

# **BROKEN CISTERNS**

**by James W. Garrett**

**For my people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The Fountain of Living Waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken Cisterns, That can hold no water. ...And I will pronounce My judgments on them concerning all their wickedness, whereby they have forsaken Me and have offered sacrifices to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. (Jeremiah 2:13; 1:16)**

The most satisfying water that I ever have tasted comes from the affluent springs that flow from the foothills of the Ozarks in western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. This clear spring water is especially delicious if it is drunk from a metal cup. There is something about the combination of the minerals that make it satisfying, refreshing, and a delight to the palate. My mother was from that region. One of her tasks as a little girl was to go to the spring each morning and fetch a pail of water to the cabin. During one season, a panther visited the spring each morning just before she arrived. She had to wait in hiding for the panther to drink and leave the spring before she could fill her pail.

Some of the worst water that I ever have consumed came from a cistern at a parsonage in rural southern Ohio. The cistern water was flat, unsatisfying, and I drank it only when I had no other choice. However, it was convenient - it was piped into the house. Needless to say, if I ever were asked to trade a tin dipper of Ozark spring water for a cup of water from that parsonage cistern, I would say, "no deal!"

What is a cistern? It is a reservoir. When rains are sufficient, or the snow is melting, the streams are full and water is readily available. When the rains are insufficient, the streams dry up. Sometimes even the springs are not as affluent. So, men build cisterns. In the rainy season, water is trapped and stored. Cisterns are built so that we do not have to depend upon the rain that falls from the sky and the springs that flow from the rocky base of the mountain.

Cisterns also are built for convenience. Springs are located naturally and sometimes they are difficult to access. They may even be guarded by a panther. Cisterns are placed conveniently. By building a cistern, we not only achieve a degree of independence, but we also are in control.

Spiritual cisterns are built for the same reasons. We build structures in our churches and in our private lives in an effort to remove our need to depend upon God. We also seek to be in control and to make convenient the access to power.

Of course, all such efforts are futile. Our spiritual cisterns may have the appearance of stability and reliability, but their appearance is deceiving; they are *broken cisterns, which cannot hold water*.

In the spirit, there is nothing more satisfying than drinking from the Fountain of Life and nothing less satisfying than drinking from a man-made spiritual cistern. Yet, the perversity of the human spirit is such that all of us tend to build cisterns.

In the following pages, we first will explore the refreshing flow that comes from the Fountain of Living Water. Then, we will consider some of the broken cisterns that we build, both those in our churches and those in our and our lives.<sup>1</sup> As we proceed in our study, the contrast between the Heavenly Fountain and our humanly constructed cisterns will become quite evident

**SECTION ONE:**  
**THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER**  
**CHAPTER ONE**  
**MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

The idyllic picture in the opening chapters of Genesis portrays an existence too beautiful for us to imagine. God and man were in perfect fellowship. When God finished His creation, He looked it over and *saw that it was good*.<sup>2</sup> It was just the way that God wanted it. He and man were in communion with one another. The creation glorified its creator.

Then something happened. Through the wiles of Satan, man was deceived and enticed into disobedience. Sin entered the world and with sin came death. Death is separation. In physical death, the soul and spirit are separated from the physical body. In spiritual death, man is separated from God, who is the source of life. Because man was created to be in fellowship with God, every human being has an inherent yearning for that fellowship. The Psalmist wrote, *As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God*.<sup>3</sup> This yearning is present even in those who are not able to identify what is happening in their hearts. There is a "God- shaped vacuum" in every

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<sup>1</sup> The operative term in this sentence is, "some." The list could go on, and on, and on....

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 4 2:1

person, and every person seeks to fill it with something.

Because of His great love for man, God was not content to allow the separation to continue. Sin was the alienating element. God, therefore, took steps to remove both the consequences of sin and the power of sin. This work of restoring of the relationship between God and man culminated in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Through the finished work of Christ, mankind has been redeemed from sin and death. However, each individual must choose to accept God's redemption. Those who do accept it and give God his rightful place in their lives, experience a restored fellowship with Him.<sup>4</sup> Those who do not accept God's redemption, remain separated from the God who created them. Their God-shaped vacuum remains unsatisfied.

We will not spend time here establishing these truths. They are well known to all believers. The purpose of this book is to describe the redeemed relationship and how mankind builds cisterns as a substitute for that relationship.

### **Knowing *about* God, contrasted with *knowing* God**

There is a difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone. Through study, I can know a lot about Abraham Lincoln. However, I cannot know Abraham Lincoln, because I never met the man, I have not shared life with him.

On the other hand, I can know someone very well without knowing all of the facts about where he was born, the names of his parents, and other details about his history. I have deep friendships with a number of people, whose lives before we met are obscure to me. When I intimately experience life with someone, I know his personality, his character, the deep longings of his heart, his opinions on matters small and large, what gives him joy and what causes him pain. I even know how he thinks and usually I can predict how he will respond and react to certain situations. I know my friend because we have shared life together, not because I have studied facts about his life. Conversely, he knows me with the same depth of understanding. We have experienced one another.

### **Fallen man can only know *about* God**

By observing nature, especially the starry skies, even the most primitive tribes have some understanding of the magnificence of God. Different tribes call Him by different names, but they are awed by the same being - the Creator of the Universe. David wrote,

*The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*<sup>5</sup>

Most of those who have not been informed by Scripture have drawn wrong conclusions about God. The violence of nature seen in such phenomena as lightning, tornadoes,

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:12-13

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 19:1

floods, and hailstorms, has convinced them that God is an angry Being, perhaps even possessing a perverted streak of cruelty. Because they do not know Him, they have drawn wrong conclusions about Him.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those in so called, "civilized" society, who have read about God in the Bible, but have not come to know Him. Some possess a great store of knowledge about details recorded in Scripture, but their scriptural knowledge is no more than a collection of facts. A number of years ago, I read Theodor Reik's *Mystery on the Mountain*.<sup>6</sup> This is a study of the events of Exodus and the Sinai. I was quite impressed with Dr. Reik's detailed knowledge of the biblical record. Yet, it is clear that Dr. Reik did not know God. His explanation of the events pointed to psychological and sociological evolution as the basis for the biblical record. He knew The Book, but did not know its author.

In the 1970's, I was a part of a South Tulsa ministerial group that met monthly to study current issues and topics that related to our work as church leaders. A Christian financial counselor, Dick Zavits, was invited to join us for one meeting. He was asked to discuss how we could help our members with their budgets and other financial matters. Mr. Zavits began by saying that when a couple came to him for financial counsel, the first thing that he did was to take out his Bible and present the Gospel. He told his prospective clients that unless Jesus was Lord of their lives, his approach to finances would be of little benefit to them. Immediately, some of the more liberal ministers in the group began to chide Dick for such an attitude. He kept a respectful and loving spirit, even though there was a bit of mockery in the tone of his critics. Their attitude seemed to be, "Who are you, a mere layman, untrained in theology, to talk to us about spiritual matters?" Finally, Dick Zavits said to them, "You clergymen may know more about God than I do, but you do not know Him any better than I do." It was an awkward moment; he had spoken the truth.

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#### CAVEAT

We must not make the mistake of thinking that knowing about God is unimportant. Indeed, knowing about God is of primary importance, otherwise we easily can be deceived into worshipping the wrong God or attributing to the true God attributes that are contrary to His Divine Nature. The only sure source of this information-knowledge is Holy Scripture.

Those whose knowledge of God is derived solely from observing His creation or the experiences of humanity can have no more than speculative and uncertain knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> Reik, Theodor, *Mystery on the Mountain*, the drama of the Sinai revelation (New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959).

of Him. Only Scripture provides the accurate objective revelation of the Divine Being. Yet, thanks be to God, in addition to objective information-knowledge contained in Scripture, Our Lord offers to us a living relationship with the very Creator of the Universe.

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### **Redeemed man *knows* God**

Redeemed man knows God. The Hebrew and Greek terms most frequently used for knowing God have the sense of *knowing by experience*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it can be said that redeemed man fellowships with God, or *knows God by experiencing life with Him*. Here are some wonderful verses of scripture that speak of the relationship between redeemed man and God.

- To the community of the redeemed in Corinth, Paul wrote, *God is faithful through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*.<sup>8</sup>

- John, writing to the world-wide redeemed community, declared that the believer experiences fellowship with both the Father and the Son... *what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ*.<sup>9</sup>

- Paul wrote to the Ephesians that his prayer for them was that their experiential knowledge of

God would bring them wisdom and revelation.<sup>10</sup> *For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him*.<sup>11</sup>

- Writing of his own heart's desire, Paul wrote to the Philippians that experiential knowledge of Jesus was worth any price that he had to pay for that knowledge. *More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but*

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<sup>7</sup> The two Greek terms occurring in Scripture with reference to knowing God are *εἶδω* (frequently in the aorist tense, *εἶδον* signifying informational knowledge, and *γινώσκω*, signifying experiential knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> I Corinthians 1:9

<sup>9</sup> I John 1:3

<sup>10</sup> ἐπιγνώσις (epignosis) - the term means precise and correct knowledge. See Joseph H. Thayer's, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Peabody, Massachusetts, Fourth Printing, May 2000) p237

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 1:15-17

*rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*<sup>12</sup>

God will restore the relationship that existed between God and man in the Garden of Eden. Sadly, not all of humanity will know the joy of that restored relationship, but only those who have accepted the redemptive work of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Redeemed man's knowing God is the first portent of that ultimate restoration. The final and full restoration will be experienced in the New Heavens and the New Earth, where God and man will dwell together in eternity.<sup>14</sup> What a wonderful blessing to live in fellowship with God, while waiting for that final and full restoration.

### **Redeemed man experiences the presence of God through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit**

Scripture mentions three Temples of the Holy Spirit :

- The worldwide Church (Ephesians 2:11-22)
- The local church (I Corinthians 3:10-17)<sup>15</sup>
- The body of each individual believer (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

Thus, the Holy Spirit is God's gift, both to the corporate Church and to each individual believer. He is not an external influence; He is the Holy Spirit, the Presence of God that resides within us.

To grasp the amazing significance of this, we note that two New Testament Greek terms are translated, *temple*:

- The first of these is *ἱερόν* (hieron). This term refers to the building and its environs.
- The second term, *ναός* (naos), refers to the sacred room inside of the temple – the room in which God dwells. In the Hebrew Tabernacle, and later in the Temple, this room was called, *The Holy of Holies*,<sup>16</sup> the room which contained the Ark of the Covenant and

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 3:8-11

<sup>13</sup> John 3:3, 5; 8:24; 14:6; et.al

<sup>14</sup> II Peter 3:10ff; Romans 8:18-23; Revelation 21-22

<sup>15</sup> Some preachers have used this text to preach stewardship of the believer's body, i.e., don't drink coffee, etc. They declare that if you do destroy your body through unhealthy behavior, God will condemn you. This is a misuse of the passage. The context clearly refers to the local congregation in Corinth. It has nothing to do with the physical body of a believer.

<sup>16</sup> In its expanded descriptive form, Holy of Holies, ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ ἁγίου.

the place where dwelt the Holy Shekinah Glory.<sup>17</sup>

The second of these terms, the *ναός*, the *Holy of Holies*, is the term always used in the New Testament when referring to the Temple of the Holy Spirit – whether it is the local church, the worldwide Church, or the body of the individual believer. Thus, the believer's body is a *Holy of Holies*, because it is the sacred room in which dwells the Holy Spirit. This truth is beyond comprehension and explanation. Yet, it is the experience of every redeemed believer.<sup>18</sup>

On the Day of Pentecost, when 3000 people accepted the Gospel message, Peter declared that the reception of the Holy Spirit was the ultimate goal of repentance and baptism (the immediate goal was the forgiveness of sin).<sup>19</sup>

*And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup>*

The background of this declaration makes clear the focus of Peter's promise. In the Ninth Century, BC, Judah was ruled by Athaliah. She was the only woman ever to sit upon the throne of Judah. She also was the only person to rule Judah who was not a descendent of David. Athaliah was a worshipper of Baal and one of the cruelest beings ever to rule any nation. During her reign, evil so permeated Judean society that God brought a plague of locusts upon the land. It was a terrible time.

There was famine, because the locusts devoured everything. There was thirst, because the locusts polluted the wells. Even the Temple sacrifices had to be suspended because there wasn't anything to be brought to the Temple. For many, death seemed to be a better choice than life. It was a hopeless time. This is the background to the Prophecy of Joel.

In the midst of this time of despair, God gave Joel a prophecy of a wonderful future event. Anticipating a time of repentance, God promised that in the days of the Messiah, He would pour out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh.<sup>21</sup> Because of this promise, the people of Judah kept hope, even when marauding nations overran them. They remembered the promise of Joel and looked forward to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>17</sup> Leviticus 16:2, etc.

<sup>18</sup> II Corinthians 1:21-22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14

<sup>19</sup> The Greek terminology, *εις ἄφεσιν των ἁμαρτιων* (*eis aphasin ton hamarton*), literally means "with a view to (or unto) forgiveness of sins." The term, *eis*, is "signifying the aim" of repentance and baptism. See Knowling, R.J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, pg. 91. Volume II, 953 pp. W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, *The Expositor's Greek New Testament*, 5 vols; (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1976)

<sup>20</sup> Acts 2:38

<sup>21</sup> Joel 2:28-32

Jesus frequently referred to the gift of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of God's promise<sup>22</sup> and Peter said that the Pentecostal outpouring was the event in which Joel's prophetic promise began to be fulfilled.

*But this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: "and it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will grant wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the lord shall be saved."<sup>23</sup>*

Peter declared that the heavenly enthroned Jesus was the one who was pouring out the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of the prophetic promise.

*"This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear."<sup>24</sup>*

Peter told the crowd that all of them could receive the fulfillment of the promise through repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Not only that, the promise was for all people of all ages.

*And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. "For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."<sup>25</sup>*

Years later, in his Ephesian letter, Paul described the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit of promise.

*In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise."<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> John Chapters 14-16 are replete with statements concerning the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. Just before His ascension, as recorded in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-5, Jesus renewed the promise.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 2:16-21

<sup>24</sup> Acts 2:33

<sup>25</sup> Acts 2:38-39

<sup>26</sup> Ephesians 1:13



In evangelistic preaching the emphasis usually is upon salvation from the power and consequences of sin. This, of course, is a proper emphasis. However, an equal emphasis in Scripture is the reception of the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of God's promise. This is true for several reasons, but the reason that applies to our present discussion is the fact that the Holy Spirit is the member of the Godhead who dwells within our hearts.

While Jesus was upon the earth, the Holy Spirit was an external entity. He was with them. After Jesus' ascension and the outpouring on Pentecost, He dwelt *in* them.

*"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you."<sup>27</sup>*

Jesus even made the startling statement that the presence of the Holy Spirit (the *paraclete*, the "helper") was more important to His disciples than His own physical presence.

*But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."<sup>28</sup>*

### **Summary**

Because God yearned for fellowship with man, He provided a means whereby the wall of sin that separated Him from mankind could be removed. That wall is removed for everyone who will accept salvation through faith in the finished work of Christ.<sup>29</sup> In order to provide the redeemed with immediate Divine fellowship, while they fulfill their days on the earth, a member of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, has come to dwell within each redeemed believer. It is through the indwelling Holy Spirit that we experience fellowship with God.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT FILLS OUR LIVES AS A FLOWING FOUNTAIN, NOT AS A RESERVOIR**

The expression, "Spirit-filled," has become common in some Christian circles. The impression is given that we have a spiritual tank inside, and that some people's tank is filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit. According to this view, through the laying on of hands or some other means, the recipient receives the filling, and from that time

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<sup>27</sup> John 14:16-17

<sup>28</sup> John 16:7

<sup>29</sup> John 3:3-17

onward, he or she is Spirit-filled.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is a biblical concept, but not in the sense just described, i.e., that we have a Spirit-filled internal cistern. Instead of a cistern, where the Spirit is stored, a better figure to illustrate the biblical concept is that of a conduit through which the Holy Spirit flows. A Spirit-filled believer is one into whom the Holy Spirit is flowing unimpeded, and out of whom the Holy Spirit flows unhindered (see comments on John 7:37ff below). The Holy Spirit in the believer's life is manifested as a Fountain, not as the Contents of a reservoir. Here are some examples of scriptures that describe the Fountain.

Concerning God's giving of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ, John 3:34 states, *for He (God) gives the Spirit without measure*. The tense of the Greek term translated, gives,<sup>30</sup> is present tense, which literally means *He continually gives*. In other words, God's manner of giving the Spirit is not by measuring out a pint, a gallon, or a barrel full of the Spirit, but rather the Spirit is given as a continually flowing presence. Jesus was Spirit-filled, but he was an affluent conduit, not the possessor of a Spirit-filled reservoir.

The same sense prevails in Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul wrote,

*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.*

This passage often is used to urge people to "get filled with the Spirit" or, to "get refilled." This is not the meaning of the exhortation. The Greek term translated, be filled, is present tense, indicating an ongoing action. It can be translated either, keep on being filled, or keep on allowing yourself to be filled.<sup>31</sup> Three truths are evident:

- The assumption of this text is that all believers normally are filled but a believer can interfere with or fail to maintain that filling;<sup>32</sup>
- It is the responsibility of the believer to insure the constant flow of the Spirit into his life;
- The filling of the Spirit is an ongoing process, not a single event. The Spirit flows into a believer as a fountain flowing into a conduit, rather than a one-time filling of a reservoir.

About six months before His crucifixion, Jesus described the Fountain of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>30</sup> δίδωσιν (didasin) third person, singular, present, indicative, active form of the verb, δίδωμι (didomi).

<sup>31</sup> The term, πλῆροσθε (plerousthe) is either passive voice or middle voice. From the structure of the word it cannot be determined which of these voices were intended by the apostle.

<sup>32</sup> This text should not be understood to argue for many fillings. Being Spirit-filled is a condition that is intended to be abiding. Any failure in this regard does not mean that one needs to experience another filling. What one needs to do is to remove the hindrance to the flow of the Spirit in his life. See Ervin, Dr. Howard, *These Are Not Drunken, As Ye Suppose* (Plainfield, NJ, Logos International, 1968) pgs. 74-87.

that would flow through the lives of those who believed on Him.

*Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."<sup>33</sup>*

What a wonderful picture of the believer! The Holy Spirit flows into his life, and everywhere he goes the Holy Spirit flows out of his life. In order for the outflow to continue, the inflow must be constant. To illustrate this truth, consider the difference between a flashlight and a table lamp. A flashlight has a battery in which energy is stored. A table lamp, however, has no stored energy. It can produce light only if it is plugged into an electrical circuit. So it is with the believer. We do not have a spiritual storage battery. We can be filled with the Spirit, and emanating the life of the Spirit into every environment that we enter, only if we stay plugged into the Source.

Paul urged the Thessalonians, *Do not quench the Spirit.*<sup>34</sup> Again, it is the responsibility of the believer to maintain or to protect the intensity of the Spirit in his life.

### **The Spirit-filled life trusts the constancy of the Fountain of Living Water**

Paul wrote that *all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.*<sup>35</sup> He also reminds us that *we walk by faith, and not by sight.*<sup>36</sup> Human nature wants a cistern, a reservoir, perhaps even something that we can hold in our hand. Human nature seeks to find a formula that can function as a template over every situation. However, this is not the way of the Spirit-filled life.

The Spirit-filled life is a life that trusts the Fountain of Living Water always to be flowing and available. An example of this is Jesus' promise to His disciples that when they were arrested and brought before kings and governors they should not plan in advance what they would say. They were to trust the Holy Spirit to supply in that very moment the words to be spoken. The Fountain would flow.

*And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> John 7:37-39

<sup>34</sup> I Thessalonians 5:19

<sup>35</sup> Romans 8:14

<sup>36</sup> II Corinthians 5:7

<sup>37</sup> Mark 13:11

Indeed, shortly after Pentecost, Peter experienced the fulfillment of this promise.

*And they laid hands on them, and put them in jail... Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people..."<sup>38</sup>*

Paul experienced the same manifestation of the Spirit when he encountered the false prophet, Barjesus (also called Elymas).

*But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?"<sup>39</sup>*

Spirit-filled believers stake everything on the faithfulness of the Fountain of Living Water. They do not live in the fear that the Fountain will dry up. They live in the assumption that its flow is never ceasing and that its abundance will be sufficient even for the most challenging circumstance. If one is not filled at any given moment, the failure is not found in the Fountain. The failure is the result of some condition in the believer's life.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE HUMAN TENDENCY TO BUILD CISTERNS**

Apart from the Holy Spirit, the believer does not have the ability to live a holy life, nor to fulfill the ministry to which he is called. Even so, both churches and individual believers constantly are tempted to forsake the Fountain of Living Water and build cisterns. Human nature does not want to trust God. Human nature wants to build a safety net. The tendency to seek security apart from God is illustrated in the history of Israel.

#### **Joshua's Challenge and Israel's Failure**

Israel's existence as a nation began when Yahweh delivered the Twelve Tribes from Egyptian bondage. For forty years, before they entered the Promised Land, Yahweh was faithful to protect them and supply their needs in the wilderness. When they finally entered Canaan, Yahweh went before them and drove out the inhabitants of the land.<sup>40</sup> He had proven Himself faithful.

After the conquest was complete, Joshua called the tribes to assemble at Shechem. He gave a farewell address in which he recounted the history of God's call upon them and

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<sup>38</sup> Acts 4:3, 8ff

<sup>39</sup> Acts 13:8-10

<sup>40</sup> Joshua 3:10

how God had gone before them and given them the land. Joshua then challenged the people to forsake all false gods and to be faithful to Yahweh.

*Now, therefore, fear Yahweh and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve Yahweh, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh. (Joshua 24:14-15)*

Stirred by Joshua's challenging speech, the people resolutely responded, "*Far be it from us that we should forsake Yahweh to serve other gods...*" (Joshua 24:16)

In spite of this bold declaration, they soon included in their worship both Yahweh and the gods of the nations that they had displaced.

All indigenous Palestinian tribes believed that there was a god over each plot of ground. These gods were the baalim. If a family had a garden plot, the Palestinians believed that it was important for them to offer sacrifices to the baal over that plot – otherwise, the crop would not reach its potential or perhaps it might even fail.

When the Israelites entered Canaan, they continued to worship Yahweh, but they also began to sacrifice to the baalim. Rather than completely trusting Yahweh, the Fountain of Living Water, they built spiritual cisterns - *baalim* symbols and *baalim* worship - insurance policies, so to speak - just in case Yahweh failed them. This practice is what Jeremiah condemned in the dramatic prophecy that is the theme of this book.

*And I will pronounce My judgments on them concerning all their wickedness, whereby they have forsaken Me and have offered sacrifices to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands...*

*For My people have committed two evils:*

*They have forsaken Me,*

*The fountain of living waters,*

*To hew for themselves cisterns,*

*Broken cisterns,*

*That can hold no water.<sup>41</sup>*

A study of the portions of the Bible that relate to the period of Jeremiah's life reveals that the people were continuing to bring offerings to the Temple of Yahweh. So, in what way had the people been guilty of forsaking Yahweh? It is clear that God views any worship

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<sup>41</sup> Jeremiah 1:16; 2:13

of any entity other than Himself as being equivalent to forsaking Him, even if He is worshipped, faithfully, at the same time.<sup>42</sup>

*I am Yahweh, that is My name;  
I will not give My glory to another,  
Nor My praise to graven images.*<sup>43</sup>

*For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act;  
For how can My name be profaned?  
And My glory I will not give to another.*<sup>44</sup>

Many nations allow their citizens to have dual citizenship - their citizens also may be citizens of another nation. Such is not the case with the United States of America. The U.S. demands that its citizens forsake citizenship in any other nation. The oath of allegiance that an immigrant must swear in order to become a citizen of the United States begins,

*I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen...*<sup>45</sup>

God requires the same oath from those who will be citizens of His Spiritual Kingdom. His people must renounce all allegiance and fidelity to any spiritual prince, spiritual potentate, or to any other god.

### **Israel's Propensity for Cisterns**

Both Judah and Israel sought security through a variety of cisterns. These cisterns always proved to be broken cisterns that could not hold water. No trustworthy substitute for the Fountain of Living Water ever was found.

One of the interesting restrictions that Yahweh imposed on Israel's kings was a limitation on the number of horses that a king could own.

*When you enter the land which Yahweh your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me," you shall surely set a king over you whom Yahweh your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since Yahweh has said to*

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<sup>42</sup> This was clearly declared in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-5).

<sup>43</sup> Isaiah 42:8

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 48:11

<sup>45</sup> Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America.

*you, "You shall never again return that way."<sup>46</sup>*

It is clear that Yahweh did not want His people to go back to Egypt, but there is more to this prohibition than forbidding them from going back to Egypt. Yahweh did not want His people to trust in horses and chariots, but in Him, the Fountain of Living Water. The psalmist wrote,

*Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; But we will boast in the name of Yahweh, our God.<sup>47</sup>*

In his farewell address to Israel, Moses instructed the people to have no fear of their enemies, even though their enemies would be greater in number and better equipped. Israel was to trust in Yahweh, not in military superiority.

*When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for Yahweh your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you. Now it shall come about that when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for Yahweh your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."<sup>48</sup>*

As long as the nation remained faithful to Yahweh, and trusted in the Fountain of Living Water, victory was theirs. Their relationship with the Fountain was their security. However, there were times in Israel's history when this important lesson was forgotten.

### **Hezekiah's failed attempt to build cisterns**

An example of this forgetfulness is seen in Hezekiah's failed attempts to build cisterns during the Assyrian advance upon Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> The mighty Assyrian army conquered one nation after another. It soon became apparent that the Assyrians intended to make Jerusalem another trophy to be placed at the feet of their emperor, Sennacherib. Even though Judah's king, Hezekiah, was a godly man, he and his nobles had to learn the lesson of trusting God and God alone.

**Bribery:** The first cistern that Hezekiah tried to build was the Cistern of Bribery. Hezekiah stripped the Temple of its treasures, items that had been dedicated to the worship and service of Yahweh. He even stripped the gold from the Temple doors so that he could send 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold to Assyria, hoping to buy

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<sup>46</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14-16

<sup>47</sup> Psalm 20:7

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 20:1-4

<sup>49</sup> II Kings 18:13-19:37; II Chronicles 32:1-23; Isaiah 36:1-39:38

off the invaders.<sup>50</sup> This cistern didn't hold water - the Assyrians kept coming.

**Confederation:** When the Cistern of Bribery failed, Hezekiah's nobles sent caravans to Egypt hoping to draw Pharaoh into an alliance with Judah. This was not the first time that Israel and Judah had sought security through alliances and treaties with heathen nations. These Cisterns of Confederation always proved to be broken cisterns that could not hold water. In this instance, God was not silent. Through the prophet Isaiah, God rebuked those who were trying to build a Cistern of Confederation.

*"Woe to the rebellious children," declares Yahweh, "Who execute a plan, but not Mine, and make an alliance, but not of My Spirit, in order to add sin to sin; who proceed down to Egypt, without consulting Me, to take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!"<sup>51</sup>*

*Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, And rely on horses, And trust in chariots because they are many, And in horsemen because they are very strong, But they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek Yahweh!<sup>52</sup>*

When the Assyrians did come against Jerusalem, no help came from Egypt. The Cistern of Confederation didn't hold water any better than the Cistern of Bribery. Both were broken cisterns.

Finally, King Hezekiah became determined to turn away from cisterns. He put his trust in Yahweh, the Fountain of Living Water.

**Capitulation:** When it became apparent to Rabshakeh, the Assyrian general, that Hezekiah had determined to put his full trust in Yahweh, Rabshakeh offered a third cistern - the Cistern of Capitulation. His speech before the walls of Jerusalem was a dramatic challenge to those who had put their trust in the Fountain of Living Water.

*Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you; nor let Hezekiah make you trust in Yahweh, saying, 'Yahweh will surely deliver us, this city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'"*

*Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, "Make your peace with me and come out to me, and eat each of his vine and each of his fig tree and drink each of the waters of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards."<sup>53</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> II Kings 18:13-16

<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 30:1-2

<sup>52</sup> Isaiah 31:1

<sup>53</sup> Isaiah 36:13-17



Rabshakeh argued persuasively that none of the gods of any of the nations had been able to provide protection from the Assyrians, so why should Yahweh be able to do so?

*Beware lest Hezekiah misleads you, saying, "Yahweh will deliver us." Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that Yahweh should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?<sup>54</sup>*

Rabshakeh urged Jerusalem's inhabitants to walk away from the Temple of Yahweh and the covenants that Yahweh had made with Abraham and Moses. He urged them to trade their trust in Yahweh for trust in the generosity of the Assyrian emperor.

The people of Jerusalem made a choice. The two cisterns that they had tried to construct had failed. Encouraged by the prophetic word from Isaiah, and inspired by the example of King Hezekiah, Jerusalem's inhabitants rejected the Cistern of Capitulation. They cast themselves upon the Fountain of Living Water. By their actions, they declared, "We will stand or fall with Yahweh." Yahweh responded to their trust by sending an angel to strike down the Assyrians. Jerusalem was delivered.<sup>55</sup>

### **Judah's Cistern of Conformity**

A cistern that many in Judah sought to build during the days of Zephaniah, was Conformity to the World. The message that they sought to communicate to the heathen nations was, "We are no different from you. There is no reason for us to be at war. We really are not the unique people that our forefathers declared us to be. There certainly is no reason for us to battle over the folly of religion."

*Yahweh spoke through the prophet Zephaniah, condemning the Cistern of Conformity. Then it will come about on the day of Yahweh's sacrifice, That I will punish the princes, the king's sons, And all who clothe themselves with foreign garments.<sup>56</sup>*

Yahweh had commanded an unique attire for His people.<sup>57</sup> Their clothing declared that they were distinct from the other nations. However, in an age in which there was a desire to say to the world, "we are all the same," such distinctions were abandoned. Those who loved foreign things and foreign ways were building a Cistern of Conformity and abandoning the Fountain of Living Water.

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<sup>54</sup> Isaiah 36:18-20

<sup>55</sup> Isaiah 37:36

<sup>56</sup> Zephaniah 1:8

<sup>57</sup> Leviticus 19:19; Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:5, 11-12

Many in Judah, especially those of the royal class, were dressing like the heathen nations, rather than following the style of dress prescribed by Yahweh. As a result, the Fountain of Living Water ceased flowing – Jehovah abandoned Judah. Their conformity to the ways of the Gentiles nations promised a measure of peace with the surrounding world, but it proved to be a cistern that could not hold water.

Years later, God spoke through Isaiah, explaining why He had forsaken Judah.

*For Thou hast abandoned Thy people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with influences from the east, and they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they strike bargains with the children of foreigners.<sup>58</sup>*

They were *filled with influences from the east*. They abandoned their unique relationship with the Fountain of Living Water, and replaced it with a Cistern of Conformity. They became no different from any other nation. In time, it became apparent that the Cistern of Conformity became their downfall. It was a cistern that could not hold water.

## **SECTION TWO:**

### **CISTERN BUILT BY CHURCHES**

#### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **CISTERN OF CONFEDERATION AND CONFORMITY**

The lesson of Israel's failed cisterns is quite apparent. God expects His people to put their full trust in Him. He is the Fountain of Living Water, and any cistern-building enterprise is a declaration of distrust of God. In spite of the lessons clearly taught from Israel's broken cistern experience, churches tend to build the very same cisterns that failed Israel. The only difference between the broken cisterns of Israel and the broken cisterns of churches is the material used.

Two of Israel's failed cisterns that churches tend to rebuild are the Cistern of Confederation and the Cistern of Conformity. Certainly, the Church should do all that it can to remove walls between Herself and those whom God wants to save through the preaching of the Gospel. However, in order to be "respectable," some segments of the Church have become little more than mirrors of the age, hawking the latest social or intellectual fad.

Comedian Flip Wilson had a routine in which he played the role of a preacher who was the "Pastor of the Church of What's Happenin' Now." Unfortunately, the skits were humorous because they were so close to the truth. Instead of asking, "What is God

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<sup>58</sup> Isaiah 2:6

doing," the question too often is asked, "What will make us acceptable to the world?" Security is sought in friendship with the current age, rather than unmixed loyalty to the Fountain of Living Water. When the Church becomes *filled with influences from the east*,<sup>59</sup> it becomes just one more human organization.

In the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century, Progressive Thinking was all the rage. Progressive Thinking was the outgrowth of Darwinian Evolution. Many church leaders, wanting to be accepted by the intellectual community, sought to explain the Gospel in terms of Progressivism.<sup>60</sup> One of the chief expressions of Progressivism was the Walter Rauschenbusch Social Gospel that became the Gospel proclaimed by mainline Protestant Churches of the era.

Some who followed the Progressive path began to present Jesus as a great moral teacher, rather than the Divine Son of God.

Another social and intellectual phenomena that became a Cistern of Conformity in the late 19th Century was New Thought. New Thought was the term that its adherents used to describe man's, so called, "enlightened self-understanding." Wanting to be intellectually acceptable, some ministers attempted to force the Gospel into New Thought paradigms.

One result of New Thought was the marriage of Christianity and psychology. Some sought to present biblical truth as no more than insightful psychology because the Church would be respectable if it presented itself as being on the cutting edge of intellectual discovery. It was not unusual for a seminary to report that more of its graduates intended to enter the counseling profession, rather than devoting their lives to preaching the Gospel. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Norman Vincent Peale and Harry Emerson Fosdick became the best known proponents of the union of psychology and religion. Fosdick defined preaching as, "personal counseling on a group scale."<sup>61</sup>

Certainly, psychology and psychiatry are valuable disciplines that have brought much good to humanity. We should thank God for psychology's giving us understanding of some of the natural forces that work within us. We should be thankful for the many dedicated and caring counselors that God has brought forth to be instruments for the healing of wounded souls. We also should be thankful for psychiatry's success in finding helpful treatments for a variety of mental illnesses. However, psychology and psychiatry cannot solve the sin problem.

The Gospel of the Cross of Christ is the only power that can remove real guilt and bring

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<sup>59</sup> Isaiah 2:6

<sup>60</sup> See Ahlstrom, Sydney E. *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972) pages 728, 788, 792-93, 798-99.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/harry-emerson-fosdick.html>

lasting deliverance from sin. Churches that forsake the Gospel of the Cross and put in its place psychological explanations as the underlying cause for man's condition have created a Cistern of Conformity. The construction of this cistern implies that the Fountain of Living Water, flowing through His Gospel, is unreliable or insufficient.

One of the most glaring examples of a Cistern of Conformity and Confederation was displayed when missionaries to Mexico and South America gave Christian names to idols and gods that were adored by the native peoples. The religious festivals associated with these various gods continue to be held, but now they are held in the name of some saint. Rather than trusting the Fountain of Living Water to draw people to Himself, these missionaries created a comfortable cistern. This practice may have made it easier to bring the populace into the Church, but it did not call people away from pagan idols to the only true God.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE CISTERN OF TRADITION**

Because fads come and go, churches that build the Cistern of Conformity, are churches that are in a constant state of flux. A totally different cistern is the Cistern of Tradition. Many people find their security in changeless habit and routine. In the 1970's when everything in America seemed to be experiencing change, one member of the church said to me, "Everything around me is changing. The only thing that seems to be constant, something that I can count on to be the same, is my church. I need that."

His honest comment was not in reference to unchanging doctrine or unchanging commitment to God. The reference was to unchanging Sunday routines. Church services always will begin at the same time; the same repertoire of songs will be sung; the same liturgy and order of service will be followed; etc. In some denominations these things are so consistent that one can visit any congregation in that denomination and know what is going to happen next.

When leaders in such churches prayerfully consider what God would have them do when they gather on Sunday, they are inviting the wrath of those whose security is found in the Cistern of Tradition. A Roman Catholic family lived next door to us when I was a teenager. This family had been Roman Catholic for many generations and they were steeped in the traditions of the church. In the late 1940's the priest in their parish began insisting that the members of the church read the Bible. He began to make Bible reading a part of the Sunday services, departing somewhat from tradition. He even began to urge his parishioners to begin reading their Bibles during the week. Our neighbors became terribly upset. The old grandmother said, "I have not read the Bible all of my life and no priest is going to change how we do things in our church."

This dear lady's comment was the result of her finding security in a Cistern of Tradition. Whether Roman Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or independent, many find security and self-identity in traditions.

These traditions become their spiritual comfort zones and anything that threatens to alter these traditions threatens the adherent's security.

A tradition that recent decades have challenged involves the musical genre and the musical style historically associated with churches, both Protestant and Catholic. Beginning in the 1980's the "worship wars" disrupted many local congregations and even some denominations. Even though modern hymnody is only about three centuries old, and the hymnal itself of more recent origin, in some quarters the hymnal had gained a status almost equal to the Bible. The substitution of "overheads" and "power-points" in place of the hymnal has been traumatic for some.

Even instrumentation had become somewhat sacred. I have been in church leadership in Tulsa since 1959. During the decades that I have served the Church in this city, I have witnessed an instrumental revolution. Historically, in Tulsa there was a clear demarcation line – the Arkansas River. Churches west of the river often had guitars and bass fiddles in their worship services. Churches east of the river – the more "respectable" side of town - had only organs and pianos. In the 1970's with the birth of the Charismatic Movement and the Jesus Movement, guitars began to invade all of the churches. Today, many churches don't even have an organ and some even have drums!

Needless to say, these changes have been rather traumatic for some, because the musical traditions that older generations have viewed as a necessary part of "church" have been discarded. The result is that some have felt disenfranchised and some have lost the sense of security that unchangeable tradition provides.

Of course, traditions are not wrong, for that matter, they usually are a wonderful asset. Traditions should not be set aside or changed without serious reflection and prayer. However, when these traditions are set aside or changed and turmoil results, the question has to be faced, "Have I found my security in a Cistern of Tradition, or in the Fountain of Living Water?"

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **TECHNIQUES AND METHODS ARE COMMON CHURCH CISTERNS**

A very common and tempting cistern for churches is the substitution of human methods for the power of the Holy Spirit. Some contemporary church growth programs, for example, are cisterns. They rely on technique and image, rather than on the Holy Spirit. When I was about 30 years old, before I had learned the lesson of absolute obedience

to God, trusting Him to accomplish what He wants to accomplish, and relying on the Holy Spirit to fulfill His mandates, I tried to build such a cistern. Here is the story.

I was the minister of a new church on the southern edge of Tulsa. We were caught up in the traditional pursuit of new members. As a part of this effort, I organized a team of door to door "evangelists." Each week, we obtained from the utility companies the names and addresses of everyone who had moved into our area in the past week. We went out night after night and called on these newcomers to the neighborhood.

Even though some of my ministerial friends in other parts of the city were having success with such endeavors, our results were very small. I decided that we needed to develop some sort of sales technique. I had an acquaintance, Doug, who owned a direct-sales book company. He and his salesmen went door to door selling encyclopedias. They were quite successful. Even though this man had a large family, he was able to drive a fine car and buy an above average home. So, I decided that I should ask Him to conduct a training seminar for our visitation teams. We needed to learn his sales secrets and apply them to evangelism.

Among other things, Doug said, "In door to door selling you do not allow a person to make any primary decision. You make the primary decision for the prospect and then let him make the secondary decision. For example, don't ever ask anyone if he wants to accept Jesus as Savior. Assume that he does. Ask him if he wants to be baptized on Sunday morning or on Sunday night. Let him make that secondary decision. He will have decided something without realizing that you are the one in control."

One of the difficulties that we faced in our door to door evangelistic calling was the "No Vendors Allowed" signs that many apartment complexes posted at their entrance. By posting one of these signs, a complex prohibited any door to door salesmen. This prohibition included door to door visitors from a church. I asked Doug what he did when he encountered one of these signs. "Oh that's no problem at all," he said. "Here is what I do. I carry a clipboard with me and if I see someone coming toward me who looks like the manager, I begin looking at the roof, the gutters, the electrical service tower, etc., then I act like I am jotting down notes on my clipboard. I try to look like an inspector. When the manager gets close, I ask him, 'are you the manager here, son? How long have you been the manager of this place?' He always quickly goes away and I continue knocking on doors."

If we had used this salesman's methods to add members, we clearly would not have been relying on the Holy Spirit. We would have built a Cistern of Manipulation. How many churches have fallen into the practice of building the cistern of manipulative techniques to raise money or to increase the size of their membership!

A number of years ago I was in a church that wanted to increase the size of its

offerings. A "foundation" that helped with "stewardship programs" was employed to achieve this goal. The contract with the organization stipulated that the foundation would receive a commission based on the size of the pledges and monies raised through the organization's program (as I recall, it was 10% - 15%). The foundation justified its "ministry" by quoting Matthew 6:21, *for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*. Their pitch to the church board was, "If we can get people to pledge and give major portions of their income and savings to the church, then their hearts will follow." Of course, the organization's motive was not to get people to have their hearts in the church – their real motive was to get money, both for themselves and for the church. Their sales spiel, based on Matthew 6:21, was merely a means of justifying their techniques.

The foundation's techniques were pure manipulation. The first thing that was done was to get prosperous and wealthy church members, usually members of the board, to make large pledges. The foundation's "ministers" then visited each member of the church. The goal was to obtain a substantial pledge from each church member. During the visit, the question always came up about how much that particular member should pledge. The salesman/minister casually mentioned the large pledges that already had been made. This intimidated the church member and tended to cause him to make a bigger pledge than he had intended to make.

Another part of the scheme was to have one prosperous church member delay registering his pledge until the program was well under way. If the program seemed to be stalling short of its goal, this man would register his large pledge at that time, thus giving new impetus to the campaign.

I admit that the plan worked. Churches who hired these foundations usually saw their yearly incomes double or triple. People felt obligated to keep their word and honor their pledges, even though some could not afford to do so. I cannot but feel that God is displeased with church leaders who would resort to such a cistern, instead of relying on the Holy Spirit to lead believers in responsible stewardship.

During the almost seventy years that I have been in church leadership, I have seen a host of schemes used to build the institutional church. Most of the men who used these techniques and programs were not bad men. They were very goal-oriented men, driven by the expectations of their denomination, their local church board, or their own measure of self-worth. Sadly, they often found ways to rationalize the forfeiting their integrity in order to achieve some goal. They did not trust in the power of God to do the work of God. In every instance, they forsook the Fountain of Living Water for a humanly contrived cistern.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **DENOMINATIONALISM AND CHURCH STRUCTURE ARE COMMON CISTERNS**

Many churches are dependent upon the cistern of denominationalism. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with churches experiencing relationships with one another in order to assist each other and to have a measure of accountability. The problem develops when a church's security and identity is found in a denomination.

Some denominations, as well as many movements that have become quasi-denominations, resulted from genuine encounters with God's Spirit. A sovereign revival, an awakening, or a reformation related to some particular biblical truth, burst upon the spiritual landscape. Within a short while, those who experienced the grand event began to create an organizational structure – an institution. Usually, the motivation for creating the structure is a noble motivation. The result of course, is some sort of a denomination.

The denomination is defined by tradition, customs, organizational styles, and, in some cases, outdated practices that were cultural customs at the time of the denomination's birth. Loyalty to the denomination and its distinctives becomes the measure of acceptability. A cistern has been built. For many, a denomination has replaced the Fountain of Living Water. Even so, no cistern, however well-intentioned and beautifully built, can provide the sustenance that flows from the Fountain.

When one builds a cistern, he has to maintain it. From time to time the cistern has to be repaired, cleaned, and sometimes, artificially filled. Time and money have to be spent on the cistern.

In similar fashion, maintaining the machinery of most denominations consumes great sums of money. Some denominational mission boards spend more money on their organization than they spend on missionaries. Some ministers attend so many conferences and denominational meetings that they have little time left for caring for God's sheep or for winning the lost. Denominational structure and politics become the priority. All of this is because the denomination has become the focus, rather than the Fountain of Living Water.

A few years ago, a local church asked me to spend two days with them, discussing some leadership problems. We studied the New Testament together and identified the biblical way to lead a local church. The leaders faced a problem. Would they do it the scriptural way, trusting the Fountain of Living Water to have His way in the church? Sadly, they concluded, "We see that this is the biblical answer, but we can't do this because we are (denomination)." Surrendering to the scriptural answer and trusting the Fountain of Living Water was risky. They felt more secure in their relationship with their cistern, the denomination.

A few years ago, I read an article about two church leaders who were working to keep



their troubled denomination from fragmenting.<sup>62</sup> On one side of the issue were those who accepted the biblical standards of sexual behavior. On the other side of the issue were those rejected the Bible as their standard- they adhered to contemporary humanist values. The goal of these two church leaders was to keep the denomination from disintegrating. They were more concerned about the survival of a denomination, than they were concerned about being faithful to the biblical standards instituted by God. It would seem that they found their security and their identity in the Denominational Cistern, rather than their relationship with the Fountain of Living Water.

It is sad when one has to walk away from his heritage because of principle. I have seen several men and women do so. Even though the process was accompanied with tears, the result was a new freedom and joy. They did not allow the denomination or movement with which they were associated to become their cistern. When the organization walked away from the foundation of Jesus and His words,<sup>63</sup> they walked away from the organization, because they wanted to maintain a relationship with the Fountain of Living Water.

Closely related to the Cistern of Denominationalism is the Cistern of Structure. Non-denominational churches that seek to follow the New Testament model of church government are most vulnerable to this tendency. For a number of years, I have had the privilege of helping churches to discover New Testament patterns of leadership and local church government.<sup>64</sup> While functioning as a teacher and consultant in that role, I have been saddened by those who have seen forms of government and structure as the cure-all for a lifeless church. I know of churches that have focused on "how we build," rather than on the saving grace of Jesus.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ***THE CISTERN OF PERSONALITY***

*Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?<sup>65</sup>*

The Corinthian Church had many problems. One of them was their building of Cisterns

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<sup>62</sup> Douglas LeBlanc, "Waging Peace," Christianity Today Magazine, Vol. 45, No. 9, July 9, 2001, page 42.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 7:24ff; I Corinthians 3:11ff <sup>64</sup> See, James W. Garrett, New Testament Church Leadership (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press) 1996, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> See, James W. Garrett, New Testament Church Leadership (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press) 1996, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> I Corinthians 1:12-13

of Personality. They had given their loyalty to these cisterns, rather than to the Fountain of Living Water.

Many churches have built a Cistern of Personality. This happens when a pastor becomes the source of security. Members of the church look more to the man in the pulpit, than they look to the Fountain of Living Water. The attitude of the church seems to be, "As long as he is up there in front of us, everything will be OK. He can make happen what needs to happen."

In Chapter Three of I Corinthians, Paul declares that there is only one foundation on which to build the church. That foundation is not a human leader, regardless of how charming, gifted, or saintly he might be.

*For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.<sup>66</sup>*

The tendency of people to turn to a Cistern of Personality poses a real problem for pastors who really care for God's flock. People always will try to install good pastors in the primary place in their private lives as well as in the local church. Pastors who don't do a very good job rarely face this problem, but those who are dedicated to caring for God's sheep always will have to deal with it. The Cistern of Personality is a very flawed cistern. When the Cistern-pastor leaves, dies, or fails, the crack in the cistern becomes very apparent. Those who trust the Cistern of Personality are destined for disappointment.

While a student in Bible college, I served as the minister of a small rural church 40 miles outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. During the early years, we lived in Cincinnati and traveled out into the country, for various services during the week. In the final years before graduation, we moved into the area of the church and commuted to school each day. There was a family in the vicinity that had a reputation for adultery, incest, and drunkenness. Five or six years before we came to the area, Art,<sup>67</sup> a seventeen year-old member of the family, killed his uncle – Art's mother's brother. The killing took place because the uncle, who was in an incestuous relationship with Art's mother, was abusing both Art and his mother. Because Art was a minor and because of the circumstances, he received a short sentence in a juvenile correctional institution. Shortly after his release, he married.

When I came on the scene, Art and his wife had three small daughters. Art was an alcoholic. I first met him while he was in the county jail, serving a sentence for driving while intoxicated. I began visiting him and praying with him every Sunday afternoon. When he was released, he and his wife, along with their little girls, began attending

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<sup>66</sup> I Corinthians 3:11

<sup>67</sup> I have used an alias to protect the man's identity.

Sunday church services. His church attendance astounded everyone. He had attended a nearby Baptist church, as a child, and had even been baptized. Even so, because of his behavior in the following years, the proper citizens of the area considered him to be a hopeless case. Some church members in our little congregation were not too happy about having Art, his wife, and children in the congregation.

Art committed himself to Jesus and I committed myself to helping him get free from alcohol. I transported him to and from work each day, in order to keep him out of bars. Barbara and I, even though struggling to provide food for our own table, helped to supply groceries for Art's family. When he did fall and get drunk, I picked him up and we started over. I was rather naïve and totally inexperienced in working with alcoholics, but I was well-intentioned. As a result of my efforts in behalf of Art, other members of this infamous family began attending Sunday services. One by one they either made commitments to Christ or rededicated their lives. It was surprising to learn that some of them had "been saved" during their younger years. There were enough of them to constitute a very visible presence on Sunday morning.

The understanding that we had with the church was that after graduation we probably would move on. Ultimately, we wanted to get back to Oklahoma. When the time came for us to leave the church, a fellow student and very dear friend who had been attending the church for a couple of years was called to become the minister. This created a crisis in the lives of some of Art's relatives. One young woman said, "If Jim Garrett leaves, I'm never going to attend church again." In a way, she meant it as a compliment to me but I didn't hear it that way. What I heard was, "Jim Garrett has been an absolute failure; he has not anchored my life on Jesus Christ; he has not taught me to trust the Fountain of Living Water; my life is anchored in Jim Garrett's ministry; my trust is in Jim Garrett." I had become her cistern. I was so troubled by her response that I vowed never again to allow anyone to view me as their instrument of security. All that I or any other leader ever could be is a broken cistern, an unreliable substitute for the Fountain of Living Water.

## **SUMMARY**

Certainly, we could cite many more Church-built cisterns, these are but examples. Suffice it to say that whenever a church chooses to substitute anything of human design or scheme, in place of Our Lord's provision or instruction, it is a cistern, a broken cistern. At the bottom line it is an affront to God, saying in essence, "We understand what you have said and done, but, really, God, You need a little help and we are happy to give it to you." The bottom line also is – we can't trust you to do your work, and so we seek our security in what we can create. Such cisterns glorify man, rather than glorifying

the Lord who purchased the Church with His blood.

**SECTION THREE:**  
**CISTERNS BUILT IN THE BELIEVER'S LIFE**  
**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THE CISTERN OF MATERIALISM**

In our private lives, we are very prolific cistern builders. Of all of the cisterns that we are prone to build, materialism is the most obvious. The Cistern of Materialism comes in various forms. It may come in the form of the Cistern of Stored Assets, or the Cistern of Secure Employment, or a variety of other less obvious cisterns. Anything that becomes our financial security, other than the Fountain of Living Water, is a Cistern of Materialism.

**Responsible Financial Conduct is not Materialism**

Before we examine the Cistern of Materialism, we register this important caveat - *responsible, legitimate economic pursuits are not materialism unless they become the basis of our economic security.* Here are some verses of scripture that emphasize the importance of a Christian's having a job and earning an income.

Ephesians 4:28 *Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.*

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 *and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.*

2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 *Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion*

*and eat their own bread.*

It is God's will for every Christian to be engaged in responsible living. For most of us, responsible living includes income-producing employment. However, one's security must not be in his job. Jobs come and go. The Fountain of Living Water does not come and go. Our jobs are conduits through which the Fountain of Living Water supplies material resources to sustain our lives.

### **Materialism Defined and Described**

Materialism is a condition of the heart. Materialism exists when one's security and sense of worth is found in material possessions and economic resources. Jesus addressed this condition of the heart.

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also... No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*

*For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span?*

*And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?*

*Do not be anxious then, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "With what shall we clothe ourselves?" For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.<sup>68</sup>*

This excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount addresses the very same spirit that is addressed in Jeremiah 2:13. Jesus called his disciples to choose between the Cistern of Stored Assets on the one hand, and the Fountain of Living Water on the other hand.

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<sup>68</sup> Matthew 6:19-21, 24-33

Even as the idols of Jeremiah's day were the product of human endeavor, so the Cistern of Stored Assets is the product of human endeavor.

The Cistern of Stored Assets is a broken cistern that cannot hold water. Jesus warned that moths and rust and thieves threaten the contents of this cistern. Today's moths and rust come in the form of uncertain world economic conditions, a fluctuating stock market, an energy crisis, an oil industry downturn, or any number of things that affect the value of assets.

Related to the Cistern of Materialism and Stored Assets is the Cistern of Secure Employment. In the not too distant past, it was assumed in America that employees of major firms could look forward to lifetime employment, followed by retirement that would be funded by the company's pension plan. In recent years, such lifetime employment has become increasingly rare.

The constantly changing corporate world of the 21st Century, characterized by corporate mergers, bankruptcies of formerly solid companies, and other rapidly developing business trends, has resulted in frequent layoffs and the termination of hundreds of jobs each year. It can be assumed that most people will experience being unemployed or looking for a job, several times during their working years. Company loyalty to employees and employee loyalty to a company no longer can be assumed.

There is good news. Jesus said that the Fountain of Living Water will not fail those who *seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*. To those who have forsaken all cisterns and have turned their hearts to the Fountain of Living Water, Jesus said, *and all these things shall be added to you*. This is a startling statement. Those who take their eyes off of their need for food and clothing and turn their eyes on God's Kingdom will have their material needs met.

This does not mean that those who seek God's Kingdom will live in prosperity. It means that they will have their essential needs met. Paul warned Timothy not to be influenced by those who considered piety to be a means of gaining financial prosperity.<sup>69</sup> Paul labeled these individuals, *men of depraved mind, and deprived of the truth*.<sup>70</sup> Concerning the desire for riches, Paul warned,

*But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.*<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> | Timothy 6:3-11

<sup>70</sup> | Timothy 6:5

<sup>71</sup> | Timothy 6:9-10

Paul's attitude toward possessions was in harmony with Jesus' exhortation and promise communicated in the Sermon on the Mount.

*For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.*<sup>72</sup>

As a man, Jesus was not endowed with great material possessions.<sup>73</sup> For thirty years He lived as a villager. In His adult years, he worked as a carpenter. At 30 years of age, He became an itinerant preacher and teacher. Concerning His own prosperity, Jesus said, *The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.*<sup>74</sup> Jesus, in His humanity, trusted the Fountain of Living Water to meet His earthly needs.

In the model prayer, Jesus said that we should pray, *Give us this day our daily bread.* One has to wonder how many people have prayed this prayer without thinking about what they are asking. We are not told to pray for a supply of bread. We are told to pray for today's bread today. In other words, *give us our bread when we need it.*<sup>75</sup> The sense of this prayer is that the supplicant trusts the Fountain of Living Water to flow forth as the need exists, rather than supplying a Bread Cistern.

I can testify to the faithfulness of the Fountain of Living Water. Early in our marriage, God began teaching Barbara and me to rely on the Fountain. The first big lesson

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<sup>72</sup> I Timothy 6:7-8

<sup>73</sup> The four soldiers who executed Jesus divided his garments among them (John 19:23). This was easy, since the usual Jewish male attire consisted of five items: the headdress (turban), the outer garment (cloak or robe), the waistband (cloth or rope belt), shoes (usually sandals), and the chiton (Greek - citw>n) or tunic (undergarment similar to a long tee shirt). Jesus' chiton was seamless, woven from the top to the bottom even as some tee shirts are today. Since it was seamless, the soldiers decided to not tear it into four pieces but to cast lots so that it would go to one of them. Some modern teachers have sought to argue that Jesus enjoyed the finest things, because He wore a beautiful, expensive, seamless robe. The first mistake made in this position is that the chiton is an undershirt, a tunic, not a beautiful robe. The Son of God was not one who wore fine clothing. His attire was the normal attire for a Jew of the First Century. See *Expositor's Greek New Testament*, Volume I, page 857; Shepherd, J.W., *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1939) page 597.

<sup>74</sup> Luke 9:58

<sup>75</sup> Matthew 6:11- The term translated "daily" is a compound Greek term, *epiousios* (ἐπιουσιος). Until recently, no examples of this word had been found in Greek literature. Therefore, the assumption was that Matthew or Luke had coined the term. However, at least one example in secular literature has been found. See Bauer, W. (Chicago, University of Chicago, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Christian Literature*, translated and edited by W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, 1957) page 296. There has been some debate over how to translate the term, depending upon what Greek terms are the basis for the compound term. The meaning either is some form of "give us today our necessary bread," or "give us today our daily bread." There now is general agreement that "daily bread" is the best rendering, although it could be rendered "give us tomorrow's bread," implying that the prayer was prayed at night.

occurred when our first child, Jim Jr., was born. At that time, I was an employee of the MKT Railroad, in Muskogee, Oklahoma. I knew that the medical insurance provided by the railroad would not pay the entire hospital bill, but I did not know what the co-pay would be. Barbara and Jimmy were scheduled to be released from the hospital on Monday. The day before, on Sunday, I sat in the morning worship service with my tithe in an envelope, ready for the offering plate. As the plate passed by, I thought, "If I put in my tithe, I may not have enough money to pay that hospital bill, tomorrow." So, I didn't put the money into the offering plate. That afternoon, I was miserable. I knew that I had made a mistake. I could hardly wait for the evening service, so that I could present the tithe to God. When the offering plate was passed during the evening service, with a sigh of relief I placed the tithe in the offering plate. I had \$30.00 left in my pocket. I hoped that it would be enough to pay the hospital bill.

I rushed home after work on Monday, showered and prepared to go to the hospital to retrieve my wife and newborn son. As I hastily prepared to leave, I noticed a nickel on the dresser. I had no idea where the nickel came from, but I picked it up and put it into my pocket. I now had \$30.05.

When I arrived at the hospital, I went to the business office to pay the bill, which amounted to... \$30.05! The Fountain of Living Water had been faithful - to the very nickel. My heart was full of rejoicing as I tenderly helped my wife and our new son into the car to go home. I often have wondered what would have happened if I had not put our tithe into the offering on Sunday? Would I have had enough to pay the hospital bill? Only God knows. I don't believe that tithing buys blessings, but this episode was a test of my trust in God.

I was in my fourth year of employment with the Katy Railroad in 1952, when God began to make big changes in our lives. I liked my job and assumed that the railroad would be my lifetime employment. However, God had other plans. In the spring of that year, God began causing Barbara and me to ponder His call on our lives. As we prayed and sought to sense God's direction, it soon became apparent that He did not intend for me to continue working for the railroad. Simultaneously, a number of older men in our church began suggesting that I consider enrolling in a Bible college. They felt that God had called me to be a preacher and teacher of the Word. Indeed, for a few years, I had been functioning as a Bible teacher in our local church. What Bible knowledge I had gained in this role was the result of avid Bible reading and studying the Standard Sunday School Quarterly. Barbara and I prayed about what was being said to us and within a few weeks we could not avoid what seemed to be God's certain will. We began to make plans to take this step.

In the opinion of everyone I knew, Cincinnati Bible Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, was the premier Bible college of that era. We reasoned that if we were going to go to school,



we might as well attend the best.

We entered into a very difficult time. We had not saved any money for school, because neither of us had planned to go to school. Yet, it also became apparent that any delay was out of the question - we were to move to Cincinnati, Ohio, and that I was to enroll in The Cincinnati Bible Seminary that fall. We began to live by prayer, desperately asking God to direct us and to confirm His will. We sought His guidance concerning how Barbara, Jimmy, and I could afford to move to Cincinnati and how to pay the tuition and other expenses. I took a Saturday job working for a plant nursery and began to sell off possessions in order to get a few dollars together.

Each day during the Monday-Friday work week, I quickly ate my lunch, then spent the rest of my lunch hour praying. During one of those lunch hour prayer sessions, as I lay on my back on top of a stack of plywood on a railroad loading dock, I began to envision God, looking down on us. I saw an indistinct figure in the clouds extend his two arms. Cincinnati was in one hand. Barbara, Jimmy, and I were in His other hand. Then, as the two hands came together, these words entered my mind, "If I want you to go to Cincinnati, all I have to do is bring my hands together." Suddenly, it seemed so simple. I knew that we were going. I quit my job on the railroad and we moved to Cincinnati.

During the next five years, our very existence depended on the faithfulness of the Fountain of Living Water. I went to school full-time and worked part-time for a chemical company. Travel to and from work took about two hours each day. After our third month in school, as described earlier, I became the minister of a small rural church, located in the farming community of Saltair, Ohio, about 40 miles north of Cincinnati. This meant driving the 80 mile round-trip to Saltair each Wednesday night and Sunday. The small stipend that the church gave us was just a bit more than what it cost us for travel and other expenses related our ministry with the church. As a full-time student, part-time employee of Rusco Chemical Company, and minister of a rural church, sleep was not a priority. Because of the need to complete homework and prepare lessons and sermons, I slept only four hours each night. Yet, I was able to keep up the schedule and to make better than average grades. The Fountain of Living Water provided supra-normal stamina.

Finances were very tight. In addition to the usual living expenses, I had to pay all of my tuition fees and purchase textbooks each semester. Rent, school, and transportation expenses consumed most of our income. There was almost nothing left for groceries and other routine daily expenses. One day, we found ourselves completely out of bath soap, laundry & dish detergent, shampoo, and toothpaste. We had no money and no means of obtaining funds to purchase these items. We had dirty dishes, clothes that needed to be washed, and of course personal hygiene was an issue. That morning, before I left for my seven o'clock class, we desperately prayed a special prayer to the

## Fountain of Living Water.

We lived on the second floor of an old house. At mid-morning that day, Barbara heard the doorbell ring. None of the first-floor occupants of the building were home, so Barbara went downstairs to answer the door. There was a man in a business suit who said, "Hello. I'm from Proctor and Gamble. We have some new products that we are developing. Before we decide which version to put on the market, we need some test families to try the various formulas. We will give you six-month's supply of laundry detergent, dish detergent, bath soap and tooth paste if you will be one of our test families. The products will be identified by letter and you just mark which one you prefer." Once again, The Fountain of Living Water had proven Himself faithful! Our five years in school, were excruciating years for our family, but experiences like this were repeated over and over again. There were times when we genuinely were hungry and the cupboard was empty, but God always sustained us until He supplied us.

I believe that the Lord gave Barbara and me a few years like this in order to teach us to rely on the Fountain. That is the pattern that we see with Israel. When Israel was in its forty-year wilderness period, God supplied food every day. Manna was present every morning and they were to gather just enough each morning for their family's daily need. Any that they kept overnight would spoil. So, they had to trust God to supply each day's manna. They could not create a Manna Cistern, and store up a supply just in case Yahweh failed.

When Israel entered the Promised Land, the manna ceased. From that time onward, God expected the Israelites to rely on Him to meet their needs through His blessing upon the crops that they would plant and the herds that they would breed. The wilderness experience was designed to teach them to rely on Yahweh and to have absolute faith in His constancy. I believe that God gave Barbara and me a lengthy manna experience of several years in order to teach us to obey His will and to rely on the unceasing Fountain of Living Water. That doesn't mean that we will eat steak. The Israelites complained that they were tired of manna. So, God gave them some relief by supplying quail in the evening. Their diet was manna and quail for forty years. There was no variety nor an exciting diet, but they didn't go hungry.

Proverbs 30:7-9 contains a marvelous prayer concerning our relationship with material possessions.

*Two things I asked of Thee,  
Do not refuse me before I die:  
Keep deception and lies far from me,  
Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
Feed me with the food that is my portion,*

*Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, "Who is the LORD?"  
Or lest I be in want and steal,  
And profane the name of my God.*

This proverb speaks directly to human nature and to the human condition. *Lest I be in want and steal*, recognizes the strong temptation to compromise morals when one is in dire need. It takes real character to stand on principle, when principle refuses to bend because of need. The writer of the proverb realized that he might not be strong enough to stand in such circumstance. This phrase reminds us of a similar phrase in the Lord's Model Prayer, *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

The plea for God to provide only in moderation also recognizes the human tendency, *Lest I be full and deny Thee and say, "Who is the LORD?"* Those who have abundance and surplus will tend to forget that the Fountain of Living Water is the source of all blessings. James reminds us,

*Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.(James 1:17)*

*Feed me with the food that is my portion*, is agreeing with, *give us this day, our daily bread*. Both of these prayers are pleading, "Oh Lord, be my Fountain; supply what I need when I need it; I ask for no more than my portion."

For forty years, Israel's portion was manna and quail. My portion may be something that simple, and perhaps even that boring, but the source, The Fountain of Living Water, is not boring.

God will supply our basic needs, food and covering. Jesus promised us that He would do so. However, we must not forget that there is one prerequisite for that provision. Jesus said, *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things* (food and covering) *shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself.*<sup>76</sup>

Most of us who live in the Western Hemisphere are able to have much more than just the basic needs for human existence. However, untold numbers of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world trust God each day for food, water, and covering. A friend of mine who has ministered in a poverty stricken West-African nation, told me of the church's 24/7 unceasing prayer meeting – something the Christians in that locale deemed necessary in order for them to have sufficient food each day. Perhaps these dear brothers and sisters find being loyal to the Fountain of Living Water much easier, than those of us who live in more prosperous settings.

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<sup>76</sup> Matthew 6:33-34a

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CISTERN OF RELIGION

Another pernicious cistern is the Cistern of Religion. I am defining religion as *a belief system that trusts in ceremonies and rituals*. Religion, so defined, seems to be a part of the history of every nation on earth.

In the most primitive religions, the practice may involve some sort of a sacrifice. Animistic religions may place an offering at the foot of a tree. Other religions may sacrifice animals or even humans to placate the gods.

When the Spaniards came to Mexico in 1519, they found the Aztecs, a race that in some respects was more civilized than the Spaniards themselves. Even today, the very ruins of the Aztec empire are among the great wonders of archaeology. These highly cultured people had one custom that scored heavily against them. The Aztecs trusted in the Cistern of Religion, expressed through human sacrifices. They viewed the gods as being cruel and ferocious. Nothing other than bleeding human hearts would persuade these gods to bless their worshippers. In each Aztec city, on top of a towering, mound-like temple called a *teocalli*, living victims were stretched before stone images and their hearts were cut out by their priests. The hearts then were offered to the gods.

The Mayas, whose culture was even higher than the Aztecs, occupied the Yucatan peninsula. A central part of Mayan culture was the sacrificial pool at Chichen Itza. This pool is seventy-five yards across, sixty feet deep, and is in a pit surrounded by seventy-foot high walls that reach down to where the water begins. The Mayas believed that Yum-Chac, the god of rain, lived in the depths of the pool and held court there. They built a fifteen foot wide raised stone road that was a quarter of a mile long, leading to a stone altar that they had erected at the brink of the pit. Down this road an elaborate religious procession would proceed on holy days. The procession was a part of the ceremony in which a sacrifice was offered to Yum-Chac. The sacrifice was a beautifully attired lovely fourteen-year-old maiden and a young warrior as her escort. With great ceremony, the maiden was flung into the pit and the warrior in heavy armor with a sword held aloft plunged after her.<sup>77</sup>

The Aztecs and Mayas are only two examples of many cultures that trusted in a Cistern of Religion that consisted of the offering of sacrifices. Anyone with even the slightest knowledge of church history knows that Christianity frequently has been presented as a religion that requires sacrifice on the part of its adherents as the means of gaining

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<sup>77</sup> For an excellent description of the Aztec and Maya places of sacrifice, see Halliburton, Richard, *Richard Halliburton's Complete Book of Marvels* (Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941) pages 96-118.

heaven.

At certain times in its history Christianity has been understood as a religion in which one must do all that he can to destroy his flesh. One common medieval practice was to wear a horse-hair shirt next to the skin and to never bathe. Such persecution of the flesh supposedly earned one special points in heaven (I wonder if special points were earned by those who had to endure the aroma of these unwashed, itching, holy religionists).

During the years of his struggle to find peace through religion, Martin Luther encountered Prince William of Anhalt, who had forsaken the halls of nobility to become a beggar. The religion of that era taught that such a self-destructive lifestyle was a meritorious work, aiding one in his quest for heaven. When Luther saw William, he felt that he was beholding a truly holy man.

*With my own eyes I saw him. I was fourteen years old at Magdeburg. I saw him carrying the sack like a donkey. He had so worn himself down by fasting and vigil that he looked like a death's-head, mere bone and skin. No one could look upon him without feeling ashamed of his own life.<sup>78</sup>*

Although in our enlightened era we may look with askance at such behavior, the only difference between Prince William's behavior and current religious practices is in the details. Both present day religion and Fifteenth Century religion are cisterns, substitutes for a relationship with the Fountain of Living Water.

### **Old Testament Prophets spoke against the Cistern of Religion**

The Old Testament prophets frequently addressed religious cisterns, especially the Cistern of Ceremonies and Ritual. Isaiah wrote to a nation that was following all of the ritual requirements of the Covenant, but Yahweh did not occupy the people's hearts. Those in places of power were guilty of greed and oppression of the poor. The nation as a whole had developed a tolerant attitude toward idolatry. In general, they lived their lives without serious concern for the will of Yahweh. Yet the worship services in the Temple were well attended. They faithfully obeyed the Law of Moses in the offering of animal sacrifices and the burning of incense. Great choirs, reflecting the worship changes made by David, sang hymns in the Temple. However, they were just practicing religion. The opening chapter of Isaiah's prophecy hits this condition head-on.

*Alas, sinful nation,  
People weighed down with iniquity,  
Offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly!  
They have abandoned Yahweh,*

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<sup>78</sup> Bainton, Roland H., Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1950) page 25.

*They have despised the Holy One of Israel,  
They have turned away from Him.  
"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says Yahweh.  
"I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams,  
And the fat of fed cattle.  
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats.  
When you come to appear before Me,  
Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?  
Bring your worthless offerings no longer,  
Incense is an abomination to Me.  
New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—  
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.  
I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,  
They have become a burden to Me.  
I am weary of bearing them.  
So when you spread out your hands in prayer,  
I will hide My eyes from you,  
Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.  
Your hands are covered with blood.<sup>79</sup>*

This is a startling passage. The people of Judah were doing exactly what God had commanded. They were bringing the stipulated sacrifices; they were observing God-ordained holy days; they were faithfully attending the Temple services, just as Yahweh had commanded. Yet, Yahweh shouted at them,

*Stop it! I can't stand the noise of your songs, the stink of your incense. I'm tired of all of the offerings. I'm offended by the sound the footsteps of people coming to participate in the Temple ceremonies.*

The Temple worship services had become no more than religious ceremonies. Their immoral, self-centered lives were lived in opposition to both the spirit and the dictates of God's Law. They had the attitude that they would "pay their dues" through the religious ceremonies, then live their lives as they pleased. Thus, they had forsaken a relationship with the Fountain of Living Water, for the broken Cistern of Religion.

The prophecy of Isaiah was addressed to Judah. The prophecy of Amos, on the other hand, addressed the same Cistern of Religion in Israel. Amos described the sin of Israel in great detail. Upper class women, already living in luxury and idleness, pushed their husbands to produce more income so that greater opulence could be enjoyed.<sup>80</sup> Judges

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<sup>79</sup> Isaiah 1:4, 11-15

<sup>80</sup> Amos 4:1ff

and government officials took bribes to rule against the righteous and the poor.<sup>81</sup> Because it was dangerous to speak out against the corrupt and powerful leaders, prudent people kept their mouths shut and did not protest.<sup>82</sup> Idleness and dissipation prevailed. People of means spent their time in gluttony, composing "songs for themselves," practicing the harp, being concerned with the beauty of their bodies, and sprawling at banquets. Here is the prophet's description.

*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,  
And to those who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria...  
Those who recline on beds of ivory  
And sprawl on their couches,  
And eat lambs from the flock  
And calves from the midst of the stall  
Who improvise to the sound of the harp,  
And like David have composed songs for themselves,  
Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls  
While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils,  
Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.<sup>83</sup>*

While the upper class reveled in this self-indulgent life-style, their cities were filled with the hungry and needy. People in places of power and dishonest merchants milked the population for all that the traffic would allow.

Even though they followed the religious custom of observing religious holidays, they could hardly wait for the holy day to end so that they could get back to their nefarious practices.

*Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land,  
saying,  
"When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain,  
And the Sabbath, that we may open the wheat market,  
To make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger,  
And to cheat with dishonest scales,  
So as to buy the helpless for money  
And the needy for a pair of sandals,  
And that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?"<sup>84</sup>*

In spite of their self-centered, hedonistic culture that cared nothing for holiness, they still

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<sup>81</sup> Amos 5:12

<sup>82</sup> Amos 5:13

<sup>83</sup> Amos 6:1, 4-6

<sup>84</sup> Amos 8:4-6

were careful to attend the Temple services, to sing songs with gusto, and to present abundant offerings upon the altar of Yahweh. They were just like the people that Isaiah described in Judah. They "paid their dues" by keeping the ceremonial law, then they lived their lives as they pleased. They were relying on a Cistern of Religion, rather than a relationship with the Fountain of Living Water. As a result, Yahweh declared His disgust with their religious ceremonies.

*I hate, I reject your festivals,  
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.  
Take away from Me the noise of your songs;  
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.<sup>85</sup>*

A very important caveat must be inserted here. Some have taken these verses in Amos and Isaiah to indicate that God had abrogated the ceremonies. Some even have used these verses to argue for an unstructured church meeting, stating that these verses show that God rejects structure, ceremonies, choirs, and the like. According to those who promote this view, Christians should just get together to see what the Holy Spirit might do that day. This is a terrible abuse of these verses. The sin of both Judah and Israel was their substituting religious ceremony for righteous living. Yahweh never rescinded the ceremonial aspects of the Law.<sup>86</sup>

Note that through the prophet, Malachi, God criticized the restored nation for failing to give proper esteem to His commanded ceremonies and sacrifices.<sup>87</sup> In Malachi's rebuke, the people of Israel are chastised because they merely went through the motions, usually with a resentment at having to do so. They looked for ways to observe the religious routines and to present the required offerings without it costing them too much. The underlying problem, both in Judah and Israel, was their using the ceremonies as an insurance premium against Yahweh's wrath, while they continued on in self-indulgence and idolatry. A Cistern of Religion had been substituted for a life lived in harmony with the Fountain of Living Water.

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<sup>85</sup> Amos 5:21-24

<sup>86</sup> Note that God's rebuke on the one hand, and his affirmation of observing the ceremonies with the proper heart is consistent with Jesus' rebuke of the scribes and Pharisee in Matthew 23. Jesus said that the people should follow the dictates laid down by these religious leaders, but that the heart of the observer must be consistent with the heart of God when observing these dictates (vs. 3, 23, etc.)

<sup>87</sup> Malachi 1:6-14



## Common Contemporary Cisterns of Religion

There are many contemporary Cisterns of Religion. We will consider a few examples.

Tithing can be a religious cistern. The Cistern of Tithing declares, "I tithe, so God has to bless me." Under the Old Covenant, one might make such an argument, but not under the New Covenant of Grace. Such an attitude trusts in the tithe, not in the Fountain of Living Water.

Similar to the Cistern of Tithing is the Cistern of Faith Formula. During the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, Faith Formula teaching became very popular. According to this teaching in its simplest form, if one has enough faith, he will be in perfect health and financially prosperous. One frequent manifestation of this cistern is quoting verses to God and declaring to God that He has to do such and such because He promised. More often than not, the verses are taken out of context. The Faith Formula practitioner makes the verses say what he wants them to say.

For many years, Barbara and I had a dear friend who followed Faith Formula teaching. One of the manifestations of her belief was seen when she was driving her car and came to a stop sign at a busy intersection. If the traffic on the street that she wanted to enter were quite busy, and finding an opportunity to enter the traffic was difficult, she would quote Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. That's what she had been taught to do. She would try to exercise her faith to create an opening in traffic. She would press on the accelerator making the engine roar... *varoom, varoom...* while reciting, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me... varoom, varoom, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me... varoom, varoom*.

The first thing that is wrong about this scene is the misuse of Philippians 4:13. The context of the verse is Paul's declaration that he can be content in every circumstance. He goes so far as to say that he can be as content when he is hungry as he is when he is full. He is not talking about being able to make things happen through the exercise of faith.

The second thing that is wrong with this scene is that this belief turns Christianity into a form of magic. True magic is being able to control the activity of spirits through formulas, chants, and magic words. Thus, if one uses the right formula, then God has to act. He is subject to our magical mantra, consisting of Scripture verses or some belief that we conjure up.

Sometimes I hear people say, *"I am believing God for..."* and what they are believing for is not something that God has promised. These formula practitioners are trusting in their

ability to believe, not in God's promise. This is a Cistern of Religion.

Baptism can be another cistern. The Cistern of Baptism claims that because one has been immersed or sprinkled, that God has to receive him into His Kingdom. Such is not the case. Faith and the resulting relationship with God must be the determining prerequisite to baptism or baptism is just an empty act. One can go into the baptistery a dry sinner and come out a wet sinner.

Church attendance can be another Cistern of Religion. When one attends church services in order to achieve points with God, he is just practicing religion. The biblical reasons for attending church services are to partake of the Lord's Supper, to receive instruction, to receive encouragement, to experience the renewal of our faith, and to encourage one another in our faith.<sup>88</sup> We do not attend church services in order to gain some points that will help us to achieve a place in heaven.

Another common Religious Cistern is the Cistern of Ritual Prayer. Even prayer can be a cistern when it is done as a meritorious act or as an act of penance. There is a distinction between "saying a prayer," and praying. When one "says a prayer," he is only reciting words. When one "prays a prayer," he is communicating, heart to heart, with God.

The tendency to say a prayer often takes place when one is reciting a pre-written prayer. Of course, it is not wrong to pray a pre-written prayer. Many beautiful prayers have been composed throughout the history of the Church. For example, Our Lord gave us the model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Roman Catholics call this prayer "The Our Father." Protestants usually call it "The Lord's Prayer." Most Christians of any stripe know this prayer by heart and can recite it. When this prayer is recited by rote - just saying some words - this constitutes saying a prayer, rather than praying. In such an instance - reciting the Model Prayer as a religious act - it is but a cistern.

Of course, one genuinely can pray the Model Prayer as well as any pre-written prayer, if the words being spoken are spoken thoughtfully and from the heart - rather than just a mechanical recitation.

Highly developed religions usually include behavioral codes in their belief system. In some expressions of Christianity, behavioral codes seem to be as important as faith in Christ. People are judged by what they wear, whether or not they drink alcohol, play

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<sup>88</sup> Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34; Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:23-25. Much of contemporary Christianity has obscured this biblical emphasis. In some churches, the sermon is the focus. In some, it is singing for long periods of time. Some churches rarely participate in the Lord's Supper and when they do it is a very special event, because of its rarity. The biblical emphasis is on mutual encouragement, and the Lord's Supper, which is a moment of personal examination and an expression of identity with one another.

cards, observe the Sabbath, dance, drink coffee, watch television, and a host of other criteria.<sup>89</sup> Certainly, it may be wise to avoid some of these things, but following rules as a way of salvation is no more than a Cistern of Religion. Paul clearly addressed this topic in his letters to the churches. Here are some examples.

*But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.<sup>90</sup>*

This is a strong statement. Paul says that asceticism is a doctrine of demons. Abstaining from the pleasure of marriage or following dietary restrictions as a way of holiness is an affront to God. God has given us wonderful pleasures to enjoy and we should enjoy them as an act of gratitude to Our God. The pleasure of sex in marriage is a gift from God. Delicious flavors and visual beauty are gifts from God. This, of course, does not mean that we should become hedonists and make pleasure the object of life. It does mean that attempting to gain salvation by foregoing pleasure is the expression of a demonic doctrine.

*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ...let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.*

*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not*

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<sup>89</sup> This was a real issue in the 1960's and early 1970's. During the Jesus Movement, many young people who were a part of the hippie culture came to Christ. When they didn't start wearing traditional "go to church" clothes, but continued to wear their tie-died tee shirts, blue jeans, and sandals, they were shunned by many congregations.

<sup>90</sup> I Timothy 4:1-5

*handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)-- in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?<sup>91</sup>*

Notice the interesting term that Paul uses for religious rules. He calls them elementary principles of the world. Religious rules are cisterns that allow the flesh to be in control. If I can obtain heaven by doing things or not doing things, then I can climb to heaven on a ladder of religious conduct. It is my ladder that my flesh has built. I am the one doing or not doing. I don't need to relate to the Fountain of Living Water because I can get to heaven through my own endeavor.

*Of course, the Cistern of Religion is a broken cistern. It can't save anyone. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.<sup>92</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of Law.<sup>93</sup>*

Paul concluded this section of the Colossian Epistle by stating that religion really can't deliver anyone from fleshly indulgence.

*These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.<sup>94</sup>*

In most instances, religious rules make the forbidden fruit more appealing. Paul intimated that in his own life, religious rules seemed to stir the very lusts that he was trying to escape.

*I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "you shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.<sup>95</sup>*

The only source of salvation from sin and deliverance from fleshly indulgence is the Fountain of Living water. Consider Jesus' words to the apostles, concerning fruit-bearing.

*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes*

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<sup>91</sup> Colossians 2:8, 16-22

<sup>92</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>93</sup> Romans 3:28

<sup>94</sup> Colossians 2:22-:3:1

<sup>95</sup> Romans 7:7b-8

*it, that it may bear more fruit. ...Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. ...By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.<sup>96</sup>*

In this beautiful metaphor, Jesus stated that the key to bearing fruit is our abiding in Jesus. Fruit comes from our attachment to the Vine, which is another term for the Fountain of Living Water. Those who abide in Jesus receive life and sustenance from Him, just as a branch receives life and sustenance from the vine. The outworking of this spiritual reality occurs through the flow of the Holy Spirit into the believer's life.<sup>97</sup>

One result of the flow of the Spirit into a believer's life is the development of holy character. Paul described this phenomenon as the fruit of the Spirit.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.<sup>98</sup>*

Note that Paul does not describe *fruits* (plural), but *fruit* (singular). This is an important distinction. A Jonathan Apple Tree produces Jonathan Apples. The Jonathan Apple has several characteristics - it matures late in the fall; it has red skin, white interior, seeds, a rather tart taste, not too large, a recognizable shape, firm, etc. When an apple has these characteristics, it is recognized as a Jonathan Apple. If it lacks one of these characteristics, it is not a Jonathan Apple. It may be a hybrid, but it is not a Jonathan. The Holy Spirit produces only one kind of character. That character displays the characteristics described by Paul as the *fruit of the Spirit*.

Many churches and individual Christians find it difficult to learn this lesson. Denominations, sects, and various ministries have tried to change people through laws and codes. Some have elaborate schemes and lists that are imposed on members and families. Interestingly, the first generation of these groups may follow all of the rules, but the next generation usually rebels against them. The key is not looking to a Cistern of Religion, but a relationship with the Fountain, whose fresh flowing water of the Holy Spirit cleanses and transforms the inner being.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE CISTERN OF SELF-CONFIDENCE**

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<sup>96</sup> John 15:1-2, 4-5, 8

<sup>97</sup> John 7:37-39

<sup>98</sup> Galatians 5:22-25

Another common cistern is the Cistern of Self-Confidence. James describes an attitude that reflects this cistern.

*Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.<sup>99</sup>*

The sin that James is addressing is not in the plans that are being made. The sin is in the self-confident arrogance that assumes that we have the ability to control the outcome of our endeavors.

Our Heavenly Father is the source of all that we have or ever hope to be. Had He not made us His children and given strengths and abilities to us, we would be nothing.

*For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*

<sup>100</sup>

The Cistern of Self-Confidence plagued me in my younger years. As a child I developed the attitude that I could do anything that I put my mind to. In many endeavors, I was a bit ahead of schedule. For example, I learned to read before I started to school. On my first day of school, Miss Anderson, our teacher, held up the *Dick and Jane* elementary reader and said, "Children, this is the book that will teach us how to read." I thought to myself, "Teacher, I have already read that one."

That set the tone for my years in school. I always was determined to be the best student in class and usually was at the top or close to it. It wasn't because I was brilliant, I just worked hard. When the National Honor Society was introduced to Muskogee, during my Junior High years, I was one of only eight admitted to the society. Later, at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, I was chosen for the *Delta Aleph Tau* honor society, an honor granted to only three students each year.

My achievements were not just in the classroom. When I became an Eagle Scout, I was the youngest person to whom the Muskogee Council of the Boy Scouts of America had awarded that rank. From my earliest years, I had owned a rifle and was a crack shot. My father and I made bows and arrows and I became an archer. When I took up the clarinet at the age of ten, I strove to be one of the best and soon was playing in bands with boys much older than I. At eighteen years of age, I became the youngest member

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<sup>99</sup> James 4:13-16

<sup>100</sup> I Corinthians 4:7

of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks that the Muskogee Lodge ever had admitted (I had to get my mother to sign a legal document allowing me to join). The list could go on and on, but the point is, I had the attitude that I could achieve anything I set my sights on and usually did.

As an adult, I considered no task too big or too difficult. When people said to me that they were too busy to do something, I scoffed. My attitude was, "If you don't have time, then start to work earlier and work later." That's the way I lived. I could do it if I put my mind to it. All that it took was commitment, discipline, and a little less sleep.

Because He loves me, God could not let this Cistern of Self-Confidence continue. In my 30's things began to happen that I could not change or fix. I will not detail the trials that beset me and my family, except to say that hardly an area of my life was untouched by the discipline of my Heavenly Father. More than one person close to us said, "You seem to be a modern Job." Every place I looked I saw devastation and failure. The church where I was the minister began to experience all sorts of problems. Various tragedies hit members of my family, both immediate and remote. My beloved Barbara began to suffer the consequences of a chronic, hereditary, incurable illness.

I found myself facing things that hard work, intelligence, or just pure grit could not touch. For a lengthy season, confusion, despair, and self-disgust filled my world. I didn't like myself when I couldn't solve the problems that beset those whom I loved. I came to feel that my whole life was a sham. I became a broken man. Although daily prayer had been a part of my life since my baptism at ten years of age, my relationship with God began to take on a new dimension. Among other things, I came to realize that a lot of what had driven me in recent years was fear of failure, not love of God. That's just another way of saying, "I was driven by pride." God, in His great love for me, brought me to a place of total helplessness.

*It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.<sup>101</sup>*

It is an indescribable comfort to know that I have a Heavenly Father who loves me enough to take whatever measures are necessary to free me from dependence on the

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<sup>101</sup> Hebrews 12:7-11

Cistern of Self- Confidence. Because I was a strong person, the discipline had to be rather severe.

I believe that if God truly loves us - and He does - then He will not allow us to go through life without some sort of impediment. All of us need something that will remind us that we are not self-sufficient. For that matter, any honest person must admit that the complexities of life are just too much for even the wisest person to sort out.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
And do not lean on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He will make your paths straight.*<sup>102</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CISTERN OF GOOD WORKS

A very close cousin to the Cistern of Religion is the Cistern of Good Works. The tendency to build this cistern seems to be inherent in everyone who has any sense of morality. Jesus addressed this cistern in the Sermon on the Mount.

*Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."*<sup>103</sup>

We can speculate about the miracle working powers of this group and what Jesus meant by *practicing lawlessness*, but such questions are not our focus here. The point is, Jesus said to them, *I never knew you*. The Greek term used here is the same term that Paul used in Philippians 3:10, in which he wrote that his goal was to *know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings...* The men of whom Jesus spoke in the above quote were men who had no relationship with Him. They were trusting in the Cistern of Deeds and Works, rather than in their relationship with the Fountain of Living Water. Jesus said that this is a broken cistern that won't hold water.

Good works are not the means whereby we attain salvation. They are not *meritorious* deeds. Many consider their eternal destiny to be determined by something similar to an old balance beam scale. On one side of the scale rests all of our bad deeds. On the other side of the scale rests our good deeds. If our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, then we are going to heaven. If our bad deeds outweigh our good deeds, then we are doomed. This is not the biblical picture of salvation. In the biblical picture, no one will be able to enter heaven who has the slightest stain of sin in his life. Since everyone

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<sup>102</sup> Hebrews 12:7-11

<sup>103</sup> Matthew 7:22-23



has the stain of sin, a means must be found to remove the stain. God has provided one way for this to be accomplished. The eternal stain remover is found in the Fountain of Jesus' Blood.

*...but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*<sup>104</sup>

William Cowper expressed this truth in a poem that has been included in almost every denomination's hymnal for more than two hundred years.

*There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains...  
The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day,  
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away...*<sup>105</sup>

I believe that Cowper's poem, sung to an American folk melody, has been popular since its composition because it expresses a truth about the Fountain of Living Water. What joy to know that God Himself has provided the Fountain that will remove every stain of sin from my life. There isn't a cistern anywhere containing such a sin-stain remover.

The contest between the Cistern of Good Works and the grace that comes through the Fountain of Living Water was quite intense during the early years of the Church. Addressing this conflict, Paul wrote,

*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.*<sup>106</sup>

When some in the Galatian Church began to succumb to the teaching that God's grace was not sufficient, that salvation must be achieved by works, Paul challenged them with this question,

*This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> I John 1:7

<sup>105</sup> William Cowper, 1731-1800, was an English poet who struggled with depression throughout his adult years. The earliest signs of English Romanticism can be traced to the poetry of Cowper and Thomas Gray. Cowper found relief from his depression in the writing of poetry, especially poems of faith. He joined his friend, John Newton, author of Amazing Grace, in producing The Olney Hymns in 1779.

<sup>106</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>107</sup> Galatians 3:2-3

They knew that they had the Holy Spirit. He experientially was present in their lives. So, Paul asked them if they received the Spirit by the Cistern of Good Works or by faith, relying on the Fountain of Living Water. His argument was irrefutable. The Cistern of Good Works was a broken cistern.

I am my earthly father's son because he has begotten me. I am not his son because I earned the right to be his son. The same is true of my Spiritual Father.

*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.<sup>108</sup>*

I am God's child because I have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. I trust the Fountain of Living Water, not any Cistern of Good Works that I could construct.

However, we must not forget that good works are important. Even though they are not the reason for our salvation, they are one of the evidences of our salvation. One reason that God calls us unto Himself is so that we can be His agent for accomplishing good works throughout the world.

*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.<sup>109</sup>*

In January, 1991, before the fall of Communism, Gordon Wright and I were in the Soviet Union. This was the era of Glasnost and Perestroika. Although we were in the country on tourist Visas, our real purpose for being there was to minister among the unregistered churches. Much of what we did was circumscribed by the government, but the believers found ways to circumvent the controls. One of the church leaders in Kiev saw our visit as an opportunity to present the Gospel in places where it normally would not be heard. He informed the director of Pedagogical School IV, a teachers college, that there were two Americans in the city. The director, a large imposing lady named, Svetlana, was eager to have us come and speak at the school. So, Gordon and I found ourselves in an austere assembly hall before several hundred future schoolteachers with curious expressions on their faces. The hall's only decoration was a large red Communist banner, containing a picture of Lenin, staring down on us. The students had never seen Americans before and were eager to learn about America. Speaking through a translator, we answered a variety of questions. They especially wanted to learn about American churches. In our responses to their questions we were able to present our beliefs and to present the Gospel. At the close of the session, one of the Ukrainians with us was permitted to distribute Russian language New Testaments to the audience, something totally unheard of at that time. Two Communist ideologues sat at

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<sup>108</sup> John 1:12-13

<sup>109</sup> Ephesians 2:10

the back of the room, watching and listening intently. Their role was to monitor all that we said and to report to government officials the content of the meeting.

After we finished speaking, we were told that we had to go into a back room to meet with the ideologues. They wanted to question us. Not knowing what lay ahead, we proceeded to the back room. Upon entering the room, we found the director, Svetlana, eager to be a good hostess, providing chocolates and coffee. Then the interrogation began. Of course, all of this took place through our interpreter, Oksana. It became apparent that the older *ideologue* was a career Communist. The party was his ticket to security. The younger man, on the other hand, seemed to be altruistic. He believed that Communism was the best economic system for humanity.

As questions turned to "religion," the younger man said, "If there is a God, and if I spend the rest of my life doing good, then I believe that I will be acceptable to Him." I looked into his face and replied, "If you live a perfect life from this point on, what will you do about your sins of the past?"<sup>110</sup> He dropped his head, he could not reply. I quoted I John,

*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*<sup>111</sup>

I have no idea what the young man did about this truth, but I could tell that he was deeply moved. He had a glimpse of the difference between his Cistern of Good Works and the grace that is extended through the Fountain of Living Water.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE CISTERN OF BUSYNESS

A close cousin to the Cistern of Good Works is the Cistern of Busyness.

*Cease striving and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.*

This verse, Psalm 46:10, is one of the sweetest verses in the Bible. An alternate rendering of the Hebrew word translated, *cease striving*, is *let go, relax*. Psalm 46 speaks of great cosmological phenomena, followed by a declaration that even the

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<sup>110</sup> I believe that I experienced, in this episode, a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to which we referred earlier, *And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.* (Mark 13:11)

<sup>111</sup> I John 1:7-9 I quoted verse 7 out of order, because it fit the situation. This passage is written to believers, but the truth addressed the need of the young Communist.

nations of the world are subject to Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts. The Psalmist is urging God's people to relax, because Yahweh is fully capable of defending His reputation and fulfilling His will.

Responsible and reliable people often take on a role that belongs only to God. Their behavior says that God cannot be trusted to take care of His own business. They must make certain that everything gets done, every need is met, and that nothing is left to chance. They frenetically rush about, carrying great burdens in their souls, always feeling like a failure because there always is more to do than anyone can get done.

Some feel that they are responsible for God's reputation. They are zealous, crusading, crusading, crusading, saints. They allow themselves no rest as they try to make the Church perfect, keep any false or misleading doctrine from being propagated, and never fail to point out any fault that they can find.

Not only individuals, but many local churches rely on the Cistern of Busyness. Some churches have meetings every night of the week. Those who are in leadership roles rarely have time to spend a leisurely evening with their families, because they have to *be about the Father's business*, when all they are really doing is caving-in to the Cistern of Church Busyness. I know of more than one marriage that has fallen apart because the busyness of the church consumed a husband or wife.<sup>112</sup> The situation could only be described as spiritual bigamy. The individual was married to the church and married to his or her spouse at the same time. The marriage disintegrated as the church became the "First Wife," so to speak.

What peace floods one's soul when he comes to the place that he really believes that the Fountain of Living Water is sufficient. Doing what God calls us to do, and no more, is a hard lesson for most Americans to grasp. Laziness, certainly, is not a virtue, but neither is busyness.

In an earlier book, *The Doulos Principle*, I described an episode in my life that spoke directly to this cistern. This episode has been so significant in my life that I must include it here.

“There are more needs in the world than we can meet. There always will be pressure on us to do other than and more than what God has called us to do. A few years ago, a woman came to my office for counseling about some problems that she was facing. After the session, the Holy Spirit gave me a word for her,

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<sup>112</sup> I could compose a sad list of women who became so caught up in church work that they came to view their husbands as somewhat of a nuisance. I also know of many ministers, elders, deacons, and other men who are so owned by the busyness of the church that their wives rarely receive any nurture, love and care - to say nothing of the children who feel that they really don't have a father, because he is owned by the church.

*Enter only those battles that I have chosen for you. When I tell you to withdraw from the field, do so immediately. To do otherwise, is to operate in your own strength, rather than in my anointing.*

As the woman was leaving my office, the Holy Spirit said to me, 'That word is for you, too.' I am, by nature, a problem solver. I love to solve problems. Because of this, I have the tendency to get involved in matters God has not chosen for me."

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I would be a liar if I said that I have lived in perfect obedience to that word. Honesty requires me to admit that the Cistern of Busyness is a difficult cistern for me to avoid. Yet, I can say that I do try to discipline myself to make decisions in prayer and sense God's pleasure or displeasure as I chart my course through life.

### **CONCLUSION**

As we conclude this study, let us exhort one another to be aware of the often unrealized tendency to not trust God to accomplish what He wants accomplished in the church and in our individual lives. Let us increasingly learn to count on the Fountain of Living Water, rather than, out of fear or distrust, to build cisterns, cisterns that cannot hold water.

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<sup>113</sup> James Garrett, *The Doulos Principle* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, Doulos Press) 2004, page 65.