

A Renewed Presence

Water

When Korleen was in Chicago I spent the week on garden patrol, trying to remember as best I could, to change the locations of the various sprinklers, turn them on and off again, try to insure no corner would miss the water, no planter box would go thirsty. I really soaked the eggplants and then watched as over the next few the shiny purple fruit appeared out of nowhere. I cringed as I found the greenhouse tomatoes wilted after a hot afternoon, drenched them with the hose, and within minutes the drooping leaves had rebounded forgivingly to their firm rigidity. And in the cool of the evening, I lean my elbows on the rail of the deck and look down on the blackberries hanging heavily on their canes, and the flourishing green square of vegetables, and the scarlet runners climbing the fence. These little corners are like a little oases growing in the parched desert that is my crispy, brown back lawn. But the gardens all showed the dramatic effects of just a bit of water in the right place. At the right time.

Water is a power metaphor in the Bible. At creation, land rises out of a watery chaos. In the Flood, it destroys, in Baptism it speaks of a new creation. In Isaiah chapter 58 it says. . . Scripture and is at the heart of . . .

“You shall be as a watered garden,”

Israel's god leans on his elbows on the rail of Heaven looking down on the Earth. He sees this little garden patch that is his people in the land of Judea, and this patch needs immediate attention. It is struggling spiritually. In need of the living water of His Spirit. Not growing. Not bearing fruit in season.

The historical background of Isaiah 58 is that of a people who half a century ago returned to their land from Babylon. In those years since the great reconstruction of Jerusalem under Nehemiah and Ezra, a whole generation has grown up worshipping in a beautiful new Temple.

But as a people, they have failed to flourish. Their economy is still unstable (Neh 5:1-8) Taxes way too high (Neh 5:4, 15). The local government officials have been either too lax or too oppressive. All this has led to an increase in violence and disorder. People who grew up in the post-exile “boom days”, people who had been told all their lives that this was to be a bright new day for the people of Israel are now starting to go bankrupt and being sold into slavery. And in the distant capital of the Persian Empire, there has been recent regime change. Artaxerxes has seized power. And now through the prophet, Israel's god is challenging this upstart ruler to deliver on old promises made to these Jews in the heady days of Cyrus and Darius when they were given their freedom to return to their land. They had been promised law, order and good government. It's time to turn on the taps financially. And if he begins to administer this part of his empire properly, if he enforces public security, relieves the needy, if he deals justly with the these people, their god uphold him. Is says, “. . . the glory of the LORD will be *his rear guard*.” (8).

When you're the Emperor, the one thing you need more than anything else is *to know who's got your back*. When he sends out his army, Israel's god will guard his rear, because, Israel's god wants his people to be swafe and secure in their land. Flourish – a watered garden.

But notice he does not say you shall be as a watered hanging basket or a watered cantaloupe vine. Or a watered cherry tree. No. It's a garden. A community. An whole environment. All the plants flourishing together, not one single corner neglected. The Lord is

addressing these words through his prophet, not to any single individual, but the whole community. Because if they want to flourish, if they want to be like a watered garden, it's going to take a grass roots movement.

But in their spiritual life, there seems to be a kink in the garden hose somewhere. There is a reason why the spiritual blessings of God are not falling on them. And if we trace the hose backwards from the sprinkler, looking for where the kink is, we find the problem goes all the way back to the

The Temple. (2-4)

The problem, the spiritual dryness, the lack of social justice, lies, not in some distant capital, but with the worship life of these people. Somewhere in the Temple there is a major kink in the garden hose. But they just can't figure it out: "Look, haven't we come to this Temple day after day, year after year? Haven't we held all the appropriate ceremonies? Four times a year we observe fasts. It's a public institution: Nobody eats. Nobody drinks. We all go around wearing burlap feedbags and we put ashes on our heads. We are serious fasters. So how come it isn't working? when we seem to be doing all the things our god requires of us in his book.

The answer lies, again, in social background as recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is a land where there is rebellion in the society. There are deep rivalry between those who have dwelt in the land for centuries and those families who, only a generation ago returned from Babylon. There are two competing priestly sects. Just below the surface of a functioning Temple lies a culture of treachery and libelous talk has been allowed to continue unabated. **1.** There is a religion of merely outward show **(2)**

So why aren't these deeply religious people flourishing? Well it's a no brainer: the same people who are making a big show of fasting in the Temple are at the same time oppressing their workers at home. Wealth abounds, but is concentrated in the hands of a just few, while others starve. The officials impose heavy taxes, and use coercion to collect, imposing slavery. So what goes on in the Temple has become merely fantasy paradise for those who want to avoid real challenge bringing justice to the society. **(3b, 4)** So to be blunt, their so-called "worship" is worse than useless. **4b**

But God is still leaning on the deck rail of heaven, and he can see his people wilting. They need the water of spiritual renewal. And he has turned the water on, but there is a kink in the hose down there, and they are the ones who will have to unkink it.

The prophets always nail the problem. They tell us what's wrong. But they also always give the people instructions on how to fix the problem. How shall they un-kink the garden hose? That's what follows beginning with verse . . .

A Torah [instruction] of True worship

These people truly want to know how their worship can be the truly life giving experience it is meant to be? They're constantly fasting and praying. But God doesn't want that kind of fast. Why would God rejoice in seeing people wilting away like a bunch of dried up tomato plants? No. Their acts of worship will really bring blessing only when they become in acts of liberation. Just outside the Temple walls there are people who are hungry and naked and enslaved. And the roots of that oppression are in the greed and ambition of a the few. And it's not until those they learn to care for those people that the hose will unkink and they they too will discover what it means to truly worship. The water is available, but they are . . .

Self-Absorbed.

We often pray God fill us with your Spirit as if we were like clay pots. But what happens in a flowerpot if there is no hole in the bottom? The more you water it the worse it is. The plant drowns because the water can't go anywhere. Yes, we should see ourselves as empty vessels, needing to be filled. But we must not allow ourselves to be self-absorbed.

But if we want to be "a watered garden" then we must realize that just as a plant absorbs the water through the roots, draws it up the stem to breathe it back into the air, we too must absorb the Holy Spirit only to immediately and without hesitation pass the blessings on in a total involvement with other people's lives. True spiritual worship is always a constant flow – a river, a total life experience.

Only human beings have the "greedy gene" that wants to hold on to what we receive. We have our culture, our personal plans, our petty emotions. We can divorce ourselves from those around us who yearn for love, and compassion and understanding and community. In contemporary Western Christianity we famously sing "I come to the garden *alone*. . . " Our spiritual lives can become all too an individualized and all too solitary an experience.

But, if we really want to encounter God, what do we need to do? What will unkink the hose so we will be like a watered garden? V7

That last phrase is quite interesting. In the broken social scene of the post-exilic period, it became very easy for people to deny the needs of even their own relatives – their own flesh and blood. *Shunning* others became a way of life. By keeping at bay they're shabbier relatives, and people they didn't get along with, they thought they could they could be genuine people of God. But they needed to learn one very important. . .

Life-giving principle.

The prophets spoke to people and societies which were, in *some* ways, *like* our own, and yet in other ways, not at all like ours. And for these two reasons, it's sometimes hard for us to find clear-cut life applications in biblical prophets. First of all, there situation is not like ours, not knowing Christ, not having the benefit of the clearer view of salvation through faith alone, apart from the works of the law. But on the other hand, often the prophets hit too close to home, speaking directly to our own deepest needs.

But the prophets always leave us with an enduring lesson for our present day lives. In this ancient prophetic oracle in Isaiah 58, there is an "IF" and there is a "THEN". **If**, (v9) you do away with the yoke of oppression, the pointing of the finger and malicious talk. . . " **Then**, (v14) 'you will find your joy in the LORD.'

Perhaps this life-giving principle of un-kinking the garden hose of spiritual life was best expressed by Jesus who said in Matthew 5

*if you are offering your gift at the altar and there
remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled
to that person; then come and offer your gift.*

So if we look at prophecy through that lens, it calls us to a couple of things:

Renew the integrity in our Relationships

This passage seems to raise a question: The if/then seems to indicate that the Judeans can earn the right to the joy of the Lord *if* they renew the integrity of their relationships, if they show mercy to others and observe a Sabbath rest and so on. But is God's presence with us dependent on what we do? Do our deeds of mercy compel God to favour us?

It does seem that way in this passage.

Can grace can be earned?

And what about . . .

A return to Sabbath rest

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the LORD,

Once again we find an IF and a THEN.

And once again, the question: is this a works-righteousness? IF we strictly observing the Sabbath will that *then* really bring joy back to life?

Reality is that worship – taking time to worship, taking a DAY to worship, not only creates a holy living environment, true worship can even exist without a spiritual commitment to a God-centered life symbolized in the Sabbath rest.

So we could simply conclude that a renewal of integrity in our relationship both with God and others will un-kink the hose.

And you shall be as a watered garden.

I would invite you now to spend a few minutes meditating on the water.

Perhaps there is a kink in the hose that God will point out.

Remember, providing the water is his responsibility.

But it's up to us to un-kink the hose.

We'll put some words up on the screen.

Let them be words of life.

Movie: "Water"