

Time of Grace Ministry
Roots and Fruit: Grow Closer to Jesus
Jeremiah 17:5-9
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GQ magazine recently published an article entitled "Twenty-One Books You Don't Have To Read," and guess what book made their list? The Bible.

Which seems pretty crazy - the bestselling book of all time, the book that whether you love it or hate it, whether you're a Christian or an atheist - you have to admit it is a book that has changed world history and American culture more than any other. I didn't agree with the total article but there's a line in the article that caught my attention. Jesse Ball who wrote his review of the Bible included these words. He said, "The holy Bible is rated very highly by all the people who supposedly live by it but who in actuality have not read it." I thought there's some truth to that quote.

You know, lots of us in the church world, we love this book. We regard it highly. In fact, we believe it's holy. It's not just a book; we think it's the holy Bible because it comes from the Holy Spirit. It's actually written by God, many Christians believe, and given through human authors. And despite our belief in it and our esteem of it, if your life is anything like mine, we don't always find time to read it. This book is a challenge to read and many Christians will go not just a day or two and not just a week or two and not just a month or two but sometimes a year or two without making this a habit in their daily life.

And if you've ever been there or maybe you are there right now, I totally get it. I mean, I know it's the pastor thing to say like, "We should all read our Bibles every single day." But when I think about that, like what it must be like for you to hear that, I get why so much time can go by without opening this book. I mean, here's the first thing I get: Look at this book. What is the last - besides Harry Potter - when is the last time you read a book that was this big? I mean, the Bible's a massive book and not everyone loves to, you know, snuggle up with a good book on a rainy day. Some of us love to read and some of us don't. So to read anything, much less a book of this magnitude, seems crazy.

And not only that, this isn't like a book written by modern people in modern times. The most recent parts of this book were written 1900 years ago. Some of its parts were written by Moses 3,500 years ago; there's poetry and prophecy by ancient Hebrew people and it can be really difficult to understand. I mean, I went to school for a lot of years to study this one book and there's some parts that I read and I think to myself, "What in the world does that mean?" So if you're brand new to church or you've been here just a few years, you know, I could encourage you to read this book. But you would open its pages and I'm sure be thoroughly baffled by many of them.

And that's not the only thing. The more complicating factor is I have a feeling that if you are a lot like me, your life is busy. That you're not just sitting around with like dozens of extra hours during your week. You might have a job or family commitments; you might be raising small kids or working mandatory overtime. You might have tons on your plate with friendships or taking care of aging parents. To really grasp and get a lot out of this book it's not just going to take a minute or two in the lobby at your next doctor's visit; it's going to take some like quiet, quantity time and you probably don't have a lot of it.

I think about this picture that we often put up at our church that we call the roots; you know, that we encourage people to plant these five different roots. But I learned something about the way that tree roots work the other day. I read an article by a tree and root expert named Thomas Perry and he said that the number one thing that prevents roots from thriving and growing is soil compaction. He said if there's a lot of foot traffic around the trunk of a tree, it will actually compact the soil so much and make it so dense that there isn't a lot of space and room for the roots to grow. Why would you commit yourself to the next year to reading a book that you might get a lot out of or maybe you won't, as I try to convince you this is worth reading every day for the rest of your life? Why would you give up another activity for the kids that they really enjoy to spend more quantity time in your home as parents just with a little breathing room and not just running from thing to thing until you crash into your beds? Why would you change your habits and your schedule to make space for this book?

Well, that's a question I want to tackle with you today. Before I say "Amen," I'm going to give you just a little bit of the how. Like, if you're interested, here's how you do it. But I want to spend the bulk of my time giving you a convincing "why." Why is this worth it if it can be so difficult for modern, busy people. But thankfully today, I don't have to answer the "why" question by myself because there's a guy who lived about 600 years before Jesus was born named Jeremiah and in his book, which is very complex and poetic and prophetic, he gives us this really, really great reason to be people who have a constant and daily connection to the word of God. Here's kind of a roadmap of where we're going to go. We're going to study just four or five verses from the book of Jeremiah and Jeremiah's going to poetically paint the picture of the kind of spiritual person you don't want to be and he's going to tell us the kind of spiritual person all of us want to be and then he's going to explain why the Bible is the one thing that can move you from that kind of person to this kind of person.

So if you're ready to learn why the Bible is not just the bestselling book but the best book of all time, you can turn on your device, open your Bible, or just follow along on the screen. We're going to be in Jeremiah 17 and let's just start with verses five and six. He writes: "This is what the Lord says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.'"

This is classic Jeremiah. He doesn't just come out bluntly and say, "Not reading the Bible is bad." Instead, he uses poetry to paint this picture and maybe you kind of felt the emotion of this picture. He's describing someone who is spiritually cursed and not blessed. He says it's like

they're parched; it's like their soul is crawling on elbows and knees through this dry, salty, deserted place. Jeremiah pictures this cotton mouth and thick tongue and cracked lips depiction of the soul that none of you would want to have. And did you catch who he says ends up in a place like that? The one whose confidence and trust is in man. Did you catch that? "Cursed is the one who trusts in man; who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord." He says what happens to us is that we can often end up in a spot that none of us would choose if we simply put our trust in man. In other words, if our faith in what is good for us or what is bad for us; if we try to figure out what will make us blessed or what will make us cursed, if the final vote in those huge discussions for our soul come down to any man or any woman instead of God, eventually our hearts will turn from God who's the source of life and will end up cursed. And that man could be any man or woman. If our trust is what our mom or dad told us, what our pastor or priest, what our favorite professor or our peers, what a pop star or the poll's; if we look to our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our intuition, our hearts, our gut, if we let our conscious be our guide, we trust in man, Jeremiah says, and we end up spiritually in a place that we don't want to be.

And the reason why, according to Jeremiah, is because the law of entropy applies to your heart. You ever heard of that before, the law of entropy? It's a fancy scientific theory that essentially says this; here's the official definition: That a closed system tends towards disorder and chaos. Here's another way to say it: If you leave a thing to itself, it gets worse and not better. And according to Jeremiah, the same thing happens to the human heart. If God doesn't have a chance to garden it, to prune what's going well so it can thrive and to pull out the sin that would choke out a thriving faith, it will not get better; it will get worse. If all we have is human opinion, trying to grow together closer to God, it doesn't end up in the place we thought it would. If you're taking notes in your program, here's what Jeremiah's really trying to teach us; that the cursed, the spiritually unhappy, trust in man. And I'm totally aware that if you are under the age of let's say 30, that that seems crazy. You might not know this if you're in your twenties or you're a teenager, but you have grown up in a culture, you have been swimming in waters that tell you the opposite of what Jeremiah is saying. I mean, you could probably finish these sentences, right? "You need to trust your gut," and "You should follow your heart," and "Your intuition wouldn't lie to you." "You can trust your feelings," right? That's all we hear: "Be true to yourself." It's outside people, institutions and authority that's the problem. The truth is found within you.

But not everyone for human history has believed that. In fact, God, when he spoke to Jeremiah, said that we shouldn't believe that. It's in the same chapter of Jeremiah that we find this in verse nine. Jeremiah says, "The heart," my heart and your heart, "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" He's saying that the heart is deceitful. We can talk ourselves into anything; we are like the best salesmen for bad ideas for ourselves. And if God doesn't speak to us from the outside, we will not end up closer to him but further away.

Let me ask you a straight forward question: Do you believe what God says about your heart? Do you believe it is as deceptive and tricky and lies to you as often as it does? Because if your answer to that question is yes, God is ready to speak to you because your Father in heaven doesn't just want to make you busier; he isn't giving you this book so you can read it a lot and

earn his love. No, like a good Father, he wants you to listen to his voice so that you will be blessed. He says, "But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord; whose confidence is in him." See the contrast? "They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." I love, love those words. My wife, about a month ago, wrote those two verses on this big chalkboard that sits in our kitchen. Every day, my family sees that because that is so beautiful and it is so clear: Blessed is the one. Not everyone, but the one who trusts in God. God says if you trust in him, if you're like a tree planted by the water, the heat might come and the difficult season of life might arrive like a drought and yet, what? You don't have to worry and you will never fail to bear fruit.

See, God is saying if you read his word, life might not get easier. There will still be tragedy and cancer and death and depression and anxiety and mental illness and addiction. You will not open the book once and you won't have a craving for drugs or alcohol or pornography; it just doesn't work that way. But what God says in the middle of the craziness of life, you will never fail to bear fruit. That there will still be love and peace and joy and I love the little details why. Because if you're in God's word every day, you will be like a tree planted by the water.

You know what the problem is with the trees in my yard? They're not by the water. They're totally dependent on the rainstorm or the sprinkler. And that's kind of like a Christian who only comes to church; like their faith is totally dependent on how good or not the Sunday message is. But what would happen if you were a tree planted by the water? Because then you can end up like this guy. This is a guy I met in another continent named Micah. He's goofily showing off his interesting beard to his wife who's apparently very interested in how he's growing it. I heard about Micah and his wife, Kayla, long before I got to Thailand. They're coworkers and some of their superiors in the missionary organization they were a part of said these two were a force of nature for Jesus. They would go into a city where very few people were gathering in Jesus name and they would love people so well and invest in them so passionately and have such peace and joy in their relationship with God that when they would open the word, like the city would get changed and they would leave. They were like this force of nature that would leave a wake of gospel love behind them. I was going to be very curious to meet them and when I did, I remember I went on a run with Micah and he told me the most interesting story. He said that he had grown up in a Christian church and it was a good church. And he was raised by Christian parents and they were really solid Christian parents. And he went to a Christian school and it didn't scar him and it wasn't hypocritical; it was a solid school that lifted up the name of Jesus. But Micah confessed to me that not once in his entire life did he open the Bible for himself. You know, his teachers would tell him you have to read this story or memorize this verse and he would. And they would schedule chapel on this day of the week and he would go. And his parents would wake him up to bring him to church and he would attend but it was always something he was forced to do and not something that he chose to do. But when he ended up in a different country, Micah realized that he needed help. And so, he desperately turned to the word. And he told me that when he did, his faith - which was strong to begin with - it exploded in all the right ways. That he found more joy in Jesus. He found more peace than ever before. He found more of a commitment to love people with faithfulness and hospitality and kindness. I

remember well that run when he said, "I never did it before, but now that I have, I'm not going back."

And your story could be like his. Maybe you went to a Christian school, maybe you've been coming to church for a long time, maybe it's your first Sunday here at our church. I don't know your story but I know this: If your connection is not just week by week or school year by school year, but day by day, you will find something so powerful and I can tell you why. If you're taking notes, actually, I would summarize it this way - why would you grow? What did Micah find? And my one word answer is Jesus. Because this book is not just about ancient poetry and prophecy; this book is about Jesus. And if you meet the real Jesus in the pages of this book, it must change you. It has to. I mean, tell me, how would it be possible that you could meet the Jesus, the God of love, in this book and not end up wanting to love people in return? You know, this book says that Jesus is so committed to you that while you were still a sinner, he died for you. It says that no matter how great spiritually or what a wreck that this past week was, that God's love is still full and free for you. This book says that if you've been sober for five years or you haven't been sober for five minutes, that God is still forgiving and kind and he is pleased with you because of what Jesus has done. This book says that you don't have to earn God's love, you don't deserve it or merit it, you don't take steps up a ladder to get to him. This book says that God is so full of love, Jesus climbed down the ladder to get to you. And if you would meet a God like that who loves you more than your parents, your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your children, anyone in the world, how could that love not sink deep into your heart like a seed and produce something beautiful? Or how could you read about the Jesus in this book and not have joy? One of my favorite things about the Jesus of the holy Bible is that he doesn't just put up with me and he doesn't just accept you. The Bible says because he took away every one of our sins on the cross, he delights in us. Do you believe that? God - I mean, does your boss delight in you? Your parents? Does your little brother, your older sister, delight in you? Don't answer that question. But God - I mean, the God who knows all of the mess, he knows the whole story. I mean, if you told the whole story, who would smile and laugh and rejoice in you? But this God is so committed because of what Jesus did that he took every sin to the cross and he gave you every bit of the perfect life that he lives and God thinks of you and he rejoices. And he dances. He's not like letting you sneak in the backdoor of heaven; he kicks open the double front gates and he throws open his arms wide and he loves you. And if you believe that, like, "God. God is proud that I'm his kid," how could that not give you a bit of joy?

And if you would meet the Jesus of this book, how could you not have peace? You know the thing you're worried about right now? I mean, the struggle in your family, the anxiety at work, the mental illness, the addiction, the court date, like that thing - do you know where that is? Underneath the feet of Jesus. So that's the why. But I promised you a quick "how" too, didn't I? I've learned that whenever I preach about how life-changing and powerful and Jesus-centered the Bible is, sometimes people get fired up. But if you're kind of new to the Bible, you probably have no clue where to start. Just a quick show of hands, how many of you are smartphone or tablet users? You have that in your possession? Let me see - yes, okay, all of you. Thank you very much. The YouVersion Bible app is - it's incredible. There's been over 336 million installations. It's the most popular Bible app that has ever been invented and it is incredible. On the YouVersion Bible app, you could download like a Bible reading plan, like get to know the

life of Jesus. You could do a topical study on anxiety or addiction or marriage or singleness or fear or depression or whatever it is. The YouVersion will break it up into separate days, tell you exactly how much to read. It will connect you with Christian friends, a lot from our church, and you can dialogue and ask questions. It will push notification like if you haven't read it in three days, it just knows if you're getting out of the habit. If you're super competitive like I am, it will keep a streak of how many days in a row you've opened the app. It is beautiful and, best of all, it comes at the wonderful Lutheran price of free. Yeah, so you can download it for free after church today and it's just a treasure trove of great ways to get into the word. I encourage you to download that today.

To be honest, I don't really care how you do it. I just want you to spend time in this book so you can get to know Jesus and you can end up blessed because that's what many of you told me; that this book has blessed you. About a year ago, I gave a challenge to our church family: Would you read the entire Bible with me in a year? And before I gave that challenge, I had been praying and asking God: "God, would you bring 10 people from our church family with me on this journey?" And I gave the pitch one Sunday and I asked people to sign up on their little communication cards and do you know what happened? I took a picture from that night. Eighty-three people said they would join me. They wrote "365" on their cards, they sent me notes like, "So excited!" "Let's do this - smiley face." But do you know what I realized, signing up to read the Bible is kind of like signing up for a gym membership on New Year's Day. Like that's the easy part. There are 365 days of commitment that follow, which is why two weeks ago when I emailed the entire group, I was kind of nervous. I asked them, "How many of you are at least 200 days into this plan?" And I sent the email and a reply came, and then a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth, a tenth, a fifteenth, and do you know what I found? Forty-five people! Forty-five people had been growing in God's word for the past year.

But that's not the best part. The best part isn't how often they read the Bible or what part of the Bible they read. The best part was the blessing that God gave to their reading. I followed up with those 45 people and I said, "Can you tell me the best thing that's happened to you spiritually?" And I wish - like, I wish I had just 20 more minutes to read every single email of how Jesus changed people's hearts and lives.

Let me give you just a few snippets. Tracy said, "I have learned what true inner peace can feel like." Nate said, "I've been blessed by the time that my wife and I have spent connecting and discussing the Bible together." Rachel said, "The time that I have connected with my teenage daughter." Holly wrote, "I find it amazing how there are some days when my reading is so connected to what I'm experiencing that day." Julie wrote, "I want to do this every year until the day I meet my Lord and Savior." But Jesse's was my favorite. Jesse said, "I learned that people haven't changed and sin hasn't changed and, best of all, God hasn't and will never change."

You know what I heard? Peace. Joy. Love. Fruit. And where'd it come from? A root. Because Jeremiah was right: Blessed is the one who will be like a tree; whose roots are by the water. Even in the season of drought, they will never fail to bear fruit. I pray that you and I together can become trees just like that.

Let's pray.

Dear God, you determined that we would be born in this time and place. And when I think for most of Christian history, how few people would have the Bible in their pockets, in their homes and in their hands, I'm just humbled by that fact. Why are we here and why are we now? God, only you can answer that question but I know we have a privilege that so many followers of Jesus have not had for thousands of years; to read the Bible every day.

God, please lead us not into temptation. I know the enemy doesn't always just want us to do bad things; he just wants us to be busy with good things so we miss the best thing. And so, I pray not just for good priorities but that we would believe your promise; that this word will not come back empty. That faith comes from hearing the message. That as we heard from Deuteronomy today that we can enjoy life and it will go well for us and the next generation if we're careful to meditate and to talk in our homes about the great things that you have done.

God, thank you for your patience with us. We struggle with this. We find time for lots of things and sometimes, not for this thing but we know that this is not a have to; it's a get to. So God, help us to get to and to want to and to meet you. We pray this confidently because we know that you delight in us, you rejoice in us, and you forgive us because of what Jesus has done so it's in his name that we pray, and all God's people who agreed, they said, "Amen."



TIME OF GRACE®

Roots and Fruit: Grow Closer to Jesus

Study Notes

Summary

Fake news. Feuding religions. Personal interpretations. How does a person have any peace in a world where everything seems so uncertain? Grow! Although the Bible is a hard book to read, it produces knowledge to keep you secure in your faith until Jesus returns.

- **Jeremiah 17:5,6:** ⁵This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. ⁶That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.”
- The cursed _____ in _____.
- **Jeremiah 17:9:** The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?
- **Jeremiah 17:7,8:** ⁷“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. ⁸They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”
- The blessed _____ in _____.
- Why grow? Answer: _____!

Points to Ponder

1. **Evaluate:** The more you trust your own heart, the less you will need the Bible.
2. Read Psalm 119:1-16, the first verses of an epic song written about the power and beauty of God’s Word. As you read, find at least three reasons to grow in the Word each day.

3. **Challenge:** Download the YouVersion Bible app and explore the hundreds of ways to “Grow” in the upcoming year.

Homework for Next Week

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-8.

“The idea that service to God [in German, this is the same word for worship service] should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in the church and by works done therein. . . . The whole world could abound with services to the Lord [worship services], not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field.”

—Martin Luther.