

We have sinned against thee

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Donald Lamont

[0 : 00] You turn with me now for a little time as we meditate together in a portion we have read from Holy Scripture, the prophecies of Jeremiah and the 14th chapter, reading again at verse 7.

O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake. For our backslidings are many, we have sinned against thee. O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?

Why shouldest thou be as a man astounded, as a mighty man that cannot save? Yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name. Leave us not.

God's servant, Jeremiah, had a singularly unenviable task to perform, a task in which he seems to have been engaged single-handedly.

He was told at the very outset of his prophetic office, of his ministry, that it would be a difficult task.

[1 : 27] Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth, God says to him in chapter 1 at verse 9. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out and to pull down and to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant.

It was essentially a message of judgment that he was called upon to proclaim. A call was being extended through him to God's church to return from the ways of sin and idolatry, or else God would cause a day of severe visitation to come upon her.

If he had the support, if Jeremiah had had the support of his brethren in the prophetic ministry, it would have no doubt greatly lightened his burden, and it would have much strengthened his case against the forces of idolatry and evil.

Rather, however, it would seem that the prophetic office at large not only failed to support him, but sought to nullify his teachings by counter-proposals and counter-teachings which arose from themselves.

This is a clear implication of what we have here, surely, in verse 13. Then said I, Ah, Lord God, behold, the prophets say unto them, that is, unto the people, Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.

[3 : 12] But then God goes on to comfort and strengthen him in the face of this, saying to him, The prophets prophesy lies in my name, I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither speak unto them.

They prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of naught, and the receipt of their heart. And so in the strength of God's grace, he had to continue in the work that had been entrusted to him.

Now then, the passage we have chosen for our meditation this morning is quite an extraordinary passage of scripture, and represents to us just how keenly the man of God felt the condition of things in a society in which he witnessed and worked and lived.

It would appear that he was seeing little evidence anywhere of fruitfulness in the affairs of God's church and amongst God's people. And so, astonishingly, he pours out his heart here in the most dramatic way imaginable.

He expresses, first of all, he expresses dismay at God's apparent indifference to the condition of things. Indeed, a superficial reading would tend to lead to the conclusion that he was blaming God for the condition, for the state of things in the church.

[4 : 45] For instance, he represents God as being a stranger. Why, he says, shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land?

In all those representations which he makes here in reference to God, he's, of course, recognizing a basic fundamental truth, namely the imperativeness of God's intervention amongst men.

If a change is to come over the spiritual climate of the church and of the nation. It was absolutely imperative in the mind of the prophet that God should intervene.

For only God could turn the climate that was flowing contrary to him and to righteousness.

And so, he expresses bewilderment that God should so withdraw himself as to be a virtual stranger in the midst of his people. And all who feel as he felt at any time in the history of God's church, they sympathize with him and understand what is behind the question which he is asking.

[6 : 00] It is not wrong and sinful in itself to ask why. If the asking of such a question will lead us, as we believe it led the prophet, to a right answer, to see where the real answer lay.

From time to time in the course of the history of the covenant people, we find God represented in this way as having withdrawn himself or being a stranger in their midst.

We think of what God himself says, for instance, through the prophet Hosea in chapter 5 at verse 15. I will go and return unto my place.

Until they confess their sin in their anguish, they will seek me early. And so, this is something that was not unknown to God's people.

But then, too, the prophet supposes God to be a mere passerby, so far as its cause was concerned, as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night.

[7 : 11] Now, the figure is highly suggestive, for a passerby is not likely to involve himself in the affairs of that community in which he finds himself temporarily.

He has no interest in it apart from the fact that it has provided him with food and with shelter, for tomorrow he will be on his way to some other place.

This suggests the prophet is how God appeared to him in relation to his cause and to his own kingdom in the world.

He is, as it were, standing aloof from it as someone who has no vital interest in his progress. And he will soon be on his way to some other location.

It will seem that he has no intention of getting involved. So, the situation was represented to the prophet.

[8 : 12] So, he sees it. He supposes God to be a mere passerby. But then, in this dramatic way of speaking, we see that he also imagines God as being bewildered.

Why shouldst thou be as a man astounded? That is, as someone who doesn't really know what to do or how to act in the circumstances.

This situation appears to be beyond him, and he doesn't know how to handle this particular situation or what remedy he should use to change things.

The suggestion, it surely borders on the blasphemous, where we're not persuaded that the prophet is in no way accusing God of indifference in the lamentable spiritual condition of which he sees around him on every hand.

He is merely continuing to ask questions so that these questions will at length lead him to find a true answer to the problem. And so, he mentions God himself as being bewildered.

[9 : 28] Why shouldst thou be as a man astounded? And he represents God also as mighty, yet unable to save.

Why shouldst thou be as a mighty man that cannot save? Here was the greatest paradox of all. A mighty man, yet unable to save?

If he had represented a mighty man who was unwilling to save, the matter wouldn't be so perplexing. But you see, this would be to have misrepresented God, for he is never unwilling.

But you see, he may be unable. And he may be unable, not because of any restraint in himself or any restraints on himself, but because restraints are being placed upon him by the sins of his people.

We'll read, for instance, the New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ being unable to do any work in a certain place because of the unbelief of the people.

[10 : 43] The prophet has no doubt whatever as to God's almightiness, or any doubt as to God's willingness to save. But he recognizes that at our occasions, when he may and when he is restrained, although not restrained in himself, or on account of any inability on his own part.

So then, this is how he expresses. This is the dramatic way in which he expresses the situation as he looks out and looks abroad on the face of the society and the church in which he is laboring and working.

Can we not sympathize with him? Could we not perhaps speak and address God as the prophet does here?

Why art thou a stranger? A wayfaring man. As a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night. Why shouldst thou be as a man astounded?

Why shouldst thou be as a mighty man that cannot save? Why? What is the answer to the seeming hopelessness of the day and the situation in which we find out?

[12:03] Where is the real answer to the lack of fruitfulness in our midst? The lack of conversions? The lack of any real evidence of a work of grace amongst us?

Where are we going to find an answer to these things? Well, I suggest that from expressing dismay in his direction, the prophet goes on to acknowledge that the cause lies in their own bosom.

The cause lies with themselves. And so he acknowledges that the case against themselves is unanswerable. And it's here that he finds the true answer to the series of questions which he has been asking in these verses.

He says, for instance, our iniquities testify against us. O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us.

You see, the prophet mentions themselves to being in a court of law, standing in a court of law, standing in a witness box as the case against them is being argued before a judge.

[13:17] Witnesses are being summoned from various directions unto the utter dismay of the defendant. The most damning witness of all is called to give evidence for the prosecution, namely the defendant's own actions and behavior.

Our iniquities, they testify against us. This is how the great final tribunal of the last judgment will be conducted.

And the personal iniquities of men are what will clinch their final doom and sentence unless they are able to summon to their side the great divine advocate himself to answer for them and to speak on their behalf.

We shall all give account of ourselves before God. And so this is what the prophet sees here. He sees the case against themselves to be so strong as that it is testifying against them.

Our iniquities, they testify against us. Our backsliding, he continues, they are many. What a blessing it is when the conscience is so sensitive that it is awed and paid not only by the undeniable reality of sin but also by the prodigality of sins committed against heaven.

[14:58] Mine iniquities, says the psalmist elsewhere in Psalm 40, mine iniquities have taken hold upon me. This is what he laments so that I am not able to look up.

they are more than the hairs of mine head therefore my heart faileth. So mightily was he convicted of the reality of sin and the innumerable number of sins which he was committing that he could not raise his eyes to the throne of God.

And how through this is from scripture and in Christian experience when the spirit of God when he deals effectively with men and women the publican whom our Lord represents as coming up to the temple to pray was so convicted of his own backsliding of his own sins that he could not as much as lift his eyes to heaven but smote upon his breast saying God be merciful to me the sinner.

And so he finds that through answer to his queries here our iniquities they testify against us our backslidings they are caused to pass before our eyes and he says further our sins are against thee for we have sinned against thee.

And so we come here finally to the prophet's answer to the questions which had been perplexing and the questions which he had been posing and the astonishment he had been expressing concerning God's apparent indifference to his cause and to his church in the world.

[16:57] The answer the true answer to this absence is to be found in that we have revolted against God.

We have rejected and we have repudiated God. We by our sin and by our rebellion we have prevented him from intervening in our affairs in order to our true spiritual recovery.

This is why as a prophet God is a stranger in the land. This is why he is as a wayfaring man that is passing by as a man who is astonished as a mighty man who cannot save.

The problem lies at our very door. We are the culprits so far as this is concerned. And what to God my friends that we ourselves would be so taught so convicted by God's spirit that we wouldn't look any further than ourselves to see where the real cause of the absence of fruitfulness in our midst lies.

We are the culprits each one of us. And it's only as we are convicted by the spirit of God that we shall properly recognize this.

[18 : 28] We shall not start looking round in other directions and imagine that the cause really lies somewhere else. When we are visited by God's spirit we shall see the cause as lying at our own door.

We are the principal culprits. We are the agents for the barrenness which we see around us. It is right and proper that we should seek to you special means as we hope to do in these coming weeks.

But my friends if we fail to see and to acknowledge before God and to prostrate ourselves in his presence in acknowledgement of our iniquities that our iniquities are testifying against us that our back slidings are many that we have sinned against God and are continuing to do so we have little hope that any blessings will result judgment must begin at the house of God if God is going to bless his heritage and men and women at large and so from there the prophet goes on to plead for mercy on the basis of what God himself is he goes on to plead for mercy his approach and his attitude they are by no means negative he first of all he sees the problem he diagnoses the problem he asks questions and he comes to we believe right answers with regard to that problem and then he proceeds to propose a remedy to those people to whom

God had sent him and the remedy remains the same to this very hour he says for instance he asserts for one thing thou art the hope of Israel oh he says the hope of Israel he is addressing God he is praying God he is praying to God and he is asserting something of immense importance something that the people at large had overlooked and repudiated namely that Jehovah alone was their hope while the majority were pinning their hope on themselves and on their alliances with forces which God had proscribed the prophet he recognizes and he acknowledges that Jehovah alone is the hope of the world oh he says the hope of Israel let Israel hope in the Lord for with him mercies be and it's only as

God's spiritual Israel comes to recognize that her hope rests in God alone will matters begin to take a turn for the better thou art the hope of Israel says the prophet thou art the savior of thy people he continues the savior thereof in time of trouble he is no doubt thinking of actual physical deliverances for his covenant people which they had known over the years on many occasions how many times had God intervened on their behalf and delivered them out of their physical and political troubles they had known trouble times without number and God had intervened on their behalf but the greatest troublemaker of all was that of sin of rebellion against God and yet they were failing to recognize that the greatest troublemaker was in their very midst troubling them and yet they would not look in the direction of Jehovah to save them and Elijah you remember when he confronted [22 : 35] Ahab and Ahab accused him of being the troubler of Israel Elijah response was that he in fact and his household were those who troubled Israel by their sin against God and so sin is the great troublemaker but thou art the saviour of thy people says the prophet but then he asserts also thou art in the midst of us yet he says thou oh lord art in the midst of us is he contradicting himself you ask in these words has he not been asserting with the same breath thou art a stranger in the land a wayfaring man and yet here he turns around and says thou art in the midst of us and he lays claim to this in spite of everything in spite of our sins our backslidings our iniquities in spite of thine apparent indifference and thy the absence of any real evidence of thy presence in our midst thou art still with us in covenant the apostle in

Romans chapter 11 the very in verse 1 of that chapter he asks the question you remember hath God cast away his people and he gives the emphatic answer to that question God forbid and that in effect is what the prophet is asserting when he says thou art in the midst of us we are thy covenant people thou art our covenant God and this is good pleading good pleading for yourself for myself in spite of everything in spite of your sins and mine our backslide is which are many the fact that we have sinned against God yet he is in the midst of us in covenant and he says furthermore he says thou art our father we he says are called by thy name we are thy children we are thine offspring albeit we are rebellious and wicked and our behavior is utterly at variance with the behavior of children yet we plead this special relationship to thee we are thy covenant children thou art our father and it is on the basis of this that he says leave us not leave us not this is the only petition which the prophet offers in all he has been saying in this context does the petition does it not contain everything that is necessary for the blessedness of

God's people and reviving of his cause in their midst so long as he doesn't leave us we can exercise the hope that he will arise and that he will have mercy on us so long as he is in our midst as he is then we need never despair so long as men and women are being brought to repentance faith and new obedience then we can be joyfully optimistic that God in the midst of her doth dwell nothing shall her remove in spite of all appearances to the contrary we must and we shall continue to hope but my friends let us never never presume on the goodness and the mercy of God let us never presume that he will always remain and that he will always abide if by long continuance in rebellion against him we can cause him to take his candlestick and actually remove it out of our midst as he did in other locations and at other times in the course of the history of his church and of his people but on the basis of what we believe to be the case that he is in our midst although the appearances of his going are little in evidence yet on the basis of our belief that he is with his people that he is answering their prayers we can offer this petition along with the prophet along with the church of long ago leave us not and we have everything in that petition we can exercise the hope that if he will not leave us that he will actively make his power and his glory known once again in bringing seasons of reviving and refreshing and renewing into our borders as he did in Israel's case on many times in our history and so although the appearance of things may cause dismay let us not be pessimistic rather let us exercise optimism that God is still in the midst of his people and on this assurance with this assurance let us continue to cry unto him leave us not come for our salvation stir up thy strength and thy might may he graciously add his blessing to our meditation together in his word shall we unite in prayer oh lord our god as we look abroad and as we would tend to be utterly dejected and despondent as we see the lack of evidence of thy goings in our midst grant that we might recognize that we ourselves are must bear the blame for this that our sins have separated between us and thee that our iniquities have risen to the very throne of god that we have challenged thee our god and our creator oh god do thou have mercy upon us do thou deliver us we beseech thee do thou give us grace to prostrate ourselves at thy footstool crying mightily unto thee not to leave us not to forsake us but rather to make thy power and glory known once again as thou did so often in times gone past we pray to seal thy word to our minds and to our hearts with power grant oh god that thy truth may bear fruit in us to the glory of thy name and to the good of thy cause be with us now as we join in singing together our parting song come into our midst as we gather in the evening minister thy spirit to us that we may be able to worship thee in private and in public in spirit and in truth and thou shalt have the praise and the glory both now and forever amen