

### The Deceitful and Wicked Heart

#### Jeremiah 17

**Jeremiah 17:1-8** - *“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, <sup>2</sup> while their children remember their altars and their wooden images by the green trees on the high hills. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.”*

<sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord: *“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord. <sup>6</sup> 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.*

<sup>7</sup> *“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord, <sup>8</sup> 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.”*

#### Background Notes

In Jeremiah 16, the Lord placed three restrictions on Jeremiah as signs to the nation of Judah. First, Jeremiah was not to marry or have a family. Second, Jeremiah was not to mourn the dead or go to funerals. Third, Jeremiah was not to attend parties or festive occasions.

The point of these restrictions was to visibly communicate to Judah what life would be like in the near future, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies would overrun and conquer Jerusalem. Families would be disrupted and torn apart. So many people would be killed that there would be no time for mourning or burying the dead. And festive gatherings or dinner parties would be out of the question. These terrible conditions were the consequence of Judah's sins of idolatry, rebellion, and disobedience.

The theme of Judah's guilt continued in Jeremiah 17. Instead of having God's Law inscribed on their hearts, the people of Judah had sin inscribed on their hearts of stone (v1). Instead of putting the blood of the required sacrifices on the horns of the Bronze Altar at the Temple, they were offering sacrifices to idols at pagan altars on the high places. They loved their idols as much as they loved their children, and involved them in idolatry as well (v2). The Asherah idols, female deities, were set up under the trees of the high places. As a result, Judah and Jerusalem, the mountain of God and the wealth of the nation, would be given over to their enemies. The people would become captives in Babylon (v3-4).

In verses 5-8, Jeremiah put together some proverbs that contrasted the sin and futility of trusting in man, with the benefits and blessings of trusting God. Verses 7-8 sound a lot like Psalm 1, don't they? And they convey the same contrast – trusting in sinful man versus the blessing of trusting in the sovereign Lord.

The nation of Judah was prone to trust in Egypt for help against the threat of Babylon, rather than turning from their sin and trusting the Lord. No wonder they were like a dried-up desert bush in a land of salt, instead of like a fruitful tree by streams of water.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

**Jeremiah 17:9-18** - *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it? <sup>10</sup> I, the Lord, search the heart. I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.*

*<sup>11</sup> “As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right. It will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool.”*

*<sup>12</sup> A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. <sup>13</sup> O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You shall be ashamed. “Those who depart from Me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters.” <sup>14</sup> Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed. Save me, and I shall be saved, for You are my praise.*

*<sup>15</sup> Indeed they say to me, “Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come now!” <sup>16</sup> As for me, I have not hurried away from being a shepherd who follows You, nor have I desired the woeful day. You know what came out of my lips; it was right there before You. <sup>17</sup> Do not be a terror to me. You are my hope in the day of doom. <sup>18</sup> Let them be ashamed who persecute me, but do not let me be put to shame. Let them be dismayed, but do not let me be dismayed. Bring on them the day of doom, and destroy them with double destruction!*

Verse 9 is one of the best-known verses in Jeremiah – in fact, one of the best known in all the Bible: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?”* Some versions translate “desperately wicked” as “desperately sick” or “beyond cure,” but the point is that the human race is fallen. Our sinful nature is capable of any sin. ***We are sick with an incurable disease called sin.***

In this verse, the “heart” represented the source of our thinking and acting, both conscious and unconscious. The heart is incredibly deceptive (in case you haven't noticed). We believe what we want to believe. We have hidden agendas (and we may not even be aware of them). We wear all kinds of masks to disguise our inner thoughts. Who can understand the heart? Only the Lord can know our hearts (v10), and only in Christ can our hearts be healed and made capable of doing what is right. The Lord knows how to give each person what he or she deserves, and He knows how to make ill-gotten gain come to nothing, like an egg that never hatches (v10-11).

In verses 12-13, Jeremiah continued his contrast between those who look to the Lord on His glorious throne and worship in His Temple in Jerusalem, with those who will be put to shame because they turned away from the Fountain of Living Waters.

Jeremiah looked to the Lord alone as his Savior - his Healer, his Vindicator and Comforter, his Refuge and Avenger. Notice the five different descriptions of the Lord in these verses: Healer (v14), Vindicator (v14&16), Comforter (v17), Refuge (v17), and Avenger (v18). Are you looking to the Lord alone for help and healing, as Jeremiah did? If not, you're vulnerable to disaster, because the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

## 2. The heart is covetous and extremely selfish.

**Jeremiah 17:19-27** - *"Thus the Lord said to me: "Go and stand in the gate of the children of the people, by which the kings of Judah come in and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem;"<sup>20</sup> and say to them, 'Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates.<sup>21</sup> Thus says the Lord: "Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem;<sup>22</sup> nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers.<sup>23</sup> But they did not obey nor incline their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear nor receive instruction.*

*<sup>24</sup> "And it shall be, if you heed Me carefully," says the Lord, "to bring no burden through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day, to do no work in it,<sup>25</sup> then shall enter the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their princes, accompanied by the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever.<sup>26</sup> And they shall come from the cities of Judah and from the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin and from the lowland, from the mountains and from the South, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and incense, bringing sacrifices of praise to the house of the Lord.*

*<sup>27</sup> "But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.""*

The sermon in verses 19-27 is known as the "Gate Sermon." The Lord directed Jeremiah to preach at all the gates of the walled city of Jerusalem - and especially in the gate used by the kings to go in and out of the city. This would be like preaching a scathing sermon on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. - and denouncing everyone in the country, from the president on down! Suppose the Lord asked us to do that - would we be willing to do it?

Jeremiah's sermon condemned the fact that the people were breaking God's Law by not hallowing the Sabbath Day as a day of rest. They were commercializing the Sabbath. They were working on the Sabbath by carrying loads of material and products in and out of the gates of Jerusalem, just as they did on every other day of the week. Why would they do

this? Why not take a break and rest on the Sabbath Day, as the Law commanded? And why not honor the Lord and worship Him on this special day? Well, the people chose to work on the Sabbath because they were materialistic and covetous. They didn't want to lose out on any opportunity for making more money! (Sound familiar?) So, rather than honoring God, they were more interested in turning a profit. This was an extremely selfish and disobedient attitude.

In verses 24-26 the Lord said that if the people would change their ways and keep the Sabbath holy, He would again bless the nation.

This exhortation to keep the Sabbath, by the way, was addressed to ancient Israel, not to the Church today. There is no command in the New Testament that commands the Church to keep the Sabbath. The Church is free from the ceremonial requirements and laws of the Mosaic Covenant. And Sunday is not the "new Sabbath" – it is called "the Lord's Day in the New Testament.

However, observing a weekly day of rest is a biblical principle, and how we treat the Lord's Day may be an indication of whether we honor the Lord more than material things or activities of pleasure. Ancient Israel did not change her ways, and in the same way many people today refuse to honor the Lord with their time and material things - because the heart is covetous and extremely selfish.

## **Practical Application**

### **Be like a tree - not like a hanging basket!**

*"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord. <sup>8</sup> For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, that 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" (v7-8).*

We have several trees on our property, and we also have several hanging baskets full of flowers. We just returned from being away from home for about two weeks. We weren't worried about the trees wilting, but the hanging baskets were a different story. Without water every couple of days, the flowers would not only wilt – they would die.

We must put down strong and deep roots into the good soil and water of God's Word, so we can be growing trees with green leaves - trees that bear fruit.

Don't be like a hanging basket. It looks pretty today, but it will wilt tomorrow without special care. Its roots are shallow, and it has no water source – it's a "basket case," in more ways than one.

**Be like a tree - not like a hanging basket!**