

**Jeremiah 3: 12 – 4: 2; “Return, O Backsliding Children”, Sermon # 3 in the series –
“Heart Lessons Learned for a Prophet and the People of God”,
Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on March 25th, 2012,
in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

I want to address this afternoon the subject of backsliding and I pray that all of us will have our eyes opened to the importance of this subject. It relates to knowing God and glorifying Him and it relates to pretending to know God and pretending to glorify Him. The people of our text are called “backsliding children”. They are not yet apostate as a whole group but probably many were. But God cannot give them up. He will still strive with them in bonds of His love. Backsliding is a movement away from God by a course of disobedience and a neglect of His Word, His will, and His Person; it is a turning away from God. Thomas Scott says, “The word backsliding seems to be taken from the oxen when they turned back instead of drawing forward in the yoke, and it is used for an individual or people renouncing the worship and service of God.” There are 2 kinds of backsliders here in our text. They are described as two sisters; 2 adulterous sisters who have acted as harlots; spiritual harlots unfaithful in their love to God—making idols of wood and stones—calling them God. But one of the sisters – Judah – was called treacherous and the other – Israel – was called righteous. Judah was treacherous in that she saw what Israel was doing in sinning and she didn’t turn to God with all her heart, but in pretense. That is our key word. For it shows us that there is a treacherous kind of sinning that is pretending when a person calls themselves a Christian. It is when they come to worship God, they pray, they listen, but they do not turn to the Lord with their whole heart.

The other sister (Israel) had sinned as well. It was the same kind of spiritual adultery. It was the same provoking of God by going after other gods, but she is seen differently because there is something at work deep in her heart to cause her to be disturbed, disquieted, ashamed and grieved over her sin; something at work in her to cause her to come back to her rightful husband—the Lord of Hosts. I proclaim it to you this afternoon; It is the sovereign grace of God. It is His faithfulness to this people as it says in vs. 14 – “Return, O backsliding children, says the Lord, for I am married to you.” The Lord God will take the trembling hand and the trembling heart of the sinner and help her to retrace her steps to return to Him.” You say to me, “How can I return to the Lord after I have backslidden?” “How can our nation return to the Lord after we have backslidden?” Let us pray that God will help us as we retrace the 4 steps which we find here, which will lead us back into the path of righteousness.

The 1st Step we must retrace is in our remembering the merciful character of God.

(Verse 12)

“Return backsliding Israel, says the Lord, I will not cause My anger to fall on you for I am merciful, says the Lord; I will not remain angry forever.” I think that we are often reluctant to return to God after we have sinned because we are afraid that He will be terribly angry with us. But if we will return to Him, He says here, we will find that He is ready to pardon, that He is compassionate and merciful to the repentant sinner. We know the reason better now, in New Testament times, that He can be this way. It is because of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have never understood you should know now – that outside of faith in Jesus Christ, God’s anger is like a great storm brewing and blowing, ready to break over your head. It is like a mountain ready to crush you – For God’s anger is righteous anger, and His indignation towards your sins is just. Your living for yourself, and for your pleasures, your not obeying His voice in the Scriptures, your having no regard, or very little regard for what God thinks is serious enough for Him to punish you eternally. Sin therefore makes God very angry, wherever He finds it, and wherever He sees it, He must eventually punish it. He stores it up with Him, lays it by Him, patiently waiting to reveal it to you in all of its fury in the future judgment, if you will not repent. God does not remain neutral to sin in any of our lives. Continuing in your sin is waging war with God, and if a man will not repent, God will eventually come against him for it.

Turn with me over to Psalm 7, verses 11-13. “God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day.” “If he does not turn back, He will sharpen His sword; He bends His bow and makes it ready.” “He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts.” You see here, that if you have practiced a sin, or sins, for many years, you must repent of that practice. But returning will mean more than your turning over a new leaf. It will mean your coming to believe that with God there is mercy. So for a man to return, or to repent, he must have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Do you see that God offers you, and all men in New Covenant times, mercy which you do not deserve and grace which you cannot earn or purchase? Jesus went to the cross for sinners and was punished for your sins if you will have Him to be your Savior. God the Father so loved the world that He sent His Son for sinners, not only for sinners before their conversion, but sinners after conversion to our great Savior. This is why Jesus died; not that we would be instantaneously perfect and able to keep all of His commandments when we first trust in Him. But that we believing in Christ, would over time, come to see all of our sinful ways and repent of each and every one of them. We must reflect upon this if we are backslidden; when looking at the treachery of our heart, it would seem to be presumptuous for us to return to Him, having received such great grace as we have in Christ when we first believe. Sin is your greatest enemy, and God identifies you with your sin before you come to Christ. When you come to Christ He then begins to see you, and He will forever see you, in Jesus Christ your Lord. He will be for you, because you have faith in Jesus. He will work with you because you have faith in Jesus. He will give you pardon and grace.

Look over at Micah Chapter 7, verse 18. “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?” “He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy.” “He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities.” “You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” You see, Philippians 1: 6 is really true for you O Christian. The Apostle Paul says there that he is confident of this very thing, “That He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” The Day of Jesus Christ is the Day when Christ shall return, physically and bodily, to judge the world and to save completely, fully, perfectly, and forever, His people. For those trusting in Jesus there will be no condemnation on that Day of Days. No, they shall be raised from the dead and changed to be like Him, and brought into His eternal kingdom with great rejoicing. But the greatest thing of all is that you can know this now, not just later. You can know this now when you come to see and know and experience the grace of Christ working in your sinful heart to turn you back from your sinful ways. When you look at yourself and you know that it is not your strength and power that has caused you to change and turn from your sin and turn to walk with God, closely and joyfully every day. It was, and it is, Christ’s power and grace that is doing it. Jesus is the friend of sinners; He will give you a true hatred of sin, when you see Him as crucified for you. Sin took Jesus to cross. Sin through the hands of wicked men condemned an innocent and righteous man, but Jesus condemned sin and overcame sin at the cross for you who believes in Him.

2ndly – the 2nd Step we must retrace when we return to God is to find out where we went astray and then to obey God’s voice. (verse 13)

“Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord you God, and scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed my voice, says the Lord.” Let’s talk about the sins of our nation for a few minutes. The idolatry of this nation is not like that of Israel of old. It is more of a secret idolatry. And it needs to be acknowledged, confessed, and forsaken just as much as that of Israel of old. The awfulness of the wickedness of the attack upon us on September 11th, 2001, woke us up to the depravity of other men’s hearts, and the falseness of their religion. But it did not wake us up to our own sins as a nation. We need to see and to understand that there are things which we trust in that will fail us, and which are provoking to God because we trust in them more that we look to God to direct us into the paths of wisdom and righteousness. I am speaking now of our wealth and our military might. We trust in these as though

God was not involved in them; as though we made all this wealth and came to all this strength as a nation on our own, apart from Him and His blessing us with wisdom and protection and His giving us these material blessings. But we are flawed in our self-assessment. And we need to be warned even as God warned Israel through Moses back in Deuteronomy Chapter 8. Turn with me back there. Here God speaks to the nation Israel through Moses and He says to them in verse 1 – “Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers.” “And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.” “So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.” “Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.” “You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you.” “Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God to walk in His ways and to fear Him.”

Then look down to verse 11 - “Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end – “Then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’” “And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.” If there was ever given a warning to Old Testament Israel which could also be applied spiritually to our country in these days, it is this. A few things I would like to apply to you and I. In verse 1 we see that the Lord leads His people at times into a wilderness to humble us, to test us, so that He might know what is in our heart.” Verse 5 – The reason that a backsliding Christian doesn’t backslide into total apostasy and hell is that the Lord chastens him.” But the problem comes and is seen clearly in verses 11-17, if we forget the Lord our God by not keeping His commandments by faith in Jesus Christ. We as a nation have experienced all of these great material blessings, and many in our land have experience the greatest of blessings, coming to know God, His having shown us mercy and grace in our salvation. If we forget what He has done for us, then we will continue to have great troubles as a nation. We will have great troubles in our economy, great troubles with regard to military situations around the world, and great troubles with natural disasters both here and around the world. See the sovereignty of God over all of these things, dear Christian, and repent of all of your sins. Prepare yourself to meet your Maker. And when you do, then prepare yourself to know the reality of blessing, both materially and spiritually. For God is a God of great goodness, as well as mercy and compassion.

3rdly – The 3rd step that we must retrace is in regard to future blessings.

(verses 1-19)

We must see that God Himself has plans that will not fail. He saw how unfaithful Israel was; how given to harlotry, and yet He says to her, “Return – for I am married to you.” He will have a remnant in all generations because He shall take action. Listen as He ponders with Himself in verse 19 concerning Israel. “How can I put you among the children and give you a pleasant land; a beautiful heritage of the hosts of nations?” He is saying, you have dealt treacherously with Me but instead of any further judgment, I will deal in sovereign grace with you. I will not save everyone in the nation, but I will take “one from a city, and two from a family and bring you to Zion.” (vs. 14) God will always

have some whom He will take and save. And those whom He saves He brings into the church; the New Testament Zion. And when He does this, He also gives you a pastor in order to help you on to do His will. Verse 15 – “And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” This is one of the means that He uses to keep you from backsliding; going back to the world and your old lifestyle that you lived before you were converted and came to Christ. He would have you to have a new life. God saw how unfaithful men could be in these Old Testament times, and so He made a New Covenant in Christ. And in relation to this New Covenant, in the fullness of time He sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. The New Covenant is made through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Lord give you who believe in Him a greater grace, so that you will no longer follow the dictates of your evil heart.

Some people in our day go to churches where they worship at an altar. Some people would really like to worship God through the visible furniture of the Old Testament Temple. They long to be able to go back and see the ark, the candlestick, and the brazen sea. But here it says in verse 16 – “Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days, says the Lord, that they will say no more, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’” “It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore.” Someday this will happen to the Jews. They will leave all the ceremonial things of the Old Testament law behind, when they are converted to Jesus Christ as a nation. They shall be brought into the New Testament Church and they will realize that no longer will they need the ark, the visible symbol of God’s glory, in their midst. They will have Christ in the midst of their heart. He is the bread of life; the manna. In Christ is the right to rule His people, the rod of Aaron which budded. Christ has the right to rule all the nations. Someday Jerusalem shall be called the Throne of the Lord as it says in verse 17. The nations shall be gathered together to it, to the name of the Lord Jesus there. They have already come back out of the land of the north, as it talks about in verse 18, and have come back to the land that God had given them as an inheritance. But, they are not yet converted to Christ. And this leads us to our final brief point.

The 4th Step which we must retrace is to mourn over our sins, but also to hope in God’s promises. (Chapter 3: 20 – 4: 2)

It is a sure sign that we are being healed of our backsliding if we are mourning and praying and confessing our sins. Verse 21 – “A voice was heard on the desolate heights, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel.” “For they have perverted their way; they have forgotten their God.” Truly this is the way back to God’s favor. “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says, “for they shall be comforted.” Comforted with the assurance that their prayers will be heard. If you are an unbeliever, you must ask yourself whether you have ever had real dealings with God. Have you ever mourned over your sins? When you come to Christ for salvation, God turns your mourning into dancing. He looses your sackcloth and girds you with gladness. But let us say that you are backslidden and here today. You know the Lord. But let me ask if you mourn over your sin? Not your sins (plural). They are all forgiven by your confessing them and your sincere intention to forsake them. But I asked, “Do you mourn over your sin (singular)? Do you mourn over the indwelling corruption, the remainders of sin there that keep you from serving God to perfection? You have thought that since you are forgiven and not perfect in your obedience that it does not matter to God whether you make progress in holiness or not. But it very much does. Verse 22 says, “Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings.” The problem in this country, in this day, is that we feel no shame for the sins which we and our nation have committed. Verse 24 says, “For shame has devoured the labor of our fathers from our youth.” We feel no shame, but we should. Verse 23 says, “Truly, in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, and from the multitude of the mountains; truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.” Our salvation from sin and shame is from Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us come to Him to heal all of our backslidings. “Indeed we come to you, for You are the Lord our God.”

