

“The Well-Watered Garden

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Jeremiah 31

¹⁰ “Hear the word of the LORD, you nations;

proclaim it in distant coastlands:

‘He who scattered Israel will gather them

and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’

¹¹ For the LORD will deliver Jacob

and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

¹² They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;

they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—

the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,

the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,

and they will sorrow no more.

¹³ Then young women will dance and be glad,

young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;

I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

¹⁴ I will satisfy the priests with abundance,

and my people will be filled with my bounty,”

declares the LORD.

The Word of God for the People of God.

[Title Slide] If you've ever heard the name Shon Hopwood, you know that he is a brilliant legal mind. In fact, he's something of a prodigy when it comes to lawyers. Here's how good he is, by his mid-twenties Shon Hopwood had gotten two cases heard by the United States Supreme Court. Now every year, there are thousands of lawyers that request that the Supreme Court hear their cases, but out of those thousands the Supreme Court only chooses a couple dozen of those cases each year. It's almost impossible to get your case heard. Most lawyers would be lucky to get just one of their cases heard by the Supreme Court during their entire career. But Shon Hopwood got the Supreme Court to hear not one but two of his cases... by his mid-twenties. And what's more, he won both cases. Oh and did I mention that this was before he had attended law school or passed the bar exam? In fact he hadn't even finished college when he argued these cases. Pretty amazing. Now

nearly years later Shon Hopwood is one of the most prominent lawyers in the country and teaches at one of the country's best law schools, Georgetown University Law Center. Yet when he's asked if he ever thought he would be in this situation he laughs because he says it's so improbable. He says he barely believes it himself. Why is it so improbable and so hard to believe? Well, I'll tell you why a little bit later in the sermon. But before we get there we need a little refresher on today's sermon. Because today's sermon really completes last week's sermon. In fact it's really part two of last week's sermon.

[Slide #2] You remember that last week we went to the waterless garden. It was a place of dryness and desert conditions, a metaphor for a time when God's people had gone wayward and not followed God. And what's more, we said that this waterless garden is a place where all of us must visit. Because we are all people that have gone wayward and sinned. We've all been at times self-centered, impatient with others, greedy, turned a blind eye towards injustice. All of us. Each and every one of us. And that's what last week's sermon was about. Grappling with our sinfulness, thinking about what it means to inhabit that waterless garden. Yet we came also to the communion table which pointed us to fact that we can all receive redemption. And that's where we're moving today. Today we're looking at

how we move from being sinful, broken people to people who are redeemed and made new. So where do we start with this? How are we redeemed?

Well last week we looked at the book of Isaiah but this week we're looking at another prophetic book, the book of Jeremiah. And while Isaiah last week gave us the picture of a desolate, waterless garden, Jeremiah this week gives a picture of a beautiful garden which has plenty of water. The text we read today really paints this picture for us. **[SLIDE #3]** It says, "Again they will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more." So in contrast to last week's depressing image, this image is full of hope.

Now the context of these images is that God's people are being restored after a time of rebellion. And we have these images of this garden to give us a sense of what redemption really looks like, the wholeness and peace that comes with redemption. And as we looked at these images there one thing that's very easy to notice. **[SLIDE #4]** The emphasis is all on God's action. In fact if we move out

beyond just these few verses and look at the entire passage we see this even more clearly that the emphasis is not on what God's people are doing but what God is doing. God is the primary actor. Hear what it says. It says "Hear the word of the LORD, you nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.' ¹¹ For the LORD will deliver Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. He the Lord says, I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. ¹⁴ I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty," declares the LORD.

This is the work of God. He says I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow; I will satisfy the priests with abundance. That's God speaking. The entire emphasis is on God's action. He is the one doing the redeeming. You know when we think about how we are redeemed from our sin, it's really tempting to think that it's something we need to do ourselves. Maybe there's a list of things we need to do. That if we just pray more, just read our Bible more, just serve more, that's the way we are redeemed. If we're going through sort of a dry time, we need to do more. We are the ones that have to do those things. We need to put more work in spiritually. But that's not true. Redemption is not something we achieve. Now, praying, reading our Bibles,

serving, those are great things. They are means of grace that God uses. But the key is that God is the one using them. Redemption is a work of God. God comes in and changes us, it not that we change ourselves.

It's like the plants in a garden. Plants are not magically going to come in and water themselves. The plants can't make their own water, right? I know there's photosynthesis, but just go with me. The plants need outside help. They need someone to come in and water them. We're like these plants. We need God's spirit to come in and nourish us, to help us grow. He is the one who comes and helps us. He's the gardener, we're simply the plants.

But here's the second thing about this image. Though redemption is a work of God, it also has to be something that we allow God to do. **[SLIDE #5]** Back to the garden illustration. If someone comes in here and waters these plants, the plants have to accept the water. The gardener comes in and waters the plants, but he can't do that work for the plants. So if God's the gardener, we as the plants must accept the water. We must allow it to nourish and grow us. See before God can really begin to redeem us, we have to acknowledge that we have fallen short and need God's help. In this passage God's people do that. In the passage God's people say, "You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me,

and I will return, because you are the LORD my God.¹⁹ After I strayed, I repented after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” We have to admit that we have fallen short and need God’s help. It’s like the first step of AA. What is it? Admit you have a problem and you need help. It the same way for us with the ways that we fall short every day. We constantly need to be admitting to God that we need help to be changed. But that takes a real commitment. See it’s real easy to just go through the motions when it comes to this. You can easily sit here in the pews Sunday after Sunday and hear about how we need God to change us but never really be open to what that means. And that’s where we’re at as a country so much right now. We all think things need to change, but we all think it doesn’t start with me or my group. No it’s the other people who need to change. But no, true change starts with each of us being willing to admit that we’re not always right True change, true redemption, for us as individuals, for us as a church, for us as a country, starts when we are willing to be totally open to God changing us. Are you willing to admit when you’re wrong in your life? Are you truly willing to allow God to change you? Are you teachable? Maybe you’re so busy being critical of others you’re blind to your own faults. God calls us to be humble and be open to being changed. God wants to redeem us, but we have to do our part we have to be open.

You know one thing that I love to do is look at hymns and how they can teach. I sometimes mention hymns in sermons to help them sort of come alive as we sing them. And one hymn that I love is open my eyes that I may see. What a wonderful reminder it is. Listen to the words.

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

Refrain 2:

Silently now I wait for Thee,

Ready my God, Thy will to see,

Open my ears, illumine me,

Spirit divine!

Open my mind, that I may read

More of Thy love in word and deed;

What shall I fear while yet Thou dost lead?

Only for light from Thee I plead.

Refrain 3:

Silently now I wait for Thee,

Ready my God, Thy will to see,

Open my mind, illumine me,

Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear,

Gladly the warm truth everywhere;

Open my heart and let me prepare

Love with Thy children thus to share.

Refrain 4:

Silently now I wait for Thee,

Ready my God, Thy will to see,

Open my heart, illumine me,

Spirit divine!

Is that your prayer today? Are your eyes open? Your ears? Your mouth? Your mind? Are you totally open to what God wants to do? Do you really think about the ways that you need God to change you? Or is it just something that sounds good when you're sitting here? Because God wants to transform you. Like a waterless garden, he wants to come in and help you grow and flourish. But it starts with you having the humility to allow God to change you.

Shon Hopwood certainly was certainly open. **[SLIDE #6]** He had to rely on God to change him and it started with him being totally open to what God wanted to do. You'll remember that he said his path to being a prominent lawyer teaching at an elite law school was totally improbable, unbelievable even. Yet you'll also remember that he had two cases heard by the Supreme Court by his mid-twenties. So why would any of this be improbable? Well, you see when he got those two cases heard by the Supreme Court; he was an inmate at The Federal Correctional Institute in Pekin, Illinois. Yes, that's right Shon Hopwood was an inmate, a convicted felon when he had those cases heard. Shon had grown up in a Christian

home in Illinois but went down the wrong path. He flunked his way out of college, abusing alcohol and drugs, and when he was 21 he and his friend decided they would rob banks. And that's what they did. They spent months planning it, looking at banks that would be easy to go into and take money, with little security. They robbed five banks in several states, holding people at gunpoint, and getting away with over \$150,000 in total. Well Shon got caught a few months later and after being convicted of robbing these banks he was sentenced to twelve years in prison. And it was in prison that he began working in the prison library and started reading books on the law. In fact, he began devouring them, reading them almost all day long until he was a self-taught legal expert. Those two cases that he got heard and won before the Supreme Court? They were appeals for other inmates he knew that were wrongly sentenced. It later took him about seven years to go to college and law school before he eventually became a licensed lawyer. And you know what Shon says, how it happened? He says after he went to prison he surrendered to God. That's actually his words. He surrendered every part of his life to God. He says his life now revolves around repentance, loving his wife and children, and using his legal knowledge to assist those who cannot afford a decent attorney. Shon was open to God, he let God come in and transform him. See being transformed is not all up to you; it's about saying yes to the transforming God who lives within you. Shon Hopwood did that. You might not be a criminal day, you

might have spent your whole life in church, but there are still parts of your life today that God wants to change and redeem. And so I hope you'll do the same today, open yourselves up to God's transforming love. Let's pray.