

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Against the Flow**

(studies in Jeremiah)

### **Water Supply Options for the Child of God** Study #2

(Jeremiah 2:1-13)

#### **Introduction: WATER and water...**

On average, San Antonio gets just the right amount of rain. Two years of drought followed by a good flood produces a perfect average.

Of course, water is a hot topic in San Antonio. Over the summer just ended water was on everybody's mind due to the droughty conditions. In actuality, though, water is always a big story.

It is true of water more than just about any other natural resource: civilization follows water.

The settling of our nation followed waterways for transportation and agriculture, as well as for drinking, cooking, and hygiene.

Our fair city was settled because of creeks and springs in the area. And, beyond the water you can see, it is the Edwards Underground Aquifer that has made possible the continuing growth of San Antonio.

In all of my backcountry excursions, the presence or absence of water is a major consideration when deciding on a route to travel. (I'm not a big fan of carrying a lot of water...)

And I'm not alone in this consideration. I just finished reading a book about the Lewis and Clark expedition of the early 1800's and was impressed at how crucial water was to their travel and to their survival.<sup>1</sup>

Rivers and lakes and aquifers are crucial to sustain a population. We need the provision of water to survive and thrive.

*Water as a picture of God's supply...*

Given the importance of water, it is not surprising that the Bible so frequently uses the image of water as a picture of God's provision for our deepest, spiritual needs.

The psalmist wrote,  
*[Psalm 42:1] As the deer pants for the water brooks,  
So my soul pants for You, O God.*

And Jesus had lots to say about water, too.

To the Samaritan woman, He promised, *[John 4:10]... "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."*

Then, on one of the great festival days of the Jews, Jesus stood up in the Temple in Jerusalem and cried out, *[John 7:37]... "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. [38] He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"*

Jesus Christ offers fresh and refreshing water that will satisfy the deepest thirsts of our souls for meaning and purpose.

However, as we turn to the second chapter of Jeremiah this morning we discover that there are other, cheaper waters available that, while wet, don't satisfy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Lewis and Clark book is by Stephen Ambrose, Undaunted Courage. Touchstone, 1996. Fascinating read. After learning about the hardships and challenges those guys experienced on their journey, I'm sure I will never consider anything I ever tackle in the backcountry difficult!

### *Orient to Jeremiah...*

The prophet Jeremiah lived about six hundred years before Jesus was born. He was called to be God's prophet to Israel and his specific task was to call the nation back to spiritual health, back to dependence on the Lord.

Last Sunday we began a series of Sunday morning explorations of the life and times of Jeremiah together.

Now, as we study Jeremiah, we won't be going through the fifty two chapters, verse by verse. While that would be profitable, we're going to take a different tack.

Sometimes we'll look at a narrative section and see what there is to learn about the life of faith from Jeremiah's life. At other times we will dig deep into one of his messages and explore that message.

That is what we are going to do today. For the next few minutes we are going to listen to the first message Jeremiah gave - probably given when he was 16-18 years old - following his commissioning from the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

According to those who have studied such things, Jeremiah delivered this message to the Jews of Jerusalem in the style of a legal indictment. This style was well known in the Ancient Near East,<sup>3</sup> and was used when subordinates offended superiors. The thrust of the prophecy is that God's people have violated their covenant with the Lord. They are liable for judgment!

As we listen to the word of the Lord that came through Jeremiah to the people of Israel in 626 BC, we'll discover that the word of the Lord to them is also the word of the Lord to us.

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<sup>2</sup> Most commentators are convinced that this prophecy was given near the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry (while good King Josiah was on the throne.)

<sup>3</sup> Several examples of this kind of a legal form are extant today. It consists of: 1. An appeal to a vassal to pay heed and a call to the earth and sky to witness. 2. A series of questions that carry an implied accusation. 3. A recollection of past benefits bestowed on the vassal by the lord and list of offenses by the vassal against the lord. (i.e. - breaking of a treaty) 4. A reference to the futility of ritual compensations. 5. A declaration of impending judgment.

I can just picture Jeremiah rising early one morning to walk the three miles from Anathoth (his hometown) up to Jerusalem. He knows what he is going to say. The Lord has told him what the message is to be.

But this was his first message. Was he excited? Was he nervous?

We don't know. We're not told. But speaking clearly, no stuttering, nice and loud, Jeremiah addressed anyone who would listen in Jerusalem.

Right out of the chute, the Lord recalled the good ol' days when His people loved Him.

### **Those Were the Good Ol' Days (vv. 2-3)**

#### **Israel - Loyal to the Lord (v. 2)**

*[1] Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,<sup>4</sup>*

*[2] "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord,*

*"I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,  
The love of your betrothals,  
Your following after Me in the wilderness,  
Through a land not sown.*

The Lord begins with some really kind words!

He's thinking back to the time when He established a relationship with Abraham's offspring. This took place at Mount Sinai when He gave the people the Law and entered into a covenant with them. God considered that He had "married" the Jews.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There is no indication as to how exactly the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. But clearly, he understood that he was conveying the mind of the Lord as he spoke. See 2 Peter 1:21 - *"holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."*

<sup>5</sup> The relationship into which Israel entered with God is depicted as a bridal relationship. The Lord "married" her at Sinai.

Well, early on, as there often is, Israel and the Lord enjoyed a “honeymoon phase” to their relationship. Love flowed between the Lord and His people.<sup>6</sup>

God recalls how His bride celebrated festivals to worship Him - Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost (first-fruits).

She followed everywhere He led her. Back in Egypt, she had known beautiful, tilled fields and abundant crops. The Lord led her through an uncultivated “*land not sown*”, yet she still faithfully followed His lead throughout forty years of wilderness wandering.

Now, if the Lord’s memory doesn’t quite jibe with what we read in the Old Testament, we’ll chalk it up to grace on His part. In fact, He was being very gracious in how He remembered Israel’s behavior!

In the Old Testament, the word “devotion” is a word frequently translated *grace* or *lovingkindness*. Almost always it is used to describe the way God deals with His people. But here, the Lord says that Israel was marked by this *lovingkindness* toward Him (chesed)!

Of course, not only was Israel loving toward the Lord, He was wonderfully gracious toward her!

### **The Lord - Israel’s Strong Protector (v. 3)**

**[3] “Israel was holy to the Lord,  
The first of His harvest.  
All who ate of it became guilty;  
Evil came upon them,” declares the Lord.’**

God considered that Israel was His responsibility. Their relationship put him in the role of Protector and Provider.

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<sup>6</sup> See the book of Hosea and the relationship of Hosea and his wife, Gomer, for another example of marriage symbolizing the relationship between God and Israel. Ephesians 5 would be the classic New Testament text showing Christ as the groom and the church as the bride.

Read the Old Testament and you’ll see over and over and over again how He came to Israel’s rescue, fended off attacks from enemies, destroyed those who tried to harm her.<sup>7</sup>

Ah, those were the good ol’ days. Everything was sweetness and light, love flowed easily, and peace and joy were the order of the day.

Is this - sweetness and light, love, peace and joy - a good description of you and your walk with God right now?

I hope so. It may be that you have recently tasted - or tasted again - some wonderful measure of His grace. Or you have been impressed again with the beauty of the cross of Jesus - how He died and rose again for you! And in grateful response to His grace, you have been leading a life of faithfulness and loyalty to Him.

If that is your current experience, wonderful! That’s great and that is the way it is supposed to be.

But it is possible that listening to Jeremiah’s words has brought you to the point of admitting that such spiritual health is *not* your current story. It may have been at one time, but it’s not now. As the Lord referred to the “good ol’ days” with Israel, you can recall the “good ol’ days” when you were enjoying intimacy with the Lord as you are not at this time.

If a healthy relationship with God is more a thing of the past than of the present, what happened? Great question - and exactly the question the Lord puts to His people.

### **These Are the Bad New Days (vv. 4-12)**

#### **A Long-Standing Pattern of Failure (vv. 4-8)**

*Fathers left the Lord (v. 5)*

**[4] Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob,<sup>8</sup> and all the families of the house of Israel.**

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<sup>7</sup> In the Ancient Near East, if a vassal state rebelled against the lord, the lord would punish. But if another state tried to attack his vassal territory, he (the lord) would attack the attacker.

**[5] Thus says the Lord,<sup>9</sup>  
 “What injustice did your fathers find in Me,  
 That they went far from Me  
 And walked after emptiness and became empty?”**

Here is a vague reference to the ancestors of the current generation of the Jews. Something happened. They came to believe that following the Lord was not worth it. He wasn't worthy of their devotion and love.

So, they stopped following His lead. As is demonstrated on every episode of “Dancing with the Stars”, (no, I've never watched the show) when she follows his lead, all goes well. But if he doesn't lead well, the dance fails. If she doesn't follow well, the dance falls apart.

God was leading. There is never a problem with God's leadership. The problem was that Israel stopped following.

At some time in the nation's past - maybe even the far distant past, hundreds of years before the time of Jeremiah - Israel lost interest in following God's lead.

And as the Lord says, when she abandoned the Lord, she ended up walking after *emptiness*

This word - *emptiness* - is taken right out of the book of Ecclesiastes. It is the Hebrew word *hebel* and is often translated “vanity.” An old seminary professor of mine used to translate it “soap bubbles.” A more modern commentator renders it “phantom.”

What a picture! Israel had it all. A relationship with Almighty God. His protection and provision. A substantial marriage to the best groom in the universe. She walked away from Him and embraced NOTHINGNESS.

Once, after Jesus had fed over five thousand people with a few fish and loaves by the Sea of Galilee, He challenged the crowd to follow Him (“***eat My flesh and drink My blood***” is the way He put it!).

They balked and the “crowd” of His followers dwindled from thousands to exactly twelve.

As the crowds walked away, Jesus turned to the apostles and asked, **[John 6:67] “You do not want to go away also, do you?”**

The Apostle Peter responded, **[John 6:68]...“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. [69] We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”**

In other words, “*After You, Lord, there is nothing. If we leave You, we've left the only real thing available.*”

On that day by the lake, Peter got it right. But for hundreds of years the Jews had missed it completely. They abandoned God and got vanity and emptiness in exchange.

To each and every one of God's wonderful gifts, His people responded with an ungrateful yawn.

People were cold to the Lord's blessings (vv. 6-7)

**[6] “They did not say, ‘Where is the Lord  
 Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,  
 Who led us through the wilderness,  
 Through a land of deserts and of pits,  
 Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,  
 Through a land that no one crossed  
 And where no man dwelt?’**

**[7] “I brought you into the fruitful land  
 To eat its fruit and its good things.  
 But you came and defiled My land,  
 And My inheritance you made an abomination.**

The Lord's blessings

After all He had done for His people!

- He brought them out of Egyptian slavery.
- He led them safely through the wilderness, giving them manna every day for forty years.

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah addresses the house of Jacob. (another way to refer to the nation of Israel, the Jews)

<sup>9</sup> “Thus says the Lord” - a common expression of the prophets. We'll hear it a lot in Jeremiah!

- He delivered them from natural disasters - drought in the desert, isolation and desolation.
- He delivered them from the attacks of enemies.
- He brought them safely into the land of Canaan, a good land with bountiful resources.

#### The people's response to His blessings

After all God had done for His people - they did not seek Him. They forgot to remember Him. They did not worship Him.

AND they absolutely ruined the good land He had given them, corrupting it through the worship of false gods.

That's how the people responded to God's gifts. The priests didn't do any better.

*The leaders rebelled against the Lord (v. 8)*

#### Priests - did not know Him

***[8] "The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' And those who handle the law did not know Me;***

In ancient Israel, the priests were not only responsible for the sacrifices and offerings. They were also in charge of instructing the people in the Law.

And sure, they could teach a class. But with these priests, there was no heart, no spiritual passion. The priests had nothing but a mechanical and purely intellectual knowledge about God. They certainly didn't KNOW the Lord.

#### Rulers - transgressed His law

***[8]...The rulers also transgressed against Me***

Then, the political rulers - kings and princes and city officials - they broke God's laws, too. They had been put in place to uphold His laws and then transgressed them!

And finally, through Jeremiah the prophet, the Lord mentions His people's prophets.

Prophets - prophesied by Baal and walked after things that did not profit

***[8]...And the prophets prophesied by Baal And walked after things that did not profit.***

Receiving this message as the prophet he was, this had to have stung.

The prophets should have gotten their messages from the Lord and from His word. Instead, they got their inspiration from the false gods of Canaan - like from Baal!!<sup>10</sup>

All the people together ceased walking with the Lord. And in a most telling comment, Jeremiah says that they ***"walked after things that did not profit."***

Earlier He had told them that they ***"walked after emptiness."*** Now, He adds an economic slant. There is no profit to abandoning God!

Walking away from covenant loyalty to the Lord impoverishes. It leads to poverty of the soul.<sup>11</sup>

Israel started off her national life with an unprecedented privilege. She was God's possession. Of all the nations on planet earth, she was in relationship with a REAL God, the TRUE God.

And she walked away from Him, throwing that great privilege in the trash.

Unbelievable. No other nation had ever done that sort of thing - even those who worshiped gods that are not God!<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Despite reformations at various times in Israel, the people continually reverted to the deities and rituals of Canaan. The false prophets led them in this way and Jeremiah was in constant conflict with these other prophets.

<sup>11</sup> Evidently, the Lord wants His people to walk after (live for) things that profit...

<sup>12</sup> On the secular scene, vassals who broke their treaty with the Lord were punished severely. In 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar was meting out judgment on Judah for

## A Unique and Awful Failure (vv. 9-12)

*A one-of-a-kind sin (vv. 9-11)*

**[9] “Therefore I will yet contend with you,” declares the Lord,  
“And with your sons’ sons I will contend.**

**[10] “For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,  
And send to Kedar and observe closely  
And see if there has been such a thing as this!**

**[11] “Has a nation changed gods  
When they were not gods?**

**But My people have changed their glory  
For that which does not profit.**

Go as far west as you can - all the way to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea (Kittim). Go east to the desert where the Arab tribes wander (Kedar). You’ll never find a people who have abandoned their god.

Only Israel has done this!

And note something fascinating. God reproaches Israel for abandoning Him. Why? Because (and He says it here for the second time!) walking after false gods does **“not profit.”**

Don’t miss this. The Lord wants us to follow Him because it is good FOR US!

It is in our own interest to follow His lead, to love Him and to be loyal to Him.

For Israel, following God would lead to national security. It would allow them, as a nation, to show off God’s glory to the nations.

For us, today, following God’s lead results in the abundant life Jesus promised. It is the path to life and love, to peace and joy.

Forsaking Him is nutty. It leads to personal disaster. And all creation cringes when they see God’s people self-destructively walking away from Him toward emptiness.

*All creation cringes (v. 12)*

**[12] “Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
And shudder, be very desolate,” declares the Lord.**

Now, having told us straight up the damage done when we, His people, abandon the Lord, Jeremiah gives us the image we’ve been waiting for. He provides us with one of the greatest pictures of sin to be found anywhere in the Bible. In painting this picture he identifies the rebellion of God’s people as a two-stage affair.

## The Two-Stage Sin of God’s People (v. 13)

*Abandoning the source of living water*

**[13] “For My people have committed two evils:  
They have forsaken Me,  
The fountain of living waters**

God - fountain of living waters

“Living waters” speaks of a flowing spring or a running stream. And every landowner alive would love to have flowing water on his property.

Imagine the blessing it would have been to a South Texas farmer in the middle of this summer’s drought and our stretch of sixty some-odd days of one hundred degree temperatures to have had an artesian spring bubbling up for irrigation.

No need to worry about rains. Let the rains fail - he’s got fresh water!

God claims to be this kind of an unquenchable resource for His people. He is a constantly reliable source of sustenance and refreshment to our souls.

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precisely this political offense. Israel was a vassal state of Babylon and rebelled against Babylon. It would happen again in 598 BC and in 587 BC.

What His people need, He provides.

Forgiveness? Got it. Purpose and meaning in life? Got it.  
Direction? Got it. Abundance and joy? Got it.

### Israel has forsaken him

Well, Israel knew all that the Lord was offering - and she walked away. She wasn't interested. At least she wasn't interested on God's terms.

Availing herself of God's water required that she stay in proximity to Him. She would have to follow Him. And *that* she was not prepared to do.

So, she walked away from God's refreshing streams and settled for emptiness. Or, as verse thirteen puts it, she dug cisterns.

### *Digging leaky cisterns*

***[13]...To hew for themselves cisterns,  
Broken cisterns  
That can hold no water.***

### Israel dug cisterns

If you lived in the ancient world and had access to a flowing stream or a lake, you would obviously use that water. If there was no available ground water, you would have dug a well by tunneling down until you found water. And if you lived in an area where the water table was so low that you couldn't dig a well, you would have had to create an underground storage tank. That's what a cistern is.

A cistern is a pit dug in hard clay or cut out of the rock. During rainy seasons, the rainwater is diverted into the cistern. It is then covered to keep it from evaporating and to keep it clean.

It is hard work to dig a cistern. Sometimes years of work are required to cut through the rock and make a storage area large enough to be useful.

But cistern-digging was common in the arid land of Palestine. In fact, the art of cistern-making made much wider settlement possible throughout the Ancient Near East.

Cisterns weren't a bad thing. They were tremendously helpful. But they did have their downsides.

### These cisterns hold no water

One modern observer of the cisterns of the Middle East tells us that water collected from clay roofs or from soil has the color of weak soapsuds, the taste of the earth or the stable and is full of worms. Doesn't sound very appetizing, does it?

But the worst thing about cisterns is - they leak!

Cisterns are normally lined with plaster, but even plaster-lined cisterns cut out of the rock are strangely liable to leak.

So, in the time of greatest need, when conditions are really droughty, the cistern owner goes out to his cistern to draw out water for his family and finds that it has failed. It's bone dry!

When the Lord accused His people of digging cisterns, He had in mind their turning to the nations around them for protection and provision. Specifically, He meant Egypt and Assyria.<sup>13</sup>

God had promised to be their Protector and Provider. They rejected Him and sought alliances with the superpowers of the day.

These alliances were leaky cisterns. Whenever the people of God put their confidence in something or someone other than the Lord, they ended up disappointed, humiliated, and defeated. The cisterns leaked every time.

If you will read through the remainder of Jeremiah 2 you will hear the Lord reminding the Jews that it has happened before and promises that it will happen again if they depend on anybody other than HIM.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah lived through the time when Judah was a vassal state of Assyrian, then Egypt, then Babylon.

Now we come to the “punchline” of Jeremiah’s sermon - and of mine.

### **Conclusion:**

In Jeremiah 2:13, the Lord puts His finger on an age-old problem. We, the people of God, tend to be incurable cistern diggers!

Now, cistern-digging is a great solution if you live in an arid land with no reliable water supply. If that’s your situation, well, of course you have to dig a cistern.

But if you are living on the banks of the Guadalupe River, or on the shore of Lake Michigan, or in the rain forest, digging a cistern would be nutty. If you have access to a clean, fresh, and refreshing water supply, well, you don’t need a cistern.

The nation of Israel had the promise of God’s “water” (His protection and provision) and dug the “cisterns” of alliances with Egypt and Assyria. How nutty!

And how nutty is it when God’s people today look to quench our thirst for life and joy by digging cisterns rather than finding life in our relationship with God!

Jesus promises to be the source of **“living water.”** (John 4) We are thirsty people and He says that He will personally fill us up - and more than that! He will overflow us so that from our **“innermost being will flow rivers of living water.”** (John 7)

Being thirsty people, we can avail ourselves of His living water and find refreshment.

But, being thirsty people who, like Israel, also have a tendency to wander, we are also tempted to dig cisterns in search of other waters that while wet, are nowhere near as satisfying as the water Jesus offers.

Ask yourself today if you have been digging cisterns. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some cisterns are respectable and wholesome looking - friends, family, exercise, work - but end up taking the place that only God should have in a life.

Some cisterns are destructive - drugs, abuse of alcohol, Internet porn, addictive online gaming, out of control gambling - and consume lives.

If you recognize that you have been relying for LIFE on the stale, flat, dirty, wormy water found in the cisterns you have dug, isn’t it time to return to the source of living, fresh water?

Jesus invites you to come to Him and drink of the water of life!

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<sup>14</sup> Consider these verses from Jeremiah 2.

*[16] “Also the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes (Egyptian cities) Have shaved the crown of your head. (a sign of humiliation)*

*[36] “Why do you go around so much Changing your way?*

*Also, you will be put to shame by Egypt  
As you were put to shame by Assyria.*