

Broken Cisterns

by Arnold Cook

Arnold Cook's sermon emphasizes the urgent need for genuine revival and the dangers of relying on substitutes that lead to spiritual stagnation.

Duration: 33:08

Topics: "Cisterns"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the fast-paced society we live in and the reliance on technology as a substitute for the supernatural intervention of God. He draws inspiration from the struggles of Jeremiah, a prophet whose ministry spanned over five reigns of different kings. The speaker also addresses the age-old question of why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, using Jeremiah's argument with God as an example. He emphasizes the importance of demonstrating the supernatural in our lives to the younger generation and encourages pastors to strive for revival, godly leadership, and a focus on missions.

Transcript

I'm coming tonight from the perspective of a church leader, concerned about this whole subject of revival from my perspective. My background is conversion in a dying church out in the country, age 11, and from 11 to 20 I thought the Christian life consisted of trying to live the Christian life, sinning, confessing, trying harder, and I was on the roller coaster for nine years, until I was invited to go to a conference where a man by the name of Bill Allen of Mansfield, Ohio, spoke on some truths that I'd never heard before. I never knew the Holy Spirit existed in the church I attended.

And that night I gave myself fully over to the filling of the Holy Spirit. That night I made a shift in churches. And that night, God moved me in his providence into a church that was in the middle of a revived state.

And that church in Owens Sound has left upon me an indelible imprint that has lasted and served me well over the years. Because in that church, I sensed the supernatural. I sensed it in their spontaneous evangelism.

It just finished a crusade for two weeks. It was extended another four weeks because people kept getting saved. And today in that church there are still those people, those couples, saved way back there in 1952.

God also impressed upon me the power of corporate prayer. That's where I learned to pray publicly. That's where I learned about the power of prayer, in that revived church.

It was also a place where I learned about radical, deeper life teaching. When I was in Bible college, my mother-in-law used to write letters to us saying what was happening in the special meetings in that church. And God was working in a miraculous way among leaders, among elders.

And God was filling with his Spirit. If I may say it carefully, some were falling down. I believe on their faces, which is the way I prefer, if I have any word in that whole matter.

But anyhow, they were falling down and God was there and transforming lives in a miraculous way. That left an indelible imprint upon me. And then that church was given to missions.

I heard about my first missionary there. And all of a sudden I heard and listened to Oswald J. Smith that God used him to call me into missions. That was a very rich inheritance, heritage, which I received from that church.

And one of my questions at my stage in life that I keep asking myself is, that's what I had received 40-some years ago. What will my generation pass on to your generation in terms of bequeathing to you the evidence of the supernatural? And that's a great burden on my heart. How can we indeed pass on the supernatural? I was in Regina during the time of the Canadian Revival, 71, 72.

And sometime after that, at the same time I was on missionary tour and was supposed to be in Saskatoon for a missionary conference. We got a phone call from Walter Bolt saying the missionary convention has been cancelled. Of course, in our denomination that's a no-no.

You don't cancel missionary conventions. He said the revival is broken out. And my response was, that's the one good reason for cancelling revival.

And I became impacted by that. Some three years later we went to Lima, Peru and saw God working in a marvelous way. I don't know what to call that thing in Lima, but you call it revival, awakening.

But I had never before seen two or three hundred people come to know Christ every month. I never before had seen a church that built a building with two baptismal tanks on the platform, baptizing simultaneously every month. I'd never seen that before.

I had never seen such hunger for God's word among the students. That experience has ruined me forever for teaching older Christians. The hunger for God's word.

And that was an experience I'll never forget because that moving of God impacted not just the Christian community, but also the secular community because they learned about these evangelicals who were honest people. Not commonly found in some of those places in Lima, Peru. The airport had problems with their security system.

Couldn't find honest people. So they used to take out groups of Christians from these evangelical churches to the airport in buses to run the whole immigration operation there because they were honest. That gets into the whole area of an awakening, as I understand it.

It impacts society. And that's a marvelous story. I remember Walter Vogt came down there one time in 1974.

I introduced him to these new Christians in my class at the Bible College, night school. And I was so excited to have this man who was involved in the Saskatoon revival come down and explain to these students what revival was. And Walter did a great job of doing it.

Talked about what had happened to Saskatoon. And these students just sat there and said, well, what else is new? They had never lost their first love yet. They didn't understand revival.

It was a foreign term to them. That reminded me of the whole matter, of this matter of revival returning us to our first love. Now, from where I sit, I see some things happening in churches that concern me.

I see church conflicts up and preaching on revival down. I see conflict resolution seminars popular. I see corporate prayer dying.

I see infatuation with the social sciences high. I see the critical sciences, theology, being given benign neglect in many churches. Enthusiasm for spiritual renewal is high and strong.

But hunger for spiritual renewal tends to be weak. I see transfer of church growth common. I see conversion church growth rather uncommon.

That is from where I sit. The encouraging thing is I do hear the voices of some prophets. I hear Charles Colson crying out that although evangelicals are mollifying, it's not impacting society.

Crime is still going up. I hear of men like David Wells writing books like *God in the Wasteland*, *No Place for Truth*, and lamenting what's happened to the word of God and the whole matter of truth. I hear Josh McDowell lamenting what's happened to the morals of church young people.

And I hear about R.C. Sproul being uncomfortable with the term evangelical. He has been diluted, looking for a better term. Maybe historic evangelicals.

Classic reformer. Whatever. Some kind of a change.

And George Barna, the evangelical research guru, is telling us now the bad news. According to his stats, divorce is just as prevalent among evangelical Christians as it is in the world. Friends, we are in desperate need of God's visitation upon us.

We all know about what's happening in terms of HIV, AIDS, that terrible plague at the end of the century. But there is another plague hitting the church which is even worse than that. It's what I call HD.

HD is historical drift. That is attacking our churches. It's more dangerous than HIV because that only destroys the body.

This destroys the soul, the spiritual life of Christians. What do I mean by that? I mean this tendency of organizations, including the church, over time to begin strong with a vision down there about 9 o'clock. At 11 o'clock on that curve there is a movement.

Healthy, powerful. About noon, high noon, it begins to tail off into that slippery slope about 1.30. And if that's not curved and turned around and reversed, we drift on down to the monument stage when God lifts his hand from movements and moves on with somebody else. And he writes over the top of those movements, *Ichabod*, the glory has departed.

That is what is happening. And my conclusion about that whole process is number one, it's inevitable. Number two, it can be curved by strong, courageous, godly leadership making tough decisions on that slippery slope.

And thirdly, it can be reversed by God-sent revival and renewal. And I believe over history there's much evidence of what happens when God moves in, especially with awakenings. And out of that come all kinds of new movements.

And God raises up his church and moves on. And I believe that's very much what needs to happen in our day. Now, I want to remind you from this passage in Jeremiah 2, if your Bible is Jeremiah 2, verse 9 to 13, Ron Owen has already served me well by commenting on this and that powerful song.

But here we have Jeremiah, a man whose ministry stretched over five reigns of five different kings. I am attracted to Jeremiah because of his struggle with his call, as I have also struggled with my call to ministry. I don't have too much to offer.

But he also encourages me over in chapter 12, where he argues with God about that old question. Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous suffer? And God comes back to him with the answer saying, Jeremiah, if you run with a footman and they tire you, how will you do in the horse race? And if in the land of peace where you dwell, you are in trouble and unhappy and uncomfortable, what will you do in the swelling of the Jordan? And God has used that many times to keep me moving ahead and trusting him with some of the areas I cannot fully understand. Now, in this passage here, we remember that Jeremiah also had served the time of Josiah.

So, Jeremiah had understood and had seen revival and renewal in his day. But again, it is a reminder that that revival was very important and very powerful. It only lasted until Josiah died and other kings followed him.

But Jeremiah here brings it into sharp focus, his concern for his people. Verse 11, Has a nation changed its gods, which were not gods? But my people have changed their glory for what does not profit. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid.

Be very desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two sins. They have forsaken me, the fount of living water, and hewn themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Cisterns, as has been mentioned earlier, are actually necessary.

They are legitimate. There is a proper use of cisterns. But the problem is with cisterns, that although they are proper and useful for saving and catching rainwater for times when there is no water, the problem is they become a place of pollution, stagnation, and they ultimately leak and become cracked, and therefore are useless.

But these people obviously had gotten to the point where they had completely ignored their God. Notice earlier there, up in verse 5, they had become adulterers, and down in verse 7, they had made God's heritage an abomination. The priests were silent, the rulers had transgressed, and the prophets were prophesying by other gods.

This is indeed a dark hour in the time of history of the people of Israel. Now, I want to today just share with you in the next few minutes a few of the things that I see to be substitutes that evangelicals are using to get by. And obviously, although we think we're getting by, we are just doing the very thing that Paul tells us

not to do.

We are comparing ourselves with ourselves. And we have the wrong benchmarks for success. We feel that we are very much alive because we're growing.

But on closer scrutiny, we are probably growing in ways that are not very healthy. So, here are some of the substitutes. Now, substitute is a pretty mild word, a pretty innocuous word to use.

You could use the word idols. You could use the word over there in 2 Chronicles 14.7 or 7.14 where it says wicked ways might be more correct. But what are the substitutes that are replacing the real thing in Christian churches, evangelical churches? Let me start with endless technology.

I believe that technology has done a job on us in this particular generation. It is Richard Swenson in his book Margin, who reminds us better than any other author I know of. He's documented the fact that this generation has seen exponential change more rapidly than any other generation previously living on the face of the earth.

And this rapid change in technology has done a job on individuals but also on the church. Someone has expressed it this way in terms of what is happening to our culture. This is the age of the half-read page, the quick hash and the mad dash, the bright night with the nerves tight, the planes hot with a brief stop, the lamp tan in a brief span, the big shot in a good spot, and the brain strain and the heart pain, and the cat naps till the spring snaps and the fun's done.

That's a little feel for the kind of life we live in this fast-paced society. And one of the great substitutes in the church is endless technology for the supernatural intervention of God. As pastors, it seems, we're never quite at the wall.

There's always one more thing we can try, one more program, one more technology, one more gimmick, and we've become seminar jokies many times and we have failed to allow God to intervene with the supernatural. A second would be guiltless evangelism versus radical repentance. It seems that in our attempt to be user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, which has its place, the church growth movement got started in India by Donald MacGowan when he tried to find what were the barriers for stopping church growth in India in his own mission.

That was very legitimate because you must remove those barriers. And unfortunately, when he brought his thesis back to North America, as North Americans, we are always taking a good idea and pontificating into a heresy. And we've done that with church growth.

We've worn out a couple of generations or decades of pastors in the process. But I hate to think about missions today without the church growth movement as originally was founded by Donald MacGowan. But this whole matter of people being brought to know Christ without really facing up to their guilt and their sin.

I believe the way we can know Christ puts an imprint upon us how we will grow in Christ. And if you come by way of some of these modern technologies, it's going to be very hard to build a Christian life upon that kind of a beginning. Thirdly, there's Christian counseling replacing a second trip to the cross.

I'm all for Christian counseling. Don't get me wrong. But unless Christian counseling directs people to the cross and to death to self and the fullness of the spirit, we are giving them an easy way around which will be a band-aid solution.

And they'll be back in your counseling room next week for more help, for another crutch. There has to be. I've been involved with missions for many years and some of our missionary staff, and I've been one of them, so I'm not speaking hard of them, but they come home, they have problems, and we put a lot of money into Christian counseling.

And rightly so in many cases. But I've often wondered if a good one-return trip to the cross to see that Christ not only died for us, but we died with him. And we are able to be delivered from self and sin and live a victorian life.

And sometimes Christian counseling doesn't quite get them back to the cross. A fourth substitute would be man-word homilies versus God-word preaching. Preaching down to man versus preaching up to God.

John Piper describes it this way. He said these courses we're singing, despite all the controversial courses, he said despite all their deficiencies theologically, at least most of them are God-word. Praise.

And he said after a half hour, there's God-word praise. Then what happens? The preacher comes up, he knows he has no background music to help him in sermon, he's on his own, and so he knows how people are wired, they're wired for self-needs, so he's a little bit of scripture, a little bit of psychology, he zeroes in, connects with their felt need, and they go home with a band-aid solution for a half a week at least. And he says, what's happening in our churches? God-word praise and then man-word preaching.

I'm afraid, as we heard this afternoon, we're assuming that people in North America, Canada and the U.S., that they understand who the true God is. Even evangelicals don't know who the true God is. And there's one of the great dangers of this substitute.

Homilies for God-word preaching. Introducing our people to God. Another subject would be professional mediation versus biblical reconciliation.

It's not uncommon these days to be caught up in litigation. To be named as a denomination in litigation. And there's a massive ignoring of 1 Corinthians 6, at least on my side of the border, in Canada.

And a whole cottage industry has formed around this matter of mediation. And churches are putting a lot of money into mediation, denominations. Pouring money, legal fees, into mediation.

And forgetting that we as Christians are the only people in the world who has the message that everybody in this world wants. Regardless of who they are, whatever level they are at. The one message everybody wants is reconciliation.

And we have been given a ministry of reconciliation. And we are bypassing it in our churches. And going with professional mediation.

And bypassing what God has provided. Another would be small group focused prayers versus corporate public intercession. Thank God for the META church program.

Small groups. We think we have discovered something very unique. Small groups.

It's about as old as the early churches. And we're going back to small groups again. Where they started.

But anyhow, God must be laughing in heaven saying these dumb North Americans with these huge homes they've built. And they're ranting around they're truthy people. And finally, they're starting to use

these homes as an extension of the church.

That makes good sense. And finally that's happening. That's good.

What I find is I participate in small groups. If what I hear there in terms of prayer. Corporate prayer.

If that's all that's happening in our churches in prayer. We are in tall weeds. Because we lost corporate prayer.

We put everything in small groups. Push it off in small groups. It's going to happen in small groups.

What happens there is very much prayer for community concerns and family concerns and interpersonal concerns. It's not the kind of prayer that's going to carry us in missions or carry the church forward in this postmodern era. Another would be evangelical orthodoxy versus experiential Holy Spirit encounters.

It's very easy to be evangelical orthodox and measure up to the statement of faith of NAE or EFC in Canada. But it's something else to lead our people into experience with the Holy Spirit. The one who has been sent to form Christ in us and to make us holy and godly people.

That is his assignment. It seems to me we're not making much progress with that. Another would be what I would call kickback giving versus kingdom giving.

Here's a very sensitive issue. Money. We all rejoice as denominations and churches and enabling agencies with December giving.

Wonderful time when God's people become very generous. Of course we have a little idea why they become generous in December. They have a little tradeoff between the government and the church and the Christian organizations and all that.

But do we all take that and I certainly don't want to knock that because we survive and that seems up there. And survive and yes thrive but survive. A.B. Simpson one time preached a sermon called seven kinds of giving and he condemned six of them as being self-centered.

He said giving to your pastor's salary, that's not giving. He's serving you and your family. Giving to the church organ, that's not giving, that's serving you.

And he read down the line and hit all the sacred cows in the process. But he said the only kind of giving which is real giving is heroic giving which is giving outside of yourself, beyond yourself where there's no possibility of kickback. And that kind of giving is kind of rare.

Kind of rare. It happens with missions giving. It happens with the inner city.

It happens with evangelism. And add to that list of kickback giving. One of the dark pages in recent history in Evangelical Church in Canada is that recently a hundred churches were exposed as having received money from gaming funds.

Casinos, video slot machines, etc, etc. And out of those hundred there were a number of Evangelical churches. And the only church that gave back the money returned the check was a Roman Catholic church.

Silence among Evangelicals. Sad day. Sad day.

Desperate needs. One more here would be getting people to the new cross versus the old cross. Now it was Tozer who commented on the old and the new.

He makes this comment. The new cross does not slay the sinner. It redirects him.

It gears him up into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect. To the self-asserted it says come and exert yourself in Christ. To the egotist it says come and do your boasting to the Lord.

To the thrill seeker it says come and enjoy the thrill of Christian fellowship. But the old cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt violent end of the human being.

The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said goodbye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going to have his life redirected.

He was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing. It slew all the man completely and for good.

We are getting the people these days to another kind of a cross that's been sanitized and polished. It is a cross which does not deal with self like the old rugged cross. And we all know that this cross is the major stumbling point.

It's hard to be user friendly and have a religion with a cross in it. But we're trying desperately to do that and quite unsuccessfully. And finally I would say we are worshipping worship instead of worshipping God.

Have you been in those experiences? Going around and around in worship and arguing over the worship wars and what kind of worship is what really makes sense and connects with us. One of my pastoral friends is over in Egypt at an international church. He's got 35 denominations in his church and he said planning a worship service is quite a challenge.

And one of his lesser sanctified moments, he prepared a sermon entitled Worship's not for you, it's for God. And he preached that one. It wasn't all that great, but worship is for God.

It's not for us. It's for him. Well, I must finish here.

How long will the evangelical church in North America continue to get by with substitutes? The truth of the matter is we're not getting by. We are paying a very high price for substitutes. And I believe that God spoke very clearly in the beginning about substitutes.

When he rejected Cable's offering as being unacceptable and received the offering of Abel, he reinforced that. And in the second commandment, speaking about graven images and idols, he reminded Simon in the New Testament, you cannot buy the Holy Spirit. And in the book of Revelation at the end of the scriptures, he reminds us of those churches that were trying to get by on substitutes and five of them were asked after only 35 or 40 years to repent.

God cannot be persuaded to allow us to get by with substitutes. When will we realize that? We'll realize that when we come to the point of understanding that in this process we are robbing God of his glory. The one who has said, I am the Lord, your God, I'm a jealous God, I will not give my glory to another.

And we are robbing his glory with our efforts with substitutes. We must realize that we are misleading our people with these substitutes. We're giving the impression that all is well, all is not well.

We're getting by on broken systems. And thirdly, we will have to come to a point and realize that we are paying a very, very high price for substitutes. High price for our children in terms of losing them because they have never seen the supernatural in the lives of their parents.

And that will not carry Christianity into their generation. We're going to lose it. Christianity is always just one small generation from extinction.

I used to believe that whenever a church died, whenever a denomination died, another one was raised up by God, another denomination raised up over here until I went to Turkey. The great Bible land of the New Testament. And there's a place where it never came back.

Maybe five or six hundred Christians among 60 million people in Turkey. The great Bible land of the New Testament. Christianity can become extinct.

We must not get by on substitutes. In my stage in life, I am parking myself a passage over here in Psalm 71. With this I close.

Here's my prayer with this aging psalmist here. 71 verses 17 and 18. Oh God, you have taught me from my youth and to this day I declare your wondrous works.

Now also when I am old and gray-headed, and I am both of those, my current plan is to die young as late in life as possible. But I am old and getting older. Oh God, do not forsake me until I declare your strength to this generation and your power to everyone who is to come.

I used to think that we were only responsible for one generation. One we're in. That's no longer what I believe.

We're responsible for this generation and for the next one. Our children's generation. Because we must pass the faith on to them.

As I spent a lot of time with my four-year-old grandson recently, I think I've added another generation. The grandchildren. Because God is a God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He's a God who keeps his covenants to a thousand generations. And his plan from the beginning has been to have one generation pass on to the next generation and on and on. And we cannot lose a single generation.

And what's the secret? The secret is found in words like wondrous works, power, and mighty works. These are the phrases which reflect the whole matter of the supernatural. Our children and our grandchildren must see the supernatural in our lives if they're going to embrace the faith in their generation.

It was Augustine who said some good things. One of the good things he said was that every generation must stand on the shoulders of the previous generation and reach higher and reach further. That's my prayer for you who are here tonight, younger pastors.

When I came into this office six years ago, I had as my vision, number one, to see revival in our Canadian churches, number two, to see God's leadership, especially at the local church level, elders, and thirdly, refocus missions. I was assured that I would have the support of my peers, my age group, for those three goals. I wasn't so sure about the younger pastors, but over these five or six years, the most encouraging

encouragement I have received on those two first points, revival and godliness, has come from young pastors just starting in the late 20s, and that group in the 30s, and some in the 40s, who are saying, Dr. Cook, this is right on.

Don't back off, is what we need. I'm encouraged by that. Let's pray.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/23/SID23135.mp3>
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/arnold-cook/broken-cisterns/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net