

A powerful plea for real repentance

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: 11 November 2012

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now we're returning today to our studies in Jeremiah, and we're going to read from Jeremiah 3 verse 1 to 4 verse 4.

And you'll find that on page 629. Page 629. This young prophet, Jeremiah, has been calling to God's people to return to faithfulness to the Lord.

Who is the Lord of the covenant. Indeed, return to the marriage relationship, essentially, because that's what covenant is about. And that theme continues here.

So chapter 3 verse 1, and we'll read on to chapter 4 verse 4. And Jeremiah says, If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her?

Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers, and would you return to me, declares the Lord? Lift up your eyes to the bare heights, and see where have you not been ravished?

[1 : 13] By the wayside you have sat awaiting lovers, like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come.

Yet you have the forehead of a whore. You refuse to be ashamed. Have you not just now called to me? My father, you are the friend of my youth. Will he be angry forever?

Will he be indignant to the end? Behold, you have spoken. But you could have done all the evil that you could. Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah, have you seen what she did, that faithless one Israel?

How she went up on every high hill, and under every green tree, and there played the whore. And I thought, after she has done all this, she will return to me.

But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one Israel, I have sent her away with a decree of divorce.

[2 : 16] Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear. But she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.

Yet for all this, her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.

And the Lord said to me, faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. Go and proclaim these words towards the north, and say, return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord. I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt that you rebelled against the Lord your God, and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord.

Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord. For I am your master. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and bring you to Zion.

[3 : 25] And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and increased in the land in these days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed. It shall not be made again. 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.

In those days, the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage.

I said, how I would set you among my sons to give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me my father, and would not turn from following me. Surely, as a treacherous wife, leaves her husband, so you have been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. A voice on the bare heights is heard, the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons, because they have perverted their way.

[4 : 40] They have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness. 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. But from our youth, the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers laboured, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters.

Let us lie down in our shame, and let dishonour cover us. For we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers from our youth, even to this day.

And we have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God. If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence and do not waver, and if you swear as the Lord lives in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.

For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. Circumcise yourself to the Lord.

[5 : 58] Remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts and to our lives. Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at page 629, and we'll have a moment of prayer and ask the Lord's help as we come to this difficult and perplexing passage.

Let's pray. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Let your bright beams arise. Dispel the darkness from our hearts and open all our eyes.

Show us that loving man who rules the courts of bliss, the Lord of hosts, the mighty God, the eternal Prince of Peace.

This is our prayer, Lord Christ, today, and we offer it in your name. Amen. Amen. Now, if we were to ask, what is the most important thing in any relationship, whether it's a marriage relationship, relationship between friends, or ordinary relationships in our daily life among acquaintances, among those we meet, apart, of course, from love, I would think honesty would be one of the most important things.

[7 : 34] There can be no relationship, whatever, with anyone unless it is built on honesty. If it's built on evasions and half-truths and glotting over problems, then the relationship soon withers.

And that is the problem that the prophet Jeremiah is facing here, a problem of easy forgiveness, a problem of what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace.

I mentioned this already. Bonhoeffer, the brave German Christian murdered by Hitler, described cheap grace as grace without repentance, Christ without the cross.

There is always a problem with the gospel of grace. At the time when the Reformation, when Luther and others rediscovered the glorious truth that salvation is by grace through faith.

That liberated them, that liberated millions of people and has ever since. Grace, the amazing grace that makes us Christ's people, makes us his children.

[8 : 37] But, you see, if the devil can't prevent us believing in the gospel of grace, I mean, very subtle enemy. He's got another tactic. He can make us cheapen the gospel of grace.

We can do anything we like and then just run back to God and he'll just brush you a hand and say, Oh, it never mattered in any case.

And this leads to complacency. It leads to pride. And finally, it leads to contempt for God. Now, this is the kind of situation in which the prophet Jeremiah is speaking.

This chapter here, these verses, probably not all spoken at one time, but as the book is put together, many of his early sermons, if you like, are collected and we have these powerful messages with deep feelings, strong and deep feeling.

Jeremiah cares and Jeremiah wants others to care. That's why I'm calling this a powerful plea for real repentance. That's what they're going to call what we're going to say today, a powerful plea for real repentance.

[9 : 50] So let's look then. We're at Jeremiah 3 on page 629. And let's look at these verses as they develop. A powerful plea for real repentance.

And first of all, we have a devastating question. In verses 1 to 5. Remember, Jeremiah is using the metaphor, the picture of the broken marriage.

God has called his people into a marriage relationship with himself. They have broken it. They have gone away from him. And this is carried on here. Now, just a word about what this means.

If a man divorces his wife, he goes and becomes another man's wife. Will he return to her? Would not the land be greatly polluted? There's a particular reference here to Jeremiah 24, verses 1 to 4. But remember, the prophets are always drawing from Moses himself. The prophets are not preaching a new message. The prophets are taking the message of Moses, the message of the Torah, and applying it to their own times.

[10 : 55] Now, a particular reference, I see, is what Moses had to say about divorce. If a man divorced his wife, and she married, and then the second husband got rid of her, Moses says there's no question of going back to the first husband.

That may seem a rather odd law. But the point is to guard the sanctity of marriage to prevent the woman simply being passed around from one man to another.

Because I've said before, when you get sexual laxity in a community, it's always women who suffer. They are passed around from one man to another. Now, the point that Jeremiah is making is, you have left your first husband, the Lord God himself, and turned away to other lovers.

Can you ever come back? This is a question that runs through the whole of Jeremiah, and indeed the whole of the prophets. Have they gone too far this time? Is there any possibility of return?

Is there any possibility, as we sang in Wesley's hymn, that the Lord will spare us? And I think what Jeremiah is saying really here is two things. There is no place for cosmetic change.

[12 : 10] Now, you notice what he says. He uses this vivid, rather shocking language I've said before, which Ezekiel does as well, because what God's people has done is not pretty, and it's not trivial.

That's why it's described in vivid language. Prostitution, pollution, abomination. By the wayside, you have sat awaiting lovers. Verse 2, you have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.

The problem is, they don't see this as a big deal. They don't think they've actually done anything very wrong. And you can see that by, you can see that by what they have to say in verse 5.

They use the language of scripture. Will he be angry forever? These are the words of Psalm 123. Sorry, Psalm 103. Great Psalm of David.

Will the Lord be angry forever? Is his loving kindness his steadfast love at an end? Oh, God will rush to our rescue. We haven't actually done anything very wrong.

[13 : 13] And they use the language of piety. Brothers and sisters, don't use the language of piety and super-spirituality. It's not pretty. And particularly, it's not pretty when there's this kind of behavior going on.

You see, this cheapens grace and ultimately destroys the gospel. So that's the first thing Jeremiah is saying. This is a superficial change. You're not really sorry at all. You're keeping on doing the things.

Lord, I'm sorry. And then go away and do exactly the same thing again. And the result of this is death. Verse 3, Therefore the showers have been withheld and the spring rain has not come.

Now you read back once again in the book of Deuteronomy, one of the judgments for disobedience and breaking the covenant is drought. Remember, that happens back in the time of Elijah as well.

The great drought that comes. It's not just physical drought. It is spiritual barrenness. When you have a church, a community which trivializes sin, grace is despised.

[14 : 21] You see, grace is not something that we can appreciate unless we appreciate sin. That's why many people don't like the gospel. Because the gospel actually tells us we are sinners.

If you don't believe you are a sinner, then grace is not going to be good news. Grace is going to be bad news. The gospel is bad news about us, although it's good news for us.

The bad news is that we are sinful, but we've turned away from God. The good news is that God is gracious and forgiving. So the devastating question, can you come back?

Can Israel come back? Is there a way back to God from the dark paths of sin? And that's followed by a divine call. Chapter 3, verse 6 to 18.

The devastating question and the divine call. And this is a specific setting here. It's one of the reasons that suggests these are extracts from Jeremiah's preaching at different times.

[15:23] In the days of King Josiah. Now, when Jeremiah preaches, the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, had already been carried off to Assyria.

Judah saw that happening, the southern kingdom. But far from turning to God, they became even worse. Now, what's the point of in the days of King Josiah? Josiah was a good king, a godly king. And Josiah undertook one of the greatest reformations ever in the story of the nation. The problem is, Jeremiah saw that people's hearts were not changed.

They had gone along with Josiah and his reformation. And the obvious proof that they hadn't changed was, you can read in the later chapters of Kings, after Josiah, they simply went back to their old ways.

As they had gone back to their old ways a century and more earlier, under the great king Hezekiah, Josiah's great-grandfather, who had been followed by the most idolatrous king of all, Manasseh.

[16:35] So you see, the problem is, these great kings and the prophets called the people to return to God. And the people returned superficially.

There are cosmetic changes. But then they turn back to verse 9. She took her hoard and likely she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree, a reference to fertility orges, a sacred tree, and the poles, which were statues around which various unsavory things would happen. But the key is verse 10. Our treacherous sister did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense.

That's the key to it. Did not make superficial changes, cosmetic changes, but their hearts remained polluted. Isn't it so easy to do that?

Isn't it so easy to fall into this trap? How easy it is to appear to love the Lord, to be busy with our evangelical busyness, even to brag about who our preachers are, to love the activity rather than the Lord, to name drop and rejoice in our latest evangelical gurus, and so on.

[17:57] Without any real change of heart, without any real turning to the Lord, that's what Jeremiah is saying.

You didn't return. And what's the Lord's response? Well, the Lord's response is grace. Amazingly. This is why grace is called amazing. Verse 11. The Lord said to me, Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than faithless Judah.

Go and proclaim these words towards the north. Now, the north was the place of Babylon and Assyria, the place of exile to which they were going to go. They are going to go into exile, but there is hope beyond the exile.

There is pardon. And so often, what the prophets do is not just talk about quick fixes and short-term solutions.

This is about, this is looking forward to the new creation, to the glorious fulfillment of his promises. God's great. One of the things about God's grace that's so amazing is that he will answer our tiny petitions and then, as it were, say, Look, I've got something far better for you than that.

[19:06] Something far more wonderful. You may remember at the beginning of Acts, the disciples say to Jesus, Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? And Jesus, as it were, said, Look, look, guys, you haven't got it.

Of course, I'm going to restore the kingdom to Israel, but I'm going to do something far, far more wonderful than that. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This gospel is going to sweep in all nations, not just Jerusalem.

And so here, why is God gracious? First of all, because he is the kind of God he is. The words of verse 12, once again, echoing the words of Exodus, Merciful, not be angry forever.

Words that were spoken after the incident of the golden calf, when the people in the desert made an idol, worshipped him as the God that had brought them from Egypt. God is love, God is grace, and his grace is greater than his anger.

Verse Psalm 29, or is it 30? I can't remember exactly. His anger may endure for a night, but his mercy, his steadfast love, is forever.

[20:22] And that's the point of that curious passage in the Ten Commandments, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation, talking about the effects of sin passing down the generation.

Notice it's the third and the fourth generation, but showing mercy, steadfast love to those who obey him for a thousand generations. Now, a thousand generations, the Hebrew way of saying forever, it doesn't mean that in the thousand and first generation God is going to say, oh well, I wash my hands of you.

It means his love is forever. Praise to the Lord for his mercy, his heseth, his great word, Hebrew word, endures forever. Read and meditate on Psalm 136, his love endures forever.

He is that kind of God. But the way forward is true repentance. Verse 13, only acknowledge your guilt. You did these things, you rebelled, you scattered your favours among foreigners under every green tree.

The key to this is you have not obeyed my voice. The way back is obedience, a true obedience to the Lord.

[21 : 36] And back to Zion, almost, I will bring you to Zion, the remnant will return. Verse 14.

Probably this is picked up from Isaiah 2, where the nations will go up to Zion.

And that part of that passage says, as the nations go to Zion, he may teach us his ways, and we may walk in his paths. So, the divine call, because of who God is, the way forward is repentance, and the way it's going to happen, in verse 15, is by true leadership.

Now you remember, back in chapters 1 and 2, we noticed, the state of the nation had largely to do with the appalling state of the leadership. Bad, rotten leadership.

Lousy leaders, who could not lead themselves, and lead the people away. God is going to provide true shepherds, of whom Jeremiah was one, of course.

Jeremiah was a true shepherd. Because Jeremiah took God's judgment seriously, Jeremiah truly understood grace. That's the point.

[22 : 43] He is a true shepherd. So, God is the merciful, the gracious God, from all eternity, to all eternity. He will receive those, who return in true repentance.

He will provide them true shepherds. And the fourth thing here, is he is going to provide them, his own presence. To the point, it seems to me, of verse 16 and following.

These are other strange verses. When you have multiplied, and increased in the land, in those days, phrase, when you hear this phrase, in the prophets, it means particularly, the last days.

Days in which we are living, of course, as the letter of the Hebrews says, the last days, which began, when Christ came the first time, and will culminate, when he returns.

In those days, they shall no more say, the ark of the covenant, of the Lord. Now, what's that about?

Now, almost certainly, the ark of the covenant, was destroyed, when Nebuchadnezzar's armies, broke into Jerusalem, destroyed the city, destroyed the temple.

[23 : 48] Because we read of various objects, of the temple, various parts, of the temple furniture, that were taken to Babylon. Some of them, be used in Belshazzar's, drunken orgy, we read about in, Daniel chapter 5.

And then in Ezra, we read, in Ezra chapter 1, we read about, how various articles, from the temple, were returned. When the pioneers, returned to rebuild, first of all, the temple, then eventually, the city, and its walls.

But there's no mention, of the ark of the covenant, because almost certainly, it had gone. Oh, I know, there's all these kind of, rubbishy stories, Steven Spielberg, and Ed Al, you know, the Raiders of the Lost Ark, and all this sort of thing, all this hocus pocus, and mumbo jumbo, about the ark.

Why was the ark, not spared? Why did the Lord, allow the ark, to be destroyed? The Lord, allowed the ark, to be destroyed, because the ark, of the covenant, where God, met his people, the place, on which his glory, rested, and on which he was, enthroned above the cherubim, was only ever, meant, as a visual aid.

That ark, was going to take flesh. The word, became flesh, says John, and lived among us. The ark, of the covenant, took flesh, and lived among us, and we saw his glory.

[25 : 11] There is no need, for a box, because we have the word, made flesh. And this is a picture, of the one, who is to come, the Lord, of the new covenant. Remember, I've called this series, the series on Jeremiah, the prophet, of the costly new covenant.

And he is going, to change evil hearts. Verse 17, verse 17, once again, echoing the Isaiah passage, the nations coming to Zion. This is a universal gospel, of the salvation, of all who will believe.

Not just the restoring of Israel, in the short term, of course, the early pioneers returned, read about it, Nezra and Nehemiah, rebuilt the city, rebuilt the temple.

But that was a very partial, and very downbeat, kind of sepia colored, I suppose. Whereas in glorious technicolor, when Jesus Christ returns, he will reign, over the whole earth.

The earth, as the prophet says, will be filled, with the knowledge, of the glory of God, as the waters, cover the sea. This glorious prospect. We have the devastating question, followed by, the divine call.

[26 : 24] But you know, there's no shortcut to this. And that's why, the mood changes again, from 318, to 4.4. There can be no, glib response.

You cannot just rush, into the new Jerusalem, sins unforgiven. Remember what John says, in Revelation, nothing that is polluted, will ever enter, that city.

Verse 20, surely as a treacherous wife, leaves her husband, and so you've been treacherous, to me, O house of Israel. They've perverted their way.

If they think, they can just run back, they're living in La La Land. They're under a delusion. They've no idea, who God is. And the root, is verse 21, they have forgotten, the Lord, their God.

So, two things here, a deep repentance. Everything that is unreal, must go. Must stop living, in the delusion.

[27 : 24] Verse 20, do you return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness. Behold, we come to you, for you are the Lord, our God. Truly, the hills, are a delusion. The orgies, on the mountains.

Talking about, the fertility, right? Talking, the kind of double talk, that confesses the Lord. We've come to you, you are the Lord, our God. Well, says the Lord, if you've come to me, stop playing around, with other gods, on the hills.

Don't live, in reality. You see, idolatry, opens the door, first of all, to fantasy, to fantasy land. I wonder, if anyone's ever told, Orwell, he got it wrong.

Big Brother, is not watching, as we watch, Big Brother, and our millions, and other so-called, reality programs. Do you know, if you live the kind of lives, you have in reality programs?

I certainly don't. So, idolatry, opens the door, to delusion. And it also, opens the door, to Satan, of course. Because, wherever there is a vacuum, wherever Satan, sees people, living in delusion, he's going to be there, to exploit it.

[28 : 35] What's the answer? Verse 23 again, the hills are a delusion. Truly, in the Lord, our God, is the salvation, of Israel, who is, who will truly save us?

The Lord, of the Exodus. And once again, look at us all the way, through the echoes, of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and so on. That's the thing, we need to ask ourselves, when we're tempted, to run away to idols.

Do we know, a better Savior, than the Lord, Jesus Christ? Do we have, a better Bible, than the one, we believe in? Do we know, a surer, and more certain hope, than the hope, of eternal life?

That's the question, we ought God's people, about to ask themselves, in every generation. And you'll notice, that, he even gives them, words to say, verse 25, we have sinned, against the Lord, our God, we and our fathers, from our youth, even to this day, and have not obeyed, the voice, of the Lord.

Call it by its right name, says Jeremiah. Don't pretend, it's an interesting, you know, the way this kind of thing, is always justified, interesting insights.

[29 : 50] This is always a way, of liberalism, interesting insights. Why is it, that such churches, where that so-called, gospel is preached, are empty? Why does no one, want to go, and listen to them?

Call it by his right name, we have sinned, against the Lord, our God, we and our, from our youth, the youth talking, of course, about the time, rescue from Egypt, and of course, remember the incident, of the golden calf, that I've talked about already.

It's not a little thing, it's deadly, and call it by its right name. Everything unreal, has to go, and then in 4, 1 to 4, there must be, a change of heart, if you return.

We cannot enjoy, the covenant blessings, simply by saying words. If you return, O Israel declares the Lord, to me you should return. Not enough to say, Lord, I'm returning, if you remove, your detestable things, from my presence, and do not waver.

In other words, show you're serious, don't talk, empty, pious talk, live, in the way, of the covenant Lord. Covenant living, then, will show the reality, of the Lord, to the nations.

[31 : 06] Verse 2, then nations shall bless themselves, and in him shall be glory. You see, the greatest evangelistic, the greatest evangelistic thing, on earth after all, is the evidence, of changed lives, isn't it?

The evidence, that the nations, shall bless themselves, and notice, not if you swear, as the Lord lives, but if you swear, in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, in other words, if your life says it, if your life says, truth, justice, and righteousness, then you can say the words.

But if your life says, adultery, whoredom, prostitution, all these evil things, then don't say the words. Because we are, we are simply, we are simply, talking, talking damnation, really, for ourselves. And this is pressed home, by two metaphors, in verse 3, first of all, break up your fallow ground, and sow not, among thorns.

And surely, this is echoed in the parable, of the sower, isn't it? It's not enough, to hear the words, of the Lord. It's not even enough, to feel, oh I rather like that, that's good, and then go away, and forget all about it, walk away, from the word of God.

[32 : 20] And then, the metaphor of circumcision, back in Genesis 17, circumcision is the sign, of the covenant. But already, I mean, Paul talks about, circumcision of the heart.

But even before, the New Testament, Moses is already, in Deuteronomy 30, talking about, the circumcision of the heart. In other words, it's not just a sign, it's not just a physical sign, it's a radical, inward change, the totality, of ourselves.

That's what it needs, to rejoice, in grace. Because, unless, we acknowledge, that we are sinners, we will not, rejoice, in grace.

Unless we repent, we will perish. Unless we truly, return, to the Lord, then all the words, all the pious, clap track, we say, will mean nothing.

A call, to a deep repentance, a fervent call, to a deep repentance, these are the words, that Jeremiah spoke, to 6th century Judah.

[33 : 25] I believe, these are the words, that Jeremiah is speaking, to 21st century, today. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, these words, are uncomfortable.

We know the deceitfulness, of our own hearts. We know our own weakness, our own fickleness, our own rebellion. Father, we throw ourselves, upon your grace, whenever our hearts, condemn us. God is greater, than our hearts. And so help us, to live, as those, whose lives, have been transformed, by grace. And thus be channels, of that grace, to others.

We ask this, in the name, of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.