
Jeremiah 17

What Is Written on Your Heart?

Setting the Stage

I think Jeremiah 17 may be one of my favourite chapters in the entire book. After all these chapters of warning, judgment, stubbornness and approaching exile, Jeremiah takes us somewhere very personal. He moves from what Judah has done to what has been written on the heart. And that immediately takes us back to Sinai.

The language is deliberate. The sin of Judah has been written with an iron stylus, engraved with a diamond point “on the tablet of their heart.” Tablets ought to make Jewish readers think of Torah. God wrote His commandments on tablets of stone, but here Jeremiah says something else has been engraved upon the people themselves. Sin is no longer merely something they have done occasionally. It has become deeply inscribed in them. Their problem is not simply behaviour. Something has gone wrong at heart level.

That makes Jeremiah 17 particularly important when we remember where Jeremiah is eventually taking us. In chapter 31 God will promise a New Covenant in which His Torah will no longer simply stand outside His people as something written on stone. He will put His Torah within them and write it upon their hearts. Before Jeremiah can tell us about that writing, however, he shows us what is currently written there.

Big Idea

Jeremiah 17 asks a confronting question: What is written on your heart? That means, what is our #1 issue in life; what defines us? Or maybe, who defines us? Judah’s sin has become engraved there, but the chapter does not leave us without an alternative. We can trust human strength or trust the LORD; become like a dry bush in the wilderness or a fruitful tree beside water; follow the deceitfulness of our own hearts or allow the God who searches the heart to expose and heal us. Even Shabbat becomes part of that choice, because stopping work requires us to trust that God can provide while we rest. The issue running through the chapter is not merely what we do, but whom we trust.

Written on the Heart

Jeremiah begins with an image that ought to make us uncomfortable. Judah's sin is not written in pencil. It cannot easily be rubbed out. It is engraved with an iron stylus and a diamond point, both on the tablet of the heart and on the horns of the altars. The imagery joins the inner person and public worship. Judah's problem is simultaneously spiritual, moral and religious.

The horns of the altar normally make us think about sacrifice and perhaps even refuge. But here the altar itself bears testimony against the people. Their religion cannot hide their rebellion. They may continue bringing sacrifices, maintaining the forms and using the vocabulary of faith, but the evidence has already been engraved where God can see it. Their children even remember the pagan altars and Asherim. What should have been passed from one generation to the next—the knowledge and love of the LORD—has been displaced by another inheritance.

And there is the tragedy. Israel had been given an inheritance, but verse 4 says they will let go of it. God gave us the Land, but possessing the gift while rejecting the Giver was never the covenant arrangement. They have kindled a fire, and exile is coming.

Two Kinds of Trust

Then Jeremiah gives us one of the clearest contrasts in the chapter. “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind,” while “blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD.” Those statements are followed by two pictures. The first person is like a bush in the desert, living in dry and salty places. The second is like a tree planted beside water, sending its roots toward the stream. Heat still comes. Drought still comes. The difference is not that the person who trusts God somehow avoids difficult circumstances. The difference is where the roots are.

That matters. Biblical faith does not promise us an air-conditioned life while everybody else sweats through the heat. The tree beside the water experiences the same summer. Yet it remains green and continues bearing fruit because its life is being supplied from somewhere deeper than the weather.

Jeremiah is asking Judah where its confidence lies. In armies? Kings? Alliances? Wealth? Religious institutions? Human ingenuity? Those things can look wonderfully secure until the drought arrives. But the person whose confidence is in the LORD has roots reaching somewhere else.

And then Jeremiah turns from trust to the place where trust is decided.

The Deceitful Heart

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?”

That verse is often quoted by itself, but Jeremiah has not suddenly changed subjects. He has been talking about trust. The problem is that the very heart with which we decide what to trust is itself unreliable. We are extraordinarily capable of convincing ourselves that what we want must be right. We can rationalise almost anything if we give ourselves enough time.

I have often defined 'sin' as rationalized self-will, and this rings the bell in chapter 17.

But God says, "I, the LORD, search the heart." That changes things. I may not understand my own motives completely, but God does. I can fool other people and, remarkably, I can even fool myself. I cannot fool Him. He searches beyond appearances and explanations into the actual person.

And that makes the question at the beginning of the chapter even sharper. What is written on my heart? What has become so familiar that I no longer notice it? What loyalties, fears, ambitions and sins have become engraved there? Fortunately, Jeremiah is not finished.

Mikvah Yisrael — The Hope of Israel

Jeremiah calls the LORD the "hope of Israel." The Hebrew expression is Mikvah Yisrael. And mikvah is a wonderfully suggestive word for Jewish readers because we know it as the pool of gathered water used for ritual immersion. The language allows us to hear more than simply an abstract idea of "hope." God Himself is Israel's source, our gathering place, the One to whom we return.

Jeremiah has already used the image of God as "the fountain of living waters," and here that water imagery returns. Those who leave Him are abandoning the source of life itself. Put that beside the tree planted beside the stream and the picture becomes even richer. Life is found by remaining connected to the source.

There is another fascinating connection here. In John 8, when religious leaders bring to Yeshua the woman caught in adultery, Yeshua bends down and writes on the ground. John never tells us what He wrote. People have supplied all kinds of imaginative answers over the centuries, but the text doesn't tell us. Jeremiah, however, gives us intriguing language about those who turn away from the LORD being written in the earth because they have forsaken the fountain of living water.

I don't want to claim more than the text gives us. John does not say, "Yeshua was quoting Jeremiah 17." But for Jewish readers who know Jeremiah, the scene is certainly worth pondering. Yeshua writes on the ground while standing among accusers who are very sure about somebody else's sin. Jeremiah has already reminded us that God searches every heart.

In that Johannine scene, the accusers one-by-one leave their setting, drop their rocks, and head away from their 'courtroom.' Yeshua has written enough on the ground that these men knew their own sins and guilt was theirs, without the issue of the adulterous woman.

"Heal Me, O LORD"

And so Jeremiah prays:

"Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed;
Save me and I will be saved,
For You are my praise."

I love the confidence of that. Jeremiah doesn't say, "Heal me and perhaps it will work." If God heals, he is healed. If God saves, he is saved. The God who searches the desperately sick heart

is also the God capable of healing it.

In synagogues worldwide, and for centuries, this thought has been part of our prayers to the Almighty for the sick. It finds expression in the Shemoneh Esrei, the Amidah offered daily. I myself have prayed these words over people in hospitals across the world.

Jeremiah himself needs that assurance because people are mocking his message. “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come now!” He has spent years warning Judah about judgment that has not yet arrived. You can imagine the ridicule. Where is this disaster you keep talking about, Jeremiah? Where is this Babylonian judgment? Come on—let’s see it.

Jeremiah responds that he has not longed for the disastrous day. He isn’t standing on the sidelines cheering for Judah’s destruction. He has preached judgment because God gave him the message, not because he enjoys watching people suffer. This is the weeping prophet, after all. Yet the opposition wounds him, and once again Jeremiah asks God to vindicate him.

Shabbat and Trust

Then the chapter seems to change direction. God sends Jeremiah to the gates of Jerusalem with a very practical message: stop carrying loads through the gates on Shabbat. Stop working. Keep the Sabbath holy. At first glance that can feel disconnected from everything that has preceded it.

I don’t think it is. Shabbat is an exercise in trust. For one day I stop. I do not produce. I do not carry on as though the entire world depends upon my activity. I acknowledge that God remains God while I rest. That is why Sabbath fits so naturally into a chapter about the person who trusts human strength and the person who trusts the LORD.

Judah’s failure to keep Shabbat was therefore not simply a diary problem. It revealed something about the heart. God had commanded our fathers to stop, but they refused to listen. Jeremiah says they “stiffened their necks.” Once again we encounter resistance to God.

Yet even here there is an invitation. If the people listen and keep Shabbat, Jerusalem has a future. Kings will continue entering its gates, people will come from Judah, Benjamin, the hill country and the Negev, and worshippers will bring offerings to the house of the LORD. But if they refuse to listen, fire will consume Jerusalem’s gates. The issue is bigger than carrying a parcel on Saturday. The question is the question of the entire chapter.

Will you trust God?

What Is Written on Your Heart?

Jeremiah 17 begins with sin engraved on the heart and ends with a people being asked once again to listen. Between those points we have two ways of living: trusting human strength or trusting the LORD, dryness or fruitfulness, a deceitful heart or the God who searches it, abandonment of the fountain or return to Mikvah Yisrael, self-reliance or Shabbat.

That makes this chapter remarkably current. We still put our confidence in governments, money, careers, religious systems, other people and ourselves. None of those things is necessarily evil. They simply make terrible gods. When they become the source from which we expect life, eventually the drought exposes them.

God invites us to put down our roots elsewhere. For me, that ultimately leads to Yeshua. The God who knows what is engraved upon our hearts does not merely tell us to try harder. He saves. He heals. And the New Covenant Jeremiah will announce later in this book promises something astonishing: God Himself will write His Torah upon our hearts.

So perhaps Jeremiah 17 leaves us with the right question after all. What is written on your heart?

Takeaways

- What we trust reveals what is happening in our hearts.
- Difficult circumstances do not necessarily mean God has abandoned us.
- Our hearts can deceive us, but they cannot deceive the God who searches them.
- God is Mikvah Yisrael and the source to whom His people must return.
- Shabbat is more than stopping work; it is a declaration that we trust God.
- The God who exposes what is written on the heart is also the God who heals and saves.

Memory Verse

Jeremiah 17:7

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.”

What's Next? — Jeremiah 18

Next we visit one of Jeremiah's most memorable object lessons: the potter's wheel. God sends Jeremiah to watch a craftsman working with clay. When the vessel is spoiled in the potter's hand, he does not simply throw it away; he works the clay again and makes another vessel. God uses that scene to speak about Judah, His sovereignty and our responsibility to respond to Him.

But Jeremiah 18 takes another turn as well. Opposition to the prophet intensifies, and Jeremiah responds with an imprecatory prayer—words of anger and judgment that can sound startling coming from the weeping prophet. The chapter will force us to think about resistance, repentance, God's freedom to reshape, and what happens when even a faithful prophet reaches the end of his patience.

Jeremiah 18 — The Potter's Wheel

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WATCH: Jeremiah 17 teaching — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDDt9spZzx0>