

## CURSED OR BLESSED?

Jeremiah 17:5-8

We live in a “digital” world. The basic science in that is before digital everything was analog. For instance you recorded a human voice by using vibrations made by sound waves on metal to turn it into an electric signal, then used that signal to make a physical record in the etchings or "wiggles" on a disk. If the sound was louder, the wiggles on the disk were larger, if the sound was quieter, the wiggles were smaller. You reversed that process by having a phonograph needle turn the physical etchings on the phonograph into an electric current which causes the metal in the phonograph’s speaker to vibrate and make the sound we hear. The bigger the wiggles, the louder the sound. However eventually the records could wear out since the etchings would get dirty and damaged. (Victrolas originally had steel needles that wore out really quickly; this got better with diamond tips.) With digital you turn the sound waves into a set of numbers that are stored until they are needed to produce the sound. Rather than loud sounds corresponding to big wiggles, the loud sound corresponds to bigger numbers, and smaller numbers to softer sounds. Since the sound is stored as exact numbers, you not only have a far more precise recording, but one that lasts longer and is much cheaper to reproduce - the numbers don't "wear out". And since there's no physical needle any more, digital gets rid of lots of the “noise” that you had with analog - there's no extra sound from the needle scraping on the vinyl.

In the same way, we can take, store, and share pictures with our phones or digital cameras as digital files, rather than as physical prints or negatives. Since we don't have to deal with a physical piece of film anymore we don't have the limitations of a small number of photos that use expensive film, or waiting for the film to be developed.

The process is called “digital” because it is based on how the signal that represents the data is either on or off. Using a number system, not with ten digits which we use because we have ten fingers, but just the two - “on” and “off”, one and zero, we can represent anything. And because everything is just a one or a zero, it's really easy to copy and transmit everywhere, and have the end result be the same - look the same, sound the same - every time. And as a result, we have all this amazing technology and its applications.

“On” or “off.” “Positive” or “Negative.” “Yes” or “no.” Whatever we call it, it can look so simple. So it can be with the way God presents His way to us. Either we follow Him or we go our own way. In the Old Testament this was very concretely presented to the people of Israel when God had half of them stand on one mountain, face toward a neighboring mountain, and yell out the blessings of following God and the other half stand on the other mountain do the reverse shouting the curses that come from disobeying Him. In Jeremiah God puts it this way:

Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any

good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

It is so clear. “Follow God, and you will be blessed.” “Go away from Him, and you will be cursed.”

So why would anyone not follow God? Yet who seems to be? The pandemic is blamed for this, but people have been leaving churches in record numbers before that. The largest growing group in our culture’s religious life are the so-called “nones,” who claim no connection to any religion. There are people who are turned off by the legalism, dishonesty, or neglect they have felt from churches and church people, the real question is not so much, “Why aren’t people going to church?” but “Why should they go to church?”

Think of it, why should I go to church if it is the source of so many social problems? You can get into trouble for speaking out against different races, differing lifestyles, different gender identities, and different belief systems, but you are pretty safe to speak out against Christianity. Christianity is seen as the cause for slavery, economic injustice, male chauvinism, wars, and antidemocratic movements. Why be associated with that?

How does following God get me ahead in life? When Bear Bryant ruled Alabama football, it was a requirement for his players to go to church. Vince Lombardi had a whole group of players go with him to whatever Roman Catholic Church was nearby for Saturday mass the night before the Packers played a game in whatever city. Being a member of a local church helped to give you prominence in a community. The local pastor often had more education than anyone in the community except the lawyer and doctor. In Korea, where missionary work after World War 2 led to a much higher percentage of Christian population than in China or Japan, connections through other Christians caused many to join churches, not so much out of faith, but economic advancement. But where are those advantages today? Why bother with church?

Why follow God when everyone else does other things? Most people today are sexually active before marriage. Most feel that what you do sexually is your own business. Most feel that life is for what I can get out of it. Most feel that the purpose of college is to get a high paying job so I can live the way I want to. Why put an obstacle like God in the way when He challenges those assumptions?

Why follow God in a world where we see happiness and entertainment elsewhere. We hear news from our friend Kebede about how many people are coming to church there. This is in a land where most people live in what we would call shacks, scrape out a living from farming or whatever labor they can get paid to do, and do not have cars. Going to church can be a lot more entertaining and “fun” than whatever else they could be doing. But we do not even have

to get up and go anywhere, when there is so much just from the touch of our smart phones or other devices. Compared to that, church is boring.

But even more we are dealing with the constant division in our lives between what we “feel like” and what is real. Why do we overeat if it is such a health crisis? Because we feel like it. Why do we delve into pornography even though it is so addictive and destroys our brains? Because we feel like it. Why do people smoke? Because they feel like it. Why do we sit around when we should be exercising? Because we feel like it. See a pattern? It is called sin, doing what we want rather than what is really best.

But in this world of sin God has done for us people who chose to go it our own way. “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.” That man was not us, but God’s Son, Christ Jesus. Jesus had to endure things He did not like. He cried over Jerusalem because He knew it was going to be destroyed for rejecting Him. He could have used His miracles to turn their ways, but they would have only done it for selfish reasons. The night before He died in the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed to His Father that there might be another way than dying on the cross. But He went to that cross anyway. Why, because His trust “was in the LORD.”

We often can miss the trust He had to have because we see Jesus as the Son of God. As God He can do anything. Crucifixion may be very excruciating, but as God Jesus can handle anything. And as God He can look into the future and know everything is going to turn out okay. Imagine watching a Cyclone game and knowing for sure ahead of time, even if we are playing Baylor or Kansas, that they will win. There is no tension then. But even more think of having to go through chemotherapy with a crystal ball that peers into the future and tells us we will be totally cured. So what was the big deal of Jesus dying on the cross?

Jesus is the Son of God. But as our Savior, He refrained from using His powers as God. He did miracles not by the power He had as God almighty, but by the power received from the Holy Spirit when He was baptized. The only way He knew it would all turn out after all is suffering on the cross is by faith in His Father. Jesus had to trust, not know scientifically, that He would be saving us from sin. And that trust in the Father, even when His Father turned His back on Him on the cross, never failed.

Jesus took our place, not only in suffering the punishment we deserve for our sin, but in trusting the Father the way we were supposed to. That is the way now God sees us; He sees the perfect trust of His Son in our place. Now we can trust in God, not to get His blessings, but because we are blessed by Him.

Jeremiah tells us about those who trust in God:

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

In the winter and with our wetter climate we don't experience like Jeremiah the extremes between desert and area along rivers. But in the late winter we can see areas where the sun shines brighter and there is protection from the north wind. These areas are where the snow melts first and the grass begins to green first. That is the way it is to have Jesus planted into our lives like He has in Baptism. That is what it is like to be planted close to Him, as He nourishes us in faith. That is what it is like to be blessed by God!