When I was a boy there was a comedy series on TV called The Good Life. And it followed the lives of two couples living next to each other. And one couple lived the normal upwardly mobile middle class life, whilst the other couple gave all that up to live organically - including giving up their car to drive around in a lawn-mower powered by manure. But the truth is that both couples were looking for the good life - we all are. And today we're going to look at Jeremiah 17 where Jeremiah tells us how we can get it.

Reading Jeremiah 17:1, 5-10, 12-13

Two Very Different Outcomes
Picture two neighbouring nations. One is thriving. The economy is growing, the leaders govern responsibly, and the index of happiness of its citizens is high. But its neighbour is a basket case. The economy is a disaster, her leaders are corrupt and unemployment is rampant.

Or imagine two businesses on the same street. One has customers queuing up. The staff are happy, business is booming and the management are thinking of opening another store in the next door town. But in the shop next door, things are grim. Days go by without a customer entering, the owner laid off his last worker months ago, and the last time you walked past he was putting up posters announcing a closing down sale - but still no one seemed interested.

Or imagine a fit, sporty, athletic young man, brimming with energy and enthusiasm. But in the apartment under his there's a guy the same age, who spends his days on the couch with a beer and remote in his hand.

And here Jeremiah sets up just such a contrast - between a life that's blessed and a life that's cursed: v5 'cursed is the man'; v7 'Blessed is the man'.

And first off Jeremiah describes the kind of life that in reality is a kind of living death, v6: 'He is like a shrub in the desert.' Now, if you watch nature programs you know that some plants have learnt to thrive in difficult terrain, but this isn't one of them. This life is more like a ball of tumbleweed. It's a dry, virtually lifeless, stunted shrub. It's shrivelled up and barely hanging on. And Jeremiah's saying, people can be like that. Someone's soul, their inner life, can be that bare and shrivelled.

And, v6, they 'shall not see any good come.' Now, that doesn't mean that nothing good ever happens to such a person, it means that the good life all of us seeks doesn't actually do this person any lasting good. It doesn't expand his soul in life giving ways.

And it's not just their inner life that's stunted, their outer one is too: there's a fruitlessness about them. Look how Jeremiah describes the terrain they live in: v6 again, 'he shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.' This shrub stands alone in a wilderness. He's the only shrub for miles around. In other words, you can live life in such a way that you become increasingly self-absorbed, and you're so intent on your own survival, on making it in life, and your heart is dried out to such an extent, that you're increasingly isolated. It exists only for itself.

Now, compare that to the life Jeremiah describes as blessed. Verse 8, 'He is like a tree planted by water.' And this life is thriving. Its roots go down deep and drink from a stream. And, v8 again, 'its leaves remain green, and… it does not cease to bear fruit.' So this kind of person has a vitality about

him or her, that far from shrivelling up in self-absorbed isolation, or sucking life from others like a shrub in the desert, they give life to others, they refresh and energise others, they leave others better off for having met them. And all because they have a water source to drink from.

And they even do it, v8, 'when the heat comes' and 'in the year of drought'. So, even in the day-to-day struggles of life - the heat of noon day, and in those seasons of life that are especially hard - the year of drought, they've stored away enough water so that when life is hard, and they feel under pressure, they don't just survive, they thrive. They don't just make it by turning in on themselves and looking out for number 1, they continue to give out to others.

And they can do that, Jeremiah says, without giving way, v8, to 'fear' and without becoming 'anxious'. Just think about that. I mean, why do we get anxious or stressed, or fearful when the heat is on or we're facing a year of drought and the pressures are mounting? Often it's because circumstances are moving out of our control, and because we want to be in control, when we're not we're anxious and afraid that harm might come to us.

But Jeremiah's saying, there's a kind of life that can weather those seasons in life and not just survive but thrive.

So what makes the difference between the two?

What you Trust Most Matters Most

At our recent prayer meeting for the persecuted church we read a letter that the UK Foreign Secretary had written in support of persecuted Christians. And in it he described himself as 'a man of faith.' And that's interesting because it implies that others who don't share his faith aren't people of faith. That you can have people of faith and people who aren't of faith. But Jeremiah says, 'nah, that's rubbish' - because everyone is putting their faith, or their trust, in something or someone. Everyone, whether they realise it or not, is a man or a woman of faith.

Now, if you investigated why one nation flourishes and another fails; why one business prospers and another closes; why one young man gets out there and grabs the world while another just lies there grasping the remote, you'd discover differences in choices and priorities and commitments made. And Jeremiah says the same is true for why one person's soul shrivels and becomes increasingly self-absorbed, in comparison to the person who in every season of life thrives and gives out to others. And the crucial difference, Jeremiah says, is in what you put your ultimate trust.

Look at v5: 'Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord." So, what is it that leads to this stunted and ultimately fruitless and lonely life? It's putting your faith in yourself, or your ultimate trust in others, Jeremiah says. And think how that's possible. You want the good life, and you think your academic performance, or your career success, is the way to get it. So you pin your hopes on yourself. Or maybe you think that marriage and family is the way to get it. So you put your faith in some romantic relationship, or your husband or wife, or kids, to deliver the kind of life you want. Or you think that the affirmation of others will make you feel good about yourself - and give you that feel good life you want. Or maybe you think that the route to the good life for you and others is politics and some party or political leader will bring that about, so you put your hope in them.

Now, those are just for this life. The nation of Judah, to whom Jeremiah was speaking, was facing a crisis of divine judgement for their sins in the form of a Babylonian invasion - and they were looking to their army, or other nations, to man, to save them. But the day will come when you and I will face death and the judgment of God that lies beyond, and what will you put your trust in then? You see, if you're not a Christian, you could put it in your (or others') rather shaky certainty that there is no God. Or, you could put it in your own moral record. But what if there is a God, and what if your moral record doesn't make the cut? Either way, like Judah, you're trusting in yourself or others.

And that's where the problem lies. Because if we put our hope in others to deliver the kind of life we want, we can become increasingly and unstably dependent on them or we can discover they let us down. And if our hope is in ourselves we have no-where to turn when we fail to deliver the kind of life we want.

But things look very different for the tree beside the stream. Verse 7, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." So this isn't some kind of abstract, theoretical belief in certain doctrines. This is personal and relational. This is a trust in God as your greatest friend and defender, as the source of the good that you seek and the security you need.

And when your trust is in God and not in yourself or others, just think how it opens up the possibilities of this ever-green and fruitful life Jeremiah describes. Firstly, you have a life source outside of yourself that you can drink from. That means you don't need to see others as competitors who you need to protect yourself from. And you're not dependent on others for your inner wellbeing, so you're not desperate for their approval. And that frees you to really help them - to encourage them when they need it, but also to help them see when a course correction might be necessary.

And you can flourish in those times when you're under pressure because you know your survival is not dependent on you. So fear and anxiety don't grip you because, sure, your circumstances are outside your control, but God has got hold of you and he's in absolute control. And when the pressure is really on, and death's approaching - you don't need to worry about 'have I done enough?' - because your trust isn't in yourself, but in God. You know you're saved by faith, not by works.

But as well as changing your response to those times when the heat is on, it also changes how you see them. You see, if it's faith in God, rather than in yourself or others, that leads to a truly fruitful life, God is not going to engineer your life so that you don't need to exercise faith in him, is he? In fact, he'll do the reverse. If it's a growing trust in him that results in a growing fruitfulness and vitality in us, then he's going to make sure we get exposed to the kind of challenges and pressures that stretch our faith. And we can be in those times and think, 'God, if you love me why are you letting this happen?' And he is saying, 'it's precisely because I love you that I am letting this happen.' And that radically changes how you see what Jeremiah calls 'the year of drought' or the heat of the day.

But also, putting your trust in God, rather than in yourself or others, means that you can rest and risk. Chapter 17 ends with Jeremiah criticising the people for repeatedly breaking the sabbath. But if you think you enjoying the good life in this life is dependent on you and your success, then you'll struggle to rest and put your work down. Or, if you think your eternal good is dependent on

you and doing enough good works to earn it, then you'll never find the inner rest that tells you, you're ok, you're accepted. But, when you know that your good, in this life and the next, depends on God, then you can find a real, deep rest, from proving yourself.

But you'll also be able to risk. You see, when your ultimate trust is in God, and not yourself or others, you'll be able to make those decisions that others might shrink from. That might be standing up for what's true, or using your resources in ways that bless others and extend God's kingdom. Either way, you can risk your comfort and the good opinion of others, because it's him you're trusting, not them.

So, Jeremiah says that if in your heart you put your ultimate trust in God you have this incredible prospect of a life of emotional and spiritual health and fruitfulness ahead of you. The problem is he also says you've got a problem with your heart.

Why the Heart is the Problem

I think I was about ten when my brother and I had our worst Christmas ever. There we were ready to unwrap the presents under the tree, hoping our parents had given us a motor controlled car or an air rifle or walkie-talkies or something. And instead they gave us a tool, a diamond tipped engraver that we could use to engrave glass with. And I sat there thinking, 'Great! Just what I've also wanted! A glass engraver!'

But over the holidays, believe it or not, we actually got to enjoy using it - and we engraved beer glasses, and wine bottles. And unlike when you'd just paint them on, those designs stayed.

One year, Su and I took the girls on holiday in France and we visited some caves, where there are these pictures of mammoths and ibex and wooly rhinoceroses carved into the walls, that have been there for thousands of years.

But that's the thing about carving and engraving, isn't it. It leaves an indelible mark. Listen to what Jeremiah says to the people: verse 1, "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart."

Now, when you and I talk about the heart we tend to think of it as our emotional centre. A guy falls in love with a girl and we say, 'he's totally lost his heart'. Or if someone's emotional expressive we say, 'she wears her heart on her sleeve'. But in Hebrew thinking the heart was less about emotions and more about the centre of our decision making. And so God is saying that the decision, commitment making centre of the people's lives is like stone, and their sin, their decision to turn away from him, is engraved in stone, it's set in concrete in their hearts.

But it's not just engraved on their hearts but also, v1, 'on the horns of their altars.' Now, an altar is perhaps *the* symbol of worship. And in the temple, the horns of the altar was where the blood of the sacrificial animals was sprinkled when atonement was made. But it was also the horns of the altar that someone would grab if they were being pursued by someone else to kill them - because no one would dare kill you whilst you were gripping the altar.

So whilst the altar represents what you worship, its horns represent atonement and protection, salvation and security. And Judah's problem was that the default mode of their hearts was to worship and look for salvation and security in stuff other than God. And that was so set in stone

that, left to themselves, they could never trust God as their ultimate hope in ways that could free them to live the life of blessing.

But that's not just a problem for ancient Judah, is it. Jeremiah says it's *the* problem of humanity. Verse 9, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' That in those well known words, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. That we can convince ourselves that we're doing something for other's good or God's glory when, in reality, it's all about us.

So if we can't trust our own hearts and motives, how can we ever have a heart that's truly trusting God and not ourselves. How can that ever-green and fruitful life of the tree beside the stream, be ours?

Well, if in v9 Jeremiah says, "the heart is deceitful… and desperately sick; who can understand it?" God immediately replies, 'I can': "I the Lord search the heart." And God doesn't just read our hearts, stand back, and say, 'what a horror story!' He does something about it.

A New Heart

Imagine a patient whose heart is failing. And the doctors have tried everything. They've persuaded the patient to stop smoking, to diet and exercise, but things have continued to get worse. They've tried multiple different combinations of medicines, but the heart has grown weaker rather than stronger. Until the point comes when the doctors say - we cannot make this better. You need a heart transplant.

And that's the Bible's diagnosis - not just for Judah, but for all of us. And later on, in Jeremiah 31, we'll read how God promises that the day will come when he will make a new covenant with his people, and instead of sin he'll will write his law on our hearts - that from our hearts we'll want to trust him. And then the prophet Ezekiel says that rather than trying to help our sick hearts limp on, God will perform that transplant we need: Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

And then Jesus comes to make it all possible. And at the beginning of his ministry he entered the wilderness, the uninhabited salt land, and Satan tempted him to trust in himself rather than God, to find his protection, fulfilment, self-worth and inner satisfaction somewhere other than in God. But Christ refused to trust anything or anyone other than his Father.

And at the cross, as he bore our sins, and as they were written into his flesh not with a pen of iron but nails of iron, as he carried all those times we've trusted in ourselves, or turned inwards in self-absorption, he experienced the ultimate wilderness, the ultimate year of drought, as he was cut off from his Father, the fountain of living water, as he cried out, "I thirst".

And then God raised him from the dead, and poured out his Spirit, and he does it all so that, by his amazing grace, he can give life to our dead hearts, and turn them from stone to flesh, and give us a new spirit. So that with new hearts and his Spirit we really can put our trust in him.

And when you do it can set you free from fear and anxiety, and to rest and to risk. Because when you know Christ loves you so much he'd endure the desert for you, you know he is with you and

won’t let you down when the temperature rises or you endure a year of drought in your own life. And when you know he’s done everything to win your salvation and earn your forgiveness, you don’t need to be anxious about whether or not you’ve lived a good enough life. So you can find rest in *his* work. And you know you’re loved and accepted in Christ regardless of your performance - so you don’t need to be eaten up trying to prove yourself. And you can risk - for others and for his kingdom, because you know he risked - and gave - everything for you.

So you can trust the Lord with your life. And as you do, you’ll put your roots further down into him, and you’ll stay fresh and fruitful even when life is hard. And rather than turning inwards, you’ll turn outwards in obedience to God and blessing to others. And instead of shrivelling like a shrub you’ll flourish like a tree planted by water.