

Title: Two trees - Jeremiah 17v1-18

Purpose: To give something of a definition of sin - "Sin is putting your roots down into something other than God"

INTRODUCTION

Roots -The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley

It has to be one of the **most successful events in the recent history of book publishing**.

It was a book by **Alex Haley** published in the **United States** in **August 1976** under the title "**ROOTS**".

"Roots - The Saga of an American Family"

The book recounts 7 generations of his family starting two centuries back with a black African boy under the name of KUNTA KINTE who was sold into slavery in the United States.

Well the book was **immediately successful** reaching the top-spot on **the New York Times best seller list** and staying there for **22 weeks**.

It quickly spawned a TV mini-series **BUT MORE THAN ALL OF THIS** - it led to something a lot longer lasting and what has been described as a real "**CULTURAL SENSATION**" for people in their droves began to follow suit searching out from official records (of birth, deaths and the like) their own families histories.

Haley had truly awakened a huge thirst in people to dig deeper and to discover their own ancestry, to uncover their own roots.

This morning

This morning we are continuing our series on SIN and are looking at the half of Jeremiah 17.

Last week we began the series where the Bible itself begins and that is with the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4 - this is the place where the word SIN has its very first mention.

And what we said, in somewhat rapid summary is:

- **FIRST THAT =>"SIN CROUCHES"** - God said to Cain (Genesis 4 verse 7) "**Sin is crouching at your door...**".

Sin is something that makes itself small.

It is one of the powerful aspects of sin that we do not properly assess its true size and danger.

Sin is something that goes off into the corners of our life and lurks "somewhat innocently" there.

We considered the wickedness of the Nazi regime and its perpetrators and we discovered that historically at the various war trials that one of the most unnerving things about these people was that they were completely ordinary. We expected to find MONSTERS but instead we found VANILLA PEOPLE - people that were COMPLETELY UNREMARKABLE.

Sin crouches and is the monster within all of us - just tightly rolled up in a ball.

- **SECOND THAT => "SIN DOES YOU IN"** - God goes on in speaking to Cain "**it** (that is SIN) **desires to have you...**".

We think we do sins BUT the stark and rather shocking reality is that:

"We sin and then sin does us!

When we're done with sin, sin is **not** done with us!"

That sinning is like shooting a gun - there is always a recoil.

We remembered that the Bible tells us the same (Galatians 6) "You reap what you sow...".

The universe that God has constructed is such that it has spiritual laws and one of these is a reflexive law that the measure you use will also be the measure that is used in dealing things back to you.

Liars will find that they get lied to, mean people will discover that their pockets develop holes, gossips will get gossiped about and cheats will get cheated on.

The sober truth about SIN is that it will have you, chew you up like crouching tiger.

- **LASTLY** - (just so that things did seem to completely depressing) - we looked at the last part of Genesis 4 verse 7 where we read "but you must master it."

And so we understood that the built-in assumption is that SIN can be mastered, that there is truly hope for us as we wage war against the progress of sin in our lives.

And we identified the hope from the other end of the Bible from Hebrews which took us to look firstly at Abel who left a great legacy as a man of faith.

But even more importantly which took us to look at one who is **not** the first Abel but the **last** Abel - a greater Abel and to Hebrews 12 Verse 24 " to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and **to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**"

This is where SIN has lost its crushing advantage, has lost its hold over us.

Jeremiah 17 - another crucial point

Well that was last week and now we are jumping to what is actually **another very crucial point in the history of mankind.**

Jeremiah is one of a handful of what we call **MAJOR PROPHETS** - now:

- Q. Who were they?
- AND Q. What were they?

They were people like **Isaiah**, like **Ezekiel** and **Daniel**.

They were called **Major Prophets** (as opposed to **Minor Prophets**) because the books of the OT that they have given us are, generally speaking LONG ONES e.g. **Isaiah** has **66 chapters**, **Jeremiah** weighs in at **52 chapters**.

Jeremiah special

Now **Jeremiah** was **SPECIAL** in a sense:

Q. Why special?

Well because of his particular place in the sweep of Israel's history - you see:

- **Isaiah** was God's prophet - God's mouthpiece in the LONG RUN-UP to the exile to Babylon carried out by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586BC - he was carrying out his ministry to the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem approximately 150 years earlier on.
- **Ezekiel and Daniel** - were God's prophetic representatives DIRECTLY AFTER the exile when the people were now no longer in the land but in the far away land of Babylonia.
- **Jeremiah** on the other hand, was one who was precisely ON HAND - DIRECTLY BEFORE and DURING the whole process of exile.

Put it another way HE was the one chosen to be God's Messenger when the plane of God's people was taxiing onto the runway and then finally taking off into the black night of 70 years of exile - over 500 miles to the East!

Q. Now why does this really matter?

Q. Why bother filling you in with these sort of background details?

Well it is because here in **Jeremiah 17** we are being given **the details & the reasons BEHIND THEM BEING FINALLY EJECTED AND SPAT OUT FROM THE LAND.**

So I think you can see that this is a pretty important chapter.

It is **the GRAND CAUSE behind the GRAND EJECTION** (otherwise known as THE EXILE).

And for us - looking into this subject of SIN - its relevance is not hard to spot - the opening words of the opening verse (Jeremiah 17 verse 1) reads: "Judah's sin...".

And if you were to quickly scan the whole of the chapter you would come across 6 different SINS that are touched upon - things like: idolatry, unbelief, greed, forsaking the LORD, rejecting God's prophet and forsaking the Sabbath.

Definition - What is SIN

Now rather than tackle this passage by simply working down this list of half-a-dozen "beefs" that God has with his errant people one by one - what I want to do is to pick up on something else that this passage gives us which is more in the direction of **A DEFINITION OF SIN** rather than **AN ITEMIZED LIST OF VARIOUS SYMPTOMS OF SIN.**

And to do this we need to dig down deeper, if you like into **THE ANCESTRY OF SIN**, to discover its **REAL ROOTS.**

And to bring this to the surface let me read the words of the LORD from **Verse 5 through to 8:**

(Jeremiah 17 verses 5-8): "This is what the Lord says:

"CURSED IS THE ONE WHO TRUSTS IN MAN,
who depends on flesh for his strength
and whose heart turns away from the Lord.

6 **He will be LIKE A BUSH IN THE WASTELANDS;**

he will not see prosperity when it comes.
 He will dwell in the parched places of the desert,
 in a salt land where no one lives.

7 **"BUT BLESSED IS THE MAN WHO TRUSTS IN THE LORD,**
 whose confidence is in him.

8 **He will be LIKE A TREE PLANTED BY THE WATER**
 that sends out its roots by the stream.
 It does not fear when heat comes;
 its leaves are always green.
 It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

Sin - Breaking the rules?

Now if I were to ask you to come up with a workable definition of sin - it would be pretty easy for us to come up with something like:

Well - Sin is: "Breaking the rules".

And to be fair this is essentially one definition that the Bible itself gives to us:

1 John 3 verse 4 "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness."

However, that said, it could not be said to be either an exhaustive definition OR necessarily, the most revealing definition.

One reason that this "breaking the rules" definition is *not* always helpful is that it can lead to us thinking about SIN in terms of some kind of scale.

So if (as here in Jeremiah 17) the people of God were guilty of committing 6 sins - that means they were pretty bad on the scale of things - however if they were just guilty of perhaps just one of them - then that is not, in the scheme of things, so devastating.

It can, at a practical level, be unhelpful to make this definition our starting point for thinking about SIN.

So let's see a different starting point and a different definition - one that is all to do with roots.

2 Men & 2 Trees

In these 4 verses from Verse 5 to 8 we are shown 2 men:

- one is a godly man and put in simple terms he is the one enjoying the blessing of God
- the other is a godless man and he is one who, all-told, has a rather barren life by comparison

Now in order to describe these two men more fully and show why they are the way they are, the LORD **likens them**, by way of **analogy**, to **two different trees**:

- **THE FIRST** comes in Verse 6 (and this is the godless man) "He will be like a bush in the wastelands: he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives."

The word translated BUSH here is **not** the one translated TREE there in Verse 8 - this is a word which derives from one which has as its base meaning **naked** or **bare** or **ugly**.

Commentators suggest that this shrub here would be **the dwarf Juniper** which has shallow root and would have a somewhat gnarled and twisted up appearance.

Notice where this tree is rooted - it is there in the wastelands, it is in the parched places of the desert. A pretty sad description for the people of Israel, living in the promised land which was intended to be for them a land flowing with milk and honey!!

These verses are ones which bring out a very obvious strong contrast (a tree in the desert, a tree by the river) - **but at the same time we should not miss the fact that there is also similarity**, things that bind these parts together:

- one is that **BOTH are trees** which have their roots down into something
- one other is that **for BOTH - the key issue is one of TRUST or BELIEF**
(verse 5) "Cursed is the one who **TRUSTS** in man..."
(verse 7) "...blessed is the man who **TRUSTS** in the LORD..."

Putting these JOINING POINTS together helps us to see our definition of SIN:

Sin is: "HAVING OUR ROOTS IN ANYTHING OTHER THAN GOD".

You see a definition like this is more clearly defining - it doesn't leave itself so open to what we might call "mission creep" or perhaps better "definition creep".

I imagine, if you know your psalms, you will have noticed that these 4 verses map pretty closely to the opening Psalm - Psalm #1 and this is a psalm which Charles Spurgeon called "The Black and White Psalm" - you're either this or you're that. There's no middle ground.

Now the question that it is going to force us to decide upon is: Q. So where is your root?

Perhaps to help us decide about our roots inspecting the descriptions will be quite revealing - see the second half of Verse 6 "He will dwell in the **parched** places of the desert, in a **salt land** where **no one lives**."

- see that this tree is **THIRSTY** (that the desert for you), it is also **BARREN** (that's what you get when you when there's an excess of salt - DEADNESS) and you also get **LONELINESS** (it's a land where no one else lives - just think about someone who is very rich they build a very large house, they buy up fields and properties around their place and over time their nearest neighbour is a long way away!).

Q. Where is your fundamental trust placed, where do you place your reliance, upon what are you depending in order to get the sweetness in your life?

Let me go across to the other tree - this is the tree of blessedness:

- So this **SECOND TREE** comes in Verse 8 ***READ***:

I wonder whether you are one of life's worriers, prone to be troubled about this and that - somehow never being able to place your trust in God's capable hands.

Well this tree is one that "has no worries when the heat comes" - it's leaves are always green, it always bears fruit.

Q. Why is this tree so utterly different?

Well the roots are not shallow - they go right the way down and reach the unfailing source of goodness. You see, come what may, the river never runs dry.

Yes the soil may become very dry, even bone dry, but this will not produce anything worse than a little bit of browning of the leaves perhaps - this tree, as verse 8 says "sends out its roots by the stream".

It comes down to trust - see there in Verse 7 "...blessed is the man who **trusts** the LORD, whose **confidence** (or **trust** - it is the same Hebrew word) is in Him."

You might say: "Well you know what - I believe I do trust the LORD..." and thinking back to that OT book of Job (there just before the book of Psalms) we see Satan coming before the LORD God and saying to Him - "yes, this man Job trusts in you BUT, and here's the point of this wager that Satan has with God, Job only trust you FOR THINGS, he does *not* trust you FOR YOU. So, if you let me take away all the STUFF he has, his flocks, his treasures, his family - THEN he will soon curse you to your face!"

We need to be aware that we can have a SHAM TRUST - which is that good old ELDER BROTHER STYLE obeying God in order to get things back out of God.

Notice another thing - with one tree it cannot receive the bad, with the other it cannot receive the good - think of it, if you like, as something genetic - it is the way these trees are rooted that enforces this reality.

See Verse 6 "He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes." When the heavy downpours hit the desert, the shrub will get the moisture - but only in passing - perhaps it will show a little bit of green for a while - but this will soon vanish - the shallow moisture drains away.

The other tree is permanently connected to the goodness that God gives.

Personal application

Now that we have got our definition of SIN: **Sin is: "HAVING OUR ROOTS IN ANYTHING OTHER THAN GOD"**. this presents a challenge to us - rather like a dog coming to where we're sitting and dropping a ball down at our feet.

Q. How do you respond?

The problem is that we will rarely tend to see ourselves very clearly - we will almost always and automatically opt for the more favourable picture.

We are completely incorrigible when it comes to letting ourselves off the hook.

The heart is incurable

And it would appear that Jeremiah is well aware of this tendency, BOTH in the people to whom he ministers and also in himself too.

Verse 9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

If there's ever a good verse which shows the full extent of the fall of mankind into sin then this is it. It speaks of what we call the depravity of man - the fact that man is sinful THROUGH AND THROUGH.

Derek Kidner in his commentary on Jeremiah has this to say:

"But only heaven sees us as we really are, and can deal with us as we should be dealt with. The wisdom writers point out that a man's thoughts and even words are deep, and may give little of him away; but verse 9 goes further, to see deep trouble here....the single word for "desperately corrupt" (Revised Standard Version) might be better understood as "desperately sick". Jeremiah shows us how to react to this diagnosis: not with self-defence but with the urgent: "Heal me, O LORD" of [Verse 14](#).

Q. How much stock do you place on your own heart to tell you the truth, or at least, to tell you the truth quickly and immediately?

Edgar Allen Poe - The tell-tale heart

Edgar Allan Poe wrote a story about a man betrayed by his heart. The story is called "The Tell-Tale Heart." It begins with the murder of an old man with an evil eye. The murderer has just buried the old man's corpse beneath the floorboards when the police arrive. A neighbor has heard a scream in the dark, and they have come to investigate.

The murderer calmly invites the police to search the house. They find nothing. But as they investigate, the murderer begins to hear "a low, dull, quick sound—such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton." The story continues in the murderer's own words:

I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased.... I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides ... but the noise steadily increased.... I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! ... "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

The murderer was betrayed by his tell-tale heart—not by the heart of the dead man, but by his own heart beating and beating with guilt.

Jeremiah had a tell-tale heart of his own. He knew that if he trusted in himself he would be cursed, and that if he trusted in the Lord he would be blessed. But his heart betrayed him: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (17:9). These words are true whether they came from Jeremiah himself or from the Lord. The human heart cannot be trusted, cannot be healed, cannot be understood. It is devious, incurable, and inscrutable. It cannot be trusted to live like a tree.

So Q. Is there any hope in this passage? Q. Any way out?

The hope in this passage - Verse 14

Well the clue to the hope comes from Jeremiah himself in his own desperate diagnosis where he cries out to God in Verse 14 where we read:

"Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise."

Q. So what exactly is he saying?

Well let me explain it by what he is *not* saying and then what I believe he *is* saying:

- I don't believe he is simply saying:

"LORD collaborate with me!", "LORD, you know that I'm trying and so as I try, you heal me progressively".

No I think it is a lot more radical than that.

Jeremiah realises that he has been desperately thirsty out there in the desert of human trust, of human effort and endeavour.

The solution he seeks needs to be a lot more fundamental if it is to be more than just a rain shower that will soon evaporate.

- Q. So what is he really pointing at?

Well notice what Verse 7 & 8 say: "...blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree **PLANTED** by the water..."

Q. Do you see that? The tree is planted. Q. Self-planted? No! Trees don't exactly do that, the LORD is the only one who can pick us up and replant us alongside His river of life.

Does this not remind you somewhat of what Jesus said there at the great feast in John 7 - every day they have been pouring out water and now Jesus says this:

John 7v37-39a "...If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive."

We need to be REPLANTED - our roots are in the wrong soil.

Remember our definition - **Sin is: "HAVING OUR ROOTS IN ANYTHING OTHER THAN GOD"**.

Nothing short of a REPLANTING, nothing short of a REBIRTH is going to be enough.

In order to get away from this full-blown dislocation of our souls - we need nothing short of a relocation of our roots.

CONCLUSION

We have the better Abel, who was One who became thirsty as He gave up His life and went out into that salt wasteland of separation from His Heavenly Father. Q. AND WHY? That we might be once-for-all uprooted from our wilderness of sin and for-ever-more drink of the life giving waters that flow direct from the throne of God.

Q. So where are your roots down this morning? Perhaps your response needs to be that of Jeremiah - BOTH a cry and an utterance of confidence: "Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed..." AMEN