

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF JEREMIAH.

JEREMIAH II. 13.

'For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.'—R.V.

EXPOSITION.

'For my people have committed two evils.'—The heathen are guilty of but one sin, idolatry; the covenant people commit two, in that they abandon the true God to serve idols.—PAYNE SMITH.

'The fountain of living waters.'—More properly the reservoir (tank) into which living waters (those of wells and streams) are drawn and where they are stored. Isaiah (44³) had already spoken of God's blessing under this figure: 'I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring,' a passage to which our Lord perhaps alludes in Jn 7³⁷⁻³⁹.—STREANE.

'And hewed them out cisterns.'—The *bôr*, or cistern, was used for storing up rain-water only, and therefore the quantity it contained was limited. But these cisterns are also *broken*, have fractures and rents in them, through which the water wastes. In such a ruined tank Benaiah slew a lion in time of snow, *i.e.* in the interval between the early and latter rain (2 S 23²⁰).—PAYNE SMITH.

'Broken cisterns that can hold no water.'—No comparison could more keenly rebuke the madness of a people who changed their glory for that which doth not profit. The best cisterns, even those in solid rock, are strangely liable to crack, and are a most unreliable source of supply of that absolutely indispensable article, water; and if, by constant care, they are made to hold, yet the water, collected from clay roofs or from marly soil, has the colour of weak soapsuds, the taste of the earth or the stable, is full of worms, and in the hour of greatest need it utterly fails. Who but a fool positive, or one gone mad in love of filth, would exchange the sweet, wholesome stream of a living fountain for such an uncertain compound of nastiness and vermin!—THOMSON'S *Land and the Book* (1st ed. p. 287).

THE SERMON.

Broken Cisterns.

By the Rev. Enoch Mellor, D.D.

The function of a prophet in ancient days was not restricted to the foretelling of future events. Every vision which Jeremiah had could have been compressed into a few days' time, but his office extended over many years. More important than the miraculous functions which he had to discharge were his duties as a preacher of the truth. These

duties Jeremiah never shrank from. Some who claimed to be prophets were overcome by temptations to concealment and to the use of flattering words; they healed slightly the wound of the daughter of Zion, and cried, 'Peace, peace, when there was no peace.' This charge never lay at the door of Jeremiah. He never swerved by one syllable from the message which God had commanded him to deliver.

He was now to remind the Israelites of that long march through the wilderness where they were led by God Himself. He was to challenge them to produce a single instance where the heathen had been as faithless to their idols as the Israelites were to Jehovah their God. 'My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.' And then God apostrophizes even brute, unintelligent matter and calls it to sympathize with Him for the apostasy with which He had been outraged. 'Be astonished, O ye heavens. . . . For my people have committed two evils, they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, which can hold no water.'

But we must not confine this text to the Jews. Men are still forsaking the fountain of living waters. I see a wide valley with a beautiful fountain in it open to all. But very few are going to the fountain, and the valley is covered with busy workers all striving to hew out cisterns which the rain may fill and they may drink from at their pleasure. Let us go down into the valley and examine these cisterns.

i. The first cistern that attracts our attention is that of *Sensualism*. The youth who works at it, with hot and fevered face, dreams that the highest enjoyment comes through the senses. Man is an animal, he says, and must gratify his passions, which were put there by God, who surely made no mistake. What can we say in reply to him? Our passions were given us by God, and were not placed within us only to be beaten down. But our passions are not now as they were when our soul came sinless from the Creator's hand, and the place which was assigned to them was ever the footstool, and not the throne.

And there is one more mistake which the sensualist makes. He strives to hew out a cistern of satisfaction by gratifying his passions. He forgets that if the gratification of passion is pushed beyond the limits assigned to it, it will yield no pleasure. It is like a pampered appetite, which becomes jaded and then at last a ruined and diseased one.

ii. In another part of the valley we find a worker who is hewing out a cistern of *Wealth*. He expatiates on the powers of wealth. It has ministered to the growth of nations, to the physical and moral improvement of mankind, and even to the extension of the gospel itself, and most important of all, it lifts a man up in the social scale. What can we reply? Christ spoke of the 'deceitfulness of riches.' Is not that true? The very idea of wealth is deceitful and always changing. Where is the tradesman who retains the same conception all his life? He makes a certain amount his goal, but when he reaches it is not content, and still presses on. Let us think also of the weakness of wealth. When a man's brain is giving way, can it restore it? Can it retard old age? Can it give health or talent? Can it give peace of mind or avert death?

iii. The cistern of the next worker is *Intellectualism*. He is clearly a higher type of man. He tells us that knowledge is the thing for man. For knowledge was man made. But there is a look of sadness on this man's face; and if we ask the reason, he tells us that he is not yet satisfied. When he gets fresh light he is only enabled the more clearly to see the darkness all around. He works feverishly lest dreaded death should overtake him and cut short the work.

iv. The last cistern which we visit is the cistern of *Morality*. Its hewer realizes that man has a duty towards God and his neighbour and is striving to work out his own righteousness. His cistern shows traces of careful work and is not without its beauty, but it is full of cracks and will not hold water. When we remark on this, he replies: 'I know that as yet it will hold no water, but it is not finished. I am striving to fill up the defects and openings with mortar—with the mortar of sorrow for the past and endeavours for the future.' But what if the mortar itself will not hold water? And what if God say, 'By the deeds of the law shall no flesh living be justified'? If these things be true, then this cistern, like the others, will hold no water.

And as we retrace our steps to the other cisterns we find that the workers work no more. On the cistern of the scholar we find the inscription, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; but fools despise wisdom and instruction.' On the cistern of the worldling is written, 'So is every man that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.' On the cistern of the sensualist we find, 'To be carnally minded is death.' When we look within all is parched and dry, and we see that the description, 'Cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water,' is too terribly literal.

If all these are but broken cisterns, where then is the fountain? On the last great day of the Feast of Tabernacles Christ cried, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.' He is the Fountain of living waters, and the way to that Fountain is open to all.

Love's Complaint.

By the Rev. A. C. Price, B.A.

In our text God mentions two evils committed by His people. First, 'They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters'; and second, 'They have hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.' The order of these two evils is not of chance but of design. First God is forsaken, and then the broken cisterns are hewed out. Before every sin there is a blank. That blank is the empty place in the heart where God should have been.

1. *They have forsaken Me.*—This sin has a twofold aspect; as it bears upon man and as it bears upon God. For man it is the extreme of folly. 'God is good,' so to forsake God is to forsake goodness. In God's 'presence there is fulness of joy.' To forsake God is to forfeit joy. In God's 'favour is life,' so to forsake God is to turn one's back upon true life. What effect then has this desertion on God? To understand this we must think of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Was there ever anyone more tender-hearted than Christ? 'And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it.' And Christ is forsaken: God is forsaken.

2. *My people . . . have hewed them out cisterns.*—How startling is the contrast between the fountain and the broken cistern. The fountain is inexhaustible, the broken cistern is powerless to hold even the dull, turbid, flat water put into it. The

fountain is a gift, the broken cistern is hewed out; much labour is spent on it, and all the labour is lost.

If we refuse to accept Christ as our Saviour, our action is not only negative, it is positive. We are deliberately forsaking God. We are definitely ranging ourselves with those who pass the fountain and spend their lives hewing broken cisterns.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

Wolsey.— O Cromwell, Cromwell!
Had I but served my God with half the zeal
I served my king, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.
Henry VIII., act iii. sc. 2, line 454.

They have forsaken Me.—There is nothing sadder than the ebb of love, when we are compelled to sit on the beach and watch the slowly receding waters as they drop down from the high-water mark which they had reached with the dancing wavelets. This takes the light from the eye, and the spring from the foot. Life can never again be quite as it was. The tide may come up again; but it will never efface the recollection of the ebb, and the fear of its return. This in human experience is something like the pain felt by the Eternal, as He saw Israel, for whom He had done so much, turn from Him to strangers. Bitter, indeed, to hear them say to a stock, 'Thou art my father'; and to a stone, 'Thou hast brought me forth.' Their apostasy was to God, as though a wife should go from the husband that doted upon her, and become another man's.—F. B. MEYER, *Jeremiah*, p. 30.

No Water.—In the evening a bright idea occurred to me. Why not try to dig a well? Islam Bai and Kasim were instantly all eagerness. Kasim got down about a yard. The clay was mixed with sand, and it was *moist*. The hopes of all of us revived. At it we went, all five of us, as hard as we could work—slowly and gradually the sand grew moister. When we got down about 6½ feet the sand was so moist that we could squeeze it into balls. In this way a couple of hours passed. Inch after inch we forced our way down, working for life—dear life. We were resolved not to be beaten. We *would* find water. We were all standing in a ring—watching Kasim—when he stopped, letting the spade fall out of his hand, then with a half-smothered groan he fell to the ground. 'What is the matter?' we asked, stupefied

with amazement. 'The sand is *dry*!' came a voice as if from the grave. We literally collapsed, became unnerved, lost all our energy.—SVEN HEDIN, *Through Asia*.

Broken Cisterns.—There is the cistern of *Pleasure*, embroidered with fruits and flowers, and bacchanalian figures, wrought at the cost of health and rest; the cistern of *Wealth*, gilded and inlaid with pearls, like the mangers of the stud of Eastern kings; the cistern of *Fame*, hewn by the youth who tore himself from the welcome of home and the embrace of human love to climb, with his banner of strange device, the unfrequented solitudes of the mountain summit, far above all rivalry, and even companionship; the cistern of *Human Love*, which, however beautiful as a revelation of the Divine Love, can never satisfy the soul that rests in it alone—all these, made at infinite cost of time and pains, deceive and disappoint. In the expressive words of Jeremiah, they are 'broken cisterns that can hold no water.' And in the time of trouble they will not be able to save those that have constructed and trusted them.—F. B. MEYER, *Jeremiah*, p. 31.

THIS finite life thou hast preferred,
In disbelief of God's own Word,
To Heaven and to Infinity:—
Here the probation was for thee
To show thy soul the Earthly mixed
With Heavenly, it must choose betwixt.

Thy choice was Earth! Thou didst attest
'Twas fitter spirit should subserve
The flesh, than flesh refine to nerve
Beneath the spirit's play!
Thou art shut
Out of the heaven of spirit! Glut
Thy sense upon the World! 'tis thine
For ever!—take it!—BROWNING.

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