

Where our hearts are

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Date: 14 April 2013

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[0 : 0 0] Now we are turning to our Bible reading, which is continuing our studies in Jeremiah, this evening reaching chapter 17, which is on page 645.

So if you turn please to page 645 and we'll read Jeremiah chapter 17. Jeremiah writes, Thus says the Lord, Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.

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.

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. 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.

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

[2 : 0 6] 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.

A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. 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, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed.

Save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise. Behold, they say to me, where is the word of the Lord? Let it come. I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness.

You know what came out of my lips. It was before your face. Be not a terror to me. You are my refuge in the day of disaster. Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but let me not be put to a shame.

[3 : 0 9] Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed. Bring upon them the day of disaster. Destroy them with double destruction. Thus says the Lord to me, Go and stand in the people's gate, by which the kings of Judah enter, and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who enter by these gates.

Thus says the Lord, Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath, or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers.

Yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction. But if you listen to me, declares the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy, and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes, who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses.

They and their officials, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This city shall be inhabited forever. People shall come from the cities of Judah and the places around Jerusalem, the land of Benjamin, from the Shephelah, from the hill country, and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings for the house of the Lord.

But if you do not listen to me to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden, and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall about the palaces of Jerusalem, and shall not be quenched.

[5 : 13] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now it would be helpful, please, if we could have our Bibles open at page 645, Jeremiah 17.

And before we look at it, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, we believe that you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear.

And we pray, Lord, as we look at this passage, not just written long ago to the people then, but a passage for us on whom the ends of the ages have come, that you will indeed open your word to our hearts and minds, and open our hearts and minds to your word.

In the name of Christ Jesus, the living word. Amen. Many people here will know of my great enthusiasm for C.S. Lewis.

But I came to know C.S. Lewis, first of all, as a writer in English literature, before I came to know of him as a theologian and the author of Narnia.

[6 : 35] Many years ago, when I was studying English at St. Andrews, about the time that Noah left the ark, I came across his truly marvelous book on medieval love poetry called *The Allegory of Love*.

A very long book, a very detailed book, but a very readable book. And I think it's about some 200 pages into that book. He says this, *The readers, if any have read so far, will think that I have led you through scenery that is more varied than attractive.*

I think that was unfair to himself, but it struck me, and I was actually dipping into that book earlier this week, that those of you who have journeyed with me through Jeremiah, if any have journeyed with me, will probably have found the journey more varied than attractive.

Because Jeremiah is a tough and difficult book, isn't he? And one of the things that's so tough and difficult is he appears to be keeping on changing his mind and changing his moods.

A chapter like this, the chapter we've read, appears to vacillate from strong faith to deep depression. It appears to talk about inevitable judgment, and then also appears to hold out the hope of repentance.

[8 : 05] Now, these are not contradictions. As I've said so often, Jeremiah places ideas together to get the maximum effect of them. You see, the point to remember about Jeremiah is, his faith, his belief in the ultimate purposes of the Lord never wavered.

His personal circumstances changed, his moods changed, and his own personal faith was shaken very, very badly. And that's understandable.

I'm always, when I read some of the commentators, I sometimes think, I wonder how many of you have gone through an experience remotely comparable to Jeremiah when you criticize him for wavering in his faith.

I wonder how many of these commentators, sitting in their comfortable studies, writing commentaries on Jeremiah, in their no doubt blameless and meritorious lives, have had the kind of experience of this man.

So I think what we need to remember is, there is a consistent message, consistent message that Lord is faithful to his covenant, and his covenant people need to respond.

[9 : 17] But his personal circumstances, his personal faith, is under horrific attack. And it is in this chapter again. And if you think this is bad, just wait till we get to chapter 20.

Scenery which is more varied than attractive. And once again, this chapter is not a disconnected collage. One of the commentators heads at somewhat despairingly miscellaneous sayings.

I don't think it is. I think there is a very clear theme in this chapter, and it occurs first of all in verse 1, engraved on the tablet of their heart.

Then again in verse 5, cursed is the man whose heart turns away from the Lord. Then again in verse 9, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

And in verse 10, I the Lord search the heart. I think that dominates the chapter, including the last part on keeping the Sabbath holy, which you may well wonder what has anything to do with what's come before.

[10 : 27] This is a chapter about people's hearts lend. Where are our hearts? That's why I've called the title tonight, Where Our Hearts Are. Remember the Sermon on the Mount, Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.

This is about hearts lens. Over the years, as I've interviewed students coming for training, not so much here, but in earlier days, I've often asked them what their heart's lend is.

Not just to describe to me the doctrines of their faith, but describe to me where they live, what nourishes them, like the tree mentioned here and in Psalm 1, where do their roots draw water from?

This is a chapter about heart's lens, where our hearts are. And first of all, in verses 1 to 11, we have false hearts and true hearts.

The basic distinction, false hearts and true hearts. And as so often, what is true and good is shown by contrast with its opposite, what Willie regularly calls necessary negatives.

[11 : 34] The true heart is shown by the fact it is not the false heart. And that's why Jeremiah is showing us, first of all, what the false heart is like.

And first of all, the false heart is hard and insensitive. Look at verse 1. The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, with a point of diamond. It's engraved on the tablet of their heart.

The word pen is possibly not the best translation. We're talking about an engraver's tool making an indelible impression on some kind of metal or on stone.

And if you've read the whole book, you will realize that this is a deliberate contrast to the famous New Covenant passage in chapter 31, where Jeremiah says, the Lord says, I will write on the tablets of your heart.

Not on tablets of stone, but on the fleshy tablets of your heart. The New Covenant is to be written in the heart. And if the hearts are like this, then clearly a radical change is needed.

[12 : 39] Not a rejigging of the old heart, not a polishing up of the old life, but the kind of radical change that can only be done by the Lord. And also what they are inwardly, they are outwardly on the horns of their altars.

Now the horns of the altar were projecting pieces on the surface of the altar, each of the four corners, to keep in place the wood. For sacrifice. And Jeremiah is introducing, once again, a theme that's been so common throughout these chapters.

Your religious practices are false. They're bogus. They're an abomination to the Lord because you don't really mean them. Your hearts are hard, therefore your worship is pointless.

And their children, I think mention of children here is this passes down the generations, the Asherim, the goddess of fertility, who was worshipped with great orgies under trees and on the high hills.

The very place, the very places which should have showed to them the power of the creator. After all, the green tree, the person who has a true heart, is like a tree planted by the water.

- [13 : 51] The high hills belong to the Lord. Psalm 95, 95, the mountain peaks are his. And yet these are the very places in which the false gods are believed to be.

The fancy word for this is syncretism. In other words, mixing up, pick and mix, worship of the Lord and of other gods. The biblical name is idolatry because if you're worshipping lots of gods, you're not worshipping the Lord at all.

Now you see the problem. There's an awful lot of religion going on in Judah. But there's not a lot of heart engagement with the Lord. See, the problem about religion is, religion is not really about the heart at all.

Religion is essentially about what I do for God. It's essentially about works. See, religion says, I do good, therefore God accepts me.

It's exactly the opposite of grace. The gospel says, God accepts me, therefore I do good. So you see what's happening there. inner hardness is resulting in a show, in a religious parade.

- [15 : 03] The devil loves religion. Because if you can get people to be religious, you can then get them to trust in their own good works and turn away from the living God and reject the fountain of true waters and as Jeremiah said, go to the broken cisterns.

So the false heart is hard and insensitive. Secondly, in verses 5 and 6, the false heart is fruitless. Verse 6, like a shrub in the desert shall not see any good come.

The good is a clear echo, it seems to me, of the creation passage. God saw everything he had made and it was good or very good. This is a more general analysis now of the dangers of the unbelieving heart.

Not just ancient Judah with the horns of the altars and worshipping the goddess of fertility, the human heart in general. Interesting, Jude uses a similar phrase about false teachers.

They are trees that don't bear fruit. They are waterless winds. Nothing can grow. No life flourishes where the heart is false.

- [16 : 14] And another point, the false heart is deceitful. Verse 9, this once again is the basic human condition, isn't it? The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

You see, we don't need to be deliberately lying to be false. The heart is deceitful. We are all very good at deceiving ourselves, aren't we? We are all very good at looking at ourselves and seeing us not as God sees us.

I know Robert Burns said, power to see ourselves as others see us. Rather more important to see ourselves as God sees us because the way others see us may be just as misleading and deceitful as the way we see ourselves.

It's sick. In other words, humanly speaking, it can be cured. Who can understand it? We can't, obviously. But the Lord, I the Lord, search the heart and test the mind.

There's a well-known passage in 1 John, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us. Or confess is a fascinating word there.

- [17 : 33] The word is homologo, which means to say the same as God about our sins. When we look at our hearts and look at our sins and see them the way God sees them.

It's awfully easy if we are confessing sins either to trivialize them, isn't it? Oh, I know I'm not everything I should be. I'm not as bad as her. Oh, I know I'm not the kind of person I ought to be, but look at him.

Or else, we sin in technicolor. I was brought up in a group of very sincere, loving Christian people who insisted you had to have a dramatic conversion.

Now, the trouble was, in those kind of circles, it was very difficult to commit the kind of colorful sins that would have resulted in such a dramatic conversion. The result was you get testimonies of people greeting holy, fictitious, and colorful stories.

Now, that is not saying the same as God says about sin. Of course, later on, as I got older, I realized the total deceitfulness and sinfulness of my own heart, but you see the point that's being made.

[18 : 47] We cannot trust our feelings. We cannot trust our hearts unless they are true to the Lord. So, you see, the false heart, the false heart is hard, false heart is fruitless, false heart is deceitful.

The true heart, there's this passage, verses 7 to 9, which is very close to Psalm 1, same kind of imagery, whether Jeremiah was influenced by the Psalm or not, we don't know.

Remember, the Psalms appear in various forms very often through the Old Testament books. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord.

In other words, the true heart is rooted in the Lord. Look at verse 5, blessed is the cursed is the man who trusts in man, whether trusting in ourselves or in other people, and makes flesh his strength.

Remember the old hymn, the arm of flesh will fail you. You dare not trust your own. I expect many of us here have had many, many, can look back to many, many occasions when the arm of flesh failed us, when we thought we were stronger than we were.

[20 : 01] That's why the true heart trusts in the Lord. Knowing he will be true, does not fear when heat comes or for its leaves remain green, is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

In other words, the changing circumstances are not what's depended on but the unchanging Lord. Through all the changing scenes of life, the Lord remains faithful, and therefore if our hearts are rooted in him, they will be true and they will be kept.

Second thing about the true heart is that the true heart knows the Lord will give a fair judgment. Verse 10, I the Lord search the heart and test the mind to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

Wouldn't it be awful if on the last day, we appeared before the judgment seat and one of us was sitting on it. That would be unthinkable awful.

Just as bad if it were me as it was any of you because we cannot trust, we cannot trust the arm of flesh. David said at the end of 2nd Samuel, let me fall into the hands of the Lord and not into the hands of men, for with the Lord is great mercy.

[21 : 23] The trusting the true heart knows the Lord is faithful, the Lord is righteous. And I think the point about verses 12 to 13 is not an irrelevance.

Jeremiah, as he so often does, breaks into song. This is a song of praise, a glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.

Now, if you remember back in chapter 7, the great temple sermon, Jeremiah said, don't say this place is the temple of the Lord because it isn't. It's become idolatrous.

But the glorious throne is the place of our sanctuary. From the very beginning God has been faithful and to the very end will continue to be.

And the true sanctuary is where he is. Remember Jesus is going to call himself the temple. Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it.

[22 : 25] I will build it again. This is not religious mumbo-jumbo. This is the worship of the living creator and the joy of the new creation. Let me help us to understand the last part of the chapter about the Sabbath.

So the true heart rooted in the Lord drawing on the streams of living water knowing he will be true through changing seasons. Knowing that the Lord is righteous and when he pronounces judgment it will be fair and therefore the true heart bursts into praise.

Not because incidentally Jeremiah is feeling any better. That's not the point. The point is he's praising the great realities of the Lord from the beginning to the very end.

The fountain of living water. That's why the Bible talks about the sacrifice of praise. Very easy to praise if our hearts are rejoicing. Very difficult to praise in circumstances like Jeremiah's.

So the false heart and the true heart. Then in verses 14 to 18 we have the inquiring heart. Now I've already mentioned that scattered throughout Jeremiah's book is a number of what are called confessions.

[23 : 42] I think laments would be better because he's not actually confessing sin so much as raising questions. The true heart is the heart that refuses to let God go.

Remember way back in Genesis Jacob says I will not let you go unless you bless me. It's not unfaithful to ask God these big questions.

Indeed it's the false complacent heart that doesn't ask questions. You never get your questions answered if you simply go to a religious person or to a religious service. Everything will be glossed over.

Everything will be made to seem alright. Jeremiah is asking the big questions again. And the big question here, look at verse 15, they say to me where is the word of the Lord?

Look Jeremiah you've been going on like this. You've criticized everything and everybody. You've been utterly negative about the whole of our life, our worship, our rituals.

[24 : 45] So where is the word of the Lord? Where is the least evidence that the Lord is with you? And that is an experience that many of God's people have.

Remember, the Lord does not always bless faithfulness immediately. faithfully. I think we need to remember that because sometimes people have to go through long, hard, dark nights of the soul before that faithfulness is vindicated and sometimes indeed it's not going to happen until the last day and indeed it's never going to fully happen for any of us or any fellowship until the last day.

how do we know that what's preached from here is true? Well, the point is, it's a question of faith, isn't it? Because it's not demonstrably obvious that it's true.

Where is the word of the Lord? I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips. Jeremiah is saying, look, Lord, I preach what you've told me to preach.

I've said what you want me to say. I haven't watered it down. Well, where is the reality? And notice verse 14.

[26 : 05] He realizes above everything else, he needs salvation. Salvation in the fullest sense of the word. Remember, people sometimes talk about the three tenses of salvation.

Saved in the past, being saved in the present, and to be saved in the future. In the middle of the 19th century, the great preacher J.S. Stewart, who was also professor of New Testament at Edinburgh University, was also asked by an American student, Professor Stewart, when were you converted?

And he replied, before the worlds were made. Now, that is absolutely true. Of course, he had come to faith. But you see the point. The glorious throne set from on high, set from the beginning.

Jeremiah has to rest on these great realities. The Lord chose me. The Lord is working in me. And one day it will be seen to be vindicated. And heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed.

In other words, I don't want sticking plasters. I don't want aspirins. I want true, deep healing and cleansing. That's what he's saying. And he is asking honest questions.

[27 : 18] And being very honest. Verse 17. Now, that may sound rather drastic.

But remember, if Jeremiah is convinced, and he is convinced, that this is the word of God. If he is convinced, and he is convinced, that disobedience will bring judgment.

Then clearly, he is putting himself in line with God. Part of the problem sometimes is that we try to be kinder than God. We try to water down judgment.

So that people will think we are rather more attractive people. But the point is this. We have no right to change the message. Let those be put to shame who persecute.

Let me not be put to shame. The very things you get in the Psalms as well. I often compare Jeremiah to the Lament Psalms. So we have the inquiring heart. We have the false heart and the true heart.

[28 : 17] The inquiring heart. And what about verses 19 to 17, which I'm going to call the heart's true home. Let me explain to you what I mean. Now, you see, if you read all this about hearts, and then you come to this bit.

Oh, you've got to keep the Sabbath day. It sounds as if legalism is intruding, doesn't it? We've gone away from this high soaring faith. We're leaping to legalism.

But that's to miss the whole point about what the Sabbath represents. Now, of course, in the Decalogue, in the Ten Commandments, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Lord says, remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

But behind that is Genesis 2. God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. And God rested on the Sabbath day from all the work that he had done.

And throughout Scripture, and particularly it is true in the letters of the Hebrews, in Hebrews chapter 3 and 4, the Sabbath is a picture of the new creation.

[29 : 22] The heart's true home will be a true balance of leisure and work. Now, you know, that's something we don't often get right in this world. Work is not a result of the curse.

But overwork and tiredness certainly is, as is unemployment on the other side. But you see, in the new creation, which is represented by the Sabbath, the heart will be truly at home, will have reached its true heart then.

And when we see it in this way, verses 19 to 27 take on quite a new light, it seems to me. Now, look at verse 19.

Thus says the Lord to me, Go and stand in the people's gate by which the kings of Judah enter, which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem. This is a message for the king and also for the people.

The gate in the Old Testament is a place of business, of commerce, of politics. This is the place where wisdom calls out in the book of Proverbs.

[30 : 28] Wisdom calls out in the gates, the head of the streets. She utters her voice, Enter his gates. Can't help recalling Psalm 100, verse 4.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Come into the city of God. And seeing that, not a place of religion, but a place of the heart's true home in the new creation.

I think this is what Jeremiah seems to me to be saying here. Once again, I want you to notice two emphasis here. Once again, the emphasis on listening and obeying.

Verse 24, If you listen to me, declares the Lord, And bring in no burden by the gates of the city on the Sabbath day. But keep the Sabbath day holy and do no work on it.

See what the Lord is saying? You cannot work to earn my favor. It's all of grace. It's nothing to do with works.

[31 : 30] I was reading something that Tim Keller said the other day. He was talking about, he said, How can we possibly boast that we were born?

It had nothing to do with it. It was totally outside our control. So how can we possibly boast that we've been born again? Once again, that is a gift of grace.

And that is the point of doing no work on the Sabbath day. It's luxuriating in the grace of God. Resting in that grace. Which points forward to the new creation.

This is the essence of covenant. Living in harmony with the principles the creator has built into the universe. That really is the whole thrust of the book of Proverbs I've mentioned already.

Living life in those kind of principles. Doing no work. I've long believed that as evangelicals we believe in justification by faith.

[32 : 27] That we cannot do anything to bring us into the kingdom of God. But I increasingly believe that we believe in sanctification by works.

When we think about it, why are we so anxious that everybody knows what we're doing in the kingdom of God? Why are we so ready to tell everybody about our activities and our busyness?

Do no work. Keep the Sabbath day holy. I'm not saying that these things should not be done. But what I'm saying is our sanctification no more depends on works than our justification.

Doing good deeds before men is about religion. Rejoicing in the grace of God is about gospel. And the second emphasis here is the restored kingdom.

Verse 25. Then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses. They and their officials, the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, this city shall be inhabited forever.

[33 : 35] Now even in Jeremiah's time, if King Zedekiah, in whose reign these words were almost certainly spoken, had repented, the city would have been saved from Babylon.

But that was not to happen. But surely it's pointing forward to something far deeper. In Matthew 21, the son of David, the true David's greater son, rode into the city, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, rejected but by the cross and the resurrection, opening the kingdom of heaven to all who believe.

And that seems to me is the ultimate meaning of this. Kings and princes riding on chariots and horses. And this city shall be inhabited forever. Because remember the holy city.

This great image that runs through scripture of Zion. The holy city is not an entity in the new creation. The holy city is the new creation under a different picture.

Read the prophecy of Isaiah. You'll find he's continually moving between the restored landscape and the holy mountain. Again in the book of Revelation. And notice verse 26.

[34 : 53] The people have come to the cities of Judah, the place around Jerusalem, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices. This is very like what he said to say at the end of chapter 16, about the people flooding to Jerusalem.

And like Isaiah's great passage, the peoples will come and climb the hill of Zion and worship Zion's God. The very heart of the matter, burnt offerings, sacrifices, grain offerings and frankincense.

These sacrifices that point to Christ, the once for all sacrifice. The trouble of course is when we emphasize on the observance of Sabbath, or for that matter Sunday, what we tend to do is either flood it with the mundane, treat it like any other day, or we freeze it with the forbidden.

And it becomes joyless. And it becomes anything but an anticipation of the new creation. See, neither way, either exalting the day or trivializing the day, goes to the heart.

But notice the if there. If, excuse me, if you do not listen. You see, obedience leads to the son of David.

[36 : 09] Obedience leads to Zion, which will stand forever. This obedience leads to judgment. This is a passage about heartlands.

This is a passage that's saying to us, where our treasures, there will our hearts be also. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Lord, how we praise you for that this prophet, Jeremiah, was faithful to you in his day and generation.

He did not water down the message or try to make it more palatable, but he remained, saying the things you asked him to say, even in the midst of opposition. Help us, Lord, to rest in you and to look to our hearts' true home.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen.