

## The Gospel Without Religion Chapter 8

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### When Religion Becomes A Cistern

## JEREMIAH'S CISTERN PARABLE

Cistern Water is Stale Water, God's Presence is 'The Spring of Living Water'

God is Not a God of the Past but of the Present

*The Waters of God flow down from the heavenly "Throne of God."*

*They flow forth to flood and nurture our innermost being.*

*These waters are not a pond or a puddle.*

*There are spiritual rivers in depths to swim in.*

*The picture of refreshing streams of God are also spoken of in Psalm one and in the stories of Elijah, Elisha and Ezekiel, prophets of God.*

*Come and drink of the waters and be refreshed,*

*For in these you will taste of heaven's glory.*

### RELIGION: LEAKING CISTERNS

*"A God of Past Glories"*

The title *cisterns* comes from God through Jeremiah the prophet, He states, "my people have committed two evils, they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters and they have hewed for themselves cisterns which do not hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13). What kind of meaning does this have for us in relation to religious detriments? Viewed in a shallow way, we may think the prophet is giving a discourse on the best kind of water supply to have, flowing wells versus stored water; but it has deeper meaning. Speaking figuratively, God expresses that the worst thing which God's people can do is to forsake the fellowship and intimate closeness of God's presence. God declares that He is the fountain of *living waters*. To exchange that intimacy with something else, as a memory of another time, lacking the freshness and vitality of God's presence is a grave mistake.

Stored water is still water but God does not prize it. It has become stale in time and has lost the zest of freshness. Religiously speaking cistern water might be yesterday's fresh water, or last year's water, or even water of many generations past. Moreover, not just staleness is bad but God says further, that those cistern leak and are steadily drying up.

The cistern allegory has a wide range of application to religious tradition. The question might be, "How long has the water been allowed to stagnate?" Was it a year ago, a generation ago, or multiple generations ago. When was there a manifested presence of God moving and alive in the midst of the assembly of His people. If there is no sense of God living and moving in the center of our lives and in our church fellowships, We are having church or worship services as merely religious people. For most of us this is all we have ever known. Stories and traditions are all that remain. Traditionalism thrives on memories of some bygone day, or accounts that God had come by and left an historical token of his glory "way back when." That however, is not enough for the people who have deep spiritual needs, who have been wounded, bound, afflicted, imprisoned, enslaved by the lash and oppression of the enemy. What force can set us free, what force can soothe our pains and sorrows? What power can touch and salve the wounded spirit? It must be something full of divine life, power and compassion. It is that fount of living fountain which flows from God. God is always a God of now, not of yesterday nor of decades past. He is the I am who Is the present tense now God. A grave danger of religion is that it risks the separation of the believer from the present manifestation of a living God. A Heavenly Father who wants to continue to make His presence known to His special people. As Jesus spoke to a woman at the well of Samaria, "*I would give you living water!* and you shall never thirst again!"

God has always desired to close the gap between himself and the human family upon the earth. The story of how God addresses this purpose becomes the substance of scripture -- the Bible. It is written that God was at work in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to himself.(2 Corinthians 5:19) There remains another side of the equation regarding the matter of knowing God; the fact that there is an unrelenting spiritual power resisting God's program. This resistance is mostly unseen, but remains potent in its effects. Just as God uses human resources and requires "a yielded vessel" to minister His grace to others; so also does our adversary with his own spiritual hierarchy. The adversary, Satan, is a spirit being who also displays supernatural powers. God's adversary has a long established agenda. His agenda is never beneficial to humanity! Our adversary is a killer and a lying deceiver. As an enemy of God, there is no good in him. He is the king of all rebellion and rules over a dominion of unseen spiritual beings who follow his orders. Just as an earthly army has a chain of command, with a strict protocol of duties and responsibilities for every layer of authority; so is it with these spiritual armies. I remember taking an undergraduate course in college in anthropology. I liked the class. It was about all the divergent cultures in the world, how they lived and how cultures and societies were unique to their in their own environments.

Religion of some kind figured in every culture. Margaret Mead a revered name in cultural anthropology, defined religion as, the "belief in Spirits." Ancient or primitive cultures show more insight of the spiritual than many in the 'civilized' world where spirituality and belief in the supernatural has all but disappeared, even from religion. I mention the world of the spirit here because religion which does not acknowledge the spiritual forces arrayed in the heavens is dangerously ignorant of spiritual matters. (1Corinthians 12:1) A religion which does not recognize active spiritual forces is powerless to deal them. In this spirit realm forces of evil are in operation to steal from, to kill, and destroy people like you and me. Our being ignorant of spiritual forces, does not negate their reality or the consequences of recognizing them in our lives.

The first of the two spiritual kingdoms is the Kingdom of God where our King of glory is enthroned in a heavenly place; The second, the kingdom of darkness, where the "God of this world –Satan, the prince of the power of the air, the great deceiver, reigns as king. Because we live in a Spiritual world we need spiritual knowledge. A secular religion limited to material interests and understanding, speaks to the natural world and natural human potential.

Secular religion does not adequately deal with the forces which will impact us for an eternity. We need more than teaching about "goodness" as positive choices or positive social attributes and evil as bad choices which have bad consequences. God is not a God of psychological wellness and feeling good about ourselves, He is a God of spiritual restoration and reconstruction which is forged not by human will, nor human wisdom but by the power of Spiritual life generated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. When God does the work of renewal it is deep and eternally effective. How many have tried to reconstruct themselves through psychological rigors or acts of the will. Self discipline to change our fleshly impulses is good only as long as our own energies prevail. But when God's hand is set to work in the human soul the result surpasses anything that counseling or self-will could ever achieve, Joy unspeakable and full of glory.

C. Pinkney, March 28, 2024 Update