

The Call to Repentance

Jeremiah 8:4-7

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In the summer of 1988 Ben Patterson, along with three friends, were set to climb the highest peak in Yosemite National Park, which is Mount Lyell. Two of the four men were professional climbers. Ben was one of the inexperienced climbers. Because of the difficulty of the glacier they had to cross, the climb would take the better part of a day. After several hours of climbing across the top of the glacier, the two experienced mountain climbers had gained quite a lead on the two inexperienced climbers.

Ben Patterson is extremely competitive, so he decided to find a short cut to the top. Off to his right was an outcropping of rock, so Ben took off in that direction ignoring the warnings of his fellow climbers. Within thirty minutes he was in a life and death situation. He found himself stuck in a cul-de-sac of rock on top of the Lyell Glacier. He looked down to see hundreds of yards of sheer ice at a forty-five degree angle. Although he was ten feet from the safety of a rock, one little slip and he would be sliding down the side of a mountain and falling for what seemed like 50 miles to the valley below. When recalling that moment, Ben says, “I was stuck and I was scared.”¹

What Ben Patterson describes is what so many in the church are experiencing. We think we have life beat and we start looking for shortcuts, but we soon find ourselves stuck in the middle of a situation that is out of our control. One wrong step and we are gone.

The Israelites had looked for shortcuts in their relationship with God, so they found themselves stuck in a difficult situation. By the time you come to **Jeremiah 8**, they are in a free fall spiritually. Nationally, they are in a mess. Jeremiah 8 is historically set around the year 605. The Assyrian Empire that had dominated the Middle East for two-hundred-years was unraveling, leaving a vacuum of power. A Babylonian by the name of Nabopolassar, who would have a son by the name of Nebuchadnezzar, began to march west toward the ancient capital of Assyria. At

¹ Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope Where God Seems Silent* (Inter Varsity, 1991), 100-101.

the same time, the Egyptians had an alliance with Assyria and they began to march north to intercept the Babylonians, taking them right through Israel. Good King Josiah goes out with an army, meets up with Pharaoh Neco at the great valley of Megiddo, and is killed. At this point, the nation of Judah begins to unravel. Babylon defeats the Egyptians and what is left of the Assyrians and Babylon becomes the dominant empire of the day.

Religiously, Judah was worshiping not only God, but also the gods of the nations around them. Since they worshiped the gods of those nations, God will allow those nations to take them captive and be their place of exile. Before God ever sends judgment, though, He always gives His people a chance to repent.

In Jeremiah 7-10 you have a collection of sermons that Jeremiah preached in those days just before the invasion and fall of Jerusalem. In **Jeremiah 8**, he preaches to them on a subject that no one, not in his day nor in our day, wants to hear. The subject is repentance. When God's people are stuck, the only way to get unstuck is through repentance.

I. When we are stuck in sin, God calls for repentance. 8:4-6.

The Lord speaks to Jeremiah and tells him what he is to stand and preach to the people. Notice this is the heart cry of God Himself. He asks three questions. The first two address normal occurrences in every area of life:

- Do men fall and not get up again?
- Does one turn away and not repent?

Upon initial reading, it seems as if God Himself is amazed at what is happening. He asks a question about a man falling, knowing it is the normal, natural thing for him to get back up. What do we do with our children when they are toddlers and they fall? We tell them to hop up. When one of our children falls off of their bicycle, we tell them to get back on and ride it again. I can remember the first time I was thrown off of a horse. My sister told me to get up and get back on that horse. When we fall down, from the time we are toddlers, we are taught to get back up.

Next God asks, "Does one turn away and not repent?" In other words, when you leave

home do you not return? When you leave the house in the morning, do you not return at the end of the day? The answer to both of these rhetorical questions is implied. The answer is yes. When a man falls, he gets back up. When you leave your home, you return again.

The third question is posed in **8:5**. God asks the questions, "Why?" Why have they turned away in continual apostasy? Why do they hold on to what is deceitful? Why do they refuse to return? Three times in this verse the Lord uses some form of the Hebrew "sub," which means to turn. Between verses 4 and 5, the root of the verb turn is used five times

- Does one turn away and turn (repent) back --turned away in continual turning away.
- They refuse to return. It is like a refrain--turn away, turn back, turn away continual turning away, return.

The word used is the word that we translate repent. Jeremiah speaks more on repentance than any other prophet and most likely any other Biblical figure. All through the Old Testament, God calls for man to turn or repent. Look at Isaiah . 55:6-7:

“Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return ...”

It is the same word, "shub," meaning to turn or it can be translated repent.

Look at Ezekiel. 18:31-32:

“Cast away from you all your transgressions ... ‘For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,’ declares the Lord God. Therefore repent and live.”

Do you hear the heart cry of God? He calls for man's repentance. Go to that famous passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

“ .. and My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn...” It is the same word, "shub."

God cries for man to repent, to turn to Him. Why? Because there is a judgment that comes when we fail to repent. That is why Jeremiah is preaching and calling to them to repent before the judgment of God comes.

Look at Psalm 7:11-12:

“God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day. If a man does not repent, He will sharpen His sword; He has bent His bow and made it ready.”

Look at Jeremiah 15:6:

“You who have forsaken Me ... you keep going backward. So I will stretch out My hand against you and destroy you; I am tired of relenting!”

Repentance is serious business and Satan fights the act of repentance. He has divided the church, believers, ministers, and ministries over this very issue. Yet all through the word of God, God is calling for His people to turn, to repent, to come back to Him. It is the only word of reality in this world.

I watch very little TV, and when I do, I don't watch network television. Therefore, I do not watch reality shows. Most of their reality is really fantasy. In what world of reality does William Hung, the rejected singer from American Idol, get a contract to make a CD?

The British novelist and playwright David Lodge was watching one of his plays on stage. The day was November 22, 1963. In the play, there was a character that arrives for a job interview listening to a transistor radio. In the play, he places the radio on the table and turns it on, letting the music and commercials play in the background. However, on this night, when he walked onto the stage, placed the radio on the table, and turned it on, the voice of a news anchor announced that the American President John F. Kennedy had just been assassinated.² In the midst of that play came a word of reality that shook the audience and the actors into reality. The actor switched the radio off immediately, but it was too late. What took place on stage after that was neither fun, funny, nor entertaining.

² Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2003), 228-229.

God's call for repentance to His people is a word of reality in the midst of us playing church. We need to take it seriously.

II. When we are stuck in sin, impenitence speaks of spiritual abnormality 8:6-7.

A refusal to repent is abnormal spiritually. That is what God is saying in these verses. That is also what Jeremiah preached at the temple to God's people. Listen to what the Lord says:

“I have listened and heard, they have spoken what is not right; No man repented of his wickedness ...”

Do you hear the incredulous tone? God can't believe it. He has listened and heard what man has said and their refusal to repent of their wickedness. In fact, He goes on to tell us what man did say. What have I done? That is man's response. What did I do wrong? I lied, but what did I do wrong? I had an affair with some one, but what did I do wrong? There is no repentance, but rather the question, "Well what did I do that was so bad?"

Look at what He says next:

“Everyone turned to his course, like a horse charging into the battle.”

He uses the word again, “shub.” Every man is turning away and doing it with strong determination. Have you ever watched a John Wayne movie? When he gets word that there is trouble, he hollers at the horse and jerks the reins around to turn the horse in the opposite direction. That image perfectly illustrates the concept of this verse. Instead of repenting, we are like a horse that is whipped around and heading off furiously into battle.

In 8:7, Jeremiah says that the stork in the sky knows her season. The turtledove, the swift, and the thrush know the time of migration. Jeremiah turns to a powerful illustration from nature. He says that birds know intuitively the season when they are to turn, to go back home, to migrate. But God says that His people do not know when it is time to repent.

God is saying it is abnormal for His people not to turn or repent. An impenitent spirit is abnormal. The most natural thing when we sin should be to immediately turn, repent, and come back into fellowship with God.

All across the Carolina coast, there is a little bird called the Red Knot. It is a sand piper. Every year that little bird will fly 18,000 miles round trip. Every February, they will fly from the coast of Argentina over Brazil and out over the Atlantic. They will fly non-stop for a week. About mid-May, they touch ground along the swampy areas of the Delaware Bay at the exact time horseshoe crabs are laying their eggs. Every little red knot will eat about 135,000 horseshoe crab eggs. They will then fly north to Canada where every female red knot will lay four speckled eggs. Those little eggs hatch. By mid-July, the females will leave the males and the baby birds and start flying south. One week later, the males will leave the babies and fly south. By mid-August, those little birds without any parental direction fly 9,000 miles south, out over the Atlantic, all the way to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of Argentina.³

God said that the birds know where to return and precisely when to return, but His people have no knowledge of when to turn back.

³ Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder* (Nashville: Integrity, 2003) 14-16.