

Broken Cisterns and Flowing Fountain

The Human Engine Waits / Jeremiah 2:12-13

The Human Engine Waits

This morning we begin a new three sermon series on the album *The Human Engine Waits* by Andy Melvin. At the end of this series on the 31st, Andy and his band will join our church family to lead us in worship and then eat with us at the family cookout at our place. Why preach an album? Several reasons. 1) To support local music. 2) To redemptively engage culture. The mission statement of ACL is *redemptively engaging peoples and cultures*. We believe that all cultures contain and disdain truth, beauty, and virtue. As Christians we are called to “redeem the times” (Col 4); we do this by considering the messages of our culture with the truth of the gospel. This particular album has been inspired by Scripture, so each Sunday I will preach a sermon text that has inspired one of Andy’s songs, attempting to show the biblical basis for each song. In so doing, we will exegete both song and Scripture. As we do, we will practically and theologically observe that redemptive engagement with the Arts anticipates the course of heavenly activity, which according to the Bible, will be comprised of *humanity living in joyful, worshipful creative community with the triune God and one another, forever in a new heavens and a new earth*. In other words, the third and final reason we are preaching an album is because we will be creating, singing and thinking music, among other things, in the new creation. The album title, *The Human Engine Waits*, is taken from a T.S. Eliot poem called “The Waste Land.” Andy has taken Eliot’s poetic phrase and infused it with theological meaning. As liner notes and personal conversations reveal, he is comparing humanity to an engine that is strained and will eventually break down. Instead of suggesting that we oil the machine, Andy advocates that we allow the machine to break down into surrender before God, to become a human engine that waits. He writes: *“It’s breaking down imitates the moment of our surrender, the moment when we finally say to our God, “I’m no longer looking to myself, but looking to You.” It’s the sound of becoming still before him, the sound of a heart appropriately bowed before the King of kings in worship.”* This human waiting is worshipping. Today we will consider the song “Our God Above,” which was inspired by several texts. The text we will focus on is Jeremiah 2:12-13, which reveals both the obstacle and goal of our worship: *“Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, 13 for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”*

The Message of Jeremiah

These prophetic writings are attributed to a man named Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called by God in the 7th century to deliver a series of very unpopular messages to a bunch of Jews who had become infatuated with popular culture. We are told that Jeremiah was the son of a priest, and therefore very likely a priest himself. But calls him from priest to prophet. Why? Jeremiah 1:16 tells us that he was raised up to declare God’s judgments: *“And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.”*¹⁷ *But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you...*¹⁸ *And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city...against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.”* No part of prevailing Jewish culture was exempt from Jeremiah’s judgments. The Jews had abandoned their God—YHWH—and gone after the gods of their neighbors. So, one reason Jeremiah went from priest to prophet is because there was no need for Hebrew priests! The Jews were worshipping at pagan

altars. Enter Jeremiah, the *prophet*. Now, when we think of prophets, we typically think of doom and gloom, which is partially accurate. In fact, most of these prophecies are judgmental, but there are a few chapters that are redemptive. So what did Jeremiah prophesy about? About Judah's neglect of the poor, about her unholy alliances with foreign nations, her wicked kings, and about God's judgment against his people. In all these things Israel had broken their covenant relationship with YHWH forged through their deliverance from Egypt. In this covenant relationship, YHWH promised to be their God, to give them covenant blessings for obedience and covenant curses for disobedience. In 2:9 YHWH takes up his covenant lawsuit against Judah: *"Therefore I still contend with you, declares the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend...¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit."* YHWH is contending with Judah because she has broken the covenant relationship. Notice that this is a very personal grievance. It isn't some kind of sterile courtroom procedure. It's more like a divorce case over adultery—messy, painful, personal. 2:20: *"For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds; but you said, 'I will not serve.' yes, on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore."* Judah left her husband, YHWH, and went after other gods: *"my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit."* The relationship has been ruptured; trust has been broken. Notice the personal touch "my people"; God's concern that they are not profiting. This is not a tyrant deity; it is the divorce case between a loving God and lustful spouse. Notice how Jeremiah phrases the judgment: Judah has "changed their glory" for other things. This phrase, "changed their glory" is an allusion to the glory Israel witnessed for 40 years in the wilderness—a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night led Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. They chose to cheat on this God of glory and grace. This is Jeremiah's message. So who was the mistress? How did it go down? Jeremiah cites two evils: *"for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."* Let's consider these two evils.

Broken Cisterns or Flowing Fountain?

The text says that Judah 1) forsook the fountain of living waters and 2) hewed out broken cisterns that could hold no water. Notice the strong image of water. Very basically, this is a picture of sin which contrasts two images—one of a **well** and one of a **cistern**. The image of God is a well, a fountain of living waters, free-flowing, life-giving, uncontaminated water. A fountain offers a continual supply of water. Water was a commodity in the ancient world. Wells were rare and often guarded, fought over. In contrast, a cistern was a man-made water container, with no supply of fresh water. Cisterns were holes dug into the ground and then plastered to hold water. They ranged in size, often large enough to double as a dungeon. A stone was frequently placed on top to keep the water from evaporating or being contaminated. And here God compares our sinful pursuits, whatever they are—lust, power, murder, pride, envy—like trying to find satisfaction from broken and cracked cisterns that can't hold water. We look for satisfaction in creativity, work, intellect, family, politics, and religion lifting the lid of our cisterns only to find that all their water has leaked out; they do not contain the water of life. They're broken; they're cracked. You see, our cistern-making is our sin, our insistence upon finding satisfaction in finite things. We bring out infinite appetites to the finite things and demand that they satisfy...relationships, work, politics, entertainment, and so on. We sin against God when we make a finite thing an ultimate thing, when we bring our well-sized thirst to man-made cisterns that can hold no water. We forsake the Fountain of living waters for man-made pursuits. You see, God is angry, not because we fail to

keep the rules of religion, but because we choose not to delight in the free-flowing fountain of God himself. God is not hard to please, nor is he an obstacle to our pleasure. Rather, we are, very simply, far too easily satisfied. As Andy sings: *"Come and fill us Father with your living water, cause these wells (more accurately cisterns) we've dug are dry. The world we have befriended has left us empty-handed and only you can satisfy."* Andy gets the point. The world, in all its splendor, cannot satisfy the longings of the human heart. Finite things cannot be ultimate things. Yet this is precisely what Judah attempted to do. Historically, Judah had abandoned God spiritually and politically. They abandoned YHWH and went after pagan gods AND pagan political power. They devoted themselves to Baal and sought the political power of their enemies for protection. Jeremiah indicts Judah: *"And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates?"* Judah was far too easily satisfied. In Jeremiah's words Judah has committed two evils. She has *forsaken YHWH, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.* Cisterns are poor substitutes for fountains. And it is here, when we settle for cisterns, that the human engine breaks down, sputters, and seizes up. Where do we go when we break down? When we realize that our man-made pursuits do not contain soul-quenching water.

The Renewing Covenant

In Jeremiah 31, God promises a day when he will renew his covenant with his people: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people... I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."* God promises a renewal of our relationship with him. How? By writing his law on our hearts and forgiving us of our sins. You see, despite our adultery, God is gracious and offers forgiveness and covenant relationship renewal. How? How can he forgive the pinnacle of evil, the rejection of an infinitely desirable God, the fountain of living waters, for finite things, for man-made cisterns? This evil must be atoned for; someone must bear its judgment. This someone is none other than God himself. We are told that on the night that Jesus was betrayed he had a meal with the church, the new Israel, 12 Jewish disciples: *"and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me. In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the **new covenant in my blood.** Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* That broken bread and poured out wine symbolize his body and blood given for them, for us, Jesus' sacrifice for our sin. His bloody death made new covenant forgiveness possible. He has died for all our cistern sins and given us the fountain of his love. He writes the law on our hearts. The commands become love-filled promises. The whole law can be summed up in this: Love the Lord with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. In other words, Jesus death and resurrection is the promise of relationship renewal with God. If we will receive his forgiveness, he will renew our hearts and fill them with the free-flowing fountain of his love. He is calling us, as Andy writes: *"As we return to you, Our spirits are renewed and our hearts are moved to worship You alone."* Where do we go when the human engine breaks down? To Jesus. And it is in him that we are satisfied and God is glorified. He has no equal on the earth.