

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
Meadowbrooke Church
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“Just Follow Your Heart”

Jeremiah 17:3-18

Introduction

I have heard the phrase, “follow your heart” more times than I am able to count. The concept of following your heart has been expressed in many different ways. Another way you can say follow your heart is, “Follow your dreams.” I think when some people encourage others that they can do whatever they set their mind to is just another way of saying, “Follow your heart.”

Kidadl is a website platform developed for the purpose of providing a, “digital home of family edutainment, helping parents educate and entertain their kids with trusted, personalized, curated content designed for families the world over.”¹ On November 30, 2021 the Kidadl team published, “100 Best ‘Follow Your Heart’ Quotes to Achieve Your Dreams.” The list is a collection of quotes from, “...known authors, plus inner voice quotes to help you on your path.”² I thought I would share with you five of the quotes listed:

“Your heart and your instincts are far more reliable than your brain. When you follow your heart, you can be sure you won’t regret it later. Even if you calculate your every move, it’s not like life ever goes according to plan.” - Nithya Menen.

“Make sure that you always follow your heart and your gut, and let yourself be who you want to be, and who you know you are. And don’t let anyone steal your joy.” - Jonathan Groff.

“At the center of your being, you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want.” - Lao Tzu.

“Only do what your heart tells you.” - Princess Diana.

“Follow your heart a little more and listen to your head a little less.” - Fabiola Francisco.

What does it mean to “follow your heart?” What it means is that your feelings are the compass of your life that will lead you to the right place in life. Another quote listed by Gina Greenlee states something a little more balanced: “Follow your heart. Then root its longing with the facts.” Zack W. Van’s quote is also listed on the website: “Follow your heart, but don’t lose your mind along the way.” Alfred Adler said something better than the others: “Follow your heart but take your brain with you.”

The passage we are looking at this morning is from Jeremiah 17, which tells us that what the world suggests is your inner compass, the Word of God declares is broken. According to

¹ <https://kidadl.com/about-kidadl>

² <https://kidadl.com/articles/best-follow-your-heart-quotes-to-achieve-your-dreams>

Jeremiah 17, following your heart as your moral compass will not lead to the place of life and thriving but disappointment. Jeremiah 17 also provides us the way to find the place of life and thriving.

Our Inner Compass is Broken

The story of Israel is one of continual failure. Their story is circular in that although their intention was to do good, they ended up behaving badly. This is not only Israel's story; it is ours as well. Jeremiah was written to warn the southern kingdom of Judah that their sins would eventually lead to discipline at the hands of Almighty God. In fact, Jeremiah 17 begins with these stunning words: **“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.”** In other words, their sin is written on the tablet of their stony hearts. The problem of Israel is a human problem, and he specifically describes the essence of the human problem in verse 9, **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick...”**

To be clear, the reference of the heart in the Bible is a metaphor for the seat of human emotions. The heart is the inner self, it is the place of feeling as it is also the place that worship flows from. If you think that this is only an Old Testament problem, you must understand that Jesus said something even more descriptive of the human heart than Jeremiah did. Here is what Jesus said of the heart: **“For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person”** (Mark 7:21–23).

Our heart is like the map Lieutenant George De Long used when he set out with his crew on the USS Jeannette in 1879. The hope was to claim the North Pole for the United States. His map was created by Dr. August Heinrich Petermann; who, like most mapmakers in his day, believed there was an open polar ice-free sea that would provide safe passage forward, not unlike the Caribbean Sea. Every previous expedition that sailed in search of the ice-free sea ran into the same problem, which was impenetrable ice. Instead of correcting the map to include the ice, Petermann modified his map to include the idea of a “thermometric gateway” that Lieutenant De Long would be able to navigate his ship through. Lieutenant De Long and his men searched for the portal but eventually realized that the theories of the scientists and geographers that helped create his map were wrong and concluded, “I pronounce a thermometric gateway to the North Pole a delusion and a snare. The USS Jeannette eventually got trapped in ice. Some of De Long's crew escaped to Siberia and survived, but he did not. De Long died in October of 1881 of starvation. To follow your heart is to use a map or compass that will lead you to the place where there is no life.

We Need a Different Compass

The prophet Jeremiah describes two types of people, and he uses the metaphor of a tree. Here is what the prophet says of the first person: **“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD”** (v. 5). This person has landed in a place where his roots are not in the LORD, but in his own heart, in his own self; it is his own heart that he trusts. In verse 6, this person is likened to a shrub. Literally, in the Hebrew, he is a little juniper tree. Where are his roots? His roots are in the desert in “uninhabited salt land”

where he will shrivel up and die. His hope is in a place that cannot produce life nor is it the place of thriving just as Proverbs 14:12 warns: **“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”** It is the place of the curse and ultimately death.

There is another person the prophet describes in verses 7 whose roots are in something entirely different; his roots are in the Yahweh and because his roots are in the LORD, he is an entirely different kind of tree; he is full of life. It is the LORD who is his compass and where he has been led is to the place of thriving and life: **“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit”** (Jeremiah 17:7–8).

The dry place is rocky, dusty, and where the best that a tree can become is a twisted-up shrub. However, there is another place that is beautiful; it is a real place that Jeremiah is drawing his metaphor from, some of the rabbis believed it to be the location of the original Garden of Eden. It is a place filled with deep, cool, emerald blue water that is continually refreshed by underground fresh springs. This place is filled with flowers, bushes, and billowy trees. It is called the “Garden of the Three Springs.” Jeremiah says that the one whose trust is rooted in the LORD instead of himself is like one of the billowy palm trees in The Garden of the Three Springs.

The person whose trust is rooted in Yahweh is the person described in Psalm 1:1-3, **“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers”** (Psalm 1:1–3).

According to Jeremiah, there are only two types of people: those whose roots are in their own selves, and those whose roots are in the LORD. There are those who follow their own hearts and then there are those who follow the LORD’s heart. One is a compass that leads to death and the other is a compass that leads to life.

Yahweh is Our Compass and More

A place of refuge is not a map, it is a place of safety and shelter. For Jeremiah, Yahweh is more than a guide. Yahweh is life for the prophet. Jeremiah’s hope is not in his own strength in trusting in God, but in the strength of God to do what we cannot do.

The focus of the “cursed” is himself, but the posture of the “blessed” man in verse 7 is a confident hope in the one who governs on a **“glorious throne set on high...”**. The one who follows his own heart is the one who has forsaken the LORD who alone is the source of thriving and life (v. 13). Jeremiah is the “blessed man” because he understands who he is in light of who God is; this is why he cries out in verse 14, **“Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise.”**

There is another name for God that we are introduced to in the Old Testament, and that name is Jehovah-Raah; it is used in Psalm 23 and it means, “The LORD my Shepherd.” Listen to this Psalm in light of Jeremiah 17:

**“The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
For his name’s sake.”**

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil.
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.**

**You prepare a table before me
In the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.**

How can I get from the place I am right now to Jeremiah 17:8 (Garden of the Three Springs)? The LORD is the one who will guide me to the place of thriving and life. What will it take for him to lead me to that place? I need to trust in the LORD; I need to follow him because my fickle heart will not get me there!

Paul understood this very thing when he wrote Romans 7:18-25, listen carefully to what the Apostle writes of his experience (something that we can all relate to):

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me....

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” (Romans 7:18-20, 24–25)

From where does Paul’s strength come from? Who is guiding him? The Shepherd of his soul. Who is the Shepherd of his soul? Who do you think it is? Jesus said of himself: **“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep”** (John 10:14-15). When the religious

leaders heard Jesus say this, they were livid! Why were they livid? Because Jesus claimed to be Jehovah-Raah: The LORD my Shepherd. **“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”** What is my only hope for the best version of me? Is it following my heart? NO! **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (Rom. 7:24-25)!

Conclusion

So, what am I to do? How do you move forward in life? How do I wisely live the years I have left? I am so glad you asked. It is actually pretty simple. You must place your trust in Jehovah-Raah. What does that look like? It is a posturing that so trusts in Jesus as the shepherd of your soul that your heart takes up residence in Jesus. The word used in the Bible to describe what I am talking about is the word “Abide.” Here is what Jesus said about abiding in him:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:5, 7-11).

Trusting in the LORD requires you to listen to the LORD. If you listen to the LORD and you truly trust Him, then you will obey him. The longer you do this, the more your heart will be shaped by God. Over time you will discover that the desires of your heart will begin to be for the things that God loves. You will also discover that the longer you walk with the Jehovah-Raah, you will also begin to hate the things that he hates.

When you trust the LORD in the way Jeremiah describes in our passage and when you seek a life that abides in the Good Shepherd, his word becomes your guiding compass. As his word shapes your mind and heart, you will find that every dream you desire and every decision you make will be one with the glory and honor of God as your motive, in place of your own glory and honor. When you get to that place in your life, it will not matter the salary, location, or risk, because trusting the Good Shepherd is where life and thriving is experienced. Until then, we sing songs like, *Come Thou Fount*:

Come Thou fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be
Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love

Here's my heart, oh take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above