

A cure for backsliding

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Preacher: Rev A.J.Macdonald

[0 : 00] Now let's turn to Jeremiah chapter 3 and the first words of verse 22. Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 22.

Return, faithless people, I will cure you of backsliding. It could be translated, return, O backturning people, and I will cure you of backturning.

Because there's a play on the word turn right throughout these words. Are you going backwards or forwards in life is really the question that this text brings before us.

Are you going towards God or away from him? You can't stand still. Either you're heading for God or you're heading away from him at any particular time in your life.

Perhaps you're not committed, not a committed Christian. But are you turning towards God? Or are you turning your back upon him? Perhaps you are a Christian.

[1 : 25] But still the question, are you going on, progressing to God, towards God? Or are you backsliding?

Are you turning away from him? All these are possibilities we must consider for ourselves. God sent Jeremiah to a society that was backsliding.

A society that had been turning its back on God and was still continuing to do so. Even though he had sent prophets to them to warn them about it.

Now we live in many ways in a similar kind of day to the day of Jeremiah. We live in a society that once knew God in great measure.

A society that was greatly influenced by the Bible, by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only influenced in the sense that people would know what the gospel was, even though they might not believe it personally for themselves.

[2 : 36] But a society that was influenced by the standards, the laws, the morality, the vision of God's word. A society that was influenced in its law, in its morality, in its science, in its medicine, in its social action, in its political freedom.

All by the great rediscovery of biblical truth, especially from the time of the Reformation onwards. Now in the last hundred years, these great insights and influences of God's word have been undermined, attacked and forgotten.

We live in a society today that has no clear understanding of what the gospel is, of what true Christianity is. Now we are not immune to those pressures.

That's why I want to consider today this question of backsliding, of turning from God. Not only at the personal level, as it is perhaps often done.

But in this context in which Jeremiah places it. Because it's from this book of Jeremiah that we get the word backsliding. And the people of his day were backsliding, not simply as individuals, but as part of a whole society.

[4 : 10] And we today, whether Christians or simply church people connected with Christian things, we are under those great pressures of the day in which we live.

So what was Jeremiah's message to that kind of society? What is the message that God wanted to bring to people in that kind of condition? That's what we've got to ask, because that's the message that he's bringing to our situation today also.

The first part of his message was this. You've turned from God. A statement of what they had done. An exposure of their error, of their sin.

In chapter 3, verse 22, the verse we're looking at, returned faithless people, or back-turning people. That word back-turning refers to this very fault, this very sin.

But in the earlier chapter, chapter 2, which we read, we see something of that unpacked for us. What was meant by this turning from God? We see in verse 13 of that chapter, a summary of it.

[5 : 31] My people have committed two sins. They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. And then that's broken down in other ways throughout the chapter.

First of all, we see that this turning from God is a long process. In verse 5, this is what the Lord says, What fault did your fathers find in me that they strayed so far from me?

They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves, and so on. The point being made here is that this is not something that suddenly happened in Jeremiah's day.

It wasn't suddenly as if the rising generation went wrong. And that probably has been one of the bugbears of our understanding of what is going on in our world at the present time.

An older generation has looked at all the excesses of a rising generation and has blamed the problems of the world on that. But God's word does not do so.

[6 : 47] It says that processes begin and go on in history from generation to generation. And that indeed in that sense the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.

Because the society that is created by the fathers is the society in which the children must live. So Jeremiah's message was clear.

It wasn't just the fault of the present generation. It had been going on as a process. But also he pointed out that it involves the leaders of that society.

We see in verse 8, he said, The priests did not ask, Where is the Lord? Those who deal with the law did not know me. The leaders rebelled against me.

The prophets prophesied by Baal following worthless idols. So again, yes, in a later chapter, Jeremiah goes to the people and he discovers that ignorant of God's truth.

[7 : 50] But then he says, Well, what can you expect? Because he turns to the leaders and they are no better. They haven't been given the lead that they ought to have been doing. So we see in these two areas, the fact that it's a process going on in history, the fact that the leadership of any society is to blame, we see these things too at work in our own situation.

What is happening today, in what may be called the secularization of society, it's not something that just began yesterday.

It's not something that even began just in the 60s. It's something that has been going on for a period over a hundred years. And one of the vital components in it is the religious leaders, not giving the lead that they ought to have done.

Religious leaders, people who are supposed to be teachers of theology and colleges and universities and people who are supposed to be ministers and preachers of the gospel turned instead to preaching a version of the wisdom of this world rather than the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ.

And we are reaping the harvest of that gradual sowing process over that last century. But what exactly is this turning from God that Jeremiah laid at the door of his generation?

[9 : 29] It is a turning from God who has done so much for us, Jeremiah says. Chapter 2 again, verses 6 and 7. They did not ask, Where is the Lord who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness?

Verse 7. I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce, but you came and defiled my land. In other words, in that passage and many others in Jeremiah and throughout the Bible, the heinousness of our sin is brought home to us in this regard because it is sin against a God who has done so much for us.

It is a God who has loved us. It is a God who has showered upon us so much good. Now, if you're a Christian, you know that in a most personal and intimate way.

You know what God has done for you in Jesus Christ that he spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all. Even if you're not a Christian, there are two ways in which you know that also.

You know it first, in that through the coming of Christ into this world, God has stayed his hand of execution because he has decided to be gracious.

[10 : 56] He has given the world an opportunity, not only an opportunity to repent, but also an opportunity to enjoy every good thing that he has created. If it were not for Christ and the mercy of God, there would never have been any of these good things to enjoy.

God would have destroyed the world immediately upon sin. Everything that you've enjoyed in our Western culture that has stemmed from Biblical understanding, our freedoms, our search for knowledge, all these great things that have stemmed from a Biblical understanding of the world, all that you've enjoyed, it has come from God.

God. And yet, you are turning from him. You are. You're turning from this God. God who has done you good.

A God who at the present time is holding out to you the salvation in Jesus Christ. He's saying, I have a remedy to your sickness, to your disease, to your troubles.

He has provided it for you. He has done nothing but love you. And yet, you're turning from him. But also, this sin of turning from God, it involves something else.

[12 : 24] It involves inventing a replacement God of some kind or other. A more manageable God. Chapter 2, verse 13, My people have committed two sins.

They have forsaken me the spring of living water. That's just what we've been thinking about. But they've done something else. They have dug their own cisterns. Broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Whenever we turn from God, it is not for very long that human beings can remain atheistic. Yes, people have done that.

but it doesn't survive for very long. Generally speaking, what people turn to immediately in turning from the true God is to create a God of their own imagination.

And we have this in Jeremiah chapter 3, verses 4 and 5, where God says, have you not just called to me, my father, my friend from my youth?

[13 : 35] Will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever? This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can. In other words, there comes, first of all, a wrong appreciation of the real God, the true God.

He is thought of more as an indulgent God, a friendly father figure who will condone sin. Sin is not all that serious, because it doesn't matter with God.

That's the kind of God that we like to have for ourselves. A God who indulges and spoils his children. The kind of parents, perhaps, that we would like to have had.

People who would give us our own way. And we fail to see that people who do have such parents have not been shown kindness.

But this is the kind of God that in this first stage, perhaps, we will want to have. A God who doesn't care about sin and therefore won't care about what we do.

[14 : 48] But that process, of course, has been going on for some time in our society. Certainly over the past hundred years. But it has gone much further than that. It has gone, as I suggested already, to outright atheism and unbelief in the existence of God at all.

But, as I also suggested, it doesn't remain long at that point. Atheism has no lasting appeal. We just need to consider contemporary events to see that.

Yes, for a period of seventy years, atheism was the official creed of the Soviet Union. But it never satisfied.

And it has not lasted. We see a tremendous resurgence of Islam on the one hand in the Southern Republic and a tremendous revival of Christianity that has been going on all the time under the scenes, as it were.

And is now claiming a victory over Marxism. So, atheism does not continue very long as a viable option.

[16 : 07] We're living at a time when we're seeing the world becoming much more religious again. When we see people considering that the option is between various gods.

Whether the god of Islam or the gods of the East or perhaps most threatening of all as has been called the gods of the New Age which is really an amalgam of Eastern religion, Hinduism and Western naturalism.

A kind of science gone mad. This is being considered as a very viable option by many people. An option where God is identified with nature.

Where you are God, where I am God, where every aspect of nature is God. Everything is God. Now this is not all that far removed from the problem that Jeremiah had to confront in his day.

But in his day he had to confront the turning of Israel to nature gods. The gods of Canaan, of Egypt and of Assyria.

[17 : 25] In chapter 2 verse 8 and also verse 18 we see this at the end of verse 8 the prophets prophesied by Baal. What's Baal? Baal is the way in which the Canaanite people worshipped.

Baal was the lord of this particular place or that particular place or this particular natural function or that. It was really a worship of nature under different guises whether of harvest or fertility or whatever.

Similarly the gods of Egypt and Assyria mentioned in verse 18 now why go to Egypt to drink the water from Sihor and why go to Assyria to drink the water from the river?

They were turning to these other gods, these nature gods. Now of course there are differences between that and the sophisticated ideas being put forward in our own day but not a great deal of difference.

For ultimately the question is is there a supreme personal infinite God who is over all and who has created the world separate from himself and he is independent of it as Christianity teaches or is the word God only a description for natural processes mysteries that we do not understand in the creation itself?

[18 : 47] that was the choice that confronted the people in Jeremiah's day and it's the choice that confronts us still today and I believe will be the choice that will confront us more and more as we move in to the third millennium.

now this sin of turning from God not only is it turning from the God who has loved us not only is it a turning to other gods but it involves other sins things in Jeremiah's day he preached a great deal about adultery but you'll discover as you read there is really a play on this idea of adultery because he's applying the idea of adultery to the spiritual turning from God the unfaithfulness you can see how it's an appropriate picture he pictures Israel as a wife who has been unfaithful to her husband turned away from him but there is this link between the two for instance we can see it in chapter 5 verses 7 and 8 why should

I forgive you your children have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods I supplied all their needs yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes in other words there was a connection we may put it like this the parents had committed spiritual adultery they had turned from the living God the children were committing physical adultery and there's an intimate connection between those two things why is it that the world in which we're living just now is a world that in many ways has got tremendous dislocations in the area of sexual relationships it's because it is a world that has virtually abandoned the worship of the living God and worshipped the God sense there is a turning from the living God and then there are all the results following on in life so the question is here have you turned from the living

God are you moving away from him instead of moving towards him because if you are then these things we've considered you must consider you're not doing this in isolation you're not an island you are a part of a great continent of human beings and human societies and movements are you moving in that direction that society around us appears in many ways to be moving or are you resisting it turning against the time so this is the turning that Jeremiah was concerned about the turning that God speaks of in his word this backsliding a turning from God but then Jeremiah went on to teach such turning away does not bring you the expected results again in chapter 2 verse 13 they have forsaken me the spring of living water and have dug their own cisterns broken cisterns that can hold no water and then again in verse 19 your wickedness will punish you your backsliding will rebuke you there

God doesn't say that he will punish us as if he's saying he will leave us to our own choice he will let the inevitable and inexorable laws that are in his creation to work themselves out so that when people forsake God and they turn to their own way they turn to their own ideas they defy his laws that he has placed in their nature and in creation he will allow the process to go on and the backsliding the turning away from him itself will bring its own bitter harvest don't be mocked don't be deceived whatever a man sows that he shall also reap we're told by Paul in the New Testament and that is exactly what is being said here so Jeremiah says all this turning away from God great things were promised people were turning away because this would be would bring great satisfaction in some way or another but it didn't work out is like broken cisterns instead of the spring of living water there was first of all just this pool of stagnant water but worse than that it was cracked so that even the stagnant water ran through into the ground well what did this turning away bring to

[23 : 51] Judah to be specific first of all it brought them weakness and dependence on foreign power again in chapter 2 verse 14 is Israel a slave a servant a slave by birth why then has he become plunder and so on the rest of that passage looking at this situation where they had become so weak they didn't have a sense of their purpose in life their identity as people devoted to the Lord they were simply the prey of all the powers of the world round about them and then there was personal misery in verse 21 of chapter 3 a cry is heard on the barren heights the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the Lord their God I think that is a very poignant very moving verse a cry is heard on the barren heights the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel and involved in this too there was destruction and loss in verse 24 of this chapter from your youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our father's labor their flocks and herds their sons and daughters and that was true in a very hideous way at that time for the worship of some of the

Canaanite deities involved child sacrifice but it was a ruination of the land even at that physical level we know that the true worship of God demanded sacrifice demanded offering but it was not such a system that devastated the land but here those who manipulated those gods the priest cast and all connected with them they bled the land dry and they held the people in fear thought if it involved child sacrifice who would want to be the family that would provide the sacrifice so there was the destruction and loss to the land as well as the misery and bitterness of having turned from God and discovered that it hadn't worked that it hadn't brought all the happiness that the world had promised that it would now what have these things brought to our own society what has this turning from God brought to us has it brought us a contented happy society far from it we have all the terrible troubles of the age in which we live we have for instance the guilt and the misery of countless numbers of women who have had abortions who have been urged by the society in which we live this is the thing to do this will make you happier yet they are not then we have the bitter regret of broken marriages and broken homes and all the failures involved we also have the misery of addictions to drugs and to drink and we have the horrible personal ruin and misery of those who suffer from AIDS again society said do what you will have whatever kind of sexual relationships you like there's nothing wrong there's nothing forbidden and now a bitter harvest has been reaped these are you might say the clearest examples the ones that stick out and shout to us but they are only the tip of a grey iceberg of misery of people who have turned from

God and yet have not found happiness what has it brought you if you are in this condition where you have turned from God you are heading away from him rather than towards him what has it brought you what has it done for you could you put into words the great satisfaction it has brought you has it brought you the peace the contentment the lasting satisfaction that you perhaps hoped would would would would and if not why do you persist in it why do you persist in turning your face away from God and moving in that direction is it because simply you are now a slave whoever commits sin is a slave to sin Jesus said that's still true today why do we carry on in it if it only brings us guilt misery and fear it's because we're enslaved and we need to be set free and so the final point is just this we're told here in verse 22 of chapter 3 return faithless people

I will cure you of backsliding return God says now we could understand if God says as he does in his word that he will judge sin that he will punish sin he warns us of his judgment even these things we've just been considering the misery and ruin that follows on from sin he warns us of those things but the altogether astoundingly precious thing is this that God doesn't have to be gracious but he is he doesn't have to forgive there's no compulsion upon him to forgive people who have sinned to take pity on those who have rebelled against him but the great gospel good news is that he has he has compassion he has pity on us he is merciful and that's what we have here the gracious invitation of God for us to return and all he asks is one thing and that is that we turn towards him now involved in that is one or two things first of all we have to realize our sin and guilt verse 13 of chapter 3 only acknowledge your guilt you have rebelled against the

Lord your God you have scattered your favours to foreign gods under every spreading tree and have not obeyed them we have to recognize our guilt or in verse 23 to come to the realization surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception surely in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel to come to a realization that we have gone wrong and to admit it and then to turn aside from these false gods verse 1 of chapter 4 if you will return to me declares the Lord if you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray in other words you have to turn from whatever false conceptions you have of God or whatever have become gods in your life whatever you become a slave to now you might say well I can't you've just been saying that I'm a slave to sin I can't do it well the thing is if there is that desire in your heart to do it

[31 : 29] God will enable you to do it it is his power alone that can liberate you but the question is is there that desire in your heart and then you have to turn to him truly chapter 4 verses 2 right through to 4 and if in a truthful just and righteous way you swear as surely as the Lord lives then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory and in verse 4 circumcise yourselves to the Lord circumcise your hearts you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem in other words what he is asking for is not yet another another pretense but he's asking for reality he's asking for you to realize deep in your heart that you are wrong and that you must wholeheartedly turn to him that's what he's asking for and that is the only thing that we are asked to do to turn to him to look to him to ask him for help and he will graciously help us he promises here to cure us in verse 22 our text return faithless people

I will cure you of backsliding and we see earlier on in this passage something of what's involved in that in chapter 3 for instance in verse 15 then I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will lead you with knowledge and understanding God promises to give us guidance and help he doesn't leave us to ourselves he gives us his word he gives us the preaching of his word he gives us instruction to lead us and direct us and then also in verse 17 at the end of that verse we read no longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts you see God himself is able to change our hearts to renew it to turn us towards himself so that our instinct is to go in his direction now we know that the person who becomes a Christian who turns to God he will not be able to do that perfectly in this life he will stumble and fall and maybe backslide again but the question is is he looking to

God is he turning to God in all that sin in all that failure in all that backsliding because if he's turning to God then that's all that matters because God will receive him and God will help him and God will use him again so the question is where are you heading in life away from God or towards him have you turned your back on God and his blessings and his kindness or have you realized the folly of your way and you've turned towards God that's what this verse challenges us to do to realize the situation we're in to turn from it to God who's merciful to receive us let us pray our gracious and loving heavenly father we thank you for the great invitations of your word reaching out to us in our sinful and miserable condition we think of the world around us which knows so little of your word of your truth of your grace of your love that all these processes having been going on for so long yet we know that you are powerful to act and to work in the lives of individuals and of nations we pray that you would come in your mighty power having mercy upon us turning your children back to yourself giving us more a sense of reality in our

Christian living and turning those who at the present time are heading away from you back to yourself we think of those who have known the blessings of a Christian upbringing of Christian homes of Christian teaching and preaching in church at the present time have turned their backs on it oh lord may they recognize the the end of such a direction may they not have to go through great bitterness of soul may they early recognize their error and return to you but we think also of those who have gone far even as a prodigal into the far country may they too come to themselves and think of their father's house we ask all of this in

Jesus name and for his sake amen