

The Fiery Bones

Jeremiah 20:9

Text

Jeremiah 3:6-4:4

Topic

God reminds Judah what happened to her sister, Israel, and warns her to learn from it and turn away from sin before it's too late

Title

"Little Sister, Don't You Do What Your Big Sister Done"

Introduction

I'm not going to mention the name of this reality show here in polite company but you'll know what I'm referring to.

It was originally shown on MTV from 2000 to 2002 featuring people performing various dangerous, crude, ridiculous, self-injuring stunts and pranks. It went on to spawn three theatrical movies.

The concept dates back to 1999 when failing-actor-turned-writer Johnny Knoxville thought of the idea of testing different self-defense devices on himself. He videotaped himself being tasered, maced, and ultimately shot while wearing a bulletproof vest.

The show featured warnings and disclaimers noting that the stunts performed were dangerous and should not be imitated, and that recordings of any stunts would not be aired on MTV. Such warnings not only appeared before and after each program and after each commercial break, but also in a 'crawl' that ran along the bottom of the screen during some especially risky stunts, as well as showing their 'skull and crutches logo' at the bottom right of the screen to symbolize the stunt performed as risky.

Nevertheless, the program has been blamed for a number of deaths and injuries involving teens and children recreating the stunts. In 2005 a sixteen year old girl was killed recreating a stunt that involved wrapping a short length of rope around the base of a merry-go-round and attaching the other end to a vehicle. The vehicle accelerated away from the merry-go-round, causing it to spin. The girl suffered fatal injuries when she was hurled about sixty feet from the merry-go-round and hit the pavement.

They should have heeded the warnings.

The unheeded warnings of a very dangerous activity are at the heart of our text. The activity is described as “backsliding” and the warning is for the nation of Judah to not follow the example of her sister to the north, the nation of Israel. Sadly, and to her detriment, the warnings went unheeded by Judah.

What about us? Will we heed the warnings of backsliding?

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 In Every Backslider There Is A Warning For You To Remain, and #2 In Every Backslide There Is A Wooing For You To Return.

#1 In Every Backslider
There Is A Warning For You To Remain
(3:6-11)

Twelve distinct sermons Jeremiah delivered form the opening chapters of his book. His second sermon begins in verse six of chapter three and continues through verse thirty of chapter six.

The word “backsliding” is used seven times in chapter three - more than half the number of times it’s used in the entire book. Jeremiah uses the word more often than it occurs in all the rest of the Bible.

J. Vernon McGee has the very best description of what it means.

“Backsliding” does not simply *mean to slide backwards* as we usually think of it. God gives us a vivid picture of what He means by backsliding when He tells us [in Hosea

4:16], "For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer ..." Do you have any idea what it is like to try to load calves into a truck or wagon? When I was a boy, we lived next door to a southern Oklahoma rancher... Sometimes we would go out to the ranch and help load the heifers. Do you know what they do when you try to get them up the ramp? They set their front feet and make themselves as stiff as they can. They brace themselves so that you cannot move them at all. When we would try to move them, they would start slipping backwards. That is God's picture of what it means to backslide. Backsliding is a refusal to go God's way, a refusal to listen to Him.

Backsliding, then, is **any** refusal, small or large, to obey the Lord. It describes **any** area in which we prefer our will and our way to His. It can be something subtle as well as something heinous.

In this section of Scripture God treated Israel and Judah as sisters. Judah should have been warned by the backsliding of her sister.

Jeremiah 3:6 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.

Jeremiah 3:7 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.

Jeremiah 3:8 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.

If Israel was a wife, she was an adulteress one. "Every high mountain" and "under every green tree" refer to the locations where the people of Israel worshipped idols of Molech and Baal by participating in immoral sexual rituals and child sacrifice.

When God said, "I have put her away and given her a certificate of divorce," He was referring to His raising-up the Assyrian Empire against Israel. In about 722BC Israel was overrun for the final time and her people carried away captive.

The impact of all this on Judah was minimal. "Judah saw it" but "did not fear, but went and played the harlot also." Instead of being warned, Judah was a "treacherous sister."

Jeremiah 3:9 So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees.

Jeremiah 3:10 And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense," says the LORD.

In "the days of Josiah the king" (v6) there had been a revival. God's assessment of it (v9) was that it was not heartfelt but merely a "pretense." That's because the people were still behaving badly despite giving lip service to the Lord. They were still committing "adultery," spiritual adultery, by worshipping "stones and trees." God called it "casual harlotry" to indicate their attitude. There was no hiding it, no being ashamed of it. There was a nonchalance about them. Sure, they worshipped Molech and Baal; so what?

Jeremiah 3:11 Then the LORD said to me, "Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.

This is an exaggeration to make a point. Israel had *not* shown herself righteous in the least, but compared to the wickedness of Judah, she seemed "righteous."

Judah had Jerusalem. She had the Temple. She had the written Word of God and it had been found and read to Josiah. In other words, Judah had greater privileges than Israel. Her backsliding was thus far worse.

Backsliding usually begins in a subtle refusal to go the way of the Lord, e.g., in my marriage or family. I assert my own will. It doesn't seem like I'm committing some heinous sin but the minute I dig-in my heels I'm moving in the wrong direction.

One author said,

The biggest danger of all is found in our so-called 'little sins.' Eventually they will catch up with us and inch by silent inch will drive us farther and farther away from God... As Edmund Burke said, "By gnawing through a dike, even a rat may drown a nation."

Without judging others, and certainly without feeling superior to them, when we see a person backslide and their life end in ruin, it ought to serve as a warning to us. We should want to remain in the Lord, walking with Him in a

greater intimacy each day, becoming less-and-less interested in the things of this world and more-and-more captivated by the things of the Lord.

There was something else in the example of Israel. Even after all her terrible sin, God still said, "Return to Me."

#2 In Every Backslide

There Is A Wooing For You To Return

(3:12-4:4)

Should we sin that God's grace might abound? *Certainly not!* But when we sin, God's grace much more abounds.

Jeremiah 3:12 Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: 'Return, backsliding Israel,' says the LORD; 'I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,' says the LORD; 'I will not remain angry forever.

Jeremiah 3:13 Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God, And have scattered your charms To alien deities under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' says the LORD.

Israel had already fallen by the time Jeremiah began his ministry. I see him speaking these words to the northern kingdom *after* their fall, when they no longer existed and no one could hear him except the people of Judah.

Who was he talking to? **He was talking to a future, restored nation of Israel!** He looked beyond many centuries, beyond even our own time, to Israel and Judah as a united nation, under God, in the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah 3:14 "Return, O backsliding children," says the LORD; "for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

This predicts that a remnant of Jews will be preserved and brought to "Zion," which we will see in this section is a reference to the future kingdom.

It's remarkable that God said, "I am married to you." He just said He had given them a bill of divorce. Under the Law of Moses, if a husband gave his wife a bill of divorce they could never be remarried. But God was

looking beyond the law of Moses to the time when His law would be written on hearts. He would indeed take Israel back as His wife.

Any doubts Jeremiah was describing the future kingdom should be dispelled by the next three verses.

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

Jeremiah 3:16 "Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days," says the LORD, "that they will say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore.

Jeremiah 3:17 "At that time Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the LORD, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem. No more shall they follow the dictates of their evil hearts.

The “ark of the covenant” was in the Temple in Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s time. God was talking about a time when He would personally dwell among His people, not in the ark, but seated on “the Throne.” That time, when “all the nations” of the earth “shall be gathered to” Jerusalem is when Jesus returns in His Second Coming.

Jeremiah 3:18 "In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given as an inheritance to your fathers.

Happier days are ahead for Israel and Judah! It will take the Great Tribulation to accomplish it, but God will preserve a remnant who will be saved at Jesus’ return.

Jeremiah 3:19 "But I said: 'How can I put you among the children And give you a pleasant land, A beautiful heritage of the hosts of nations?' "And I said: 'You shall call Me, "My Father," And not turn away from Me.'

How could God do this? How would He not only preserve and restore them but save them? By the coming of His Son, Jesus, into the world.

Not only will the Lord ultimately rule and reign, but the Jews will finally be able to call God “Father.” In other words, in the future kingdom they will enjoy an intimacy with the Lord that they never have... But which we do today by virtue of our own relationship with Jesus.

In verses twenty through twenty-five I believe we see a dramatization of Jewish repentance at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Jeremiah 3:20 Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, So have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 3:21 A voice was heard on the desolate heights, Weeping and supplications of the children of Israel. For they have perverted their way; They have forgotten the LORD their God.

Jeremiah 3:22 "Return, you backsliding children, And I will heal your backslidings."
"Indeed we do come to You, For You are the LORD our God.

Jeremiah 3:23 Truly, in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, And from the multitude of mountains; Truly, in the LORD our God Is the salvation of Israel.

Jeremiah 3:24 For shame has devoured The labor of our fathers from our youth - Their flocks and their herds, Their sons and their daughters.

Jeremiah 3:25 We lie down in our shame, And our reproach covers us. For 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 our God."

When they see the Lord they will, the Bible says, "look upon Him whom they have pierced." Those future Jews, preserved through the Great Tribulation, will recognize Jesus at His Second Coming as their Savior and Messiah.

Jeremiah 4:1 "If you will return, O Israel," says the LORD, "Return to Me; And if you will put away your abominations out of My sight, Then you shall not be moved.

Jeremiah 4:2 And you shall swear, 'The LORD lives,' In truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; The nations shall bless themselves in Him, And in Him they shall glory."

We're still looking forward to the Millennium in this appeal. It is the time in the future when Israel will be united - both Israel and Judah called "Israel" - and "the nations" of the world will "bless themselves in Him" - in Jesus Christ.

In verses three and four we return to the nation of Judah, to her situation in the sixth century BC.

Jeremiah 4:3 For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns.

The treacherous sister, backsliding Judah, is first compared to “fallow ground.” Fallow ground is simply hard soil and must be plowed before it can receive seed.

J.R. Miller wrote,

God himself does a great deal of plowing. His Word is a plow. It cuts its way into men's lives, crushing the heart, revealing sinfulness, producing penitence. It finds men impenitent - and leaves them broken and contrite, confessing sin and asking for mercy.

We mentioned earlier how that the Word of God had been rediscovered and read during the reign of King Josiah. It was like a plow.

But the revival under Josiah stopped short. It was only a pretense. Why?

Ask a farmer and he'll tell you that any “thorns” (weeds) must be removed or they will grow alongside the crop and choke it out. A sixth century farmer would understand weeds and stumps and rocks that needed to be removed. It was hard work but necessary if a harvest was to be expected.

This is where Judah fell short. They kept in their lives the love of the world and the worship of its idols and those weeds choked-out the Word of God.

God reveals and we must respond. As the Word plows, God shows you weeds... stumps... rocks that are hindering His harvest. You need to follow through and remove them.

Right now, as we speak, is the Lord prompting you about something? Act on it!

Backsliding Judah is next told,

Jeremiah 4:4 Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My fury come forth like fire, And burn so that no one can quench it, Because of the evil of your doings."

They were already circumcised. They had performed the outward ritual as required by the Law of Moses. But God never meant for them to think that

circumcision as a ritual meant anything. It was always symbolic of the need to be circumcised in their “hearts.”

We don't have these kinds of rites and rituals but it doesn't mean we can't become superficial. The things we do - devotions, Bible reading and study, fellowship, even our serving the Lord or sharing Jesus with others - can all become an outward form of religion with no inward godliness.

In the end, I must allow God's Word to turn me inside-out. As one pastor put it, "What you are when you're alone, that alone you are."

Get 'alone' with God. Plow, prepare, cut-away any remaining flesh. Then go around turned inside-out and you'll turn the world upside-down for the Lord!