

BOAST ABOUT THE RIGHT STUFF**JEREMIAH 9:11-16, 23-24**

Sometimes, bragging and boasting can turn into almost an art form. If so, the North Koreans might be at the very top. Kim Jong-il was North Korea's supreme leader from 1994 to 2011. He was the father of North Korea's current dictator, Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-il was presented as larger than life by the North Korean media. Reportedly, Kim underwent daily intensive memory training that involved memorizing huge amounts of information. Kim was quoted as saying, "I remember all computer codes and telephone (numbers) that workers are using now." At one meeting, North Korean officials said they were impressed when Kim recalled all of their phone numbers with "lightning speed." Kim's memory wasn't the only amazing attribute he claimed. He apparently wrote operas, piloted jet fighters, and produced movies. But North Korean propaganda stretched credulity when it stated Kim's golfing accomplishments. The story goes that the first time he ever played a round of golf, Kim Jong-il shot 11 holes-in-one. Hmm... Today's Scripture deals with boasting about the right stuff.

Last week I began a new series of messages based on the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. It contains the words of a prophet who lived about 600 years before Jesus. Reading through Jeremiah is a bit like walking through a very long spiritual desert. Negative, joyless, discouraging. But every now and then you come across a kind of oasis in the book of Jeremiah. After trudging through long chapters of spiritual sand and rock, you then come across a few verses that are positive, insightful, uplifting, or encouraging. It's like coming across an oasis in the desert – a place of refreshment, renewal, life, and hope – in a dry, thirsty land. I've picked out seven of these oases in the book of Jeremiah for us to consider. That's why I'm calling this series of messages "Oases: Life-Giving Streams in Jeremiah's Desert."

The people of Israel were busy worshiping anything and anyone but the one, true God. The wealthy and powerful were taking advantage of the poor and vulnerable. The majority arrogantly believed that God would never allow a foreign nation to capture the capital city of Jerusalem. After all, the temple King Solomon built some 300 years earlier for the Lord was located there. Surely the Lord would protect the temple built in His honor! God gave Jeremiah a very difficult assignment. What was it? "Hey, so-called 'people of God' – the Lord has had it with you. You're as wrong as wrong can be. God's judgment is coming and it can't be avoided. Jerusalem will be lost, the temple destroyed, and the majority of you deported. Resistance is futile. God will not save you from the invaders. Surrender for your own good."

Maybe the most succinct summary of Jeremiah's entire 52 chapter message is found in just a few verses: 9:11-16. Let me read it while you follow along. Israel had rejected the Lord and refused all pleas to repent and return to Him. As a result, they now faced the full weight of His judgment which would come in the form of an enemy invasion. This judgment could no longer be averted. Too late. No religious ritual and no sacred place – even the temple - would provide protection from the judgment to come. Now, that's definitely not the spiritual oasis I want you to experience with me today. That's part of the desert! But the oasis is found in the same chapter just a few verses further

on: 9:23-24. Ahhh.... Now that's better, isn't it? It just kind of pops up out of nowhere. What we discover there is this wonderful, unexpected little oasis of spiritual truth. In just a few words, Jeremiah provides us with a marvelous insight into what truly matters and what doesn't. It's presented as a kind of contrast. He reminds us of what human beings value and what God values. They aren't the same thing. First, let's consider...

WHAT WE VALUE.

What do human beings value? 2,600 years ago the Lord said through Jeremiah "Wise people should not boast that they are wise. Powerful people should not boast that they are powerful. Rich people should not boast that they are rich." (Jer. 9:23 NET) What's the old saying? "The more things change, the more they stay the same." What do most people today consider to be the most important, valuable possessions in life? What matters? What will help you get ahead? What will ensure success and happiness in life? First, knowledge. But this kind of knowledge is far more than just having a kind of encyclopedic grasp on information. It's not about being a walking, talking Google app. It's more than just being really smart academically. It's the effective use of knowledge. The best English word for it is probably wisdom. We admire and look up to people we think are wise. If someone says to you, "You are really smart," or "You are really wise," it's a compliment. Your chest might stick out a bit more than normal.

Second, we value power. Strength. Power is the ability to dominate, take over, or project a significant influence in some way in the world. We admire powerful athletes. That's why we watch professional sports. We admire powerful businessmen. That's why we look up to Jeff Bezos of Amazon or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. We admire powerful politicians and powerful celebrities. We vote for them. We watch their movies or download their music. That's why we want to have the most powerful military in the world. Again, if someone says you're strong or powerful – be it physical strength or just the ability to influence other people significantly - it's meant as a compliment. You have something of value. Power or strength in almost any form is of great value.

Thirdly, we value wealth, don't we? Riches. Financial clout. We admire wealthy people like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett many times just because they're rich. We think their enormous wealth is something good and important. Some people think money is the answer to every problem in life. More schemes are created to achieve wealth, to increase wealth, or – if necessary – to take wealth away from others and get it for yourself than probably any other pursuit in life among human beings. I don't think 2,600 years has changed what human beings value most even one iota. It's still very much knowledge or wisdom, power or strength, and wealth or riches.

Are knowledge, power, and wealth bad things? Absolutely not. That's not at all what God said through Jeremiah, is it? In fact, there are many passages in the Bible that suggest all three are actually very good things God can give people as blessings. There's nothing intrinsically evil or bad about any of them. Wisdom is a gift of God. To have a strong body, or a powerful personality, or an innate ability to influence people positively are all great blessings. Money – honestly acquired and managed – is indeed

a great asset in life. Some of the great men in the Old Testament – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, David, and Solomon – were fabulously wealthy.

So, why the kind of negative tone then? “Wise people should not boast that they are wise. Powerful people should not boast that they are powerful. Rich people should not boast that they are rich.” (Jer. 9:23 NET) What turns these good things into bad things? The problem is with us not with knowledge, power, or wealth per se. It’s because of two mistakes we make. First, we value knowledge, power, and wealth more than a personal relationship with God. God says, “If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they understand and know me....” (Jer. 9:24 NET) Someone has said, “The greatest enemy of the best is the good.” In other words, you can settle for getting good things, become satisfied with them, and forget about getting what’s best. You can settle for knowing God superficially.

In 1889, American journalist Edgar Nye introduced the phrase, “a mile wide and an inch deep.” He was referring to the Platte River. The Platte is a muddy, wide, shallow, meandering stream mostly in Nebraska. You can’t use it for shipping. It was disqualified because of its lack of depth. Nye wrote that the river “had a very large circulation, but very little influence. It covers a good deal of ground, but it is not deep. In some places it is a mile wide and three-quarters of an inch deep.” And so the phrase was born. It’s not meant to be a compliment. It’s used to describe people whose knowledge is superficial. Is your knowledge of God a mile wide, but an inch deep?

There’s something infinitely more valuable than knowledge, power, or wealth. It’s a personal and eternal relationship with the living God. When you value knowing God most of all, knowledge, power, and wealth have a way of taking their proper place. The best and the good get aligned. They become great blessings to ourselves and others. But if you don’t value God the most, those three blessings get twisted up. They become curses. Knowledge turns into intellectual arrogance. Power becomes a way to manipulate, abuse, and control others. Wealth turns into greed which sometimes means taking advantage of people to get or stay rich. Apparently, this was part of the problem with the “movers and shakers” among the people in Jeremiah’s day. The wise in Jeremiah’s day were Israel’s governing and religious elite. The powerful and strong were Jerusalem’s military. The rich had gotten wealthy through greed and exploiting the poor. When they’d put their ultimate trust in such things rather than in knowing God, the people of Israel had made a profoundly wrong choice. They’d forgotten about God and all their knowledge, power, and wealth had turned from something positive into something negative. It certainly wasn’t going to save them from God’s judgment.

Here’s another reason knowledge, power, and wealth can become bad. We falsely assume that they’re more about personal achievements rather than God’s blessing. Jeremiah talks about boasting often in these two verses. What it is and what it’s not. Perhaps you have a keen intellect and an impressive education. These are good things, but they’re not something to boast about. They aren’t the most important things to possess. Perhaps you’re endowed with remarkable physical strength or the ability to project influence or power. Maybe you’re a born leader who naturally exerts authority

over others. Not worth boasting about. Perhaps you have everything money can buy. Again, nothing to boast about.

We give ourselves too much credit for getting knowledge, power, and wealth and too little credit to God for making them possible to get. The inevitable result is boasting. Instead of feeling gratitude toward God, we project pride in ourselves. That's why Jeremiah rejected the whole idea of boasting here. I'm not trying to diminish the value of hard work. And, of course, personal effort is an important part of acquiring knowledge, power, and wealth. But even the ability to work hard comes from God Himself. Who gave you your body, your brain and your abilities? We have nothing that we have not received. Get over yourself and be thankful. Give up boasting as ultimate foolishness. Live gratefully. That happens when we consider...

WHAT GOD VALUES.

“If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they understand and know me. They should boast that they know and understand that I, the LORD, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice in the earth and that I desire people to do these things.” (Jer. 9:24 NLT) Quite simply, what really matters in this life and for all eternity is knowing God and what He values. This is far more important than possessing knowledge, power, or wealth. On the one hand, if you have knowledge, power, or wealth, but you don't know God, you ultimately possess nothing of real value. On the other hand, if you know God, but you're kind of lacking in the knowledge, power, or wealth categories, it's no big deal. You have what matters most. Isn't that Paul's point over in the New Testament? “Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.... Therefore, as the Scriptures say, ‘If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.’” (1 Cor. 1:26-29, 31 NLT)

Sometimes truth that's just assumed need to be savored. Isn't it remarkable that we can actually know God? Don't lose the wonder of that great truth! The Bible makes that assumption everywhere. In other words, God created us in such a way that we can actually understand Him and know Him personally and experientially. Jesus said, “And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.” (John 17:3 NLT) Jesus just assumed it's possible to know God. I don't think Paul, the great Christian leader, ever took it for granted, however. He once wrote, “Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.... I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.” (Ph. 3:8,10 NLT)

It's very clear what the Lord meant here by knowing Him when He spoke through Jeremiah. Knowing about God is important. We sometimes call it "doctrine." It means we explore things like the fact that God is omniscient. He knows everything there is to be known. We wrestle with the truth that God is omnipresent. He fills the universe in such a way that there's literally no place from which He is absent. We marvel at God's omnipotence. He is all powerful. My mind gets boggled when I remember God is eternal. That simply means God has never had a beginning and will never have an end. Amazing! But here knowing God is like knowing your spouse, your parent, your child, or your closest friend. It's personal and experiential. It's knowing what a person likes and dislikes, what makes him happy or her angry, what attracts her to you or what distances him from you. This is the kind of knowing that God invites you and me to experience. Intimate. Personal. Experiential.

Head knowledge about God is great, but only up to a point. But really knowing God is more like being a baseball shortstop. You can watch videos, read books by the greatest shortstops of all time, and listen to coaches lecture on what makes a good shortstop. But what will make you a truly good shortstop is getting out on the field and practicing. The only way you'll really get a feel for the game is to field ground ball after ground ball, or figure out when to play the ball on a short hop, or discern how far to cheat toward second base when the double play is on. The more practice you actually have at being a shortstop, the better you'll be. Getting a "feel for the game" in knowing God is much the same. You can listen to many sermons and read countless books, but true knowledge happens only when you practice the disciplines that lie at the heart of the faith. Like what? Like meditating on and then simply obeying God's Word, like learning how to pray, like learning how to discern leadings of the Holy Spirit, and like trusting God through very difficult times. As those disciplines are practiced, your life becomes more attuned to God's life. Like a very experienced shortstop, you just know what to do. You just start to know God personally and experientially.

Notice that God goes on to underline here what's most important for you and me to know about Him. He always acts out of "hesed." That's the first Hebrew word. It shows up 245 times in the Old Testament. No one English word can cover all of its meaning. Here's a partial list: "loving kindness, mercy, love, steadfast love, faithfulness, loyalty, and unfailing devotion." It's very close to the Greek word for God's love – "agape." "Hesed" is an inner aspect of God's character that prompts Him – not because He must and certainly not because we've earned it or deserve it – to show kindness, mercy, grace, and generosity to you and me. The other two words are very close in meaning. In Hebrew they're "mispat" and "sedaqa" – usually translated "justice" and "righteousness." They convey the truth that God always does the right thing. Both words refer to how God relates to and treats human beings – always with integrity, always with fairness, always with honesty, always with goodness.

What's the proof that you and I know God personally and experientially? When God sees those same character qualities showing up in your life and mine: hesed, mispat and sedaqa. "They should boast that they know and understand that I, the LORD, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice in the earth and that I desire people to do these

things.” (Jer. 9:24 NLT) It’s when we love God, yes. But it’s also when we love other people faithfully, devotedly, and generously regardless of whether they deserve it or not. It’s when we relate to God with integrity, yes. But it’s also when we treat other people with integrity, with honesty, with fairness, with mercy, and with kindness. When God sees His own character showing up in - and being lived out - by followers of Jesus here on Earth, He is pleased and delighted. After all, this is exactly why He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross and rise again from the dead: to make it possible for God’s love, faithfulness, and justice to show up in your life and mine consistently. Knowledge, power, and wealth however valuable they may be even when properly used are never as valuable as truly knowing God. What does it mean to be a Christian – a follower of Jesus – on a day by day basis? It’s all about allowing Jesus to fill your life and mine with His loving kindness, integrity, and righteousness. It give Him great pleasure to find those qualities – His qualities - in your life and mine.

Years ago, Jennifer Tatum found her mother at the kitchen table, reading and chuckling in frustration. Jennifer asked Mom what she was looking at. She told Jennifer that she'd been studying Proverbs for her devotions, and she'd just read chapter 31—the chapter that offers a list of what makes a godly wife. Mom was frustrated, because she realized she could never be the woman God described in the passage. They talked about it some more, and Mom finally arrived at a decision that still inspires Jennifer today. While it may not be easy to be a godly woman, Mom decided to just take it one verse at a time. She said, "I'll work on the first item in the list. When I've got that one mastered, I'll move to the next one—hopefully I'll be a godly woman before I die." Years later, Jennifer checked with Mom to see how she was progressing. She laughed and told her she was still only seven or eight items into the list, but was currently stuck on, "Her children call her blessed." Mom said, "I might have to wait for all of them to grow out of their teens before I can accomplish that one."

Recently, Jennifer and her sisters got together and made a certificate of completion they called "Proverbs 31 Training." They took every verse from the passage, and came up with an example of when Mom had fulfilled that requirement. It ended up looking like a real diploma, and it had her many accomplishments listed one after the other. Jennifer and all her siblings signed it, including her dad. They read it aloud to her, and when they got to the last verse—"Her children call her blessed"—one by one, we all said, "Mom, you are blessed." Mom cried and cried. She probably never thought she would fulfill all the descriptions of the woman described in Proverbs 31. When her children were able to point out an instance when she had done each one, it was too much to contain. She'd finally reached her whole life's goal! Jennifer says what her mom is going to do with her time now is anyone's guess!

The more you walk with God each day, the more you read His Word, the more you keep your heart open to His leadings and direction, the more you learn to trust Him and obey Him through both life’s ups and downs, the more you know Him. And that’s the only accomplishment worth boasting about. The more you know God, the more you become like Him. It’s just inevitable. And that gives Him much joy!