

# Broken Cisterns

*Thirsting for the Creator Instead of the Created*

Sarah Ivill



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*Broken Cisterns*

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*To the Fountain of living waters,  
And to all those who have hewed out cisterns for yourselves  
and found them to be broken,  
may you know the joy of returning to Christ.*



“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 evils:  
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,  
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns  
that can hold no water.”  
—JEREMIAH 2:11–13



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# A Note from Sarah

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The outline of this book came from a speaking engagement topic I have shared many times with different groups of women over the past several years, originally titled “Thirsting for Springs of Living Water.” Due to the response I received, I decided to expand it into a book, and I am grateful Reformation Heritage Books opened the opportunity to do so. It is my hope that you will study these chapters and discuss the questions in the context of the local church. Hopefully older women will study it with younger women, or mothers will study it with their daughters. It can also be beneficial to read on your own or with a friend and discuss the questions with them sometime during the week.

If you choose to use it for a book study at your church, I encourage you to have the women read the chapter during the week and answer the questions so they can be prepared to discuss them in a group setting. The leader can summarize the chapter and then facilitate the questions. Adding a time of prayer and fellowship around food would be an

added blessing. My prayer for those of you doing this study is that you will drink of the water that Christ offers you so that you will never be thirsty again (John 4:14).

*Soli Deo gloria!*



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Finally, thank you to my heavenly Father, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. To the triune God for what He has done through me, a broken vessel that too easily and often delights in broken cisterns, yet one that is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the Creator to the praise of His glorious grace.

# Introduction



Carol pulled out her iPhone. What started out as an occasional look at social media had turned into a habit that had gotten out of hand. She kept trying to convince herself that she had technology use under control, but she couldn't ignore the countless hours she seemed to lose each week on her phone, how depressed it made her feel when she compared herself to others and their accomplishments, and how empty it left her feeling relationally. What she had thought would enhance her social relationships had turned out to empty her.

Sarah stepped off the scale. When did she get so obsessed with how much she weighed? Counting calories and exercising had become so important they were taking over much of her thought life. What she had thought was a health kick had turned into an addiction to thinness and fitness. What she had thought would fulfill her had failed her.

Gina pulled into the mall parking lot. How long had she been attempting to drown out her problems with shopping? She kept adding more and more debt to her

credit card. What she had thought would fulfill her was draining her.

Amy laid her head on the pillow. When did she get hooked on sexual sin? What started out as an irregular occurrence had turned into a deep thirst for more, but she couldn't ignore the emptiness and shame she felt inside. What she had thought would fulfill her had devastated her.

Lisa looked at her calendar. When did she ever stop running here and there and everywhere? She was beginning to realize that her busyness was really her way of ignoring the loneliness she felt inside. What she had thought would distract her had depleted her.

Kay looked at her office wall. So many signs of achievement surrounded her, yet she felt more anxious than ever. She was always looking to meet the next deadline, always hoping she would measure up, always fearing failure. What she had thought would lead to prestige and popularity left her feeling even more insecure.

Tammy looked at her children. She had thought motherhood would make her happy. But after hours of sitting in carpool lines, shopping for the latest designer clothing, sitting on the sidelines cheering them on in their games, and trying to steer them in the right career directions, she realized she had poured so much into them that she hadn't taken time to do much else. She had elevated her role of motherhood so much that she had neglected other important priorities and relationships, especially her relationship with the Lord. What she had thought would fulfill her had frazzled her.

Perhaps you, like me, can relate to one of these women. What they are doing is not new. It's as old as what Eve did in the garden and what Israel did in the wilderness and the promised land. Ponder the Lord's word through Jeremiah:

“For My people have committed two evils:  
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of  
living waters,  
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken  
cisterns that can hold no water.”  
(Jer. 2:13)

In Jeremiah's day there were three sources from which Israel could obtain water. First, they could have fresh spring water. This was the best of the best. Think of the best water you've ever tasted from a bottle. However good you thought it was, it would pale in comparison to the fresh running water found in Palestine. Second, Israel could have had well water. This wasn't terrible, but it wasn't the best either. Think about coming in from a hot day and drinking a glass of water that had been sitting on the counter all day. Certainly water, even when it's room temperature, will do when you're thirsty, but it's not nearly as refreshing as a cool glass of water from the refrigerator.

Finally, Israel could obtain runoff water that had collected in a cistern. This was a pit cut into the limestone and then plastered to prevent water from leaking. These cisterns could also collect sediment and mosquito larvae. The only thing worse than drinking a cistern's water would have been trying to drink from a broken

cistern. In a broken cistern no water would remain at all, only silt and larvae.<sup>1</sup> I don't know any woman who would put a water bottle up to her mouth and chug down silt and larvae, and yet figuratively many of us are doing just that. We are hewing out cisterns for ourselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Understanding why we do this and the danger of doing this will help us say no the next time the world, our flesh, or the devil offers us a broken cistern.

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1. Paul R. House, "Jeremiah," in the *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 1372.

*Part 1*

# **Broken Cisterns Lead To...**







## *Chapter 1*

# **An Imperfect World**



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It was a hot summer Saturday, and my husband and I had decided to take our four children to four different places after having lunch at home. We committed to keeping the final two destinations a surprise. We had a return to make at Staples and we needed an item at Home Depot, so these were our first two nonsurprise stops. We were hoping to get in and out of each store relatively quickly so we could move on to the better surprises, but our younger two children didn't want to stop playing with the pens at Staples and pretending to be employees by taking things off certain shelves to "restock" them. Finally, we managed to get out of Staples and moved on to Home Depot. But we only exchanged pens for lawn mowers. Our children clearly weren't in a hurry. As I sat and watched my four-year-old and two-year-old happily playing and taking their time enjoying the air conditioning and different environments of these places, it suddenly occurred to me that they had no idea of the better surprises ahead. What my husband and I knew was coming (a stop for ice cream and then playing at a splash pad in their bathing suits)

wasn't anywhere on their radar. So they settled for pens and lawn mowers.

Isn't that how it is for you and me? We have the glorious riches of God's grace at our disposal, and yet we often content ourselves with the broken cisterns of this world.

We constantly hew out cisterns for ourselves when we have the Fountain of living waters, the Lord God, offering us Himself, His word, His peace, His promises, and His protection.

### **We Are Worshipers**

Eve (along with Adam) had been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27–28). This means she had been created to reflect His knowledge, righteousness, and holiness and to have dominion over the creatures.<sup>1</sup> Adam and Eve were also given a charge by God: “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen. 1:28). This charge, also known as the cultural mandate, involved worship, work, woman, and the words of God. Eve was to worship God alone. She was to work for His glory and according to His standards. She was to serve her husband, submitting to his headship and humbly helping him however she could. And she was to look to God's words as her sole authority for all of life. The facts that she was created

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1. Westminster Shorter Catechism, 10. See Gen. 1:27–28; Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24.

in the image of God and that God had given her a specific purpose are important for us to realize because they reveal something about all of our hearts.

First, they reveal that we are worshipers. You and I were born to worship. The question, then, is not whether we will worship but who or what we will worship. We know we are to worship God and to glorify and enjoy Him forever, but because of the fall we often fall prey to the temptation from the world, the devil, and our own flesh to worship someone or something other than the one living and true God.

This is what happened to Gina, whom we met in our introduction. The shopping mall had become a shrine. She worshiped materialism instead of her Maker. This happens to you and me too. To whatever we give most of our time, talents, and treasure is what we worship. Scripture says that we must worship God alone: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). Why? Because “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2). Since the Lord has delivered us from slavery to sin, death, and Satan, we are to worship Him alone. Since He alone is King, the psalmists call us again and again to worship Him.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;  
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.  
For He is our God,  
And we are the people of His pasture,  
And the sheep of His hand. (Ps. 95:6–7)

And “Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth” (Ps. 96:9).

When we come to the New Testament, we learn that worship is spiritual, and nothing is to be withheld from the God who has called us each by name. After spending the first nine chapters in his letter to the Romans declaring the great doctrines of the Christian faith, Paul turns to the Christian’s duty in Romans 12: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1–2).

In the Old Testament God’s people had to sacrifice their best animals on the altar before God in order to atone for their sins and be in good standing with Him. As New Testament believers, we are called to sacrifice ourselves, not to atone for our sins to be in good standing with God (Christ has done that on our behalf), but as our thanksgiving offering for the salvation He has already provided for us. A living sacrifice is far harder to offer than a dead one! The animals used in the Old Testament sacrificial system couldn’t crawl back off the altar. But you and I can! Have you ever given your day to Christ, only to take it back again, using your time, talents, and treasures for your own good and glory instead of His? The Lord is asking us to stay on the altar, continually offering our actions, attitudes, accolades, and

aptitudes to Him. He doesn't want part of us; He wants all of us.

He wants us to wonder at His glory and His grace (Psalm 29). He wants our mouths open wide in praise of who He is and all He has done (Psalm 150). He wants us to rid our lives of other gods that we bow to each and every day, such as anger, beauty, career, relationships, social media, and sexual sins (Col. 3:5). He wants us to sing gospel songs of grace in our hearts to Him and to each other (Col. 3:16). He wants us to strive for holiness in our lives by His enabling grace (Heb. 12:14). He wants us to invest in kingdom work, leading others to worship Him (Matt. 28:18–20). And He wants us to continually praise Him with the fruit of our lips (Heb. 13:15).

### **We Are Workers**

Second, Genesis 1:27–28 reveals that we are workers. You and I were made to work. The question, then, is not whether we will work but for whom or what we will work. We are to work for the glory of God. “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24).

But because of the fall, we often work for the glory of people, desiring power, position, possessions, and prestige for our own glory. This is what happened to Kay, whom we also met in the introduction. She had worked for accolades instead of the Almighty. This also happens to you and me. There's a startling contrast in the book of Acts between a couple who worked for their own glory

and a couple who worked for God's glory. Ananias and Sapphira sold one of their possessions (a piece of land), but instead of giving all the proceeds to the work of the Lord they kept some of the money for themselves. The sin was not in keeping some of the proceeds. The sin was in lying, in saying they were giving all the proceeds when they really were withholding some of the profit for themselves. Such deceit cost them their lives (Acts 5:1-11).

In contrast, Aquila and Priscilla worked for the Lord. They were tentmakers, just like Paul. In fact, he worked alongside them for a time in Corinth, before they traveled together to Ephesus. Paul continued on to Jerusalem, but Aquila and Priscilla stayed in Ephesus. During their time there they had the opportunity to disciple a young man who was already educated in the Scriptures and fervent for the faith but who needed more accurate instruction. Because of Aquila and Priscilla's fruitful and effective work for the gospel, Apollos went on to minister in another region, publicly and vigorously refuting the Jews and teaching Christ in all of Scripture (see Acts 18). Our work matters; it will either aid in the further proclamation of the gospel or detract from it. May each of us "take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (Col. 4:17).

The final chapter of Proverbs paints a picture of a wise woman who glorifies God. "She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands.... She...provides food for her household,... considers a field and buys it.... She girds herself with strength,... perceives that her merchandise is good,... stretches out her hands to the distaff,... extends her hand to the poor,... makes

tapestry for herself.... She makes linen garments and sells them,... watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.... Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates" (Prov. 31:13–31). A woman who works for the glory of God will seek the welfare of others. She will willingly work, as to the Lord. She will provide for others' needs. She will consider her work in light of God's wisdom. She will strengthen her arms for service. She will take care of herself, as she is able, so as not to be a burden to others. She will work hard, not in futility but in the fear of the Lord.

In contrast, the unwise woman is also pictured in Proverbs. Most often the unwise woman is pictured as an adulteress (7:5–27; 9:13–18) or as a quarrelsome wife (21:9, 19). She works hard to cause others to wander from truth. Far from seeking the welfare of others, she seeks to trap others by her alluring speech and conduct. Instead of providing for others' needs, she places them in desperate need of rescue from sin. Far from serving, she seduces. Far from loving and working for God, she loves and works for evil. We can be certain that, apart from God's enabling power in our lives, our work will be for our flesh, the world, and the devil.

### **We Are Wired for Relationships**

Third, Genesis 1:27–28 reveals that we were created to live in community with others. God, after declaring all of creation very good, said that it was not good for man to be alone and made a helper for him, Eve (Gen. 2:18). The question, then, is not whether we will be involved

in relationships but how we will honor God in our relationships. We are to be life-givers to those around us, extending a helping hand, lending a listening ear, walking the extra mile with those in need, and sharing our hearts with others (see, for example, Col. 3:12–17). But often we retreat into isolationism and individualism, taking life from others by closing our hands, stopping our ears, running away on our feet, and encasing our hearts.

This is what happened to Lisa, another woman we met in the introduction. She was running from her loneliness, filling her calendar with busyness so that she wouldn't have to face her fear of being alone. It's also what happened to Tammy. She had elevated her relationship with her children to such a degree that she had neglected other necessary relationships, especially her relationship with the Lord. This happens to you and me too. Too often we isolate ourselves in our sin and shame, our suffering, or even in our service. We are good at rugged individualism, thinking we can manage things on our own. But according to Scripture, this is not God's way.

The picture that Paul paints in Ephesians of believers living in right relationships is instructive for us. We are to walk in both unity (4:1–16) and purity (4:17–5:17). We must recognize that we need each other, especially each other's gifts that Christ has given to us, as well as each other's love that flows from God's love for us, in order to run this race of grace for God's glory. When we withdraw from our sisters, we withhold from them an important part of the body. Regardless of whether you are a hand or a toe, you're needed! For example, an older woman



in the church may have studied the Bible all her life. She may think she doesn't need to come to Bible study anymore. But she's forgetting that there might be a young woman at her table who needs her to speak truth into her life and show it by her actions. She's forgetting that we will continue learning more of Christ through God's Word until the day we die. She's forgetting that she's a vital part of the covenant community. She's forgetting that she's not just in covenant with God but in a covenant relationship with God's people as well.<sup>2</sup>

Our relationships are to be ruled by God's Word. We are to exalt Christ in them. We are to love one another because God first loved us. We are to attend to each other's needs. We are to always point each other to the truth. We are to invest in each other's lives so that we can help each other run the Christian race with endurance. We are to give each other the opportunity to share our hearts freely and openly. We are not to neglect meeting together for corporate worship. We are to sing gospel truth to each other. We are to help each other when times are tough. We are to invite others to do life with us by asking them to pray for us and encourage us. We are to be peacemakers when conflict arises. And we are to strengthen each other with the truth of the gospel each and every day.

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2. For more on this topic, see Sarah Ivill, *The Covenantal Life: Appreciating the Beauty of Theology and Community* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018).

**We Are Accountable to the Word of God**

Finally, Genesis 1:27–28 reveals that we are in submission to the ultimate authority, the Word of God. God was King of the garden kingdom. His rules were to be obeyed, or there would be consequences. That means we are not free to be or do anything we want to be or do, contrary to what the world tells us. We are either walking in obedience to God or walking in disobedience to Him. We are to place ourselves in a posture of humility, laying our very lives on the altar for the Lord to do with as He pleases (again, see Rom. 12:1–2). But instead, as fallen creatures, we want to control our own lives, submitting to ourselves. This is why Paul labors in Ephesians 5:18–6:9 to speak about Spirit-filled submission. One of the ways by which we obey Paul’s exhortation to “be filled with the Spirit” is by “submitting to one another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:18, 21). He goes on to teach that wives are to submit to their husbands, children to their parents, and slaves to their masters. The key in each one of these situations is that submission is to take place as though one were submitting to the Lord (5:22; 6:1, 5–7). As those who have been saved by grace alone and given numerous spiritual blessings in Christ, we are to submit to God and to one another in fear and reverence of our Creator and Redeemer.

Psalm 19 gives us a beautiful description of God’s Word. It is perfect. There is no other book on your bookshelf that is perfect. But God’s Word is. The next time you need help, reach for God’s Word. It also has the power to convert souls. I have known of men and women who were converted simply by reading Scripture. God’s Word

is sure and filled with wisdom. Before seeking a counselor, let us seek Scripture. It is righteous and has the power to make one's heart rejoice. It is pure. It enlightens one's eyes. It endures forever. It is true. It is to be desired more than the treasures of this world. It serves to both warn us of danger and encourage us toward faithfulness. It's a Word you don't want to be without; indeed, a Word you cannot be without. It is your very life. Moses told Israel, "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess" (Deut. 32:46–47).

### **Forgetting Who We Are Is Costly**

Something tragic happens in Genesis 3. Eve forgets who she is (an image bearer of God who is to reflect His knowledge, righteousness, and holiness). And she forgets what she is supposed to do (worship, work, live out her design as woman alongside her husband, and obey the words of God). This has disastrous results.

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God

has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen. 3:1–5)

Satan offers Eve what she already has—Eve is already like God! She has been created in His own image. But Eve has an impure thirst that leads to an imperfect world. She doesn’t just want to be like God; she wants to be god in her own life. And on that tragic day in the garden when Eve believed Satan’s lie, she rebelled against God’s Word, and all humankind fell with Adam and Eve. The perfection and delight of the garden were marred by the putrid deceitfulness of sin.

According to 1 John 3:4, “sin is lawlessness.” One Reformed catechism defines it this way: “Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation.”<sup>3</sup> And because we reject and rebel against our Creator, resulting in spiritual death, we become idolaters. Idolatry occurs any time we exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the created instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Or, as this catechism puts it, “Idolatry is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security.”<sup>4</sup>

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3. The New City Catechism, A. 16.

4. New City Catechism, A. 17.

Because our hearts are broken from the fall, we trust in broken cisterns instead of in our blessed Redeemer. We look to our health for our hope. We look to our hobbies for our happiness. We look to the stars on our children's report cards for our significance. And we look to our savings for security.

Thankfully, the tragedy of the fall is not the end of the story. Genesis 3:15 (the gospel in seed form) is close at hand, and we are going to take a long glimpse at the gospel in part 2 of this book, but for now I want us to focus on the effects of the fall on our thirst. In the next chapter we will look at how an impure thirst leads to disorder, discontentment, and death.



Can you relate to our family's Saturday? Have you ever wanted to surprise someone with something but couldn't get them away from what they thought was ample pleasure? The Lord has a treasure house of merciful riches for us, and yet we're often content to sit amidst broken cisterns. These can never satisfy our thirst because they're broken. Our thirst must always and only be satisfied in Christ.

**Thinking It Through**

1. Describe a time when you have tried to surprise someone with something, only to have them content to go on doing what they were doing, or when someone tried to surprise you with something and you were resistant to giving up your current activity.
  
2. If someone were to look at the way you devote your time, talents, and treasure, what would they say you worship?
  
3. In what ways did you work for the glory of God this week, and in what ways did you work for your own glory? You may want to ask a friend, your husband, or one of your children what they saw you working for this week.
  
4. Why do we tend toward isolationism and individualism instead of toward interdependence in the church?
  
5. How does your life reflect interdependence with your church family?

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6. In what ways does your life reflect God's Word as your absolute authority?
  7. How are you seeking to teach those under your leadership that God's Word is our final authority on all matters?
  8. Spend time in prayer this week, asking the Lord to give you a desire for His glorious riches and to take away your affection for broken cisterns. Consider keeping a journal of your written prayers, along with other notes or answers to questions, as you study this book. Repent of worshipping, working for, and witnessing about that which is not for His glory. Then pray that you will worship, work, and witness for Him alone.
  9. Seek to memorize Deuteronomy 32:46–47 this week. You may want to consider writing it out once a day to help you, or speaking it out loud three times a day.