

I Will Heal Your Backsliding

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Date: 02 February 2020

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[0 : 00] 22, Jeremiah 3, 22, return faithless people, I will heal your backsliding.

Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God. Old-fashioned words don't always have old-fashioned meanings.

Sometimes the reason we get rid of old-fashioned words is because they make us feel kind of uncomfortable. So we wouldn't dare now describe someone as being choleric, which means permanently irritable.

Perhaps we might talk about him being opinionated instead. Isn't that right, Phil? Sounds better.

Sermon is another old-fashioned word which today's church finds rather uncomfortable.

Carrying along with it overtones of hypocrisy and command. To the considerable loss of the authority of the preached word, we prefer words like address or talk.

[1 : 10] Now, backsliding. There's an old-fashioned word which makes us deeply uncomfortable because although it may sound old-fashioned, its meaning is scarily relevant and immediately contemporary.

You know, I wonder whether you're ever like this. That you're just one of hundreds here this morning, but God is speaking just to you. That it's you and him and everyone else here is entirely incidental.

They don't know what's going on in your heart because you're really good at hiding what's going on in your heart from others. But God knows. To him it's as plain as day.

And both you and he know that for some time now, you've been backsliding. There it is, out in the open. You've been backsliding.

And your commitment to Jesus Christ is not what it once was, nor what, in your best moments, you want it to be.

[2 : 16] Let's not call backsliding by a more comfortable name. Lest it lose its seriousness and the urgency with which we must address it.

Let's not call it, well, as I'm getting older, I'm moderate. Or as I'm getting older, I'm maturing. The truth of it is, we've lost that edge for Jesus. We've lost our first love for him.

The world around us has turned our eye. And our hearts are as dull as dishwater when it comes to Christ. Though we may still intellectually affirm the truths of Christianity.

Though we may call ourselves Christians. Though we may do all the things that Christians do. Our hearts are not in it. For us to talk about loving Jesus, it refers firmly in the past.

And yet, as I say, in our best moments, we want it back. We want to love God as once we did. With all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

[3 : 27] We know that our backsliding has done us no real good at all. We might be richer for it. We might be healthier for it.

We might be better traveled for it. But we most certainly aren't the happier for it. Now the people of Jeremiah's day knew all about backsliding.

They were experts in it. They'd been backsliding for longer than they could remember. But to them, a gracious God says, Return, faithless people.

I will cure you of backsliding. Again, I ask, Do you ever feel as though, Even though you're just one of hundreds of people here, God is speaking just to you?

That it's just you and him. And everyone else here is entirely incidental. And perhaps you feel that way today because it really is that way today.

[4 : 32] God is speaking to you as an individual. He's saying to you, Return, faithless one. I'll heal your backsliding.

I want us to consider four things together this morning. First, what is backsliding? Then secondly, why is backsliding so serious? Then thirdly, what does God say about backsliding? And then lastly, how should we deal with backsliding? Yes, indeed, God is speaking to each of us as individuals today. And he says, I can give you your edge back.

I can fill your heart with the love that you had for Christ when you first believed. First of all then, what is backsliding?

Verse 22 literally reads in the original language, Turn back, sons of turning back, and I will heal your turning back. I think we get the point of the verse.

[5 : 36] It's about turning back. Having turned back from following God, God is now calling upon his people to turn back from their turning back. The word associations are just too strong to avoid.

God is seeing it just like it is. At the end of the day, backsliding is turning back. We backslide from our faith in Jesus Christ.

The word is translated also as apostatize, which is where if we don't nip it in the bud, our backsliding will eventually lead to our apostasy, to our leaving the Christian faith altogether.

To use an English analogy, to backslide is to turn one's back on the gospel. It's not to slip up in the faith.

That gives us too much of an excuse and wriggle room. Backsliding is nothing less than turning our backs on our former resolutions, our former attitudes, and our former life.

[6 : 51] When we first became Christians, we resolved to fully commit every area of our lives to Jesus. Our attitude was one of complete, if not perfect, dependence upon him.

Our lifestyle became one of denying self and sin in order that we may pursue the holiness and Christ-likeness of grace. We wanted nothing to get in the way of our newfound faith.

But it's different now. It's not only that our first resolutions and attitudes and life have weakened. We've actually turned our backs on them.

And we've turned our back on committing every area of our lives to God. I want to keep this area private. It's my own. We've turned our backs on self-consciously depending entirely upon God. Because we've learned how to become just a little bit self-reliant. We are certainly no longer active in putting sin to death in our lives and pursuing the holiness of grace.

[8 : 03] Because we don't see the need to be like Jesus when everyone else in the world seems to be getting on fine without him. We're no longer zealous for the things we once were.

The Bible gathers dust on a shelf. We've almost forgotten how to pray. And church is all about meeting with our pals rather than meeting with the living God.

Let's call it for what it is. It is the process of apostatizing. It is turning our backs on all we once knew to be wholesome, true, and right.

And with considerable discomfort to ourselves, we know this morning that God is speaking to us.

These words from his word are like arrows hitting home into our hearts convicting us.

You are that man described here. You're turning your back on all that you once knew to be right.

Indeed, the word backsliding may be an old-fashioned word we don't use much today but its meaning is all too uncomfortably relevant.

[9 : 22] And what makes it so uncomfortable is that there are really only two directions of travel in the Christian life. You're either going forward or you're turning back.

There's no stasis. There's no treading water. There's no holding ground. As Christians, we're either going forward in our faith or we're turning back from our faith.

We're either growing or we're backsliding. Does this leave you feeling kind of uncomfortable? That's what backsliding is.

Why, secondly, is it so serious? Why is it so serious? When we in the Christian church think about sin, unfortunately, we tend to fixate on either public sins or sexual sins.

However, the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus especially saw it different. They were far more concerned really with sins of the heart and especially the sin of hypocrisy.

[10 : 35] That on the outside we should appear devoted to God but on the inside in our hearts we're very far from him. For Jesus and the prophets of the Old Testament, the heart of a man's religion was the religion of a man's heart and it's there in his heart on the inside where no one else can see that his character before God is judged.

So why then is the sin of backsliding so very serious? Why is it so serious when we as Christians turn back from our faith? It's because it is an intensely personal sin.

We commit it person to person against God. Look at the end of verse 22. You are the Lord our God. You are the Lord our God. What makes backsliding so serious is that it represents the betrayal and denial of the deepest of all human relationships that of a man to his God.

when we backslide we build walls to keep God out. You know what makes the sin of adultery so very serious is that it represents the fracture of a marriage relationship.

[12:01] What makes the sin of backsliding so serious is that it betrays our fundamental relationship with God. And that's why throughout the remainder of Jeremiah chapter 3 in many of the other prophets of the Old Testament and even for Jesus backsliding is called spiritual adultery.

Spiritual cheating on one's God. Though we as God's people are joined to God by covenant love and commitment yet we go searching for other spiritual lovers.

perhaps we begin to find more satisfaction in our work than we do in our relationship with Jesus. So we pour our time and our energy into advancing our career paths than advancing in the gospel.

Backsliding is so serious because it represents the betrayal of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ. Then you say what importance is that?

Of great importance in every way because your relationship with him is no casual relationship where both parties are relatively uncommitted to each other.

[13:26] There's a history here. A history of God's eternal love and gracious determination to do us good. A history of Jesus Christ's death on our behalf and his resurrection for us as the first fruit of our own resurrection.

A history of God's Holy Spirit working on us and drawing us to see the beauty of salvation and filling us with the joy of faith. Remember all these wonderful things and then realize God's relationship with you is very far from casual.

it is deeply committed so much so that it's lovingly sealed with the blood of his own son. So what then does the death of Jesus mean to you anymore?

Let me ask that question. Does the cross on which our Savior died fill you with awe that it was for you that he suffered and died?

Does the resurrection of our Lord leave you entirely untouched? And have you forgotten that at this very moment in time the risen and exalted Christ intercedes at the Father's right hand for you?

[14:47] And what does the thought of a future without God fill you with anything but dread? No, there's no casual relationship here at all. Remember what it was like when you first believed in Christ and became a beloved child of God the Father.

Remember the feelings of joy and security, of relief, of love and peace. More than anything else, remember what it was like when you first believed to pray, spend time in the presence of God and the sheer pleasure of being with God.

and of reading his word. And there's nothing more you wanted in life than to know Jesus better, more and more, deeper and deeper.

That's why the sin of backsliding is so serious, because it involves the betrayal of that fundamental relationship, the denial of the shed blood of Christ and the intentional forgetfulness of the wonder of salvation.

You know, in the first point, I was very careful to say that backsliding is turning our back on the faith. But now I want to be even more direct from this passage and say backsliding is the direct betrayal of God.

[16:12] God, we are outraged, and rightly so, when a man who has been married for decades betrays his wife and commits adultery.

we call him faithless, and rightly so, he has broken the fundamental vow he made to his wife on the day of their marriage. How much more outraged we should be when we think of our own backsliding.

That though Christ has shed his lifeblood for us, we shall not live for him. That though he loves us, we shall love another. The prodigal son ruined himself by leaving his father behind.

For a while he lived in luxury with a million friends, and he enjoyed all of life's pleasures. But he was never happier, though it took him some time to realize it, than when he was enjoying his father's embrace.

And I ask this question from bitter experiences of periods of backsliding in my own Christian life. Tell me, has turning your back on God made you any happier, more fulfilled, or more satisfied?

[17 : 38] I'm not asking whether you're having a good time. You may well be. I'm asking whether on the inside you feel like the prodigal son. I'd guess that like me, though no one else can see a difference in your practice or your mood.

You know that building walls to keep God out of your heart does you no good. There's no treading water when it comes to our relationship with Jesus Christ.

We're either going forward or we're turning back. We're either loving him more or we're loving him less. And I think, I suspect, that there may be some among us who have been wandering from Christ for some time now.

And even though no one else knows, you know. And you're realizing this morning, perhaps for the first time, you want back. You want to admit that you've made a mess of things to him. You want your relationship with him restored.

You want to be healed. Third here, what does God say about backsliding? The last two points are quicker.

[18 : 53] What does God say about backsliding? I want to share something from my own experience with you, something deeply personal. I do so not because I want to draw attention to myself, but to the amazing restorative power of forgiveness.

Many years ago, someone who I loved very deeply betrayed me. It was a horrible period of my life. I felt deeply hurt. In fact, that may well have been the last time I ever cried.

My hurt soon began to turn to hate. Some years later, that person wrote me a letter asking for reconciliation. And I took that letter to show some of my friends and asked them what I should do. They all told me to throw it in the bin and have nothing to do with that person who had hurt me so grievously. And that's what I'd resolved to do, throw it in the bin. But then at the last moment, my closest friend phoned me up.

Someone whose counsel I've always admired. And he told me, he said, Dow Boy, that's my nickname, if you want to be like Jesus, then you need, no matter how much this person has hurt you, you need to forgive them and be reconciled to them.

[20 : 13] Let me tell you at that time, I could have put my fist down the phone and slapped him in the face. I wished my closest friend had kept his mouth shut and kept his opinions to himself because in my heart of hearts, I knew he was right.

Oh, I had a restless sleep that night. But I woke up resolved to turn my back on hate and to be prayerfully reconciled.

Dow Boy, he said, if you really want to be like Jesus, you need to forgive and be reconciled. That was hard, but he was right.

Perhaps my best friend had been reading Jeremiah 3.22 just before he phoned me up because although I had resolved to forgive this person who'd hurt me so much, I still harbored a little bit of any resentment toward them.

Not so with God. Because he says to the backslider, to the person who has turned his back on him and has betrayed him, he says, return, I will cure you of backsliding.

[21 : 29] With all the genuine affection of his infinitely loving heart, hiding no resentment, bearing no grudges, our heavenly father calls out to us, saying, return, and I will heal.

He is more passionate for us to return to him than we are to return. Don't we know how much our turning away has grieved his holy heart and don't we know the joy of God himself if we should turn back?

Return, he says, and I will cure your backsliding. You say to me, Colin, I'm so broken. I have betrayed him so grievously that he'll never want me back.

To which he says, oh, I do return. Well, you say to me, but I made a commitment to Christ as a child.

I have spent so many years wandering from Jesus, there is no way he will want me back now. To which he says, oh, I do return. Or you say, but nothing I've done up to this point in my life is altogether that serious, but I just know in my heart of hearts, I don't feel about Jesus the way I once did.

[22 : 55] And he says, return. And perhaps you think to yourself, well, maybe you need to heal yourself before you make a decision to return to Christ and recommit yourself to him.

Maybe if you just get back to a regular sequence of Bible reading and prayer, maybe if you just get more serious about church, and then at some point you can declare that you want to return to him.

Look at the text with me very carefully. The text tells us, it is God who shall cure us of our backslidings and not we ourselves.

Our immediate task is not that of restoration. Our immediate task is that of return. Return, he says, that's your job.

I will heal your backslidings. That's my job. And you say, I find it really difficult to admit I've been wrong.

[23 : 55] How can God ever forgive me? Yes, the prophet Jonah thought exactly the same way when you run away from God. But in one of the greatest verses of the Bible we read, the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.

This is the essence of the gospel of God's grace. That the blood of Jesus shall cure us even of our sins of backsliding and that he continues to love us freely always.

The last question. How should we deal with backsliding? How shall we deal with it?

Well, old-fashioned words don't always have old-fashioned meanings and backsliding as we've seen is one of those. Perhaps we don't use it quite so much in the modern church because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

It's like a fork being drawn across a plate or nails being scratched down a chalkboard.

Nevertheless, as we close, I want us to briefly ask the question, how should we respond to this message of gospel conviction and gospel invitation?

[25 : 06] That the Jesus who we have turned our backs upon invites us to return lovingly and he will heal our backslidings. So, look at the text again.

Here we are. The second part of the verse, the people of God are pictured as one responding to him in the ideal fashion as they say, yes, we will come to you.

And in your heart of hearts this morning, you know that God is speaking to you and challenging you to return to your first love of him. And perhaps you feel a little bit like I did when my friend phoned me up and told me that I needed to forgive that person who had destroyed my life.

You say, it's so hard to admit that I've been wrong. It's so hard to return. What you aren't seeing today is what the prodigal son saw as he took the first step to return to his father.

Namely, his father was running out to him. And his father's arms were open, ready to embrace him and to welcome him home. The arms of Christ are open wide today, entirely as wide as they went upon the cross when these hands of his were nailed to that tree and he is waiting for you to return.

[26 : 35] If the Holy Spirit of God is working in your heart this morning, if he's doing his work of sovereign conviction, that he's also assuring you that if even you should take the first step toward Jesus, that even if you should recommit yourself to him this morning, no matter how hard you'll find it to admit that you've been wrong, you will find him far more willing to accept you than you are to accept yourself.

You'll learn, you'll learn that though you've not loved him as you should, he's never stopped loving you. That although you've lost interest in pursuing your own holiness, he's always had a greater purpose for your life.

Don't you miss those times of loving intimacy with him? Maybe when you were reading the word and praying and you felt as though you could reach out your hand and touch him.

Don't you want to return to him? Don't you want to be healed of your backslidings? Yes, I will come to you. And that in your heart of hearts is what you want to say to Jesus this morning, is it not?

Perhaps you don't know where to begin. And I and the other elders can help you with that. Well, I don't come down for tea and coffee after the service. Go and make a beeline for Phil or for Evan, for Bill, for Peter, for Ross, for any of the other elders in this congregation.

[28 : 18] Speak to them about recommitting yourself to Jesus. However, let me suggest that you begin not by coming to me or to the other elders, but by coming to Jesus.

And in the quietness of your heart, saying to him this morning, saying those same words, which is backsliding people have been saying to him for a thousand years.

Lord Jesus, I've been backsliding from you for more years than I care to remember, and it's done me no good at all. I want to turn away from my turning away.

I want to turn back to you. I want to experience the joy of the gospel. I repent of my backslidings. Lord, will you heal me?

Let us pray. We thank you for the word of your gospel, O Lord. For the word that came to Jonah the second time. And for the word that comes to us, Lord's day by Lord's day.

[29 : 29] We thank you for your gospel invitation to us today. Return, O faithless people, I will heal your backsliding. And Lord, we ask that if anything be true, that what's been said this morning would be directed not toward the person sitting next to us in the pew or towards someone we can identify as perhaps having backslidden their faith, but to us as individuals who in the quietness and the solitude and the privacy of our own hearts know that it's not what it once was between you and us, but we want it back.

In Christ's name we pray these things. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.