



Jeremiah 17:5-8 Identity in Christ

Summary: Will you love Jesus more and look more like Him a year from now?

This morning will be a little different. We just finished Mark's gospel, next week we'll start the book of 2 Timothy and then sometime late Spring, we'll begin the book of Romans. But first, I want to take one Sunday and share what I'm thinking. The President gives a State of the Union address, maybe we could call this a State of the Communion address?

My single greatest goal in ministry is to pastor this church safely through whatever 2024 brings and see a congregation of people who love Jesus more twelve months from now than they do today. Next February, I hope to see:

- More people
- Looking more like Jesus
- Producing more fruit
 - o for the glory of God and the good of others,
 - o and enjoying it
 - o even if it's hard.

I want to see us beaming with excitement and confidence because of what we have seen God do in our lives personally, in this body, and in the lives of people we know.

And I believe that's possible. It's absolutely possible, because that's not just my hope, it's the goal of Jesus. Maybe you've heard these words found in the book of Jeremiah before?

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

This passage was written by the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Israel who were in captivity in Babylon – things didn't look so great for them at the moment, but God wanted them to know, they had **a future and a hope**. They had a reason to live, there was something to look forward to. The day was coming when they would see the goodness of God. Some of them would see it as their daily lives on earth were transformed. Others would go through continued difficulty and ultimately be delivered in death, but one way or the other, God's eternal future for them was bright and it was guaranteed.

Jesus said something similar to the disciples on the night before His death when He reminded them:

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

Copyright The City Gates Church, 2023. Authorized for personal use only.

Notice, that according to both Jesus and Jeremiah – God is already at work thinking about you and your situation and your future. God has a purpose and a plan for you. And it's good. It's filled with [hope](#). Or, in the case of Jesus, it's full of [fruit](#) – lasting, enduring, fruit. God wants to produce good things through you, to see amazing things come out of you. He wants you to be a source of blessing to others. And none of this is advanced level super-spiritual stuff – it's all in the base level package – this is average Christianity.

Paul explains this further in Galatians chapter 5 where we learn that this fruit that we're supposed to bear, is actually virtuous behavior.

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control.

Basically, the Holy Spirit is at work inside you, farming you to produce virtue. As you grow spiritually, you become more fun to be around, you're helpful, you're encouraging, you're comforting and calming to other people. And this is God's plan. This is God's future for you: that you would be a source of blessing to others.

And here's the additional benefit - before any of that fruit can pass *out* of you, it has to be formed *in* you. Before things like [love](#), [joy](#), [peace](#), [patience](#), [kindness](#), [goodness](#), [faithfulness](#), and [gentleness](#), can come out of you, you're already experiencing them on the inside. If you're producing this kind of spiritual fruit, it means you're healthy on the inside of your life, your roots are in the right place.

And once again friends, this is normal, average, status quo Christianity. This is not super-spirituality. This is not what the Championship team looks like. This is what God wants to produce in every single one of us. This is God's plan for your life.

And so, as a pastor, called by God to spend my life pointing people to Jesus, I want to watch you become what God wants you to be.

I want to see you filled with the fruit of the Spirit – more [loving](#), more [joyful](#), experiencing a sense of [peace](#) in your soul, finding that you are supernaturally able to [patiently](#) endure things that once would have driven you crazy, and still kind of do but you're getting better at handling it, showing [kindness](#) to people and experiencing it yourself, and to see that you're still here and still plugged in to all the places and relationships where you've made a commitment because you're [faithful](#).

But I see things on the horizon that worry me. I see things that could endanger this crop of fruit and that's what I want to focus on this morning, here at the beginning of the year. We'll do it by looking at another passage in Jeremiah where the prophet expands on the analogy of fruitfulness with two alternative life situations. Look at them with me if you will:

Jer 17:5 Thus says the LORD:

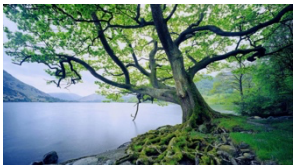
“Cursed *is* the man who trusts in man
And makes flesh his strength,
Whose heart departs from the LORD.
6 For he shall be like a shrub in the desert,
And shall not see when good comes,
But shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness,
In a salt land which is not inhabited.

7 “Blessed *is* the man who trusts in the LORD,
And whose hope is the LORD.
8 For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
Which spreads out its roots by the river,
And will not fear when heat comes;
But its leaf will be green,
And will not be anxious in the year of drought,
Nor will cease from yielding fruit.

Two examples show us two ways to live. You can be a **shrub** in the desert in **the parched places of the wilderness** – a place that is hot, hard, and dry, a place that is inhospitable and barely sustains life. And what does that produce? What does a **salt land** produce? Not much.



And then step into this situation, what does it feel like to be the **shrub**, in the **salt land**, in the **parched places of the wilderness**? It feels like scarcity and suffering – scarcity on the outside and scarcity within. It's living under and inside a **curse**.



Now contrast that with the alternative – what is it like to live under and inside of a **blessing**? Well, the **shrub** is now a **tree**, the **scrub** has branches. Its **roots** go deep and find a steady supply of water, it consistently produces **fruit** which is a blessing to those who receive it and the one who produces it. Remember, external fruit is a sign of internal health.

And notice please, because everything hinges on this – the tree still finds water and bears fruit even when the **heat** comes. Even **in the year of drought**.

You see, here is where I want to share what's really on my heart. As the pastor of a church at this moment in history and in this place, I feel like a captain on the eve of battle, like a coach during the buildup to the big game, like the mayor of a coastal city as a Category V hurricane tracks straight for us.

To use the words of Jeremiah, my concern is that this may be a **year of drought**, individually and collectively, that will expose our true spiritual condition – are you a shrub in the desert or a tree by the river?

I'm concerned about four things specifically.

First, politics. This is an election year and right now there is no indication that the upcoming election will be any less contentious than in 2020. I'm concerned about you as individual Christians, us as a local church, and the corporate church in America.

I'm concerned about political challenges to your spirituality and our unity. I'm concerned that the upcoming election cycle has the very real potential to make you look, act, think, and speak less like Jesus and for the impact that will have on our individual souls, our congregation's unity, and our corporate witness as a church.

I'm concerned about challenges coming from the left and the right because neither is a clearly Christian party. Yes, Democrats have a whole camp of progressives who seem to be openly antagonistic to people of faith and who support openly sinful lifestyles, choices and behaviors, but the Republican party often sees the church as little more than a voting block and the dangerous phenomenon of Christian nationalism has become for some people a heretical false gospel.

When a man who doesn't read the Bible, much less seek the Jesus communicated through the Bible, or allow its teachings to transform his life, carries a Bible to a political rally as a prop he's confusing himself and everyone else who sees him. When Ben Carson appears on a news show and says Donald Trump is like King David - a flawed man, but ultimately used by God, he's not doing the true church any favors. When a person wears a cross but can't tell you what it represents or why it's significant - you know that whatever it means to be an "evangelical" has become a political identity separated from its theological reality.

And my concern is that this confused mashup of political and religious ideas is going to be everywhere this year. I'm going to endure voices on both the left and the right talking about God, Jesus, Church, evangelicals, and what Christians believe and support and they're going to be describing something that sounds nothing like what I believe.

That will be hard enough to endure 'out there,' but then, let's be real - it's going to happen *in here* too. In our church. Not necessarily from the pulpit, but in conversation in your small groups or home groups, or over coffee in the hall, you're going to hear people saying things about a politician, or a party, or a policy and you're going to think, "I don't agree with that at all."

My question is, how will you handle that? Will you let it cause division? Will you let it agitate you? Will you let this political cycle turn your heart away from people? Or, will you be able to patiently love people who see things and say things differently? When it comes to politics, will you seek to talk to God in prayer more than you talk to people? Will you seek His heart on the issues and shut out the talking heads?

My friends, it's the [year of drought](#) and this is only one of the reasons for it.

Second, there's the issue of the culture and its bullhorn – everything is now everywhere, in your face, forcing you to respond and sometimes we just don't know what to do or say. We're all in reaction mode right now as forces, issues, and agendas are pushed on us and our kids in the community, at school, at work in training sessions, and in the media.

To use the language of Jeremiah, the **heat** has come, it's everywhere and it's oppressive. And as a pastor I feel the challenge of speaking against the new normal and leading a congregation faithfully through it.

I'll tell you now, I think, often, about how I'm going to preach the book of Romans when the things the Scriptures say in the opening chapters are directly opposed to the accepted views of culture today.

And frankly, I don't just think about the reaction of the world outside, I wonder how people in here, in our church will react to my sermons. I'm grieved by the possibility that some people will leave this church when I simply say, this is what the Bible clearly says about gender and sexuality, *and I still believe it.*

I have no intent of being mean, or launching a war on people who legitimately struggle with issues of same-sex attraction but I have to say what Scripture says and some people will not like it.

Now, the fact of the matter is, what Paul says in Romans was just as offensive when he wrote it as it is today, if not more so. But there was a time, a very long time, in history when reading Romans 1 and 2 wouldn't cause any trouble. Now it will. Because the **heat** of culture is blowing. The question is – will I feel it like a **scrub** in the **parched places** of the wilderness, or as a **tree** planted by the **rivers**? Because, there's heat in both places.

That's only the first half of my list of concerns this year.

Number three – personal disappointment and difficulty – some of you don't have time for issues of politics and culture because you're busy dealing with the issues of your own life. You're dealing with your marriage, your kids, or your parents.

Right now, we have people in this body fighting for their marriages. We have spouses walking out on people they once said they would be with “*til death do we part*” – some are walking out literally and some are just checking out emotionally. We've also got men and women trying desperately to lead their spouse spiritually and the other person is slow to respond to either the love of Jesus or the love of their mate. Do you know how many people, *men and women*, who come to church each week without their spouse?

And then we've got people fighting for their kids - we have a couple doing their best to hope and pray and believe God for a miracle in the midst of what has been a very, very difficult pregnancy. Another couple is walking their tiny daughter through treatment for leukemia.

We also have people who are fighting for their lives - at least two women who worship with us now measure their lives in months, not years, and they, their husbands, and their kids and grandkids are all trying to figure out how do you do this? How do you live while you're actively dying?

We don't have time to talk about issues with employment, extended families, way ward children, and list goes on and on.

And none of the situations I've described is singular, there's more than one person, couple, or family in each of these situations - the struggle is widespread.

As a pastor I have concerns for the people going through these difficulties. There's the issue of immediate physical and emotional well-being of course, but then there's the fact that I know these things always come with a spiritual cost, they burden our souls. The [heat](#) comes, it's the year [drought](#). And the question is, how will you endure?

Because for some people, the challenges and struggles, the disappointment and difficulties of this life will be the death or the diminishing of their faith. Those who once seemed like [trees by rivers](#) will become more like [shrubs](#) in the [salt land](#).

Not long ago in a sermon we said *disappointment is often the first step towards disbelief*. Something didn't turn out the way you wanted or expected. A prayer wasn't answered the way you wanted, when you wanted. And it may have even been a good prayer. So now you're disappointed and the disappointment leads to disbelief. You walk away from church. Maybe you still keep some small scrap of faith, you don't write off God entirely, but it's not the same as it once was - before the [heat](#) came, before the year of [drought](#) - before your [tree](#) turned into a [shrub](#).

And then **fourth - offers of indulgence**.

This can seem like the opposite of number three, or it can become a coping mechanism for it. It's the opportunity to indulge, to be distracted, to fall into holes of entertainment and ease and lusts of the flesh. It's everything from overeating to spending hours on video games or endless scrolling on your phone or tablet. You give in to the abundance of our modern lives where everything is always available, easy, and addictive.

So then, to do anything difficult - and by that, I mean anything that would have been considered normal life even twenty or thirty years ago - feels boring, unnecessary, and inefficient. You begin to develop a warped and unhealthy expectation of life and relationships because you expect everything to be amazing.



In today's world of indulgent consumer convenience, you can walk into a store and buy fresh kiwis grown in New Zealand any day of the year. The problem is, that distorts our view of reality. Because it's a scientific, botanical fact that plants take time to bear fruit. They take time to grow. So, if you look at yourself, or you look at others and you expect them to always be full of fruit all the time, like the produce department of Whole Foods, you've got unrealistic expectations. The market might work that way, but people don't.

And here's the real problem with that – if there's something you want, and you can't find it in your own life or in the lives of the people you're supposed to be in a relationship with, you can just get in your car, go to the store and find what you want to satisfy your cravings. Or even worse, pull out your phone, order it, and have someone else deliver it to you. You can get pretty much anything you want, the way you want it, when you want it. But that kind of indulgence doesn't develop deep roots in your soul.

And you need deep roots to navigate the years of **drought**, to survive when the **heat** comes and beats on the leaves of your tree.

So, these are the four main things I'm thinking about as I look down the calendar. These are the things I'm concerned are going to make our lives difficult individually and together. These are the main ways I think we'll feel the **heat** and the **year of drought**.

So, what do I hope to do about it?

One thing is simply to talk about it – to call it out – to tell you, this is your captain speaking, I'm turning on the seat belt sign because we're expecting a bumpy ride.

And then, **second**, to **point out the difference** between the **desert shrub** and the **fruitful tree** that is unmistakably clear in the text. One **trusts in himself** and looks to find help from other people - his, or her, heart departs from the LORD. This one becomes the **desert shrub**.

The other person **trusts in the Lord**, puts their hope and faith in God. Their roots push down deep and find the nourishment they need even in the **year of drought**. This is the person without fear or anxiety. So,

Number three, I want to remind you of your identity – the soil you're planted in.

I grew up in Southern California and although it was about an hour's drive to the beach, it was a frequent place to go. And whether you're surfing or body boarding, or swimming, one of the things you quickly learn is how to get out past the tide. When the waves are pounding, you don't try to go power through them or go up and over them, you'll get pounded. You go under them. You dive down and you swim under the wave.

Friends, my goal as a pastor of this church is dive down under the waves that are crashing and help us move through the surf zone just like a tree by the river pushes its roots down deeper to find water in the year of famine.

This is why I've been emphasizing our connection to the global, historic church. That as a Christian, your identity and history are not confined to the role or status of religion in America. What you approve and disapprove of are not determined by the latest thing the celebrities, influencers, or activists say you have to support, denounce or defend. That you don't expect things to always be easy, in fact, you expect that at times things will be hard, really hard, to navigate and deal with. Because this has been the experience of Christians all over the world and all throughout time.

I want to preach a gospel that is as true and real, as comforting and as confrontational here in Northern Virginia as it is to people in Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang, or Las Vegas, New York and Los Angeles or in Texas, Missouri, or Florida for that matter.

It's why I've asked us to repeat the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's prayer, and sing the doxology. I want your roots to grow down deep. I want you to be strengthened and established. I want you to know the church has been here before. Years of drought come. Heat comes. It presses down upon us. But the testimony of Scripture and the testimony of the Church show, we can still produce fruit if you're a [tree by the river](#) instead of a [scrub in the desert](#). You can feel the [heat](#), feel the thirst, and still produce fruit: [love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control](#).

Last summer, during my Sabbatical, I was reminded of the opening lines of the Heidelberg Catechism. Now, if you grew up in a Catholic, or Presbyterian, or Anglican or Methodist church you've probably heard of a catechism and maybe even been through it.

If you come from a less formal or traditional church you may be immediately suspicious because you think that's something *they* do, that's not something *we* do. It's OK, trust me, a catechism is really just a syllabus to help people know and remember important things about the faith. And all I really want to highlight for you is the very first part of the very first question of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The first question is:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

And the answer begins:

A. That I am not my own but belong
—body and soul, in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

I want you to think about that – I want you to chew on that, reflect on that. What is *my only comfort*? It's not the outcome of the elections. It's not the defeat of the forces of culture. It's not moving to a red state or a blue or purple one for that matter. It's not getting out of my hard circumstances, or finally receiving the answer to my prayers. It's not money, or promotion, or anything I can buy. My ONLY comfort in life and in death, is that I am not my own but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Church my hope is that you will latch onto this. That you will let it comfort you and instruct you. That you will let it guide the roots of your life deep, deep, down into the waters of the river Jesus has planted you by.

He knows what you're facing. He knows what you're up against. He knows what is coming at you. And still, He says, you can bear fruit.

The [heat](#) may come this year, it may be the [year of drought](#), but those who sink their roots deep into Jesus will produce [love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness](#), they'll be the kind of people others want to be around and they'll enjoy the blessing of experiencing first-hand everything they share. God wants to do this in your life, will you let Him?

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Jeremiah 17:5-8 Identity in Christ

Summary: Will you love Jesus more and look more like Him a year from now?

- What things are you concerned about this year? What things do you already know are going to happen? What are you concerned might happen? How could your small group or family pray for you and with you about these things?
- What kind of fruit have you seen God produce in your life? Where have you seen fruit in someone else's life? Who have you seen change and how?
- How do you respond to the promise of **Jeremiah 29:11**? *For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.*
 - o Why is it hard to accept the promise of peace and hope in the future when the present hurts so much?
- **John 15:16** *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.*
 - o How can you testify to God's choice of you? How has He directed your life in ways you didn't request or expect?
 - o What evidence do you see of remaining fruit in your life – what enduring good has God accomplished through you – or where do you see this happening in someone else?
- Politics, Culture, Disappointment and Difficulty, Indulgence – which one do you expect you'll have to grapple with the most this year?
- When have you felt like a desert shrub and when have you felt like a tree by the river in the year of drought? What contributed to the different experiences?
- What is your reaction to the first question of the catechism – What is your only comfort in life and death? Why is the word 'comfort' important?