

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

JEREMIAH 3:11-13
RETURN TO THE LORD!

Then the Lord said to me, "Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah! Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say:

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.

Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree; and you have not obeyed My voice, says the Lord.

Other than the temporary "fun" of trying to walk up a very slick and slippery hill after an ice storm, what's the point? It will take a great deal of careful concentration and maneuvering to get to the top. What happens if those efforts are combined with laughing, joking, and poking fun at how your friend is doing? You will slide back. Maybe there were times you were serious about getting to the top, but kept sliding back down. Have you ever had that problem with a vehicle—getting part-way up only to slide back down?

In our text the Old Testament people of God are described as "backsliders." In their relationship with the Lord they were careless and pre-occupied with other things. They slid backward instead of forward, incurring the Lord's anger. The word in Hebrew is actually not "backslider," but "one who turns." They had turned away from the Lord bringing His anger.

These verses are addressed to "Israel," which was the name of the Ten Tribes that had broken away and "turned away" from the Lord, with their own king and their own worship center. They had already been taken captive out of their homeland for their idol worship. These words are directed at them, BUT ALSO to "Judah," the other Two Tribes who had God's temple, and the capital, and descendants of King David on the throne in Jerusalem. The prophecy of Jeremiah was actually directed to Judah. Judah, like its "sister" Israel, had "turned" from the Lord, sliding backwards. Only worse. "*Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah!*" Judah was in a sad state of affairs. Captivity and exile to a foreign country were awaiting. Here God calls to Judah, Stop "turning away," and "turn back" in repentance, seeking mercy and forgiveness for your evil.

What had they done? They had turned to other gods and the sins that went with it. In chapter 2 Jeremiah says, You are like people who have turned away from the fountain of living—"fresh"—water and have made for yourselves cisterns in the ground—"tanks" for catching dirty run-off water. And to top it off, the tanks are broken! Useless. He warns, "Your own wickedness will correct you." We might say, "Your sin will come back to bite you." Pick whichever sin you want, bad-mouthing other people, giving-in to laziness, lording it over others, or sins a little worse or a lot worse—they will all come back to bite you! Sin is like that. Jeremiah also says you were planted a noble vine, but have become a degenerate plant--from a luxurious grape vine to noxious weeds! Shame on you. They had turned away from the Lord and His promise of the Savior, and said to a tree "you are my father" and to a stone "you gave birth to me." Foolishness! And the devil wants you to believe that you came by random chance to this earth from a few molecules that somehow started "life," that "nature" made you and when you're dead you're done. Ignorance. Jeremiah also says, You are like a wild donkey in the wilderness, who when her time comes, runs here and there looking for a mate. She cannot be stopped. No sense, just emotion. And Satan tempts you to turn away from the Lord too, and to run—to backslide--to all the short-lived things of this life, which, in the long game, are worthless. He tries to convince you that money is more important than the Lord, more important than His acquittal for your sins through faith in Christ. He tries to convince you that your cell phone, your e-mail, and your Facebook are your life, and that the Resurrection in Jesus is nothing. What good will those pleasures do when you stand Guilty before the Holy Judge at the doorstep of eternity facing the terrors of hell?

In our text God calls out to Judah, and Israel, and you. *Return, backsliding Israel, says the Lord. . . Acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree.* It's easy to seek love and acceptance and self-value anywhere and everywhere, except in the Lord; to look under every green tree where there's a fresh place to set up an idol, to try every new thing in life to find comfort, happiness, and fulfillment. Do you look for peace by packing your schedule to the top? by indulging in every kind of recreation that there is? by doing everything except turning to the Lord and His Spirit and your Savior?

In our text, God says, Enough! *Acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God.* He says, Acknowledge it! Admit it. Did you sin yesterday? Did you drink too much? Did you curse the tractor or the cows or the dog? Did you complain over your lot in life? Did you blame someone else and God for your difficulties? Did you smart-back to your mother or ignore her wishes? Jeremiah says, *Acknowledge your iniquity.* It hurts your pride to do that. I know that too. But every day, more than you like to believe, you “transgress,” you “trespass,” you cross the forbidden line, you rebel against God. You turn away, break away, from the Lord’s will.

You have not obeyed My voice, says the Lord. Can you identify with that? Actually the words say. “You have not heard my voice, says the Lord.” How many times does that happen to you? Wives, do you speak to your husband, and he is clueless as to what you said? Parents, do you have important words for your children, and they don’t even respond? Do you yell at the dog “Get back here,” and he keeps right on running? Do you call the cows, as my grandfathers did with their dairy herds sixty years ago, “Come, boss!” and they don’t come? So irritating! How do you think God feels with you? How many times do you hear, but not hear? Does it happen with God’s own Word right in God’s house of worship? Do you hear the words, but not hear them because you “tuned out” the pastor and were thinking about this afternoon’s get together, the movie last night, or the long list for tomorrow? At times at God’s house, do you actually hear the words, comprehend them, but tune out the message? “It doesn’t apply to me. I have a reasonable excuse. Nobody else faces what I face, so I get a pass. I can go ahead and transgress—be a little dishonest, be a little unfair, take sides in an disagreement because it’s to my personal advantage regardless of where the truth stands.” How are you different from Israel and Judah?

Acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree; and you have not obeyed My voice, says the Lord. Repent and seek the Lord’s forgiveness. “Lord, I have failed You again. For Jesus’ sake, who was willingly punished with death in my place, please forgive me.” --- Be sure to understand about “repentance.” Do not think that these statements, “You must repent to go to heaven,” “You have to tell God you’re sorry,” mean that these actions of yours *earn* for you His forgiveness? It would be like saying, “If I go to church 50 out of 52 Sundays, I will be forgiven.” Going to church does not earn forgiveness. Merely *saying* to God, “I’ve done wrong” doesn’t earn fix anything, merely *saying* empty words, “Forgive me” doesn’t earn you forgiveness. Yet repentance is necessary! It is necessary for the heart to acknowledge “I have disobeyed you, Father. I can’t fix it. For Jesus’ sake, please forgive me.” I did wrong, I need help. I cling to Jesus, the Savior You sent. The forgiveness is totally His gift.

For Jesus’ sake the Lord does help. *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.* Just like God’s mercy was extended for blatant idol worshipers and transgressors like Israel and Judah, likewise His mercy and forgiveness is extended to you. *I will not cause My anger to fall on you.* Literally, “I will not cause My face to fall on you.” How does a person’s “face” fall on you? With a scowl, If you were misbehaving at the table, or at church, and your father’s face fell on you and gave you a look, what does it mean? You are in trouble. So here God says to backsliding Israel and Judah, Return! Come back to Me for mercy, and My face will not fall on you. Rather, in Jesus He lifts up His countenance upon you! These are precious words of mercy and forgiveness. These are words for each one of you this morning! Come, in Jesus’ name. “The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin” (I John 1:7). “Son, be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven you!” (Matthew 9:2). The Lord says even to wayward people, *I am merciful,* He is compassionate and forgiving. Indeed, He has not lowered His standards for you or said to you “Close enough.” He demands perfection! His Son toe-ed the mark for you, perfectly. His Son has met your punishment and paid your penalty completely. Trusting in Him you are acquitted--100% Pure! In Jesus you are spared. *He will not remain angry forever.* “We conclude that a man is justified by faith, apart from the deeds of the law: (Romans 3:28). You are restored to your homeland in heaven. The blessed resurrection from the grave is yours.. Although you have no claim on it, Jesus is your claim.

“Backsliding” is not ok. Turning away from the Lord to other things is not ok. It brings His wrath. When you are disgusted with the backsliding in our nation, don’t just point at everyone else. Read Daniel chapter 9. In captivity, faithful and godly Daniel pleaded for forgiveness for Judah, and included himself with their guilt and their sin. Point at yourself. In Jesus, re-turn to the Lord. Through Him you are forgiven. And in the Lord’s Supper today, treasure His personal assurance. He gave His life for you. He gave up His body and blood for you. Here He shares it for your own great comfort. Trust Him. You belong to Him and to the Father and to the Spirit. Devote your days to Him, not to empty cisterns or desires in the wilderness.

So be it! Amen.

Pastor Kanzenbach---