

A BIBLICAL STUDY ON JEREMIAH

LESSON TWENTY-ONE: JEREMIAH'S SECOND DISCOURSE, PART ONE

by Sandy Harber

**"And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also."
Jeremiah 3:8**

Jeremiah opened his second discourse (Jer. 3:6-4:4) with a tale of two sisters: backsliding Israel and treacherous Judah. The ten tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel began their backsliding in 975 B.C. when they rebelled against King Rehoboam, King David's grandson. Israel crowned Jeroboam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim (I Kings 11:26), as their new king (I Kings 12:20). King Jeroboam wasted no time in separating the people from their religious heritage, which was centered in the temple in Jerusalem, located in the southern kingdom of Judah (I Kings 12:26-27). He created two new centers of worship, one at each end of his territory. Each location, Dan in the north and Bethel in the south, showcased a golden idol in the shape of a calf (I Kings 12:28-29). King Jeroboam appointed priests to serve at the new shrines and he proclaimed certain days to be festival days (I Kings 12:31-33). Thus, he replaced the worship of Jehovah, as outlined in the Law of Moses, with his own man-made religion (I Kings 12:30).

Backsliding is what happens when a believer chooses to do what he wants to do, to have things his own way instead of obeying God's Word (Prov. 14:14). It may involve outright rebellion like the Israelites who choose to convert to the religious practices of their neighbors. Or, it may be a process of neglect and indifference where the believer gradually withdraws from God, His Word, and His people. A lack of spiritual growth is a type of backsliding, which Paul confronted in the Corinthian Church (I Cor. 3:1). Backsliding has many paths, but they all take you away from God. If you are sliding down that path stop now. Get down on your knees (literally or figuratively) and confess your sins. Open your Bible and reconnect with your Savior.

God pleaded with Israel for more than 200 years to give up their idols and return to Him. But His pleas were disregarded. In 722 B.C. the Assyrian army conquered Israel, and transported the people out of the land (II Kings 17:5-18). Jehovah had divorced His unfaithful wife (Jer. 3:8). The southern kingdom of Judah observed all that had happened to Israel. Unlike Israel, Judah had periods of reprieve due to the actions of God-fearing kings who attempted to rid the land of idolatry. Under kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, the people worshipped Jehovah - at least, outwardly. Judah had the advantage of godly kings, prophets, the Levitical priesthood, the temple, and the example of backslidden Israel. But Judah did not repent and turn back to God with her whole heart (Jer. 3:10). Therefore, treacherous Judah's condition was worse than Israel's (Jer. 3:11). She was the unfaithful partner in the covenant relationship between God and His chosen people. No one is unfaithful by accident. The people willfully turned away from their God and worshipped and served idols. Sometimes they tried to serve both God and their idols simultaneously. Jesus shot that down in the Sermon on the Mount when He declared, "You cannot serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24). With His Own finger God wrote on a stone tablet, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; 24:12; 32:16). Judah had broken the first commandment. Her treachery, her unfaithfulness, hurt the Lord more than Israel's backsliding. The people pretended to serve and worship God, but their hearts were not in it. God lamented, "Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart" (Jer. 3:10). Jeremiah used the word "heart" 60 times in his book, indicating its importance to the God Who put His words in the prophet's mouth (Jer. 1:9). Generally, the heart can be defined as "one's innermost character, feelings, or inclinations." The heart is the center, the core, of your being. Jesus said that loving God with your whole heart is the greatest commandment (Mt. 22:37). Have you given your heart to the Lord?

God is merciful (Jer. 3:12). If Israel and Judah would only admit their transgressions and turn back to Him the Lord would bless them (Jer. 3:13-14). Jeremiah gave them a glimpse of the future kingdom, when Israel and Judah will be united again as one nation (Jer. 3:18). God will establish His throne in Jerusalem and all nations will come to worship there (Jer. 3:17). He warned that their idols cannot save them; God is their salvation (Jer. 3:21-23). He urged them to weed out the false religious practices and plant true spirituality in their hearts (Jer. 4:3-4).

"Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD. . . ." Jeremiah 3:14a