muddy pit because he proclaimed that the Lord would send Babylon to destroy Judah and Jerusalem.

Such is the background of our text today. *The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with the point of a diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of your altars; while their children remember their altars and their wooden images by the green trees on the high hills.* Judah's sin was not some light fluffy thing that God frowned upon and then let it pass. Their sin was dire and severely displeasing to Him. It was written against them with a stylus of iron having a point of diamond. A stylus was a pointed instrument for making lines and marks on soft surfaces. The ancients would write with a stylus on surfaces of wax. The Lord is here talking about something much more durable—writing with a stylus of iron with a very hard diamond point! Such was used to engrave stones, leaving a long lasting written message. The sins of idolatrous Judah were to be engraved for the “long haul” upon their hearts. They were to be engraved on the “horns” at the corners of their altars. The altar of incense in the temple by God's design had “horns” on its corners (as in animal horns). Here the people could turn for protection and strength from the Lord. But now their sins would be engraved not just on the tablets of their hard hearts, but also on the corners of the altars—directly in God's continual view! This was not a light matter. In fact their own children had learned this way of life and worship, and these children thought it was perfectly normal! In God's eyes, it was sin—open, rebellious, disobedient sin.

The Hebrew word for “sin”—used here—means to miss the mark, to miss the target. Each miss is counted and recorded. Unlike basketball, where the shots that go IN the basket are counted FOR you, the picture here is that every shot that does NOT hit the mark is counted AGAINST you. That is sin. And how many misses are allowed? None! The people of Judah had angered the Lord tremendously. In his prophecy Jeremiah also wrote, *“This people has a defiant and rebellious heart. They have revolted and departed. They do not say in their heart ‘Let us now fear the Lord our God’ (Jeremiah 5:23-24). ‘From the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness. From the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely’ (Jeremiah 6:13). Sin was rooted in their hearts. ‘The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind’ (Jeremiah 17:9). God knew what was going on in their lives and in their hearts.*

God knows what’s going on in your deceitful and desperately wicked heart as well. How many misses do you have? If you think you only sin a little, you are sadly mistaken. *“Who can understand his errors?” (Psalm 19:12)* What goes on in your “gut”? Impure thoughts? Longing for revenge? Deceitfulness and holding up self, at least in your own mind, as being really good? Finding fault with others? -- God knows your heart. -- And do you miss the mark on purpose? As in one, two, five more drinks? Or dabbling with illegal substances—drugs—(not unheard of you know, even among God’s people)? Wasting the wealth God has given you? Laziness--ignoring the fruitful labor-at-hand for the sake of entertainment, TV, Facebook, fun, and recreation? You too are a sinner. Jeremiah’s word “Repent!” applies to each of you as well.

The people of Judah in their stubborn self-righteousness, likely were thinking “Oh sure, we serve God. We have His temple right here in our midst and do the worship things that make Him happy.” ---- But they would face God’s anger. His blessings of land and nation would be taken away from them, a gift He had given. The people of Judah would be exiled to a foreign country, their city and temple destroyed. *For you have kindled a fire in My anger which shall burn forever.* God had reached the end of His patience. He was about to reject them—forever.

Those who foolishly and stubbornly walk away from God, who see no need for His forgiveness and mercy-- have only His wrath to face. Without God’s mercy in Christ, the forever-fire of hell awaits. *Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited.* To trust self or other man-made things and ideas, be it idols and religions, or cell phones, or your own good record, brings only the withering life of being isolated in a desert wilderness. Without God’s mercy in Christ, life only unravels, dries up, and dies. You might think all is fine, but eventually all withers.

HOWEVER, for the child of God in Christ, for those who cling to Jesus, the One who “took” the receiving end of the stick meant for you, who died in your shoes, and who—having paid your price in full—rose in victory . . . in Him there is life! The Lord is for you a fountain of living waters and healing. *Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes. But its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit.* To thrive! What a contrast with the one abandoned in the desert to wither.

How precious is any water in this life. How refreshing is the blessed rain. How green the pastures, fields, and lawns look this summer! Last summer one of the trees on the parsonage lawn began to wilt. The tree needed water. It was not planted by a stream. I was able to bring the stream to it and let the hose trickle for several hours. The next morning, the leaves were fully open and fresh like always. Spiritual water is even more precious. In Jesus you have the Lord’s healing and forgiveness and life forever. He is your sure and confident hope. When He spoke to the woman at the well of Samaria, Jesus said, “Whoever drinks the water I shall give him will never thirst. The water I shall give him shall become in him a fountain of water springing up to everlasting life” (John 4:14). In the Book of Revelation John sees in heaven “the pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1). The water of eternal life is yours in Jesus. You thrive!

In Christ, you are not cast out and sent into exile. You live under His hand of blessing. You are well-rooted against all the onslaughts of life. When the heat of difficulty and oppression from Satan’s hand comes, you need not fear. You do not wither. Your leaf is green. You need not be anxious about this life or the life to come. The key is Jesus. To walk your own path without Him means ending up in the desert, forever. Stay in the Word of God. Stay in your Bibles. Realize how deceitful your heart is, but how true His love is for you. Life is in Christ, in His Word. It gives forgiveness and heaven! With the Savior you will be fruitful. In Him you will never cease from bearing fruit. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in Him, the same brings forth much fruit. Without Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).* What a pleasant future! What a pleasant present! What a contrast to the desert without the Savior! You thrive!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---