

Things That Hinder Us From Turning To God.

Text: Jer 8:4-9

Suggested Hymns:

361, 334, 333, 290, 127

1) Notice how earnestly God is pleading with His people

2) Notice the things that kept the people from turning to God

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Jeremiah 8:4-9, *“Moreover you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Will they fall and not rise? Will one turn away and not return?”’* ⁵ *Why has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, They refuse to return.*

⁶ *I listened and heard, But they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turned to his own course, As the horse rushes into the battle.* ⁷ *“Even the stork in the heavens Knows her appointed times; And the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow Observe the time of their coming. But My people do not know the judgment of the Lord.*

⁸ *“How can you say, ‘We are wise, And the law of the LORD is with us’? Look, the false pen of the scribe certainly works falsehood.* ⁹ *The wise men are ashamed, They are dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD; So what wisdom do they have? (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We have now arrived at the last of the three pre-lent Sundays. Today is Quinquagesima Sunday which means that this Sunday falls within fifty days of Easter.

Let us recall part of the Gospel Lesson, Luke 18:31-33, ³¹ *Then [Jesus] took the twelve aside and said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished.* ³² *“For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked*

and insulted and spit upon. ³³ ***“They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.”***

With this announcement the Gospel lesson for today invites us to make ready for that most sacred of all seasons in our church year. We, too, want go up during the season of Lent to Jerusalem and once again see Jesus in His deepest humiliation, in order to learn afresh, that we have been bought with a price, so that we may value our redemption more highly.

God wants the sight of the suffering Redeemer to stir our hearts from the slumber of indifference and kindle in us anew the fire of love and devotion! One of the saddest words that ever fell from the lips of Jesus was the bitter complaint addressed to the people of Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37, ³⁷ ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”***

In our text we hear God complaining because of the impenitence of His people of old. ***They hold fast to deceit, They refuse to return. My people do not know the judgment of the Lord.*** How indescribably sad it is that God’s own people refuse to return, that God’s own people do not know the judgment of the Lord!

We ask, *What was it, that hindered them from turning to God.* Let us consider the things that hinder us from turning to God. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Notice How Earnestly God Is Pleading With His People.

Jeremiah lived shortly before, and during the first years of, the Babylonian Captivity. The Northern Kingdom had been destroyed. Jeremiah now pleads with Judah-Jerusalem to turn from the evil of their way, lest God’s judgment also visit them, and their city be destroyed, and their Temple laid waste, and they be led away into captivity.

Our text is taken from the Temple address of Jeremiah. At the command of the Lord, Jeremiah stood in the gate of the Temple and said, ***‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the Lord!’***”

³ *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.”¹*

Our text is a bitter complaint that the people do not heed the warning voice of God’s messenger. *‘Thus says the LORD: “Will they fall and not rise? Will one turn away and not return? ⁵ Why has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, They refuse to return.*

⁶ I listened and heard, But they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turned to his own course, As the horse rushes into the battle. ⁷ “Even the stork in the heavens Knows her appointed times; And the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow Observe the time of their coming. But My people do not know the judgment of the Lord.

It seemed so unreasonable that God’s people should not turn to Him. If they had not been His people, we might understand. But they were God’s people. From the days of Abraham God had revealed Himself to them as the God of the gracious covenant. Throughout the ages the voice of prophecy and revelation had never ceased.

Clearer and more clearer pictures of the life and the work of the Redeemer had been revealed. Again and again God had lifted up His warning voice against the sins of the heathen nations surrounding His people. Great prophets had been sent with special messages in times of danger and stress. And yet, in spite of it all, God’s people were now like wild horses rushing down the road to destruction.

It all seemed so unreasonable. *“Will they fall and not rise?”* If you fall on a slippery road, the first thing you will do is try to get on your feet again. But here are God’s people fallen on the slippery road of sin, and they make no effort to rise again.

Will one turn away and not return? If you make a wrong turn on the highway, the moment you realise your mistake you will turn around and get on the right road again. But here are God’s people who have made a wrong turn, turned away from God, but they make no effort to get back on the right road. They keep going right on, just as before, in spite of all the warnings and in spite

of all pleading. How unreasonable! *Why has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding?*

Even the animals know better. *“Even the stork in the heavens Knows her appointed times; And the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow Observe the time of their coming.* They are migratory birds. They know when to go South in order to escape the rigours of winter. They know when springtime calls them back to return North. They heed the call of their Maker in the voice of nature. *But My people do not know the judgment of the Lord. No man repented of his wickedness. Everyone turned to his own course, As the horse rushes into the battle.*

Do we not have the same sad picture in the church of today? Follow the gracious dealing of God with His people down through the ages. Look how God is pleading with people to turn from the path of sin! Look how God has been speaking words of warning to the nations of the world during the last twenty years!

See how the voice of divine judgment and retribution has resounded in every corner of the world! Think of the churches in our own country and of local conditions. Many of God’s people are barely luke-warm! It seems as if there are only a few people who are really earnestly taking God’s Word seriously. Others are just playing around a bit with religion, and still others, are dead asleep in indifference.

God is listening attentively, listening to see whether there is any response; but so many go right on in the way of sin and indifference.

2. Notice The Things That Kept The People From Turning To God.

It all seems so strange, does it not? And we ask, Why is it? What are the things that keep people from turning to God?

The first point is that *They hold fast to deceit. They refuse to return* as our text says. That is the terrible curse of sin, that, while we have no ability to deliver ourselves from the power of sin, we have the terrible ability to harden our hearts against the pleading voice of God.

Once the people of Judah had lost the truth, they served the lie with a vengeance. They filled the temple with false gods of every kind. They committed the ultimate horror. Following the worship of the god Molech, they sacrificed their own children in a fiery blaze of inhumanity and idolatry.

They performed these human sacrifices in a place called Tophet, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom south of Jerusalem.² Once having become the servants of sin, they could only fall deeper into the pit of shame.

The Lord's judgment matched their sin. Most of them would die violent deaths. The number of the dead would be so large that there would be no room in the graves. Their death would be so swift that there would be no time and no one left to bury them.

This lack of burial was frightening to them, for many believed that the soul would not rest without a decent burial. God warned them and their leaders that there would be no rest or escape for them even in the grave. Such is the punishment for unrepented sin. It follows the sinner to the grave and through all eternity.

Human nature has not changed over time. We read in Acts 7:51-53, what Stephen spoke to the people, ⁵¹ *You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.* ⁵² *“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,* ⁵³ *“who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”*

That was the terrible indictment which Stephen hurled at his tormentors. Here they were stoning Stephen to death. Why? Because he was preaching the risen Christ. Scripture says that *they were cut to the heart*. They knew it was the truth.

Probably some of them had been at the trial of Jesus. Some of them may have heard Pilate testify, *“I find no fault in Him.”* Some of them may have seen Pilate wash his hands as a token of his supposed innocence. Some of them may have even cried, *“His blood be upon us and upon our children.”*

Some of them may have also helped to arrange for that hush-money given to bribe the guards at the grave of Jesus. And yet, in spite of it all, they are putting Stephen to death although they knew that he was preaching the truth. ***“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”***

Oh, let us pray to God that He would take from us the hardness of our hearts. Let us pray to God that He would touch us with the warmth of His Gospel sun, so that the crust of ice in which our hearts are imbedded may be melted, that God may never have to say to any of us, ***“you were not willing!”***

The second point is that the people of Jerusalem refused to see their sin. ***No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, ‘What have I done?’*** Their conscience must have been smiting them. Jeremiah had minced no words when he spoke to them of their sin. ***“Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know?”***³ And yet they dared to say, ***“What have I done ?”***

How easily we put off our sin! How lightly we, too, say, ***“What have I done?”*** We keep right on sinning until at last our conscience has been rocked to sleep.

Oh, that we might beware of sin, little sins! They are like a little seed falling into the crevice of a rock. It springs and sprouts. In the course of years you see a tree growing out of that rock, with the roots worming their way into the cracks. And then one day a mighty storm blows that tree, and the rock is split wide open. And it all was caused by that tiny seed which long ago fell into that crevice. That is what sin is like!

During the inquisition they had a diabolical invention called the Virgin’s Kiss. The poor victim, stripped of his clothes, was pushed forward to kiss the smiling image, when its arms enclosed him in a deadly embrace his body was pierced with a hundred hidden knives. That is what sin is like!

That is the thing which keeps us away from God — the sin which we love, the sin which we embrace, the sin which we no longer feel. May God open our eyes to see sin in all its hideousness!

May God, as we stand below Calvary's holy cross during this season of Lent, teach us to understand that our sins are the nails which nailed Jesus to the cross, so that none of us will ever say, ***"What have I done ?"***

The third point is pride and false wisdom. Our text says, ***"How can you say, 'We are wise, And the law of the LORD is with us'?"*** That was the boast of Jerusalem, ***"We have the Law of the Lord. We have Moses. We know what to do. We do not need your preaching, Jeremiah."*** That is what kept them away from God. They were wise in their own conceit.

Is it not similar with us? We think we know it all. Nobody can tell us anything. We have our own ideas about God, about sin, and about Judgment.

Some people have, in their own conceit, given up the simple story of the Cross, and while they speak beautiful words of Jesus and sing songs of Calvary, they have taken the real Jesus down from the cross and have put their own conception of Jesus in His place. They are wise in the wisdom of this world.

so holding fast to deceit, refusing to return, refusing to see their sin, pride and false wisdom are some of the things that keep people away from God. May they never keep us away!

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem," and as we go, let us pray: O God, touch our hearts and revive our faith, so that people may know that we have been in dark Gethsemane and on Calvary's holy hill.

Let us close with the words of the hymnist,

*All that I was, my sin, my guilt,
My death, was all my own;
All that I am I owe to Thee,
My gracious God, alone. Amen.*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Jeremiah 7:1-3

² Jeremiah 7:31

³ Jeremiah 7:9