



## **The Self-Irrigating Christian**

### **Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #36**

**Jeremiah 17:5-8**

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I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Jeremiah 17:5-8. Summer is that time of year when a distinction is being drawn between neighbors. It is a distinction that is especially prevalent when there is extreme heat and lack of rain. I notice this distinction every time I drive through my neighborhood. It goes something like this—brown, brown, green, brown, green, brown, brown, green, brown. I notice the distinction as I look out at my backyard—which looks like a desert wasteland—and at the neighbor behind me whose yard looks like a veritable emerald Garden of Eden. It’s plush. All the neighbors who live around that man have a nickname for him—we call him, “The Sodfather.”

There is a reason that Sodfather’s grass looks so much better than the rest of ours. The rest of us drag hoses across the yard, put out sprinklers and give our yards just enough water to make our water bill go up without doing too much damage. However, if you look at Sodfather’s lawn early in the morning, you’ll see little sprinkler heads popping up one by one. As you watch the water come bursting out in abundance, it’s clear why his lawn looks so good. It’s because underneath that lawn there is a link of fresh, life-giving water that is flowing all through his yard, finding its way to the top of the yard and keeping it green—unlike the rest of our yards.

That picture of dry, arid land and green, abundant plants is a picture the prophet Jeremiah used to call the people to repentance during his day. Jeremiah lived at a turbulent, depressing time in the history of God’s Old Testament people. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been taken captive by the Assyrians as God’s judgment on them for their apostasy—for their turning away from God. Jeremiah ministered in the Southern Kingdom of Judah which was on the verge of being overrun by the new world power—the Babylonians.

Jeremiah is sometimes known as “the weeping prophet” because he wept for the people’s lack of repentance and for the state of the nation. I like what the ESV Study Bible says. It says that rather than “the weeping prophet,” he should probably be known as “the

persevering prophet” because he persevered through years without any real response to his message. Only two people really responded positively to his message: his scribe Baruch and Ebel-melech, an official of the king. Humanly speaking, it really didn’t look like Jeremiah had much success other than that.

The people were in this middle ground where they wanted to act like they were worshipping God but it wasn’t really in their hearts. They wanted the Lord God—Yahweh—to be their God and yet they also wanted some help from Egypt against their enemies. Into that context, Jeremiah comes with a very black-and-white message. He says, “There really isn’t this middle ground where you can hang out and try to have it both ways—have one foot in God’s camp and one foot in the world’s camp.” It’s really more like this dried-out yard and this green yard, or this shrub in the desert and this green tree planted by the streams of water. You can’t have it both ways. There are two ways to live. Either you’re like that shrub in the desert or you’re like that green tree planted by the waters.

That’s the message of Jeremiah 17. Let’s look at it, but let me pray before we do. Heavenly Father, as we come to Your Word this morning, may what Jeremiah said of Your Word be true of us. *“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts”* (Jeremiah 15:16). Amen.

Look at Jeremiah 17:5-8:

<sup>5</sup> *Thus says the Lord:*

*“Cursed is the man who trusts in man  
and makes flesh his strength,  
whose heart turns away from the Lord.*

<sup>6</sup> *He is like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see any good come.  
He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land.*

<sup>7</sup> *“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.*

<sup>8</sup> *He is like a tree planted by water,  
that sends out its roots by the stream,  
and does not fear when heat comes,  
for its leaves remain green,  
and is not anxious in the year of drought,  
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”*

Jeremiah is laying it out there as black-and-white. There's two ways to live. You can be like Person #1 who is like a shrub in the desert or you can be like Person #2 who is planted by a stream of water. Let's look at those two images of those two people.

## Person #1—The Shrub in the Desert

First, the person who is like the shrub in the desert. Notice this person's philosophy and approach to life in verse five. They trust in man and make flesh their strength. They trust only in human ability, in what they can see and in their own resources. They may believe in God but God doesn't really enter into the equation. You might say they're living as practical atheists—whatever God may be, He doesn't figure into the everyday life or affairs of human beings. This person's motto is, "If it is to be, it's up to me."

This person would also say, "If there is any need for salvation, it will definitely happen through my own efforts." They have a completely secularized view of the world. It's like Augustine's, *City of Man* or the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11—a monument to human initiative and ability apart from God. This person is characterized by arrogance, pride, autonomy and self-sufficiency. They have no need.

Look at the result for this person in verse six, "*He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness.*" This person's life is going to be like living in an arid, desolate place of thirst and death that has no nourishment. Their being is going to shrink and their growth is going to be stunted. They're going to live "*in an uninhabited salt land,*" Jeremiah says. It's also going to be lonely for this person. They "*shall not see any good come.*" Some translations say, "They will not see when good or prosperity comes." In other words, they're in such a desolate, desperate state that they're not even able to benefit when good comes around. Philip Ryken puts it this way when talking about this person:

"So even when the rains finally come, they will not do him any good. When the showers of blessing come, they will simply disappear into the sand. When the Holy Spirit falls upon the people of God in the power of revival, he will miss it because he will be somewhere else. The man who trusts in himself will be left parched and lonely."

(*Jeremiah and Lamentations* by Philip Ryken)

It reminds me of Jonah 2:8 and the person who clings to worthless idols—things they have made. God's Word says that the person who clings to worthless idols forfeits the grace that could have been theirs. Note the final assessment for this person—it was at the

very beginning of verse five. At the end of the day, this person is considered cursed. The banner over their life is, “Cursed.” Not only do they not know God’s favor, God is actually against them.

At the end of verse five, see what the source of their condition is—that their heart turns away from the Lord. Remember in biblical terms, the heart is the essential “you.” It is the seat of our desires and affections. It is our central character. This person’s central character is not turned toward their Maker but bent away from their Maker. It is taking confidence in their own resources. For Judah in Jeremiah’s day, this was an indictment against them for turning to foreign powers to be their strength rather than looking to the Lord. It was an indictment against them for their idolatry and their mixing of true religion with false religion, for oppressing one another and perverting justice for financial gain.

For us today it’s equally an indictment. In his commentary on verse five, Ryken says that, “this verse is a direct assault on American culture.” *“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.”* Ryken goes on to say:

“It would be hard to imagine a statement that is more un-American, at least in the twenty-first century: ‘Cursed is the one who trusts in man.’ In other words, anyone who trusts in technology, economics, psychology, medicine, government, the military, the arts or any other aspect of human culture is under God’s curse. Yet these are exactly the things Americans trust for meaning and security in life. American money says, ‘In God We Trust,’ but what Americans really mean is ‘In Self We Trust.’”

That is our tendency, isn’t it? I think this verse is a very appropriate reminder to us in an election year. While we ought to take full advantage of the privilege we have in being part of the political process, as followers of Jesus Christ we ought never to put our faith in that process. It’s a reminder to us that when we place our hope in material prosperity over spiritual prosperity—our relationship with Christ—we will shrink. We will shrivel and dry up. That’s the first person—the person who is like a shrub in the desert: self-reliant and man-centered.

## **Person #2—The Tree Planted by a Stream of Water**

Jeremiah says, “There’s a second plant that I want you to look at.” It’s a tree planted by streams of water. It has a consistent, ever-flowing source of nourishment and refreshment. Look at this person. Notice the echoes of Psalm 1:1-3 here:

<sup>1</sup> *Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;*  
<sup>2</sup> *but his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.*  
<sup>3</sup> *He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.*

There are echoes of that in Jeremiah 17:7. Notice this person's approach to life. The person who is like the tree planted by water "*trusts in the Lord,*" and their "*trust is the Lord.*" Their confidence is in the Lord. They rely on Him. They hope in God. They don't just trust in the Lord; notice it says their "*trust is the Lord.*" The Lord Himself is their trust. There's something personal here. There's a connection here that says, "God, I'm relying on You. I am staking my life on You." They are depending on God and resting in Him.

This person knows his or her place in the universe and understands the distinction between the Creator and the creature. They are characterized by humility. They are not competing with God for rulership of the universe. I'm reminded of what is said about Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:6-7, "...[He] *did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped* [or held onto], *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...*" This is a Christ-like approach to all of life. This person has been awed by the greatness of God and has not lost the wonder and the amazement. He or she understands that they're dependent upon God's grace.

Look at the result for this person. The result is fruitfulness, abundant life, a continuous intake of life-giving nourishment that leads to visible greenness of leaf and visible fruit. This person is actively engaged in seeking God. They send out roots toward the Living Water. Therefore they are able to stand strong when the pressures and temptations of life come upon them. They don't fear when the heat comes. They are not anxious in the time of drought. Their fruit is sustainable through the worst of times.

Here is the source of this blessedness and fruitful abundance—they are dependent upon God. They're trusting in Him and relying on Him. Their taproot goes down to the Living Water, the Source of all life and blessedness.

For Jeremiah's day, he is calling the people back to the true worship of God. He is saying, "Trust in God. Don't trust in some foreign power to save you. Don't fear the

impending judgment because it's coming—still trust in God. Have confidence in His final victory whether you see it in your lifetime or not.” We're reminded to do the same—to not trust in man-centered philosophies or solutions to our problems. We're reminded to not fear despite our circumstance and to have confidence in God's final victory whether we see it in our lifetimes or not. We know that the victory has already been won at the cross.

This is the bottom-line of Jeremiah 17—there are two ways to live. You can live as one trusting in human solutions and shrivel like that bush in the desert, or you can trust in God, make God your trust, know abundant fruitfulness in your life and know the continual stream of Living Water. Where you place your trust will determine the direction of your life. The direction of your life will be blessed or cursed as a result of where you have placed your trust.

When we come to a passage like this, we can't help but ask, “Where have I placed my trust? Do I look like the shriveled-up bush in the desert? Do I look like the tree constantly drawing nourishment from the Living Water? Have I placed my trust in my own ability? Have I come to the Lord and said, ‘Lord, look what I have done,’ or have I trusted Him for His grace?”

Jeremiah sets up two contrasting pictures here. The fact of the matter is we all start on the one side of the equation. He tells us that in verse nine. Look at Jeremiah 17:9-13. It's actually the Lord speaking in verse nine:

<sup>9</sup> *“The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick [or “beyond cure” as the NIV says];  
who can understand it?*

[Here's Who understands and searches it.]

<sup>10</sup> *“I the Lord search the heart  
and test the mind,  
to give every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds.”*

<sup>11</sup> *Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch,  
so is he who gets riches but not by justice;  
in the midst of his days they will leave him,  
and at his end he will be a fool.*

<sup>12</sup> *A glorious throne set on high from the beginning  
is the place of our sanctuary.*

<sup>13</sup> *O Lord, the hope of Israel,  
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;  
those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth [or “shall go  
down to the dust”],  
for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.”*

That has been Jeremiah's indictment from the beginning of the book. Early on in Jeremiah 2:13, God says this about His people, *"for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."* That is the state of each person's heart, isn't it? We are born with hearts that are desperately wicked and beyond cure. We look to resources other than the Lord. We dig out cisterns—places for water to gather—and we drink that putrid water rather than turning to the Source of Living Water. Jesus comes to us and says, "I am the Living Water. All of those who drink of Me shall drink and never thirst again" (John 4:13-14, 7:37).

The first thing we need to do when we come to this passage is ask ourselves, "Have I been there? Have I come to Jesus Christ, the Source of Living Water, in repentance and faith? Have I come to Him and asked for forgiveness that I might no longer be a shriveled up bush in the desert?" Then I might be a constantly renewed tree drinking from the streams of eternal life. We who have come to and drunk from that stream of Living Water know that even as believers we can often feel we are in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. Often we allow our circumstances to dictate that. Even though by God's grace we are His children and have been planted by the streams of Living Water, we're still living in that desert place. Again, our circumstances often make us feel cursed rather than blessed—like we're the desert rather than the oasis.

In an article called "Self-Irrigating Christian," Pastor William Farley comments about this passage and has this to say about relying on our circumstances: "The deeper our spiritual tap-root descends, the less we also rely upon life's circumstances, and the more we depend on intimacy with God for joy, productivity, and fulfillment." Intimacy with God is our connection to the Living Water. Then he goes on to give these principles for living in that place of relying on the Living Water for joy, productivity and fulfillment.

1. Jesus is the Living Water and our relationship with Him is the connection.
2. The taproot to Jesus, the Living Water, is faith. As we exercise faith, we draw on Christ.
3. Where our taproot of faith goes for nourishment determines our fruitfulness. Have we gone to human solutions for nourishment? Then we end up in the desert. Have we gone to Christ the Living Water? Then we are refreshed.

Where you place your trust will determine the direction of your life. When we trust in Christ, the Source of Living Water, we know the joy of being refreshed. We need to realize every day is a new opportunity to trust in the Lord and to renounce self-effort. Every day is a new opportunity to experience His blessing, favor and grace.

## Four Ways to Stay Fruitful

How do we do that? How can we be self-irrigating Christians? Not self-irrigating in the sense that the water is coming from ourselves, but that our self is tapped into the Living Water and we are continually drawing on Christ to grow in His grace, be abundant and be fruitful. I want to stick with the gardening analogy and talk about four ways to stay fruitful.

1. We need to weed.
2. We need to feed.
3. We need to be pruned.
4. We need the Son.

### 1. We Need to Weed

If we're going to be a self-irrigating Christian, we need to first weed out self-sufficiency through prayer. Self-sufficiency is the weed or thorn that we want to get rid of in our lives and the tool is prayer. Prayer itself is a declaration of dependence.

In his book *The Hidden Life of Prayer: The Life-blood of the Christian*, David McIntyre says of the church father Origin, "It has been said of Origin in his own words that his whole life was 'one unceasing supplication.' By this means, above all others, the perfect idea of the Christian life is realized."

What is the Christian life? The Christian life is communion with God. What does communion with God look like? It looks like prayer. Prayer is coming to God and saying, "God, I am needy. You are my Provider." Prayer is really a picture of the Christian life and of dependence on the Lord. I don't know about you, but I have found in my life that prayer is the number one way for me to commune with God and grow closer to Him. Yet it's typically the first thing that is ditched when life becomes busy and stressful. That's crazy! It's the number one way to become connected to God and yet it's the first thing that goes when life gets stressful—that's like a company that's in financial trouble firing its best salesman. It doesn't make any sense.

When we pray without ceasing, we clear the ground of our hearts for the weeds of self-reliance to be cut down and for the soil to be made a fertile place where faith can grow. We need to weed out self-sufficiency through communion with God in prayer.

## 2. We Need to Feed

We need to feed on God's Word. God's Word is like Miracle-Gro for Christians and we need to feed on it. The message of the Bible itself teaches us not to trust in ourselves but to trust in God. It says that God is the Creator and we are the creatures. It says that Christ is the great Savior and we are in need of being saved. It says that Christ is the King and we are His subjects, that Jesus is the Master and we are His disciples and that Jesus is the great High Priest and we are in need of intercession before the throne of God. The message of the Bible is that Jesus is the Bridegroom and we are His bride eagerly awaiting His return.

Jeremiah put it this way in Jeremiah 15:16, *"Your words were found, and I ate them [I took them in as nourishment for my life], and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts."* This was his experience of God's Word. In order for God's Word to be a joy and delight for our lives, we need to read our Bibles out of more than just habit and duty. It certainly is a great habit and a duty, but if we simply read our Bibles for checkmarks, we won't know this kind of fruitfulness. We need to read our Bibles with expectancy, depending on the Holy Spirit and trusting that God really wants to reveal Himself in His Word. Isn't it amazing that we have a God Who has spoken and wants to make Himself known? He doesn't want to conceal Himself; He wants to reveal Himself to us! He wants to do that every time we open His Word and read it in faith.

We need to weed out self-sufficiency through prayer. We need to feed on God's Word and make it Miracle-Gro in our lives.

## 3. We Need to Be Pruned

We need to allow trials to prune us. In John 15, Jesus used a very similar analogy when He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches and My Father is the vinedresser—the Master Gardener. If you abide in Me you will be abundant but My Father will prune the branches that aren't fruitful."

When I was about 13, one of my first jobs was pruning at an apple orchard. I remember two things about that job. Number one is that it's really cold at the end of a

metal ladder in early March in Michigan. Number two is that I had no clue what pruning was about. It didn't make any sense to me at all. Here we were, hacking and chopping all kinds of branches off this tree and it just looked terrible to me afterwards. There were all these branches underneath. I'm not a tree-hugger or anything, but I felt like I needed to apologize to the tree for what we had just done.

It didn't make any sense to me until I came back in the fall for my other job of picking apples. Then it made sense because I could see the abundant fruitfulness of the trees. I could see that those branches would have been in the way and those trees would not have been as fruitful as they were if we hadn't pruned them months earlier in the winter.

God's purpose through trials is to prune what hinders our relationship with Him. It hurts. It's not our natural tendency to embrace trials. It is not natural for any person to embrace a trial when it comes his or her way. I know what my natural tendency is when difficult things happen in my life—panic and then rely on my own resources. That's pretty much my typical two-step plan. When I do that, I become that dried-up shrub in the desert. I am parched and in a lonely place.

God calls us to *"Count it all joy...when you meet trials of various kinds"* (James 1:2). I think there are at least three things we need to embrace, accept and trust in faith about God when we experience trials:

1. **He is sovereign over all things** including this trial
2. It might be a surprise to me but it wasn't a surprise to Him.
3. As much as we're believing in His sovereignty, we need to believe that **He is good** and means to do good to His people. We need to believe that's His desire and His way—to do good things and give good things to His children—including us.
4. We need to believe that **He is near**. He will never leave me nor forsake me (Deuteronomy 31:8; Hebrews 13:5).

He is sovereign over this, He is absolutely good and He is near to me in this trial. When we embrace these things, we become like those trees whose leaves remain green even in the drought and are not anxious even when the heat is turned on.

I think what is true of individuals can also be true of a church body. As a church, we can be like a shrub in the desert or we can be like a fruitful tree planted by the Living Water. As various members of our body go through seasons and trials of life, it is a privilege and precious grace of God to embrace those trials together with them as a congregation. I am

sure that God will make us more dependent on Him and grow us in our faith as we wrap our arms around those in our midst who are experiencing trials through the days, months and years ahead.

## 5. We Need the Son

We need to weed out self-reliance through prayer, feed on God's Word, allow trials to prune us and depend on Jesus Christ the Son. Jesus is the source of Living Water. He took the discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well to a new level when He told her, *"...whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life"* (John 4:14).

Friends, we need to rehearse regularly the truths of the gospel—of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We need to rehearse and remind ourselves of those truths or we're going to find ourselves in a wasteland of self-effort. On one hand self-effort is going to tempt us to pride—thinking that we've done something to contribute to our salvation. On the other hand self-effort is going to tempt us to doubt because we know deep down we could never do enough to save ourselves. We need regular reminders that salvation is completely dependent on Jesus Christ.

That is why the Lord gave us the Lord's Table. It is a reminder that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. It's a reminder that our deceitful, desperately wicked hearts would condemn us—but God has not left us to ourselves. He has done what we could not do for ourselves. Listen to the words of Jeremiah 31:31-34:

*<sup>31</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. <sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

When we take the Lord's Supper together we are reminded that the Lord Jesus Christ came to guarantee that new covenant—the new covenant that Jeremiah and the other

prophets spoke about. We are reminded that it is a covenant sealed in His blood and because of what He did on the cross, people like you and me who have desperately wicked hearts can be renewed. We can have a new heart, a heart of flesh that loves the Lord and wants to serve Him.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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