

HOW GOD KEEPS MY LIFE “GREEN”**JEREMIAH 17:5-8; PSALM 1**

Do you consider yourself an environmentalist? Concern for the planet on which we live is often referred to as “going green.” It’s certainly a current trend in our culture. Like most trends, going green has become a source of pride. According to the Institute for Grocery Distribution, nearly 70 percent of today’s shoppers reach for more expensive grocery items if they’re marked organic, fair trade, or free range. Everything from your neighborhood supermarket to high fashion has been marked by the fad. An outdoor-wear company, Patagonia, produces fleece jackets made from recycled plastic bottles. Diane von Furstenberg, Oscar de la Renta, Nike, and Levis all offer eco-friendly items. Even Sam’s Club now sells jeans and T-shirts made with organic cotton. Just about every time you turn on the TV, it seems some celebrity somewhere is promoting his or her newest environmental pet project. My subject today is not actually about the environment, although let me say in passing the Bible teaches us that God created the Earth and has given human beings the task of caring for it and not abusing it.

There’s a literal kind of “going green” that means being concerned about the physical environment around us. But there’s a spiritual kind of “going green” or “staying green” that I want us to think about today. It’s based on a passage in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. We’ve been taking a journey through that book in recent weeks reflecting on what I’ve called spiritual oases – wonderful passages that provide spiritual insight and encouragement. Let’s look at the passage I have in mind for today. Now if that Scripture has a familiar ring to it for you, it might be because you’re thinking about another passage which is very similar – Psalm 1. It was likely written before Jeremiah was born. It’s possible that Jeremiah himself was familiar with Psalm 1 and was even trying to quote it. Let’s also read Psalm 1 just now.

Both passages use the same image. Both refer to a healthy tree planted by a river as a picture of a person who enjoys a great relationship with God. Palestine – where both Psalm 1 and Jeremiah are set – was and is a very arid climate. Trees that could withstand long months of drought and still remain lush, green, and fruitful were a phenomenon. Most of them were planted by a river from which they could draw moisture even in times of drought. Spiritually speaking, God has the same effect on a person’s life. If He is present and in charge of your life, you remain “green” so to speak, like these trees pictured on the screen today. Jeremiah added the picture of a dry, withered shrub out in the desert as a picture of a person who doesn’t have this kind of relationship with God. I think of those old TV westerns that sometimes showed a plant called a tumbleweed just blowing around – dry, dead, rootless. “They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land.” (Jer. 17:6 NLT) If God isn’t present and in charge, your life cannot remain “green” spiritually in any lasting way. Ultimately, your life resembles a stunted shrub – a tumbleweed – with no hope for the future.

So, here are the questions we need to answer this morning. Do you want to live a “green,” healthy life spiritually or a dry, dead life? Do you want to live a well-watered life spiritually or a withered life? It’s your choice. You get to decide. And as I reflect on

these two passages in God's Word – Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1 – it seems to me that it comes down to how you and I answer at least three questions. And they're questions we need to ask and answer not just once in life, but often – maybe every day. So, here's the first question...

QUESTION #1: WHO WILL I TRUST IN LIFE?

There's a phrase widely used in our culture today with which I have a problem: "faith-based." Often, certain projects or programs are described as being "faith-based" which means that religious believers of some kind – Christians or people of other faiths – are the ones providing those projects or programs to the wider community. What's wrong with that? The phrase "faith-based" assumes some people are "people of faith" while others are not. That's a wrong assumption! At the end of the day, we are all "people of faith" or "faith-based." The only difference between people is the object of our trust. Regardless of who you are – regardless of your religious orientation or lack thereof – each of us exercise faith in something or someone as we make decisions in the present or make plans about the future. Who or what do you trust in? Where or in whom have you put your faith? The contrast is not really between those who have faith or not, but instead those who trust in God and those who trust in themselves – those who have faith in God and those who put ultimate faith in themselves.

The Bible is very clear on this issue. If you want to live a well-watered, "green" life, spiritually speaking, you will put your trust in God and God alone for this life and for eternity. All the time. Every day. If you want to live a withered life, you will put your trust in yourself – in your own intelligence and in your own abilities – to somehow get you through life and even into eternity. "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD.'" (Jer. 17:5 NLT) You and I must choose one or the other. Either we live our lives putting our ultimate trust in God or in oneself. Scripture makes it clear that it's a horrible mistake to live your life trusting in yourself rather than in God.

Pastor and author, J.R. Vassar, writes about doing ministry in Myanmar (Burma) and coming upon a broken Buddha. One day he and others were prayer walking through a large Buddhist temple, when Vassar witnessed something heartbreaking. A large number of people, very poor and desperate, were bowing down to a large golden Buddha. They were stuffing what seemed to be the last of their money into the treasury box and kneeling in prayer, hoping to secure a blessing from the Buddha. On the other side of the large golden idol, scaffolding had been built. The Buddha had begun to deteriorate, and a group of workers was diligently repairing it. The insanity and despair of it all hit me. Broken people were bowing down to a broken Buddha asking the broken Buddha to fix their broken lives while someone else fixed the broken Buddha. We can be just the same. We can be broken people looking to other broken people – even ourselves - to fix our broken lives. That leads to a withered life.

Who so negative? Why can't I trust myself or put trust in myself? Jeremiah answered that question in the verse right after what I read today. "The human heart is the most

deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jer. 17:9 NLT) The heart was just another word there for your inner self – the place where we make decisions, where our attitudes toward God, other people and life are formed, and where the motivations behind our actions are created. The Bible makes it clear that every last one of us is deeply flawed. By nature, we are deceitful. We even lie to ourselves. Our inner selves have an incurable spiritual sickness that won't get healed this side of Heaven. The depth and subtlety of the spiritual darkness in our hearts – the inner parts of ourselves – is beyond our comprehension. We just have to take God's word for it. The old saying is memorable and true, "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart." If you trust in yourself, if you fail to acknowledge that you can deceive yourself, you're on the fast-track to a withered life. It means that you don't accept God's rightful role as Lord and Master of every area of your life. When you fail to trust the Lord in any area of your life you invite a curse upon yourself. When you fail to trust the Lord, you reject Him. What's the ultimate outcome of living life like that? When you fail to trust the Lord, you end up living an unproductive, fruitless, withered life.

So, what does putting your trust in God look like? We talk a lot about that at church and among followers of Jesus. Jeremiah said, "But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence." (Jer. 17:7 NLT). I think of another very well-known Scripture that says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take." (Pro. 3:5-6 NLT) What does it mean to trust God? At the very least, it means I surrender my life to His Lordship every day for everything. No area of my life is excluded from His sovereignty. He's my Boss everywhere all the time. It means I put my confidence in Him not in myself. My sense of being safe and secure is in Him be it my financial security, my health security, or where I will spend eternity.

Psalms 1 provides another interesting, but maybe not obvious, answer to what it means to trust God. "You thrill to GOD's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night." (Ps. 1:2 MSG) You develop an appetite for God's Word. You're eager not only to know what it says, but also to do what it says in your life every day. Our KRBC definition of discipleship is the acrostic ROPES. Both the "O" and the "S" in ROPES emphasize this aspect of trusting God. Being an intentional follower of Jesus involves a relationship with God and others, obedience to what God reveals in Scripture, prayer, evangelism, and Scripture itself. I'll say something bold and "in your face" today, but I believe it's scriptural. If you have no desire to know God's Word or if it just bores your sox off, there's a very easy explanation. You're not truly a follower of Jesus. I don't care if you walked down a church aisle years ago or said a prayer to accept Jesus into your heart. A "green," well-watered life loves God's Word. Can't get enough of it. It's an essential part of what it means to trust God. "But they delight in the law of the LORD. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season." (Ps. 1:2-3 NLT) A withered life has no use for God's Word. Doesn't want it. Will never read it. Certainly not interested in doing it. "But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water." (Jer. 17:7-8 NLT) Do you want a withered life spiritually or a well-watered life? Here's a second question we need to ask and answer.

QUESTION #2: WHOSE APPROACH TO LIFE WILL I FOLLOW?

Psalm 1 addressed that question more than Jeremiah. It says, “Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.” (Ps. 1:1 NLT) A kind of downward progression is actually suggested right there. People who end up living a withered life spiritually start by listening to the advice of people who have no use for God. They may not be bad people necessarily. They just live their lives without any real interest in God or what He wants. They bring that godless orientation into their attitudes, their behavior, and their values. If you follow the advice of these folk, you’ll take the next step down: standing around with sinners. Yes, we’re all sinners, so what does that mean? Sinners, here, refers to people who openly enjoy attitudes and behavior that don’t honor God and harm other people. Stay there long enough, and you’ll take another inevitable step down. You’ll join the mockers. Who are they? These are the people who know God exists but reject Him. They’re proud about rejecting God and scorn anything and everything that has to do with Him. “No one’s going to tell me what to do. Not even God.” A shrub doesn’t dry up and die all at once. And just like a tree doesn’t wither immediately, neither does a life. A spiritually withered life begins with a slow, creeping conformity to the world’s attitudes toward God and life. It’s a downward spiral. You accept advice that leaves God out of the picture. Then you adopt godless attitudes and behavior. Finally, anything to do with God becomes revolting to you.

Just as there are steps down to a withered life, there are steps up to a well-watered life. Obviously, an attitude of worship and daily surrender to God is the alternative. I refuse to trust in myself, but instead acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus over every area of my life. I recognize that I’m a sinner and I ask for and receive God’s forgiveness regularly. I cultivate a desire to obey God and actually do obey Him even when it costs me to do so. I’m open to the Holy Spirit convicting me, changing me, and transforming me as needed. I don’t avoid godless people; in fact, I try to point them to Jesus. How else are they going to hear about Jesus if I’m not in their lives at all? At the same time, I’m always on the alert for godless attitudes, and I reject them when the Holy Spirit points them out to me. Living like that results in a well-watered life spiritually. Live like that and God will keep you “green.” How will I actually live out my life from day to day? Whose approach to life will I follow? Here’s a final question to ask and answer when it comes to choosing between a well-watered life and a withered life.

QUESTION #3: HOW DO I DEFINE A BLEST LIFE?

People who don’t follow Jesus answer that question very differently than God does. For them, a blest life has little to do with God if at all. Instead, “blessing” is often defined as enjoying great health for as long as possible. “Blessing” is having all the money you want and more. “Blessing” is a happy retirement. “Blessing” is a happy family. “Blessing” is reaching your goals, achieving your dreams, and being self-fulfilled. “Blessing” is having other people think of you as being successful or significant.

So, how do you define a blest life? What rises to the level of and deserves the description “blessing”? Hear again what Jeremiah says. “But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. 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 never stop producing fruit.” (Jer. 17:7-8 NLT) What’s a blessing from God’s perspective? First and foremost, blessing is the ability in this life to develop a trust relationship with God. It begins when I put my faith and trust in Jesus to establish a relationship with God. I trust in Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead to cover my sins and make it possible even to have a relationship with God. I refuse to trust in my own pathetic goodness. Then, as I learn to follow Jesus, I endure a variety of “trust tests” and pass them with the help of the Holy Spirit. A trust test is any difficulty in life that forces you to depend on God to a far greater degree than you ever did before. Instead of pulling you away from God, it pulls you closer to Him. Losing your job is a trust test. Holding on to God through a terminal illness is a trust test. Surviving a divorce is a trust test. Seeing a precious loved one pass away is a trust test. Children living far from God is a trust test. You get the idea. When you go through anything hard that increases your hope and confidence in God and God alone, it deserves to be called a blessing.

Trust tests actually point to another definition of a blest life. It’s a drought-proof life. Not a life free of droughts, but a life that survives any and all droughts. Droughts in life are inevitable. Neither the author of Psalm 1 nor Jeremiah ever promised that spiritually blest people didn’t suffer or struggle. Periods of drought in life – be it great loss, disappointment, or trials – were just assumed. “They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.” (Ps. 1:3 NLT) “Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.” (Jer. 17:8 NLT) When we trust in the Lord, yes, God may be gracious to reach down and miraculously deliver us. But God also blesses us by giving us the courage and strength to endure seasons of withering drought. Droughts in life can prove the sufficiency of Jesus alone in our lives. He alone gives us the living water that sustains us. Both the tree and the tumbleweed experienced drought, but the tumbleweed didn’t have the deep roots whereas the tree did. Doesn’t following Jesus and obeying God result in blessing in life? When you do life God’s way, isn’t the result that good things happen to you and you have less problems overall? Yes, as a general rule, that’s true. But life doesn’t always follow the rules. Bad things – droughts - can still happen not only to good people, but to God’s people. And the simple fact that God sustains us through droughts, keeps us productive for Him and to others through droughts, and restores us after droughts – that is blessing indeed!

In January 2010, a devastating earthquake hit the country of Haiti. It was a catastrophic event that killed an estimated 160,000 people and affected the lives of 3 million people profoundly. Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision, reflected on his visit to a church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti nearly a year after the earthquake. The church's building

consisted of a tent made from white tarps and duct tape, pitched in the midst of a sprawling camp for thousands of people still homeless from the earthquake.

In the front row sat six amputees ranging in age from 6 to 60. They were clapping and smiling as they sang song after song and lifted their prayers to God. The worship was full of hope and thanksgiving to the Lord. No one was singing louder or praying more fervently than Demosi Louphine, a 32-year-old unemployed single mother of two. During the earthquake, a collapsed building crushed her right arm and left leg. After four days both limbs had to be amputated. Demosi was leading the choir, leading prayers, standing on her prosthesis, and lifting her one hand high in praise to God. At the time, Demosi and her two daughters, ages eight and ten, were living in a tent five feet tall and perhaps eight feet wide. Despite losing her job, her home, and two limbs, she was deeply grateful because God had spared her life the year before. "He brought me back like Lazarus, giving me the gift of life," Demosi said. She believed she survived the devastating quake for two reasons: to raise her girls and to serve her Lord for a few more years. Richard Stearns remarked how convicted he felt watching Demosi thank God for her blessings – expressing nothing but praise - while knowing that we here in America can so easily complain about trivialities like clogged drains or a slow Wi-Fi connections in our homes.

What will happen to you when the trust tests come? What will happen to you when life's inevitable times of drought impact your life? What do you want your life to resemble? This dry, dead, rootless tumbleweed? Or do you want your life to look like these green, healthy, trees planted by rivers of water? How indeed does God keep your life and mine "green"? It may well depend on how we answer some important questions. Who will I trust in life? Whose approach to life will I follow? How do I define a blest life?