

## “Leaky Cisterns”

Reading: Jeremiah 2:4-13; 36:1-4, 21-24

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

If there's one thing I've learned to hate, it's a leak. Not too long ago, Pastor Carey was away for a couple of days for a meeting and Junia was young enough at the time that she needed to go with her, so I had the house to myself. And I had things pretty well planned to maximize my time: I had planned to eat whatever gut-destroying foods I don't normally get to eat, and I'd planned on catching up on the superhero movies I was getting behind on. And then I heard it. Almost imperceptibly at first, more like a tickle in my ear than a recognizable sound, I heard a *drip, drip, drip*. And in an instant my plans changed to spending a good part of the next day replacing the bathroom faucet. There was a pinhole leak in one of the supply lines. Nothing too major, but it had to be replaced, and I don't do that sort of thing very often so naturally it took at least a couple of trips to the hardware store to get everything I needed. If there's one thing I hate, it's a leak.

And yet when I think back to my (very limited) experience with plumbing, most of the time the leaks are what I've had to deal with. The leaks are where the problems are. When we've had to do plumbing work in the parsonage, I can't think of very many times when it's involved water gushing out of a gaping hole somewhere. Most of the time it's just a leak. Sometimes it's not even a very big one, it's just enough to keep things wet and run the risk of bigger problems down the road. Sometimes it's even tempting to just leave it, ignore it, hope that it just goes away, or leave it for someone else to worry about. And when we talk about our lives with God, it's the same thing. Most of the time, in our day to day lives, it's not the big challenges to our faith we have to worry about. Most of the time the devil doesn't present us with an either-or option, a moment of denying your faith or facing horrible persecution for remaining faithful. Most of the time it's the leaks, the steady drip-drip that wears you down, that isn't a crisis now but might cause one later.

I love the imagery Jeremiah uses in our reading for today. “My people have committed two sins,” God says through Jeremiah. “They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” They've given up a sure and constant source of life for something they've made themselves. They would rather be able to control their source of water, even though it doesn't work very well, rather than rely on God. They would rather have leaky cisterns than a living spring.

We're spending time in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah for a few weeks, and though there are many ways we could understand and apply his words to our lives, to help focus our thoughts I'm pointing to the ways Jeremiah confronted the lies of his society with the truth of God. That was the job of a prophet, to speak God's reality into the confusion of the world. Last week we saw that Jeremiah's message was that God is not surprised by what we face and by what's going on around us. Today we see Jeremiah confronting the lie that our cisterns can hold water. They won't. Don't rely on them. They're bound to leak. If you rely on the work of your hands, the cleverness of your own intellect, the wisdom of your own understanding, the manmade gods of your own culture, as the sustainer of your soul, that cistern will leak. There is only one spring of living water.

There's a showdown that is taking place here, and has been taking place for a long time. You remember the story of Moses and the Exodus and the Red Sea, when the Lord saved the Hebrews

from Egyptian slavery by going head to head with the power of Egypt and its gods. The God of Israel showed His power time and time again, humiliating the greatest superpower on the planet, until He led the Hebrews out to freedom. But the warning was that they should never again be tempted to rely on the power and security of Egypt, because that security would come with the price of slavery. So often throughout their history, God's people were tempted in times of crisis to look back to Egypt with its strength and security. Maybe it would be better to give up reliance on God and instead trust the swords and chariots of Egypt. That's one of the things going on here, many centuries after the Exodus. The security of the nation is threatened, so some people are tempted to look back to Egypt for rescue rather than listening to God.

But the bigger issue is that they're changing their gods. The Lord invites them to look as far as they can from east to west, and see if they can find anyone who has done such a thing. It's unheard of, God says, for a nation to trade in their gods for a better option. The implication is that the pagans, the Gentiles, those who are supposedly so detestable, are more faithful to their false gods than the people are who have actually encountered the living God. After everything the Lord did for them, they abandoned Him. They went after worthless things, futile things that could offer nothing, and as a result they became worthless, empty, and futile themselves. You are what you eat, we might say, or where your treasure lies, there your heart is. In 2 Kings 17, which was written many years later and gives a list of the reasons why God allowed the nation to be destroyed, that phrase is one of the reasons: "they followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." The sense is that they didn't just wander away aimlessly, they deliberately exchanged the Lord for other gods. They gave up on the spring of living water and built their own wells instead. They couldn't control the spring, so they preferred the leaky cisterns that were the work of their own hands. The passage has the sound of a court case: God is bringing charges against the people, calling the heavens to witness this, and everyone is guilty from the priests to the scholars to the prophets. Everything is leaking.

Sometimes it's worse than a leak. A leak is passive: you're not dumping out the water, you're just failing to stop it from leaving. Sometimes it's more active than that. Sometimes it's a little rejection. Not as bad as completely rejecting God's word all at once; not as bad as flagrantly turning your back on God, but still rejecting just a little bit at a time. Can you picture the scene we read about in Jeremiah 36? Jeremiah has had his scribe Baruch prepare a scroll with God's words on it to be read in public, and after it's been read, several of the king's advisers are so moved by it that they decide they have to present it to the king, even though they know he hasn't been receptive to Jeremiah's words before. In fact, they even instruct Jeremiah and Baruch to go into hiding before they present it to the king, but the situation is so dire, and God's word is so desperately needed, that they feel like they have to make one last-ditch effort to convince the king. So they send their representative in to read the scroll to the king, who's sitting near a fire to warm himself in the cold of winter.

Keep in mind that this is a hand-written scroll we're talking about; this was long before printing technology, and scribes were a pretty specialized occupation. Nowadays there are discussions about whether we should even bother teaching children to write since they're likely to grow up in such a digital world, and that's surprisingly close to what it was like back in the Iron Age. Most people had no need to write, and indeed probably didn't need to read, either. Writing a scroll, especially a long one like Jeremiah's, would have taken a lot of time, specialized effort, and financial investment. And so this scroll is taken in to the king, and the words of Jeremiah begin to echo through the hallways calling people to repentance and warning them of the disaster that is sure to come. It's the last thing the king

wants to hear. How dare this prophet tell the king that his kingdom is doomed, and that people should surrender to their enemies and accept the consequences of their choices?

So as the scroll is read, the king reaches up, cuts off a section, and tosses it in the fire. Maybe he and his attendants think this is funny: Eugene Peterson says that “giggling in the presence of the holy, cheap joke making in the atmosphere of the sublime are defenses against an awareness that requires a change of life.” They're mocking the word of God little by little, column by column, rejecting it bit by bit with a show of contempt, because they can't afford to take it seriously. It's too dangerous to do otherwise. Being serious in a holy moment, when faced with God's instruction, might mean that you'll have to change, repent, admit that you've gone far down the wrong path. And so strip by strip, drip by drip, they sneer at God. I picture the reader of the scroll trembling: should I stop reading? He's obviously rejecting it, but do I have to continue with this farce? Or will the king vent his anger at me if I stop? And so the reading goes on. The word of God is proclaimed, but it is burned as soon as the words have been said.

Why would we do such a thing? None of us here would, say, burn a Bible page by page. None of us here would physically bow down before an idol carved from wood, or take part in a ritual to a pagan god made of stone. Why would the king burn the words of Jeremiah piece by piece? Why would the nation persistently exchange the fresh, living water of God for the stagnant waters of a leaking cistern? Because you don't control the course or the flow of a living spring. And if you listen to the word of God and take it seriously, you might have to change. If God is in charge and we are not, then our own decisions are not the basis for knowledge. If God is the foundation, then I have to build my life on Him, not where and how I want to. I have to give up control and trust that the unseen God is more faithful than the cistern I can see.

What lies do we face in our culture today? The same basic lie Jeremiah preached against. We continue to tell ourselves the lie that we can build cisterns that won't leak. We're coming close to an election, and it's been a nasty campaign season, and we hear leaders assuring us that their candidate is the one who can fix all your problems. *This* candidate is going to do what no one else has done before. *This* candidate is worth compromising our identity as Christians for the sake of gaining some power in this world. *This* candidate is worth trading your hope in Christ and His kingdom for hope in a better kingdom in this world. *This* candidate is worth ranking the values of God's kingdom, deciding which ones matter and which ones don't. Don't buy what they're selling. Vote as you feel is best, but don't think for a second that they're bringing real hope. That cistern is sure to leak. That king (or queen) is sure to burn God's word. They might burn different parts of the scroll, but they'll burn it just the same.

We continue to tell ourselves the lie that our cisterns won't leak in our personal and family lives. The world tells us that what really matters is being a “good” person, with “good” often being vaguely defined or changing its definition to meet the needs of the moment. Be a good person, raise a good family, impress the neighbors, don't cause trouble, don't ask too many questions, and rack up lots of debt along the way to keep the system going. A well-lived life is a well-entertained life in which you're successful and nice enough to be popular but not a goody-two-shoes who will make anyone else feel guilty. Religion, if that's your thing, is there for you to use and modify or discard as you deem necessary. God is there for you; you're not expected to be here for God. Religion is great if it's managed in a socially acceptable manner. But that cistern won't hold water. That's not what life is

about. Building your life on a foundation of yourself is bound to leak. Go for the stream of living water instead.

All in all, we continue to tell the lie that the things we can see and touch and understand and control are cisterns that will hold water, and they will be much more reliable and manageable than some God whose living water bubbles up from someplace we can't see and might take us somewhere we don't know. If I can control it, it's more reliable than God. That's the lie of the leaky cistern. It might hold some water for a while, to be sure, but it will leak over time. Come to the spring of living water, the God who will sustain you, the God who will be faithful. God is not safe, and He's not predictable, and you can't control Him, but knowing and following Him is what your life is for.



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