

A word to the backslider

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, as we gather, we ask that you will teach us, that you will open up our eyes, and you will meet us in your word. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I would be grateful if you could open your Bibles to page 629, Jeremiah chapter 3.

In the 1940s, one of Hitler's officials, by the name of Rosenberg, wrote down 31 recommendations for the Reich Church, the State Church, in Nazi Germany.

He said because Hitler's autobiography, Mein Kampf, represented the pinnacle of human literature, they should stop printing Bibles, stop importing Bibles, and that Mein Kampf should be the rule of life and conduct for all German people.

He said that the architecture of churches must be left intact externally, but inside there were to be sweeping changes. On the altar, there was to be on the left-hand side a sword, and on the right-hand side, the Bible was to be replaced with a copy of Mein Kampf.

[1 : 2 0] The crucifix, which hung in many German churches, was to be replaced with a flag and a swastika. Rosenberg wanted to corrupt the worship of God for political purposes, to ensure the loyalty of people to the Nazi regime.

By God's grace, his recommendations were never implemented, and the worship of God continues in Germany to this day. But this wasn't the first attempt by a politician to corrupt the worship of Yahweh for their own ends.

After the death of Solomon, Israel was split in half. Ten tribes went to the north, under the reign of Jeroboam, and two tribes remained in the south, Judah, under the reign of Rehoboam.

And Jeroboam in the north, in Israel, was concerned that if people went down to Jerusalem, in Judah, to worship God in the temple, that their hearts might be turned away from him, from Jeroboam, and they might be loyal to Rehoboam.

And so he fashioned a religion, taking something of Yahweh worship and corrupting it. He built a great golden calf in the north of the country, in Dan. And he built another one in the south, in Bethel.

[2 : 3 4] And he said to the people, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt. And he instituted a priesthood, not from the tribe of Levi, but really from anyone who could lay his hands on.

And he introduced a new festival, not according to the festivals Moses had instituted, but one of his own imagining. He created an idolatrous religion to retain the loyalty of his people politically.

But the people of Israel developed a taste for idolatry. And in time, they came to worship not just these two calves, but all the gods of all the nations surrounding them.

They adopted their practices. They adopted their morality and their beliefs. And in time, that religion spread south. And the people of Judah accepted the worship of the nations around them.

And so, when Jeremiah is called as a prophet during the reign of Josiah, he discovers, in chapter 2, verse 11, that his nation had changed its gods, even though they are no gods.

- [3 : 46] That my people, God's people, have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Their polytheism was rife, verse 28, For as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah.
- And so Jeremiah was commissioned to preach to these people, to lead them back to the God of heaven, the one true and living God, from all the idols of the nations around them.
- But what do you say to a nation that once knew God and once knew his ways, and then wholesale rejected them? What do you say to an individual who once walked with the Lord and has since turned aside from listening to his voice?
- Well, Jeremiah says two things. First of all, he speaks to them of the gravity of their sin. Secondly, he speaks to them of the greatness of God's grace.
- The gravity of their sin and the greatness of God's grace. Now, about 13 years ago, I went to university in England, and I was very happy.
- [4 : 58] I met lots of lovely English people. And I decided, while I was there, that I would learn the language and the culture of the English. And so I asked them the sort of things they did. And one event which was very popular was May Day Morning.
- We don't do it quite so much down here, but down there it's a big festival. And on May Day Morning, about five o'clock, the streets are filled with people, much like they are today.
- People from all over the country, lots of Morris dancers. And they used to congregate on a bridge in the centre of the town of which I lived. Next to the bridge, there was a great tower.
- And on top of the tower, as the sun rose, a group of choir boys would begin to sing. People would listen to the choir boys. And then a few individuals would jump from the bridge, which was about 15 feet high, into the river below, which was about two feet deep.
- Every year people were injured. Every year without exception. And we were warned months before. They said, don't jump off the bridge. If you jump off it, you'll break your ankles, you'll get arrested, you'll be expelled from the university.
- [6 : 04] It was made very clear the consequences of jumping off that bridge. And yet every year without fail and without exception, people jumped off the bridge. They knew the risks.
- They did it anyway. They carried on regardless. And so Jeremiah speaks to the people of Judah. And he says, that is precisely your attitude.
- You know the risks. And you are carrying on regardless. And in verses 6 to 10, he reminds them of the history of their neighbours, the people of Israel.
- And he says, have you seen what she did? How she went up on every high hill and every green tree and there played the whore. And I thought, after all she has done, she will return to me. But she did not return.
- Verse 8, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. The people of Israel turned their back on the living God. And ultimately they were sent away from his presence.
- [7 : 02] And Judah saw it. Verse 7, her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And verse 8, after Israel had been sent away into Assyria, her treacherous sister did not fear.
- But she too went and played the whore. Verse 10, she did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense. She maintained a religious veneer, but her hearts were not set upon the Lord their God.
- They knew the risks of disobeying God and pursuing idolatry. And they continued and carried on regardless. And really to emphasize just how serious the problem was, I think it's worthwhile taking a brief look at 2 Kings chapter 17.
- Bob's been doing very helpful studies in 2 Kings. And there is a concise summary in chapter 17 of the idolatry of Israel just before Jeremiah preached.

You recall how God called the people out of Egypt. He set his love upon them and he entered into a unique relationship with them. You shall be my people and I shall be your God.

[8 : 15] Chapter 17, verse 8. They walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel and the customs that the King of Israel had practiced.

They rejected the worship of the true God for the idols of the nations around them. Verse 9. They built high places in all their towns. Verse 10. They set up for themselves pillars and ashram on every high hill and under every green tree.

Verse 12. They served idols of which the Lord had said to them, you shall not do this. God loved them. God saved them. God gave them his commandments that they should have no other gods and they should never bow down to an idol or a statue.

Very quickly they did. And then he sent them prophets. Verse 13. He warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, turn from your evil way and keep my commandments.

But verse 14. They would not listen. They were stubborn as their fathers had been who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he had made with their fathers.

[9 : 27] They went after false idols and became false and they followed the nations that were around them. They didn't listen to God. They ignored his prophets. They continued in their idolatrous ways because they wanted to be just like all the nations around them.

And we're told, aren't they, the extent of it. Verse 17. They burned their sons and daughters as offerings. They used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord provoking him to anger.

Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. Over a century of state-sponsored idolatry and God bore with them patiently and yet they refused to repent.

And so his judgment fell and they were taken into exile. But before they were, of course, the gangrene had spread. Verse 19. Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced.

They saw the adultery of their sister and they continued in it themselves. They saw the divorce of their sister and Jeremiah warned them, this is your fate unless you repent.

[10 : 46] They knew the risks and carried on regardless. And it's a very chilling thought, isn't it? Because these people had once known the Lord. They knew what he was like.

He'd given them his name. He'd revealed to them his word and they turned away. And we see that. We don't see it in terms of a golden calf in Bear's Den to stop us worshipping in the centre but we see it sometimes very obviously.

So for example, this year, the Association of American Atheists had a conference in America and they invited the son of a famous Christian pastor who's now an atheist to come and talk about their folly of Christianity.

And after he had spoken they had a special un-baptism ceremony and that is people who'd been baptised and who'd confessed their faith in Christ could come and a man was standing with a hair dryer and he would dry their hair where they'd been sprinkled with water because they publicly wanted to turn away from the God of heaven.

Sometimes it's very obvious. But other times it's more subtle, isn't it? You see, the people of Israel began to follow the gods of the nations around them and it can be very possible for us to look at the gods of the nations around us of self-seeking pleasure, self-promotion, professional success at the expense of our principles, of comfort, of ease, the things the world wants and to make that our God rather than the service of the living God.

[12 : 19] Jesus knew this, of course. His disciples were listening to him as he preached the Sermon on the Mount and the question came up about worry. People were worried. They were worried about their food, about their appetites, about their bodies.

They were worried about their clothing, about their material objects and their possessions. And Jesus said to them, do not worry about your material possessions. Do not worry about your appetites and your needs because the pagans, that is, the nations, run after these things.

They worship these things. But your Father in Heaven knows you need them. Seek first His kingdom and they will be added unto you. We are not to concentrate on building our own little empires or the world of our own choosing.

We are to seek first God's kingdom and not follow the gods of the nations around us. But secondly, you'll notice where the temptation came from. And I find it terrifying that they were led into sin, not always by the nations around them, but by their own countrymen, the people of Israel, the people with whom God had made a covenant.

It's very stark, isn't it? And that was a problem for the early Christians as well, that people who claimed to be part of the family of God were actually those who would draw their hearts away from serving God.

[13 : 44] So the Galatians had preachers, didn't they, who preached a different gospel and a different Jesus. You remember Paul's words as he bid farewell to the Ephesian elders.

Acts chapter 20, after I leave, savage wolves will come in and not spare the flock. Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth to draw away disciples after them.

People who look for all the world as if they belong to the church of God and yet who will distort the worship of him in order to draw people away from him. very chilling.

So we must be discerning. We mustn't be paranoid as Christians but we must be discerning when we're invited to a conference or given a CD or given a book. We must say, does this person lead me to Christ alone?

Do they encourage me to put my faith alone in him and to trust in his grace alone? Or are they seeking to draw me away from the worship of God? Well, in Israel's case it was very clear.

[14 : 55] And having identified therefore their sin, the sin of Israel, so as to warn Judah, he then speaks to them of God's grace. Verse 12 onwards.

I am not a particular fan of celebrity culture and reality TV and so on. But I was interested a few weeks ago when one of the stories in these sort of circles was front page news.

It was a story concerning Peter Andre the singer and Katie Price of Jordan the celebrity. And a photograph had appeared and Peter Andre had seen it and he said, this is the worst day of my life.

I looked at the newspaper and I wondered what the story was. And essentially the photograph was his wife, Katie Price, with her new partner moments after separating with him.

And also in the photograph were his children playing with this new man, laughing and smiling and joking with him as if he was their father. A photograph of his unfaithful wife and his children treating another man as their father.

[16 : 11] The worst day of his life because he wanted his children to be with him. And to love him and not to love this stranger. Jeremiah 3 verse 19 I thought you would call me my father and would not turn from following me.

Surely as a treacherous wife leaves her husband so have you been treacherous to me O house of Israel declares the Lord. A husband whose wife has been unfaithful, a father whose children have run off after another father.

That is precisely how the Lord felt when he saw the idolatry of the nations of Israel and of Judah. So what does he say? What does his father say to his children?

Well three times he says to them return faithless Israel verse 12. Return faithless children verse 14. Return faithless sons verse 22.

God calls his people to return. He promises them that if they do he will not look on them in anger. He will not be angry forever. He will bring them to Zion. He will heal their faithlessness.

[17 : 20] He will heal their backsliding. God offers them grace. Despite a century of idolatry his word to his people is return. What does that involve?

Verse 13 only acknowledge your guilt that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favours among foreigners under every green tree and that you have not obeyed my voice.

Acknowledging their sin that they have rebelled against God and they have refused to listen to his voice. They have ceased to read the law of Moses to listen to the preaching of the priests.

Verse 22. To take upon their lips the words of the sons of Israel behold we come to you for you are the Lord our God. Truly the hills are a delusion the orgies on the mountains truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.

They are to remove chapter 4 verse 1 the detestable things from his presence to acknowledge their guilt to turn away from their idolatry and to return to the Lord the true God in whom is the salvation of Israel.

[18 : 35] And if they do that God promises great good to them. He says I will take you verse 14 one from a city two from a family and bring you to Zion I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

He promises to bring them back from the land of exile to restore them to himself to gather the people he once scattered and ultimately to include them in his final purpose for the world verse 17 at that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord and all nations shall gather to it to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.

You see God's purpose was that the people of Israel the people in Jerusalem would teach the nations how to worship the true God and yet the opposite had happened. The people in Jerusalem had been led astray by the nations to worship the idols which they worshipped and yet God made a promise and God had a purpose that one day people of all nations of every tribe and tongue and people would gather around his throne in Jerusalem to worship him and what Jeremiah sketches for us in verse 17 John colours in in Revelation chapter 7 when we are given a vision of a great multitude greater than the multitude running the marathon this morning gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb in the new Jerusalem crying out salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb who sits upon the throne.

The door is open says the Lord to Israel to return to be included among that great multitude to take his name upon our lips and to worship him if they repent and put aside their detestable things.

well Jesus told a story didn't he about a son once and I'm told that in the Middle East if you asked for your inheritance before your parent died it wasn't because you were trying to dodge inheritance tags it was because you were saying to them I wish you were dead already I wish you'd get out of my life and this son said to his father can I have my inheritance I wish you were dead and he took the money and he went off to a far and distant country and he squandered it on his appetites prostitutes and high living but of course soon the money ran out health broke down job came to an end friends abandoned him and as he was sitting in a pig farm one day he said maybe my father will take me back as a servant and so he got up and he walked home and as he was walking home we noticed this man running towards him men in the Middle East don't run it's very undignified and he ran towards him and he showered him with good things he gave him a ring and a cloak and he called for the fatten calf to be slaughtered and he said my son has come home he was dead and he is alive and he welcomed his prodigal son home into the father's house well maybe that's a word for someone here today we get a lot of people in through the doors during the week and a lot of people are very honest and they say you know I started with the Lord but I'm not going on now

[22 : 02] I had one man talking to me he said well I'm a backslider and the problem is one of my Christian friends says that if you're a backslider you can never go back to the Lord I don't know where he got his theology what is God's word to the backslider return return return three times he says it return and I will bring you to Zion and you will be gathered around the throne of the Lord with people from every nation united in worship so if you're here and you're away from the Lord and you're straying and you're walking along that broad road know that he is calling you to return he is offering you cleansing and forgiveness and restoration and if you've got a friend or a family member who's living for themselves instead of living for God you can take that word to them return because the Lord will heal their backslidings if they return and stop serving the idols of the nations and once more worship the God of heaven but of course there's another side to the coin isn't there because Israel knew this and they refused to repent and Judah heard this but as you know your Old Testament history if you turn to the last chapter in Jeremiah you see that they failed to repent as well and the Babylonian army came into Jerusalem and carried them away took away the treasures of the temple of the Lord and left the city in ruins

Jeremiah heard the words Judah heard the words of Jeremiah but carried on regardless and so Jeremiah presents them with the challenge in verse 3 with the choice they had they can break up their fallow ground they can circumcise themselves to the Lord they can return to him internally turning their hearts back to him not just following the external religious practices and he will restore them and heal them or verse 4 his wrath will go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it because of the evil of your deeds if somebody refuses to listen to the Lord and to his patient correction and rebuke there comes a point where no more can be done and that was a temptation for the Hebrew Christians in the first century they were under great pressure to publicly renounce their faith in Christ to go back to their old ways and the letter to the Hebrews contains encouragements and it contains challenges and in chapter 10 the author encourages the people to press on with Christ he says therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus and since we have a great high priest over the house of God let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near as Christians we are to draw near to God we are to draw near to one another encouraging one another praying for one another to remain faithful to the God who has called us but he goes on to say for if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins but a fearful expectation of the judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries verse 31 it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God idolatry is a very grave sin and Jeremiah showed the gravity of it to the people but having wounded them he heals them by presenting them with God's grace and it is a very great grace greater than the gravity of their sin but they have to choose they have to choose who will they serve they will have to choose between life and death whether to serve themselves whether to serve their idols or whether to serve the living God that is the choice we all face that is the choice that you if you are straying from the Lord face this day will you live under the gravity of your sin or will you respond to God in his great grace and hear those words return and I will heal you let's pray

Father we thank you that you are so honest with us that you are willing to show us our sin but then you are willing to speak words of comfort and love and grace we do ask that our hearts might not be drawn away after the idols of the nations but that you might keep us faithful to yourself and we ask Lord for any in this congregation who are straying in their hearts that they might understand more of your grace and your love and of your wonderful purpose for the world in which you have made so we ask that your healing and your forgiveness might be very present among us as we meet around your table we ask this in Jesus name Amen