

Jeremiah 17:5-10 “No army could help some folks!”

I chose the title of this sermon months ago.

Later when it occurred to me this title could be taken more than one way, I felt embarrassed.

One might take this to mean that in a few situations, having no military power could be to one’s advantage.¹

Yet most of us have been in such predicaments it seemed the greatest army in the world could not rescue us.

That is the desperate condition I originally had in mind.

Have you ever felt that powerless?

“There is no solution. It is hopeless; no one can get me out of this mess.”

Those acquainted with Greek mythology might recall this story: **Eurystheus, king of Mycenae demanded that Herakles (HER-a-kleez) (Lat: Hercules) perform ten virtually impossible tasks.**

King Eurystheus refused to count two of the great deeds Herakles performed, so Herakles had to do 12 great labors.

What type of impossible deeds did king Eurystheus require of Herakles? One of them (actually the fifth) was to clean the stables of Augeas, a king who ruled over an area known as Elis in southwest Greece.

The Augean stables, which housed 3000 oxen, had not been cleaned in 30 years. Herakles was supposed to clean the stables before nightfall. Augeas promised that if Herakles got the work done, Herakles would receive a tenth of the herd (300 oxen).

Herakles cleaned the stables by diverting the course of the nearby rivers Alpheus and Peneus through them.”

This legend was set in an area near the site of the first Olympics in 776 BC. Norma, Janice, and I visited there a few years ago when our ship was in port at Katakolo(n), Greece. Some photos are included.

¹ Switzerland is renowned for its neutrality, but does have an army of about 140,000 personnel.

At times we feel as if we are in no-win situations—as this Greek myth illustrates.
Today’s text foresaw that powerless condition.

In Jeremiah, the Lord tells us why we usually get into jams.

He also informs us how to get out of them.

We all want to achieve an edge in life.

How can we prevail over others?

When I was young, I looked for ways to gain an advantage.

My folks had little money.

It seemed to me they kept getting poorer.
At the time, it didn’t occur to me that I was one of the causes of their meager resources.

Mom and dad had little education.

My dad attended trade school, but otherwise had little formal schooling.

One elder sister attended a semester at Kansas Wesleyan; then got married.

Even into my high school years, college was a world beyond my knowledge and background—it was not one of my goals.

When I was young, I never heard anyone refer to me as promising; I was also short.

How would you ever have guessed?

Friends and relatives often commented about my shortcomings.

I am not asking for sympathy; I do not deserve it and do not want it.

I am simply stating that like many youth of the day, and perhaps today, I looked for some kind of edge, some advantage.

I yearned for some secret of success, some way to overcome life’s obstacles.

In my preteens, I dreamed of being a football star, of owning my own railroad, and of having girls fawn all over me.

But I developed no long-term or short-term plans or schemes.

My goal as a late teen was to one day make a hundred dollars a week and drive a new convertible that had a wraparound windshield as the 1954 Oldsmobiles and Buicks sported.

The year after high school, doctors gave me bad news about my health.

One doctor told me that because my heart was weak, I should quit work.

A Portland orthopedic surgeon took x-rays of my spine, diagnosed that it was deteriorating, and fitted me with a full back brace.

While Norma and I dated, I wore that brace.

You can see why I looked for some kind of edge, some advantage.

I started college at Portland (Oregon) State mostly because my closest friends planned to attend there, and I didn't want to be left out.

I declared psychology as my major.

I took that class because I thought it would help me understand the thinking of others.

If I could outwit or outsmart opponents, I would gain an advantage. The professor who signed me into the General Psychology class chuckled scornfully because I incorrectly spelled psychology.

Studying psychology, I thought, would help me achieve an edge; I enrolled in other

psychology classes and read numerous books on psychology and psychiatry.²

I have hundreds of notes and quotes from experts in both fields.

Much of the information was helpful.

There are good people in the mental health professions and I do not want to demean them or speak too generally.

A few realities, though, helped me see that outthinking and outmaneuvering people would not bring the results I hoped.

First, no one cannot outwit everyone in all fields of knowledge.

Second, Norma and I were acquainted with both psychologists and psychiatrists.

They were not necessarily any happier or successful in their personal relationships than non-professionals.

Indeed, a well-publicized study revealed that the recovery rate of people treated by

² My Merriam-Webster Dictionary (copyright 2016) defines psychiatry as “a branch of medicine dealing with mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders.” Psychology is the “science of mind and behavior.”

psychiatrists was no different from those who received no treatment.³

At times the patients that the professionals were treating were better at figuring out what was going on than their high paid counselors.

Norma and I repeatedly saw this.

The patients were often savvier than the doctors and were simply playing mental games with them.

Many of the coping medications prescribed by mental and physical health “experts” have created unforeseen side-effects.

Society is grappling with a relentless, rapidly growing, drug dependency problem.

Devious behavior, drug and alcohol addiction are not new.

Jeremiah said: **“The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”**

Mental health professionals often miscalculate how deviously human minds operate at times.

There’s a fascinating connection between the word translated “deceitful” here and one of the Bible’s best-known persons.⁴

The name Jacob and the word translated “deceitful” have the same root; they differ only that Jacob begins with a yod (a jot) the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

Trace the word akob or akov (the Hebrew letter “beth” sometimes is pronounced with a “v” sound) and you find these connotations:

Insidious, slippery, supplant (to take the place of by force or trickery), grab the heel (in order to trip), as someone might secretly track your footprints and take advantage of you when you were not looking.⁵

The connection between “Jacob” and the word deceit is evident in the exchange between his brother Esau and their father Isaac after Jacob stole Esau’s blessing: Isaac tells Esau:

³ Results of this study were published, as I recall, in Time Magazine in the mid-1960s.

⁴ Jcoab - יעקב decietful - עקב

⁵ *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible and Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, William Gesenius.

“Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.”³⁶ Esau said, ‘Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing.’”

Jacob, the deceitful one, went north and encountered his mother’s brother who was even more crooked than he.

Jacob and Laban spent years trying to gain advantage over the other.

Greed permanently divided them and their families.⁶

Much of modern technology is designed to give us an edge.

Folks secretly, craftily, record and film others to trip them up.

With all its supposed intellect, education, technology, and smarts, our world suffers increasing hate and division. Much of the rancor results from people motivated by lust for an edge or an advantage

Greed and power-grabbing infect and afflict increasing numbers.

There is a simple, powerful, healthful, way to gain an advantage in life without being crafty, sly or deceitful.

We don’t need a lot of smarts; we don’t need to outwit anyone; it requires no computer smarts; anyone can do it.

We choose God, praise God, and follow Jesus and his ways.

Will we join the people around us who scrounge, stingily hold on to their “toys” and go all out to gain the advantage?

Or will we obey God, act lovingly as Jesus did, and wait for God to bring justice?

The choices are clear.

In Jeremiah’s time, the outcome of the choices his forefathers and contemporaries made was sadly everywhere.

Jeremiah’s ancestors and peers chose to live by the standards of the people around them.

⁶ Genesis 25 -35 tells the sad details of this long-term deceitful conflict that negatively affected their children and their children’s children.

They trusted human wisdom and strength and failed big time.

“(5) This is what the LORD says: ‘Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD.’”⁷

The word cursed carries intimations of being broken, barren, and destitute.

Let me tell you about a church leader Norma and I greatly respected and our kids loved.

He had earned a very good living and gained respect in and out of the church.

This friend got to a point later in life where he decided to quit serving others.

He resigned his church offices and responsibilities telling me it was time for him to enjoy life and live to please himself.

He deteriorated fast.

Norma saw him on the street and barely recognized.

We bailed him out financially on more than one occasion.

He died alone: broken, barren, destitute: “They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness in an uninhabited salty land.”⁸

Another church leader we admired became resentful because others with his education level made more money than he.

“**It wasn’t fair,**” he said.

Though he spoke and taught about faith, he evidently no longer depended on God.

He put major effort into making money. He was far from destitute, but he died alone, broken and barren, away from his good family.

“**The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?**”⁹

Let me share one more story.

This church leader advised me to not depend on the Lord as Norma and I had chosen to do.

⁷ Jeremiah 17:5 NLT

⁸ Ibid, verse 6

⁹ Verse 9

“You need some other way to make a living,” he said.

Norma and I have never earned much.

Because there were some complex factors one year, we paid a CPA friend to prepare our tax forms for us.

**After he did our taxes, he commented,
“You are sure not in this business
for the money, are you?”**

Yet God has always taken care of us.

The greatest financial blessing we ever received came from a completely unexpected source.

The instigator of it had at one time loudly voiced no confidence in me; members of that family openly opposed my ministry.

For years, they saw Norma’s humble, loving, hardworking service in the kingdom.

Yet Norma credits God for it all.

We do not regret our walk with God.

I regret only that I haven’t been more bold, faithful, and forgiving in following Jesus

“But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. (8) They are like trees planted along a river bank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.”¹⁰

Appearances mean nothing to the Lord.

We can fool others; we won’t hoodwink God.

“But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.”¹¹

He has perfect knowledge and unlimited power. When we fully obey Him, He gives us the edge. The church in Smyrna was the weakest of the seven churches in Revelation.

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! ...

¹⁰ Ibid, verses 7, 8

¹¹ Verse 10

Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.” Rev. 2:8-11

We can all be victorious as the Smyrna church was.



😊 Athens

😊 Corinth

😊 Olympia – site of first Olympics in 776 BC

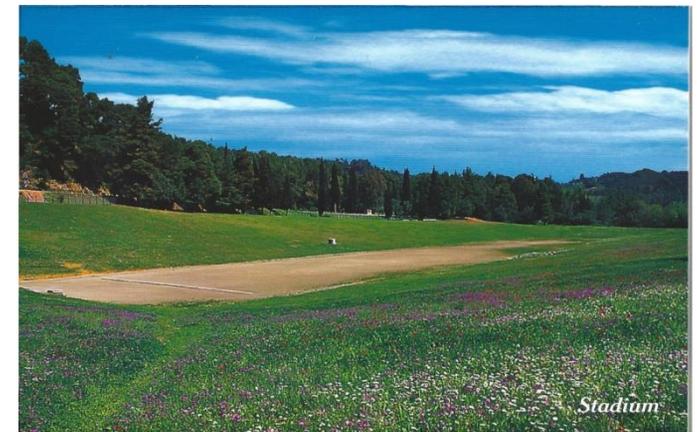
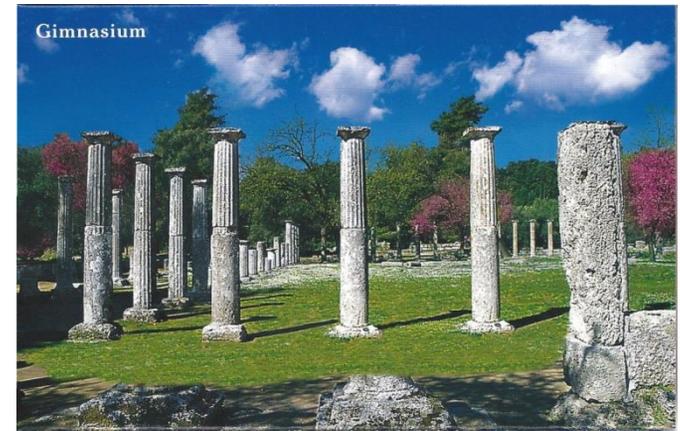
→ Katakolo –modern port city-

in 2015, Janice (their daughter), Norma, and Bob visited Katakolo and Olympia. Pictures are from an album Bob

purchased there. The western portion of this region was known as Elis in ancient times. The area labelled Achaia was called that in New Testament times. Peloponnesus was a more ancient term for the southern region. The Peloponnesian War was the struggle between Athens and Sparta, 431 to 404 B.C.

Modern Turkey is the land mass on the right of the map. In Roman times, it was known as Asia or Asia Minor.

The city of Smyrna was located a few miles south of where you see the L in Lydia.



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