

WOULD YOU RATHER BE A SHRUB IN THE DESERT THAN A TREE BY THE WATERS?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 17

Extracts:

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” [Jer. 17: 5-8]

If you had an extra dollar that should be spent immediately, which of these two would you give it to: the stockbroker or the postal worker? That was one question that my macroeconomics professor at graduate school used to ask his new students. Without any hesitation, the majority of the students would give the dollar to the stockbroker because he was presumably richer and could already have saved much. Therefore, he would not hesitate to spend the extra dollar. The postal worker was presumably on the struggling side of the fence. Therefore, he would grab the dollar and save it. However, the professor would gleefully rule the popular answer wrong! The right answer, according to him, should be viewed from the point of view of certainty of income flows. For example, the stockbroker might not be sure of the next income. Therefore, he would need to save against the rainy day. The postal worker, on the other hand, was sure of his regular wages way into the future. Therefore, he could afford to spend the extra dollar without thinking!

In today's lesson, God calls anybody who trusts man over Him a shrub in the desert while s(he) that depends on Him is like a tree by the waters. The stockbroker is analogous to the shrub in the desert that may not be sure of the next drop of water. Therefore, in order to survive the drought, it has developed conservative coping ways. The tree by the waters, on the other hand, is sure of water supply all year round. Therefore, like the postal worker who is sure of regular pay, the tree by the waters can afford to let go of survival concerns. So, if it looks easier and better to be like the tree by the waters, why do most of us prefer to be like the shrub in the desert by relying on man instead of God? Let us find out in today's lesson.

1. A shrub is a stunted tree!

In Chapter 17 of the book of Jeremiah, God takes up with the prophet another interesting illustration of how He viewed the people of Judah. Their sin was “written with a pen of iron . . . on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of (their) altars” [Jer. 17: 1]. Therefore, they were beyond redemption “for you have kindled a fire in My anger which shall burn forever” [v. 4]. Then, God used the analogy of a shrub in the desert and a tree by the waters to illustrate His case against the people.

There were those who had chosen to trust “in man” and make “flesh (their) strength, whose heart departs from the Lord.” Such people were cursed and were like “a shrub in the desert” [vv. 5-6]. Those who trusted in the Lord, on the other hand, were blessed and were like “a tree planted by the waters” [vv. 7 -8].

In order to understand this illustration, let us have a glimpse of the reality faced by a shrub in the desert? Here are some of them as described in today’s text [v. 6]:

a) *It inhabits the parched places in the wilderness*

A feature of the desert is the absence of water. Everywhere is dry, dried out and hot. For example, if you have been to Las Vegas, Nevada, in the United States, or passed through the Sahara Desert in North Africa, you will appreciate what a desert can mean. It can be an unending expanse of searing sand or baking stones at the mercy of blazing storms. In order to carry out any form of human activity, a small patch of land may be irrigated to bring in limited supplies of water (as in an oasis) or to harness the little rain water that may fall during the year. The trees or crops that may be cultivated are hardy in nature, that is, those that can thrive on little or no water. Such trees can only be shrubby in nature, with tough and tiny dry leaves and sturdy roots.

b) *The shrub is in a salt land which is not inhabited*

God called a shrub in the desert a plant “in a salt land which is not inhabited” [Jer. 17: 6]. In this context, salt represents what is desolate and useless. For example, after Abimelech, Gideon’s son had taken the city of Shechem that had dealt treacherously with him, he “killed the people who were in it, and he demolished the city and sowed it with salt” [Judg. 9: 45]. That way, it would no longer be fit for human habitation. In like manner, the shrub is alone and lonely in the desert because the land cannot be cultivated. It is bare and barren.

If people find themselves in such places, it is more likely to be by chance than by choice. For example, they may have been born there and that is their inheritance. Such people will do all within their economic power to make the parched land

inhabitable. In Israel (Middle East) and Nevada (USA), for example, you will appreciate man-made efforts to turn deserts into lush lands. But it is not cheap to do or to maintain. Therefore, at the earliest opportunity, such people would be willing to move to better-watered parts of their territories or go elsewhere. However, the shrub cannot move along with the people. It is stuck in the desert! It “knows” that water is in short supply. Instead of finding its way out of such a harsh place, it tends to dig in by *adapting to its harsh circumstances*.

In what sense are people who trust in man like a shrub in the desert? They have spiritually *chosen to remain* in the arid places of sin and perversion instead of exercising the option of repenting and moving to better places. That point is underlined by the Psalmist when he cried, “When I kept silent (i.e., refused to repent), my bones grew old... for day and night (God’s) hand was heavy upon me; *my vitality was turned into the drought of summer*” [Ps. 32: 3, 4].

How do we trust man over God? Here are some ready examples:

a) *When we rely on material things for our sustenance*

Every one of us prefers pleasure to pain. Therefore, we work or steal to obtain material comfort and call it success. A huge bank account, a couple of stable investments and such like gadgets soon become the gods that we rely upon. Unfortunately, money cannot buy us love, joy, or peace of mind. Instead, we get more headaches and worry! The one who owns thousands wants millions. The millionaire aspires to be a billionaire. There is no satisfaction. The Preacher summarizes the frustration and futility of material wealth as follows: “all the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full” [Eccl. 1: 7], and “all the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied” [Eccl. 6: 7].

We have seen how natural disasters, such as the *Tsunami* in Asia and the *Katrina* in New Orleans, USA, can suddenly reduce the wealthy to paupers *overnight*. Why then should you put your trust on earthly treasures which can rust or thieves can steal or destroy [Matt. 6: 19- 20]? That is why God says that unrepentant sinners are in a salt land of judgment and desolation and shame, according to the “fruits of (their) doings” [Jer. 17: 3-4, 10- 13].

b) *When we rely on others*

Some times, we believe that all it takes for an assured future is to know and depend on people in high places. They may be our parents or siblings, mentors or benefactors, charities or the state. However, sooner than later, we lose such benefits and privileges when our benefactors lose their power and position. Many developing countries are failed states which can hardly balance their budgets, not to talk of fighting natural or man-made

disasters. They now rely on grants, loans and relief materials from international agencies or rich countries. Powerful ministers of state even in advanced countries lose their high status when the President who appointed them loses the next election or dies in office. In Scripture, see what happened to Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth who shared bread with King David on the same table "like one of the king's sons" [**2 Sam. 9: 11**]. However, when David fled from Jerusalem, following rebellion by one of his sons, Absalom, the cripple lost his princely privileges. He was abandoned by his servant, Ziba, and neither washed his feet nor trimmed his mustache "nor washed his clothes from the day the king departed until the day he returned in peace" [**2 Sam. 24**].

Friends and family can disappoint or deceive us. For example, it was Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve apostles that betrayed Jesus, his Master. Our worst enemies may be members of our family [**Mic. 7: 6; Matt. 10: 36**]. Therefore, it is unreliable to trust in human beings or make flesh our strength without anchoring our hearts on the Lord [**Jer. 17: 5**].

c) *When we trust in ourselves*

How often do we hear people call themselves "self-made"? They may have been very hardworking, brilliant or lucky. They may have occupied strategic positions in government, industry or church which they have used to feather their own nests. They may have been smart thieves that have avoided arrest. What they show the world is the outcome of their pursuits, not the means they have used.

What do you see when you look at such people? The Psalmist describes them quite vividly as follows: "pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eye bulges with abundance; they have more than eye could wish... They speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens" [**Ps. 73: 7, 8, 9**]. Above all, they are so selfish that they only give away trash or out of self-interest, such as for tax purposes! For example, the Rich Fool chose to pull down his barns and build a bigger one to "store all my crops and my goods (and) I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry'" [**Lk 12: 16-19**]. Everything about him was summarized in "I," or "me" or "mine." When death struck that night, his wealth could not save him! He was like a shrub in the desert that is short of essential water supply in the heat.

From the forgoing, we may be at a loss to understand why some sinners should remain unrepentant and incur the curse of God. Recently, I watched a discussion on CNN's *Larry King Live* which featured a gay bishop, a lesbian minister, a homosexual "believer" and other church leaders. Rather than hear of repentance, you saw an attempt by the gay ministers and believers to convince listeners that

believers who condemn homosexuality are extremists who are betraying the gospel of Jesus Christ. They maintained that, during His earthly ministry, Jesus moved with the downtrodden and prostitutes; that He would have welcomed the homosexuals if He were to come today. What they cleverly avoided was that every sinner that Jesus encountered He always told to go and sin no more. For example, to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; *go and sin no more*” [Jn 8: 1-11]. He did not say to her, “Go and sin *more more!*” It is no wonder that God told Jeremiah, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” [Jer. 17: 9]. In the wicked or unrepentant sinners, sin is “written with a pen of iron” and “on the tablet of their heart” [v. 1]. To trust in man and make flesh one’s strength is to put themselves under a curse, to be like a shrub in the desert. They are like chaff which the wind blows away [Ps. 1: 4]. The shrub may be a tree but it is a stunted one. Why not be like a tree by the waters and be tall to the high heavens?

2. But a tree by the waters is better!

In place of curses, there are blessings for those who confess their sins and repent, that is, return to *fellowship* with God and His Christ. By that action, such people have acknowledged that “all those who forsake (God) shall be ashamed” [Jer. 17: 13]. Since they have put their trust in God, the blessing that they will receive is like that of “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*” [vv. 7-8].

The key to this tree’s abundance is the *constancy and assurance of water supply all year round*. Therefore, it does not have to worry about conserving water because there will be no drought. It does not have to worry about heat because when the land is hot, the breeze over the water will cool it down. It produces fruits all year round. Its roots are extensive and deep, and its leaves are bold and evergreen. Would you not like to be like such a tree? That is why the Psalmist has said, “It is good for me to draw near to God; *I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all (His) works*” [Ps. 73: 28].

Who is the source of this water? God answered that question when He told Jeremiah that He is “the fountain of living waters” [Jer. 17: 13]. Jesus reiterated this point when he told the Jews, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” [Jn 7: 37, 38]. In the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, John recorded the following [Rev. 22: 1-5]:

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but

the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no light there: they need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

Clearly, God has shown us in Jeremiah Chapter 17 a glimpse of the heavenly blessings that He has reserved for those who trust in Him.

3. Conclusion: the choice is obvious!

To trust in God is not to depend on a nebulous concept of God, as they do in religion or idol worship. It is to accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour, and to obey *all* that He has asked you to do. He is the only one that can introduce you to His Father as His brother or sister. Then, once God adopts you as His son or daughter [**Rom. 8: 14-17**], you acquire an unbroken *relationship* with Him. That is how you become like a tree planted by the waters. Parents may divorce from each other, but children can *never* be divorced from their parents. Children can fall out of *fellowship* with their parents (such as during a temporary disagreement or quarrel) but their parent-child relationship remains unbroken. In like manner, sin may break your fellowship with God every now and then but the relationship remains. That is why when you repent *each time you sin* and return, the renewed fellowship strengthens the relationship. See what happened to the prodigal son when he returned home! Like the tree by the waters, all the supplies that he had lacked when he was in the desert of want were restored to him!

Would you rather be a shrub in the desert of human uncertainty or a tree by the living waters of God and His Lamb? The choice is obvious!