

2. God's plea to the backsliders

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One of the most frightening situations for any devout born-again Christian is becoming a backslider. No one is forced to become a backslider, nor does anyone become a backslider from one moment to the next moment right away. It is a deliberate compromised process that takes a long time. That is what sin does to us – numb and dumb.

The ancient Israeli people had everything going for them when they came into the Promised Land. They had the God who provided everything for them during the 40 year wilderness journey. It was this same God who was feared by all the pagan kingdoms around them. It seems that these kingdoms around them already lost courage even before the Israelis fought against them.

Then, the logical question would be, "If the Israeli people knew that they won the battles because of their Jehovah God, why did they want to serve the gods of the kingdoms which they conquered?" You got me. To explain that, I have to ask ourselves this question: Haven't all of us heard or seen enough ugly results of the backsliders around us? Then, why would any one of us think that it would be any different for us if we choose to backslide from the Lord?

Young prophet Jeremiah started his ministry with the messages from the Lord to warn his people in Israel. He had a gift for expressing theological truth in pictorial language that can be read as poetry. We will see several word pictures that represent the relationship between the Lord and Israel, or the backsliding Israelis, or the horrible situations where they would be in. The Lord is pleading to our hearts through the prophet Jeremiah so that we may not be in the same situation as these ancient Israelis were.

A. WHAT INJUSTICE AGAINST GOD?

Jeremiah 2:5 Thus says the Lord: "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, That they have gone far from Me, Have followed idols, And have become idolaters?"

Jeremiah 2:8 The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' And those who handle the law did not know Me; The rulers also transgressed against Me; The prophets prophesied by Baal, And walked after things that do not profit.

Jeremiah 2:19 Your own wickedness will correct you, And your backslidings will rebuke you. Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing That you have forsaken the Lord your God, And the fear of Me is not in you," Says the Lord God of hosts.

From Mt. Sinai, the Lord made an agreement with the people of Israel that they were in a loving relationship that could be compared to marriage. In the OT, Israel's idolatry is compared to spiritual adultery and even prostitution.

After all of the first generation of the Israelis who made the exodus from Egypt died in the wilderness with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the second generation followed the Lord and devoted to Him until they occupied the Promised Land. Then, they wanted to exchange their God with the worthless and defenseless idols of the pagan kingdoms around them. Thus, began their idolatry.

I see two reasons for backsliding in these verses:

1) They didn't know the Lord – v8

The original Hebrew word for 'know' is "yada". It was also used in Genesis 4:

Genesis 4:1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, "I have acquired a man from the Lord."

I am not saying that we should know the Lord in the same sexual way as between Adam and Eve, rather I am talking about the intimacy. But in here these priests were supposed to know the Lord and His heart well. It was their job and calling, but they didn't. You can only imagine what the rest of the country would be like. It is no wonder that they backslid.

2) The fear of God was not in them – v19

During the time when President Reagan was in the White House, there were very little terrorist activities, because he was a strong leader and the USA was the superpower that did not tolerate the terrorism. The terrorists feared Reagan and knew that he would not put up with their terrorist activities. That's why the day Reagan was swearing in as the President of the United States, Iran released the hostages after 444 days. Now that we have a president who is not willing to call a spade a spade, the terrorists around the world do not see that anyone can stop them.

When we do not have the fear of God, there is no limit of sin that we would not do. Fear of the Lord is a constant abiding awareness of God's presence in my life at all times. An excellent Bible teacher and pastor Ray Stedman defined it like this: "Worldly fear of the Lord is the fear that He might hurt me; godly fear of the Lord is the fear that I might hurt Him."

Then, there is a vivid picture of the result of deserting the Lord:

Jeremiah 2:13 "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns--broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Israel forsook the true God for false gods, which was like abandoning a spring of fresh flowing water for a cracked muddy cistern that couldn't hold water. In the Holy Land, water is a valuable possession, and nobody would do a foolish thing like that. But they did

B. IN PRETENSE

Jeremiah 3:6-10 The Lord said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: "Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. 7 And I said, after she had done all these things, 'Return to Me.' But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8 Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. 9 So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. 10 And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense," says the Lord.

When Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., the Southern Kingdom of Judah witnessed this divine judgment. Nevertheless, they refused to learn from Israel's destruction and turn from their sins. God had "divorced" Israel and put her away; Israel became a part of Assyria, and the Northern Kingdom was never restored.

I've said this many times, but it's worth repeating. People with a good hindsight learn from their own mistakes; but people with a better hindsight learn from other people's mistake. Obviously, the people of Judah thought that God would not punish them for whatever the reasons they came up with.

Here is the truth of their hearts. While the Southern Kingdom Judah had good and godly kings, such as Hezekiah and Josiah, the people went along with their kings' reformation. But as soon as those kings were dead, they went right back to their evil ways. In other words, they were not following the Lord with their whole heart, but in pretense.

C. SHEPHERDS ACCORDING TO MY HEART

Jeremiah 3:15 And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

The word 'pastor' came from a Latin word and it means 'shepherd' or 'feeder'. In my opinion, the most important qualification of a pastor is not a degree or Bible knowledge though they are very important. Rather, it is the heart of a pastor according to God's and a determination to obey the Lord and to feed the congregation straight from the Bible without compromise.

The Lord willing, I hope that I will not compromise the Word of God to my last breath and feed our congregation with nourished spiritual foods so that you guys can be the best fed sheep in the world. That's my goal.

D. DID GOD DECEIVE HIS PEOPLE?

Jeremiah 4:10 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Surely You have greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem, Saying, 'You shall have peace,' Whereas the sword reaches to the heart."

While I was studying the Book of Jeremiah, this verse bothered me. God never deceives anyone. He is the God of truth and He cannot sin. So what does this mean? When the Lord said, "You shall have peace," it is a conditional promise. If the Jews obeyed Him and worshiped Him, they would have peace because the Lord would protect them. But these people didn't and they wonder why God punished them. Really?

It was the false prophets of Judah claimed that no matter what the Lord is going to protect them. These were the people who led the inhabitants of Judah away from the Lord with the idol worship, but they thought that the Lord had an obligation to protect them. Shouldn't they ask those idols to protect them since they'd rather worship them?

Like those false prophets of the ancient Israel, how many people have the Prosperity Gospel teachers led away from the Lord with their heresies? They told their congregation and followers that they could claim wealth and health from God and He is obligated to provide those things for them. Then, the things didn't come true. When these people were in shock and dismay, those teachers typically condemned them for their lack of faith. This kind of heretical behaviors of the teachers destroyed many naive people's faiths.

E. A TYPICAL REACTION OF SINNERS

Jeremiah 5:18-19 "Nevertheless in those days," says the Lord, "I will not make a complete end of you. 19 And it will be when you say, 'Why does the Lord our God do all these things to us?' then you shall answer them, 'Just as

you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve aliens in a land that is not yours.'

God's grace and mercy were repeated here again. Though devastating judgment would come to Judah, the Lord would not forsake His people completely, but He would bring them back to restoration. Since they served foreign gods, God would send them to the idol central, Babylon.

When we continually demand our ways to the Lord in our prayers, even if they are not in His will, He will allow us to have them. Then, we will regretfully realize that there are many good reasons that the Lord didn't want us to have our ways.

Isn't that a typical reaction from sinners, including us, to do in these two verses 18 and 19? Blaming God for the consequences of their sins. Come to think of it, the Lord gets the blames for just about anything and everything. Repentance and restoration will never start as long as we blame the Lord for the consequences of our sins.

F. THEY ARE NOT ASHAMED

Jeremiah 6:13-15 "Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, Everyone is given to covetousness; And from the prophet even to the priest, Everyone deals falsely. 14 They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, Saying, 'Peace, peace!' When there is no peace. 15 Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; Nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; At the time I punish them, They shall be cast down," says the Lord.

I have to wonder what kind of differences our Lord sees between the Southern Kingdom Judah at this time of the Book of Jeremiah and the USA in the 21st century. The text says that everyone was given to covetousness including the prophets who were supposed to declare the oracles of God and the priests who were supposed to show the way of God to His people.

Peace is a wonderful message to bring, and one that most people want to hear. The problem is that sometimes it isn't true. Sometimes there is war and conflict that we must deal with whether we would like to or not. Most significantly, there are times when God's word to His people is not peace, but "repent" and "prepare for judgment."

There are many so-called pastors and Bible teachers who have a large following and they declare 'feel-good' messages instead of the truth from the Bible. They are exactly the same type of people who were mentioned here saying, "Peace, peace!" Just as the Scripture says they are not at all ashamed of their untruthful messages and don't care to blush because they don't follow the Lord.

Listen, once people deceive themselves for what they want, then, they really believe that anything they do should be fine with God or they simply don't care what God thinks. To them, nothing is forbidden in their sin list, nor are they even embarrassed or feel bad for their sins, like many homosexuals around the world.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) True Christian faith has never been popular, and the road that leads to life is still narrow and lonely.

2) Repentance and restoration will never start as long as we blame the Lord for the consequences of our sins.