

## **JEREMIAH 17.5-9: WHAT ON EARTH AM I HERE FOR?**

*(40 Days of Purpose, Chelmsford 18/2/07)*

### **1. LIFE BEGINS WITH GOD**

There are no return-fares for life's journey. It's a one way trip to the end of the line. We can't go back and start again, so there's not much point in being wise after the event. It's vital that we therefore have a travel guide – and the travel guide for life which God has given us is the Bible.

So, as with the help of Rick Warren, we begin our 40 day spiritual journey of discovering God's purpose for our life, it is important that we look to the Bible for guidance.

And so this morning we begin with a word of wisdom taken from the Book of Proverbs: **“A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree”**. It is with this word of wisdom taken from Prov 11.28 that Rick Warren heads the first section of his book *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Let me quote it to you again: **“A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree”**.

The quotation is taken from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible – and it seems to me that in this instance Peterson really hits the spot.

By contrast the GNB is much more mundane: **“Those who depend on their wealth will fall like the leaves of autumn; but the righteous will prosper like the leaves of summer”**. And frankly the other modern translations are no better.

There are essentially two ways of living, says the Proverb:

1. On the one hand, a life lived for self, a life lived in pursuit of self, and that leads to death. Far from enriching life, it leads to an impoverishment of life.
2. On the other hand, where a life is lived for God, and in dependence on God, that leads to fulfilment and happiness.

Surprisingly, perhaps, a life lived for self, deprives us of our very self.

In one sense we have never had it so good, as we have it today.

In spite of all the financial pressures upon us, our standard of living is far higher than it ever was. We live in an age of unprecedented prosperity.

And yet we are not the happier. We are suffering from 'Affluenza'.

Or in the words of Walker Perry, an American novelist, we live in the time of the 'living dead', in which people *“who seem to be living lives which are good by all sociological stands... somehow seem to be more dead than alive”*. He went on: *“There is something worse than being deprived of life: it is being deprived of life and not knowing it”*

This is the context in which we do well to heed the question put to us by Rick Warren, and which will be forming the subject of our reading and of our small group discussions: *“What on earth am I here for?”*

Some years ago Laura Ashley started up her country fabrics business because she sensed *“that most people wanted to raise families, have gardens and live as nicely as they can”*.

And of course, there is nothing wrong with families & gardens & living nicely.

But if that becomes the be all and end all of life, then life becomes empty and meaningless.

To quote Proverbs 11.28.again: **“A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump”**. Perhaps not surprisingly, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who dedicated his life to proving that God is dead, spent the last ten years of his life in what was then called a lunatic asylum. His biographer says that this was partly the result of trying to live with the logic of his position as an atheist.

*What on earth am I here for?*

Rick Warren points out that, paradoxically, we are not here for us, but for God.

To quote Rick Warren: *“If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born **by his purpose and for his purpose.**”*

If we want to experience fulfilment and meaning here in life, then we must start with God – and go on with God.

So we come back to the Proverb again: **“A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree”**

## 2. GOD MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Along with this verse from Proverbs Rick Warren also couples two verses from Jeremiah 17, which essentially reinforce the thrust of Prov 11.28: **“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord... They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit”** (Jer 17.7-8 NLT).

This morning I particularly want to focus on these two verses.

However, to appreciate the two verses, we have to put them into context, for like the Proverb, there is a contrast between two trees:

**“The Lord says, ‘I will condemn those who turn away from me and put their trust in human beings, in the strength of mortals. They are like bushes in the desert, which grow in the dry wilderness, on salty ground where nothing else grows. Nothing good ever happens to them. But I will bless those who put their trust in me. They are like trees growing near a stream and sending out roots to the water. They are not afraid when hot weather comes, because their leaves stay green; they have no worries when there is no rain; they keep on bearing fruit’** (Jer 17.5-8).

Yes, there are two types of trees here in mind.

1. On the one hand, what the GNB calls **“bushes in the desert”** (v5). I am told that the Hebrew word denotes the dwarf juniper, commonly found in rock cliffs and barren places of the desert. It is an interesting word, because it is associated with a Hebrew root meaning ‘*stripped*’ or ‘*naked*’; the idea being that this particular shrub looks bare and unadorned.
2. By contrast the other tree is covered with green leaves, and has loads of fruit. It is a really healthy tree. According to Peterson’s paraphrase: *“Never a worry through the hottest of summers, never dropping a leaf, serene and calm through droughts, bearing fresh fruit every season”*. Why? Because this tree is **“growing near a stream, and sending out roots to the water”** (GNB).

What a difference water makes – especially in hot countries.

To celebrate my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday Caroline and I went on a cruise down the Nile. And there in Egypt you see the difference that water makes. For everything along the river bank is green – but the moment you are away from the river, you are in the desert. The contrast between the green river banks and the surrounding desert is amazing.

To return to Jeremiah: the two trees are symbols of two contrasting ‘faiths’.

1. On the one hand, there are people who have faith in themselves – people who are self-reliant, in the sense that they live their lives without reference to God. They are not necessarily bad people – most of them are very decent people, who work hard to provide for their families. But essentially they rely upon themselves and their own resources. They believe that ultimately happiness or success in life is down to what you put into life. God does not feature in their lives. But this kind of self-reliance or self-confidence however leads to loss of self. In the words of Jeremiah, “The Lord says, **‘I will condemn those who turn away from me and put their trust in human beings, in the strength of mortals. They are like bushes in the desert...’**”
2. On the other hand, there are people who have faith in God, who put God first in their lives, who look to God for strength and direction. It is with those in mind that the Lord says: **“I will bless those who put their trust in me. They are like trees growing near a stream”**.

God makes all the difference.

Those who live for themselves, for whom life centres around getting more and more things, end up being the losers.

Yes, for a time they may well seem to prosper – but the trappings of affluence can be deceptive.

For when the scorching heat comes, when the rains fail, i.e. when everything begins to go wrong in their lives, when illness or tragedy strikes, when the pressures of work or indeed of redundancy became intolerable, then what?

Those who profess to be self-reliant have nothing to draw upon – unable to tap into the resources that really matter they shrivel up inside – they become like dried-up bush in the rocks.

By contrast those who put their trust in God and live for him, are able to flourish.

Do notice: they may well share the same environment as those who never give God a thought – in the sense that those who put their faith in God are not immune to the stresses and strains of life.

God does not promise his children that they will be free of disappointment and pain.

We live in a fallen world. Hard times do come.

But when those hard times come, God’s children are able to cope, because they are able to tap into God. Notice, our resources are not in ourselves, but in God who, as it were, waters our roots, keeps them strong and firm. As a result of God’s presence in our lives, we do not keel over when the wind blows, and the storm howls.

In the words of the Psalmist: **“God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble”** (Ps 46.12).

Yes, there is the world of a difference between those who put their trust in themselves or indeed others, and those who put their trust in God. To quote Prov 11.28 again: “**A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree**”.

### 3. GOD IS TO BE TRUSTED

If this is so, then the question which faces each one of us, is this: in which category do I find myself? When the chips are down, do I really trust God, or do I try to use my own wits to get through life?

The temptation for everybody here this morning is to reply ‘We trust God’. After all, we have come to church this morning – we believe in God, do we not? The truth is that we can sometimes kid ourselves. We may well believe in God, but this does not necessarily mean that we trust him.

We may well give mental assent to the idea of God, but do we truly trust him for all that we are and all that we have? When it comes down to the practicalities of life, are we as self-reliant as any other?

The path to true faith in God begins when we realise the folly of self-reliance – once we realise our own weakness and inadequacy.

I find it significant that immediately after the analogy of the two trees with its contrast of trusting in self and trusting in God, Jeremiah goes on to say “**Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful; it is too sick to be healed**” (17.9).

Now when Jews of old spoke of the heart, they had in mind not the emotional centre of a person’s being, but rather the intellect and the will. In other words, it is not the heart as such which is confused and sick, but the mind and the will.

For us to try to live life relying upon our own insights is therefore a nonsense.

The fact is that our lives have been blighted by sin, our thoughts and judgements have been distorted by sin, and because we cannot see aright, we cannot live aright.

God is the only one who can rescue us from ourselves – he is the only one who can heal us and restore us.

So Jeremiah cries out in v14: “**Lord, heal me and I will be completely well; rescue me and I will be perfectly safe. You are the one I praise**”.

It is God, and God alone, who can deal with the sickness of our hearts and minds.

It is God and God alone, who can rescue us from the power of sin, which is at the root of this sickness.

Jeremiah looked forward to the day when God would make a new covenant with his people: “**I will be their God and they will be my people... I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs**” (Jer 31.33,34).

This morning we shall gather around the Table and look back to the day when God made that new covenant in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus.

This is the God we are called to put our trust in: the God who loves us and through his Son offers forgiveness for our sin, the God who through his Spirit offers strength for living.

The fact is that left to our own resources, we are doomed to make shipwreck of our lives. But with God’s help, we can find purpose in this life, and hope for the next.

So, 'What on earth am I here for?' We are here to live life with God and for God. The fact is that **"A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree"**.

Let me this morning encourage you to put your faith in the God who made you, and who gave his Son for you.

Life without God is quite literally a 'dead-end'; only with God does life gain meaning and fulfilment.